

MARA YANNI

THE LIMITS OF TRADITION: BEN JONSON'S COMEDIES

The common estimation of Ben Jonson as a lover of the ancients, a spokesman of traditional beliefs, and a man of conservative politics does not impart the whole truth about his complex personality or art. Time and again, perceptive critics of his life and works have located contradictory and unsettling elements in his practice that are at variance with the orthodoxies of traditionalist discourse.¹ "Just how bizarre and extreme Jonson's demands can be," writes John Creaser, "has often been obscured by the neo-classical guise in which he presents his texts."² Far from questioning the authenticity of Jonson's allegiance to the values of the past, these inconsistencies speak about his singular relation to tradition—a relation that is mainly an index of his solitary and desperate position as a man at odds with his times. For it is a well-known fact that Jonson saw the consolidation of the new materialist and acquisitive culture of the present times as the main cause for the disintegration of society into total anarchy.

The purpose of this paper is to re-examine Jonson's appropriations of the discourse of tradition in the light of his special position as a dramatist practicing his art under the pressures of various public contexts, both at the hazardous fields of the Court and at the public theater. The issue is examined on two levels: The first part of the discussion seeks to define the ways Jonson appropriated tradition --the authority of both the ancient masters and Eng-

1. Anne Barton notes that the "rage for order which shapes his work is almost always met and, in a way, substantiated by a equally powerful impulse towards chaos and license," in *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Preface, x. Also, David Riggs talks about "the interplay of reckless self-assertion and a rationalistic self-limitation in a single life," in *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 2.

2. John Creaser, "Enigmatic Ben Jonson," in *English Comedy*, eds. Michael Corder, Peter Holland, and John Kerrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 104.

lish native tradition-- in order to eschew personal difficulties or promote his authorial self by endorsing the criteria of good taste as a literary critic and the ideals of the English past as a satirist. Following this assessment, the second part takes issue with Jonson's deployment of the poetics of classical satire in his four major Jacobean comedies. It is argued that more than often, these plays generate ambiguous significations that destabilize the authority of traditional discourse and render problematic the reformist intentions of his art. This failure is the result of Jonson's engagement in the traditional ideology and formal realism of classical satire to represent the overwhelming materialism of a new culture --a reality of a different order, which could hardly be understood or represented in terms of either ideological or stylistic traditionalist presuppositions.

The conflict between a deeply ingrained personal belief in traditional order and the opposition of an inimical and alien contemporary reality must have had a fundamental impact in the formation of Jonson's subjectivity and literary identity. The pressures arising from this conflict --magnified by a violent and idiosyncratic temperament-- are evinced both on the private and public spheres of his life: his struggle for acceptance, the depth of his bitterness, his vehement attacks against rivals, and his excessive wrath against the things he disapproved of. Most importantly, the excess of his stance as a reformist in the satires and comedies he produced, suggests a decentered self, the figure of a malcontent lamenting the loss of the Golden Age.³ As Alvin Kenan suggests, Jonson's "rigid classicism, moral authoritarianism, and stout insistence upon form and realism (all of which link him with the tradition of the ancients) seem as much a desperate defense raised against disaster as rational aesthetic positions freely chosen."⁴

Jonson understood tradition in ahistorical and ethical terms. He evoked it both stylistically and thematically, that is, through the reiteration of literary conventions and motifs of ancient authors and through commentary about the lost values of the past. His view of the ancients as founders of a superior system of transhistorical values has clearly an essentialist basis and it belongs to the context of current Renaissance beliefs that link closely the concept of nature with tradition:

3. For a discussion of the 17th century "decentered self" and the "malcontent" see Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* [1984] (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 49, 119, 149, 158.

4. Alvin Kernan, "Acting and Alchemy: The Major Plays of Ben Jonson," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, II (1973): 8.

I cannot think nature is so spent, and decayed, that she can bring forth nothing worth her former years. She is always the same like herself: and when she collects her strength, is abler still. Men are decay'd, and studies: she is not."⁵

This central belief in essential nature, coupled with adjunct humanist ideals of order, hierarchy, and a providential universe, as well as ethical and political considerations, forms the basis of the dominant discourse of tradition.

It has often been pointed out that the authority of tradition functioned as a sustaining argument for the legitimation of the claims of the ruling classes in this period. Jonson's faith in traditional order, therefore, is not devoid of political significations indicating his allegiance to the monarchy and the *status quo*. The humanistic education he had received at Westminster prepared him for becoming a vigorous spokesman of this dominant ideology, while his career at James' Court and at the public theater suggests a deliberate choice of the traditional ethical and political order as a model for the right way of living.

