



*Every Man In His Humour*  
(Prologue & Act IV Scene V)

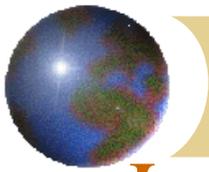
*Ben Jonson*

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## *Jonson and his Contemporaries*

- ✿ Jonson's artistic detachment from most of his contemporaries was radical and he stood apart from the mainstream of Elizabethan literature
- ✿ Held greatest contempt for writers like Thomas Campion, Samuel Daniel, Sir John Davies, Thomas Dekker, Michael Drayton, Edward Fairfax, Sir John Harrington, John Marston and Thomas Middleton
- ✿ Jonson's attitude towards the four great names of Elizabethan poetry – Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare and Donne – was somewhat ambivalent.
- ✿ About Shakespeare Jonson opines that the scandalous inventor of tales, tempests, servant monsters, sea-coasts in Bohemia 'wanted Arte' (*Conversations with Drummond*, 50), one who 'could not escape laughter' (*Discoveries*, 662)
- ✿ Jonson contradicts himself when he evaluates Shakespeare as a writer 'not of an age, but of all time' (*Ungathered Verse*, xxvi)
- ✿ About Donne, a personal friend, Jonson observes that he was 'the first poet in the World in some things' but also believes that Donne 'for not keeping accent deserved hanging' (*Conversations with Drummond*, 117 – 18, 48 – 49)

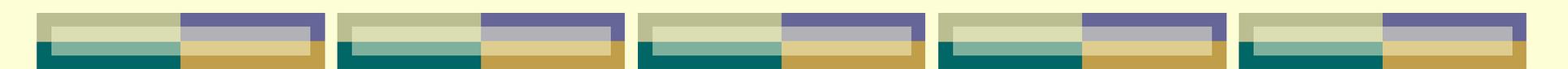
# Jonson and his Contemporaries

- Jonson was too intelligent not to respect the works of the greatest of the Elizabethan writers, Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare and Donne.
- However, their achievements made Jonson uneasy
- These great Elizabethan writers were at odds with the classical Greek and Roman models and formal literary theory of Renaissance
- Jonson remained alienated from the popular currents of late sixteenth century poetry and drama
- Jonson developed a distinctive poetic and a distinctive comic mode by reacting against a generalized Elizabethan norm

# Background

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- The essential context of Jonson's work is London
- London became a metropolis during his lifetime – its population increasing from 1,50,000 to 3,50,000
- There was a significant seasonal population because of the centralization of royal and legal administration, particularly of the provincial ruling class
- This concentration of people, wealth and power was also a focus of the poor
- This social set up allowed the acting companies, though theoretically under some aristocratic patron, to operate as a capitalist industry
- The theater companies invested in buildings, actors, décor and script and made profit from the box office
- These companies began operating in 1570s and by 1599-1600 about 10,000 strong audience witnessed half a dozen plays on weekends



# The Audience

- The Elizabethan theater has to cater to an audience which has no homogeneity
  - The theater is open to not only noblemen, gentlemen and students but also ‘vagrant persons & maisterles men that hang about the Citie, theeves, horsestealers, whoremoongers ... & such other lyke’ (E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 316)
  - ‘An inorganic audience of this kind, in the linguistic and class conditions of Elizabethan England, must be, in Bakhtin’s words, *heteroglot* – not a constituency to which a unitary or authoritative word could be addressed from the stage’ (Peter Womack, *Ben Jonson*, 15)
  - The casual and heterogeneous nature of the new urban audience breaks the traditional constraints on both staging and language
  - The direct word is replaced by novelty and ambiguity
  - During the Jacobean period there was a shift in theatrical gravity from large unroofed playhouses to private houses
  - The Jacobean theatre address itself to two audiences, one diverse, the other unitary – the public and the court
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# The Author

- The acting companies were in constant demand of new plays
- The playwrights were highly paid for their manuscripts
- Normally the writers were associated with some company which gave them a sense of security whereas the company got scripts tailored to its own needs
- This reduced the relationship between a buyer and a seller to that of an employer and wage earner
- Shakespeare escaped being an employee by being a share holder of the company for which he wrote
- Jonson never sold than two manuscripts to a company
- He also did not produce enough plays to be considered a professional playwright during his time

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# Jonson – the writer

- Jonson's detachment from the theater industry can be traced to three alternative centers of literary production: masque writing for the court, literary patronage and publication
  - Everything Jonson wrote – public plays, masques for the court and poems addressed to individual – were also meant for publication
  - In this he significantly differs from his contemporaries
  - He published quarto edition of his plays
  - The greatest endeavor was to produce the folio version of collected works in 1616 – *The Works of Benjamin Jonson*
  - Jonson is here influenced by classical drama – the book places its author in the same light as the classical authors of antiquity providing the means for future appreciation
  - The book also appeals the solitary reader instead of the collective audience – its motto being 'I do not labor so that the crowd will admire me: I am content with a few readers'
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- The theatrical world displays three levels of communication simultaneously – author to reader, dramatis persona to another dramatis persona and actor to audience
  - These three levels of communication converge at a point when a line is spoken on the stage
  - However, they remain separable because of their own orientation
  - The distinction, though present in any theater, is present with a peculiar sharpness in Jonson's plays
  - Jonson in his plays goes on to intimately combine the writer-reader line with the persona-persona line to marginalize the actor-audience line