Yet Jonson's allegiance to tradition was not totally unqualified: "For to all the observation of the Ancients, wee have our owne experience," he wrote in the *Discoveries*, expressing "haughty confidence in innovation."⁶ It is worth noticing that from 1605 on, Jonson's vision of traditional order assumes a more contemporary form: it relocates historically the model for the right order from antiquity to the English Medieval past.⁷ In his major Jacobean comedies he alludes frequently to the authority of the social and economic morality of England's feudalistic past, and uses it to create a sharp contrast with the materialism of the new capitalist system. This practice is a clear indication of his preference for more traditional forms of the monarchy. Conversely, it is an attempt to place in the context of a great tradition the history and culture of his native land.

In the plays Jonson wrote during Elizabeth's reign, he appears as a rigid classicist and uncompromising reformer. Through a display of scholarly

5. *Discoveries*, 124-8; in *Ben Jonson*, eds. C.H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-1952), vol. VIII, 567. Hereafter cited as HS.

6. *Discoveries* 134-35, in HS, vol. VIII, 567. See also HS, vol. I, 377.

7. See L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* [1937] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, Peregrine Books, 1962), 151-191.

learning, allusions to ancient authors, and the classicism of his style he did not hesitate to castigate the vulgarity and ignorance of the greater part of his audiences. It is a critical commonplace to consider Jonson's *Everyman Out of His Humour* (1599), *Cynthia's Revels* (1600), and *The Poetaster* (1601) as products of a self-conscious effort to apply all the formal rules and advisings of the ancient masters in an attempt to create a new kind of comedy --an alternative to Shakespeare's romantic kind and closer to his own taste for realism and moral edification.

In the early years of his career, Jonson's diverse uses of tradition seem to evolve around one central consideration: the formation of elitist criteria of taste, which were drawn from the classical tradition and used to legitimate the kind of poetry and drama that he himself produced. Rules of style, generic requirements, and the ideology of the ancient masters were appropriated to create a useful set of criteria built around such distinctions as the elite and the popular, the learned and the ignorant, the polite and the vulgar. The ignorant or vulgar audiences of the public theater were the main target of his violent attacks as much as the poetasters: "If we fail," says Cordatus referring to Jonson's play in the Induction of *Every Man Out of His Humour*, "we must impute it to this only chance, / Art hath an enemy call'd Ignorance" (217-19 / HS, III, 436). Needless to say, that his "learned" audiences at the Blackfriars or the Court --his prospective patrons-- had been suitably addressed in the Prologue of *Cynthia's Revels*, as those who "censure, understand, define/ what merit is" (16-17 / HS, IV, 43). Actually, this elitism, based on exclusionism, was at work throughout Jonson's career and it led progressively to the formation of the principles of literary criticism that he incorporated in his *Discoveries*.

Jonson, however, read tradition in an intensely personal way: from the vantage point of his specific situation in the present. The use of tradition in his early plays seems to have functioned additionally in other directions, towards fulfilling various extra-textual aims, often of a personal and self-serving nature. These frequently overlapping aims include, first of all the deployment of traditional discourse in order to get the attention and win the favor of the monarch and the Court at a time when royal patronage was the ultimate measure of success for any aspiring playwright. Of course, these tactics did not always work: Although Jonson wrote *Cynthia's Revels* hoping to win royal patronage through an impressive amount of flattery for Elizabeth in the role of Cynthia, there is clear evidence that the court performance of the play ended in disaster.⁸ This was meant to happen since the play con-

8. See Barton, 80; Riggs, 71.

tained a severe critique of the Court behind a celebratory sheath of classical mythology and tradition. Such audacity was uncalled for and it may have been the reason for his lack of success in the Elizabethan Court.