- Jonson wrote for a theater where the marginalization of the actor-audience line had just began
- The *dramatis personae* in the medieval and Tudor theater could see and talk to the audience
- In the Elizabethan theater the spectators are drawn into an enclosure whose permanent focus is on the stage
- The Elizabethan script simultaneously ignores the presence of the audience
- The persona or character is a creation of the writer – full of his moral sensibility and understanding
- The writer is present in every word the characters utter – he is the creator whose wisdom permeates them all, ordering and animating their superficially casual exchanges

- The Prologue to *The Staple of News* graphically brings out the desire of Jonson to insulate the play from the actuality of the show

For your own sakes, not his, he bade me say,  
Would you were come to hear, not see a play,  
Though we his actors must provide for those,  
Who are our guests, here, in the way of shows,  
The maker hath not so.

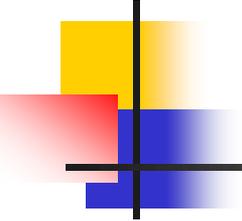
(Prologue 1 – 5)

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- Though need make many poets, and some such  
As art and nature have not better'd much;  
Yet ours for want hath not so loved the stage,  
As he dare serve the ill customs of the age,  
Or purchase your delight at such a rate,  
As, for it, he himself must justly hate:  
To make a child now swaddled, to proceed  
Man, and then shoot up, in one beard and weed,  
Past threescore years; or, with three rusty swords,  
And help of some few foot and half-foot words,  
Fight over York and Lancaster's king jars,  
And in the tiring-house bring wounds to scars.  
He rather prays you will be pleas'd to see  
One such to-day, as other plays should be;  
Where neither chorus wafts you o'er the seas,  
Nor creaking throne comes down the boys to please;  
Nor nimble squib is seen to make afeard  
The gentlewomen; nor roll'd bullet heard  
To say, it thunders; nor tempestuous drum  
Rumbles, to tell you when the storm doth come;  
But deeds, and language, such as men do use,  
And persons, such as comedy would choose,  
When she would shew an image of the times,  
And sport with human follies, not with crimes.  
Except we make them such, by loving still  
Our popular errors, when we know they're ill.  
I mean such errors as you'll all confess,  
By laughing at them, they deserve no less:  
Which when you heartily do, there's hope left then,  
You, that have so grac'd monsters, may like men.

# Prologue to Everyman In His Humour

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- ❑ The prologue goes on to crisply point out what the author intends to say
- ❑ Rather surprisingly, the prologue is mostly about what the audience is not going to see in the theater
- ❑ Jonson in the prologue brings out the inefficacy of the materiality of stage production – make-up, costume, props and speeches – to merge with the world they represent
- ❑ The crude atmospheric devices are only there for the childish and impressionable audiences
- ❑ The converse demand that Jonson seems to make is that the actor-audience line should stay out of sight, not deforming with its miscellaneous contingencies the aptness and truth of the 'image of the times'

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- In terms of literary history Jonson intends to identify himself with the neoclassical tendencies in Renaissance poetics
  - The prologue can be read as a fairly complete outline of the neoclassical canon
    - 1 Unity of time, place and action
    - 2 Exclusion from the stage of improbable events
    - 3 Stable separation of genres
    - 4 Decorum of language
    - 5 Combination of pleasure and moral instructiveness

# Fencing

- Gentlemen had the privilege of wearing swords as part of their full dress in civil life. The laws of the duel, endorsed by the code of honour, were beginning to replace the more savage 'killing affray', the murder of an enemy by a man's retainers and serving-men. The fashions of fencing whether in sport or earnest, were of foreign origin, when men of fashion quarrelled in print, by the book, 'on the seventh cause', and fought with rapier and dagger, to cries of 'ah, the immortal *passado* ! the *punto reverso* ! the *hai* !' (G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, 174 – 175)

# *Language*

- At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels, on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all ‘languages’ and dialects; there developed the literature of the *fabliaux* and *Schwänke*, of street songs, folk sayings, anecdotes, where there was no language-center at all, where all ‘languages’ were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 273)

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- # The scene (Act IV, Scene V) can be looked upon as a dialectic of the city
  - # The size and heterogeneity of London – an outcome of the national and political centralization – results in the center-less interchange of diverse language types, where speech types jostle and make fun of each other
  - # *Every Man In His Humour* as a whole is, among other things a stylization of such a babble: the idiolects of gallant, soldier, bourgeois, countryman, street seller, intercut anarchically as the farce gathers momentum (Womack, *Ben Jonson*, 80)

Thank You