The garb of tradition was also useful as a means for self-protection. Like a true literary monarch Jonson could afford to control the free play of dissident meanings in his texts by situating them within a strict framework of traditional order, which operated as a protective shield to avert suspicion and thus the danger of possible persecution by the censoring authorities. In *Sejanus* (1603), the tragedy adapted from Tacitus, he managed to expose himself into real danger, for he was summoned and interrogated by the authorities about incorporating "dangerous" material. As a result, he decided to be more careful in the 1605 printed version of the play. Thus, in the heavily loaded with classical references Preface, he took pains to explain that he had used his ancient sources accurately --in order to protect himself from "those common torturers, that bring all wit to the rack" (28-39 / H S, IV, 350).⁹ Jonson's claims to scholarship and objectivity, however, cannot obscure the fact that he was mainly interested in bringing out "the contemporary relevance" of history, and "his own sombre vision of life."¹⁰ There is no doubt that Inigo Jones was right in suggesting that Jonson's use of the classics was indeed generally suspect: "The good's translation, butt the ill's thine owne."¹¹

In an age that regarded the profession with great ambivalence, a sure way for Jonson to establish his reputation as a well-respected author --a member of an elite group of learned authors that forms part of the tradition-- was to draw parallels and identify himself with various ancient masters. Characteristically, in the Induction to *Every Man Out of His Humour*, the character Cordatus initiates a discussion about comic license, and after referring to Aristophanes, Plautus, Terence, Plato, Aristotle, and Martial, he concludes: "I see not then, but we should enjoy the same license, or free power, to illustrate and heighten our invention as they did" (247-70 / HS, III, 437). Similarly, in the third act, where a character is about to commit suicide and thus transgress the law of comedy by using violence on the stage, Jonson reminds his audience (through the mouth of Cordatus) that Plautus had done it too

9. For details about Jonson's problems with *Sejanus*, see Annabel Patterson, "Censorship and Interpretation," in *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Routledge, 1991), 40-48.

10. J. W. Lever, *The Tragedy of State* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), 63.

11. Inigo Jones, "To his false friend Mr Ben Jonson," in HS, vol. XI, 385. Also mentioned in Riggs, 353.

in his comedy *Cistellaria*: "is not his authority of power to give our scene approbation?" (III. viii. 91-92 / HS, III, 522).

The identification with Horace -- a well-known Jonsonian trait -- was used in the *Poetaster* as a means to assail and undermine the status and reputation of rival playwrights. Among the various ancient masters it was Horace that appeared more congenial to him: his austere morality, his reformist career as a satirist, his suffering attacks from many enemies, even his being "corpulent" just like him.¹² Relying on the authority of Horace's credentials, Jonson registers his attacks against his rivals Marston and Dekker, by reducing them to the level of insignificant poetasters in the Rome of the Golden Age. Yet in spite of its Augustan disguise, the play succeeded in making him new enemies, because besides the playwrights it also offended soldiers, lawyers, and actors.¹³

However, L. C. Knights has suggested that it would be a mistake to define Jonson's relation to tradition with sole reference to his classicism -- as most critics have done -- and neglect the "native springs of his vitality." This is the popular tradition of individual and social morality originating in English Medieval culture. Jonson's major link with this "living tradition," according to Knights, is his drawing from the "anti-acquisitive" stance inherited from the Middle Ages.¹⁴ More recent criticism has pursued this point further, by noting that Jonson's four major Jacobean comedies explore the relation between the moral and economic order through a sharp contrast between the old way and the new: i.e. through placing an ideal "agrarian non-acquisitive social ethics" against the "publick riot" and "fiscal anarchy" of capitalism.¹⁵

Jonson's attitude toward a native tradition and popular forms of culture that originate from the Middle Ages is, however, complex and for the most part ambiguous. On the one hand, he showed a high degree of eclecticism in choosing from the lore of the English past only those elements that seemed

12. For a study of parallel circumstances between Horace and Jonson, see Riggs, 77.

13. See H S, vol. I, 28, 29, 416.

14. Knights, 48, 151, 168.

15. See, Peggy Knapp, "Ben Jonson and the Publick Riot: Ben Jonson's Comedies," in *Staging the Renaissance*, 164-66. For earlier studies suggesting a similar line see Peter Womack, *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Don E. Wayne, "To Penshurst": *The Semiotics of Place and the Poetic of History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1984; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1986; Lawrence Venuti, *Our Halcyon Days: Pre-revolutionary texts and Post-modern Culture*. Madison: University of Wisconsin. 1989.

to endorse the ideological and formal requirements of the great tradition of the ancients. Thus, he adopted the idea of the "humours" from the context of Medieval physiology, quoted Chaucer, expressed his interest for the old types of English comedy, and used material from the morality plays. In addition, the realist background of his plays is enhanced through the use of allusions to numerous other items of popular origins (ethical treatises, character books, medical texts, jest books almanacs, and *commedia dell' arte*).¹⁶

On the other hand, in spite of such rich usage of the native tradition Jonson never derived a complete plot for his comedies from it. Regarding his contemporaries, he showed respect for Shakespeare, Sidney, Spenser, and Donne, but he also felt "uneasy," as Barton notes, "for their achievements were at odds with the Greek and Roman Models he cherished."¹⁷ Thus, his well known objection to the genres of "fantastic comedy, romantic tragedy, 'Tales and Tempests', and the native 'History' with 'its three rusty Swords'," forms the basis for his unfair judgment of Shakespeare and other contemporary playwrights, such as Kyd and Marlowe, whose works have links with the native literary tradition.¹⁸ These, however, were the very things that contemporary audiences seemed to enjoy the most.

In the four major comedies that Jonson wrote under James -- *Volpone* (1606), *Epicoene* (1609), *The Alchemist* (1610), and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614)-- native tradition is a major source of inspiration. Classical sources, allusions, and the formal conventions of ancient satire are still present, but they acquire a less rigid form. The overt didacticism of the earlier plays, in particular, has disappeared, tempered by an increased amount of materials belonging to the native or popular tradition. This works well in the context of the playwright's expressed intention to construct a contemporary English scene, an "image of his times."¹⁹ Consequently, there is renewed emphasis on the contemporary, the historical, and the empirical. All four plays have been rightly labeled Jonson's "London plays," given that Venice, the setting of *Volpone*, is only a thin disguise for seventeenth-century London. Bearing the characteristics of city comedy these plays display, in the words of Tennenhouse, "a densely populated environment teeming with different types of activity, most of which is corrupt and all of which requires some grand new

16. See Riggs, 46-47.

17. Barton, 6.

18. HS, vol. II, 122. Also Prologue of *Every Man In His Humour* 9, in HS, vol. III, 303.

19. The phrase is mentioned in the Prologue of *Every Man In His Humour* 23, in HS, vol. III, 303.

ordering principal."²⁰ Satire is now explicitly directed against Jonson's own society and the satirist's strategy is the same in all four plays: the forms of tradition are there to evoke an ideal past order exposing, through a devastating contrast, the depravity of the present times.

There is no doubt that Jonson was inimical to the idea of the substitution of a native tradition of individual and social morality with a new order that emphasized materialist and acquisitive values. Such a change had definitely taken place at this time and Jonson was simply reacting against it. In his estimation, money and the materialist values of a new capitalist order are shown to be the single cause for the deterioration of contemporary society. Now, whether these alone, or in combination with various other factors transcending the economic ones, were actually responsible for the degree of disorder that Jonson locates in his society, is a matter that invites a lot of speculation. Nevertheless, there is one thing that can be taken for granted: Jonson, as an artist and a man of conservative politics, expresses an intensely personal view in his attacking the things that he felt went against the grain of his moral and aesthetic beliefs.

Jonson's idea of a past ideal order, however, remains an unrealized vision in his four major Jacobean comedies, for it is never made concrete or visible in terms of dramatic action. The overt classicism and didacticism of the earlier plays had functioned as a framework of authority that enabled him to control possible misreadings of his work, by defining clearly the space of its interpretation within the limits of the politically or morally correct. Contrastingly, in his mature and artistically superior Jacobean comedies traditional moral discourse is subsumed within an ironic context that blurs the direct vision of the right order for the spectators. "What initially seems clear turns out to be equivocal, or teasingly elusive, or in the most developed form, insoluble in significance."²¹

Actually, the only clear thing the audience gets to see upon Jonson's stage is a host of foolish, depraved, even criminal figures whose career suggests a totally anarchic image of society. Apart from suggesting the complex-

20. Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (Methuen: New York and London, 1986), 161.

21. Creaser, 109. The critic's general argument is that Jonson's "enigmatic art" descends from "the pervasive rhetorical culture of the sixteenth century in which minds were trained to argue *in utrumque partem*, on both sides of any question." (115).

ity of Jonson's art, these facts raise a number of questions. Was Jonson's audience --or kinds of audiences--capable of grasping *his* vision by merely watching the play? What are the political implications in Jonson's stage representation of contemporary society as a world devoid of order? And how do all these affect the reformist function of his satire?

In the four Jacobean comedies, the main target of the playwright's attack is greed, lust, and ambition. The theory of humors continues to operate here in the critique of the materialist ethics of the period. Metaphors of illness, death, and decay appear frequently in the texts, particularly in *Volpone*, suggesting a society totally taken over by disease. The symptoms of the disease are varied but they can all be classified under a common denominator: the subversion of nature and its hierarchies. The last is mainly expressed through inversion or parody. *Volpone*'s much discussed address to his gold as a substitute for God at the opening of the play is a prologue for subsequent distortion of all "norms" at the social and private spheres: religion, law, marriage, and parenthood. Inversion is also at work at the formal level of the play: the popular form of the beast-fable is used in *Volpone* with humans in the place of animals.

A similar strategy is applied in the other three plays. As a travesty of the right order, the three scoundrels in *The Alchemist* suggest the active (Face), the contemplative (Subtle), and the passionate dimensions of Sidney's model of the ideal man while the story itself is a parodic structure of an old-fashioned morality play.²² *The Epicoene* generates subversive implication through the inversion of gender roles. And *Bartholomew Fair*, the play in which "the reformers are reformed by the fools,"²³ transforms the scene of a Fair, a traditional medieval institution, into a panorama of corruption, and anarchy. In all four plays, Jonson is in fact asking his audience to reconstruct an integral image of the right order from the bits and pieces of a distorted vision. The only thing visible, though, is the image of a diseased society, in which depravity and disorder are so deeply ingrained, that the hope of reform appears like wishful thinking. Thus, the more the playwright insists that this is a "true" picture of his society; the more remote appears to be the possibility of an ideal alternative.

22. See, Dutton, 123. In addition, Edward B. Partridge suggests that "the alchemist (Subtle or gold) becomes a parody of the Creator," while Jonson, a moral idealist and dogmatic Christian, "treats alchemic terms as 'a parody of the Word.'" In *The Broken Compass: A Study of the Major Comedies of Ben Jonson* (London, 1958), 127.

23. Jonas Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass. 1960), 238.

It goes without saying that the excess of Jonson's representation of social perversity and decadence, as well as the ambiguities resulting from the distortion of all figures of the right order on the stage, easily make the plays vulnerable to the charge of carrying subversive implications. In *The Alchemist*, for example, Peter K. Ayers has located iconoclastic undercurrents: the decline from the Golden Age takes the form of urban saturnalia and thus the squalor of the present appears in a perverse fashion as a liberating agent from the weight of traditional moral, social, and political restraints inherited from the past²⁴

The most serious implication concerns the critique of governing authorities. The equivocal nature of the stage representation of the fair in *Bartholomew Fair* is a notorious example. James, to whom the play is addressed, had asked Jonson to write something that would silence the Puritan attacks against his liberal theatrical policies. In answer to the king's request, the playwright produced a play that appears to support the King's right to license plays and popular entertainments, yet it also questions it at the same time. *Bartholomew Fair* has been read as a "reactionary critique of the Stuart Court's all too permissive (in Jonson's view) licensing practices," an exploration of the ways licensing leads to licentiousness and hence to anarchic rebellion: The fair, as well as Jonson's play, function subversively by calling into question the ability of political authority to control the rebellious implications ensuing from its own licensing practices.²⁵ One wonders whether this is not the reason that there is no record of subsequent performances of *Bartholomew Fair* after its first presentation at Court on the 1st of November, 1614.

In similar manner, the other three plays contain an implicit critique of various forms of authority. In *Volpone*, for example, the Avocatori appear helpless and prone to misjudgment, while the authority of Providence does not seem to have an active part in the final distribution of justice. In fact, in all four plays the punishment of the evil ones results from the mechanical application of the farcical formula "the cheater cheated," while all the good characters are weak, ineffectual and easily gulled (Celia, Grace, Morose, Overdo), as critics have variously pointed out.²⁶ The overall picture suggests

24. The critic has located "iconoclastic implications" into the linguistic, theatrical, and textual structures of the play as well. "Staging Modernity: Chapman, Jonson, and the Decline of the Golden Age," *Cahiers Elisabethains: Late Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 47 (April 1995), 9-27.

25. Richard Burt, *Licensed by Authority, Ben Jonson and the Discourses of Censorship* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993.), 101.

26. Katharine Eisman Maus aptly notes that "virtuous characters play a less signifi-

the absence of an authority capable of re-establishing the disturbed hierarchical order at any level.

To whom then were these comedies addressed? For if the depraved and foolish characters in Jonson's "true" picture of society were truthful representations of his spectators, it is hard to believe that the latter could grasp the meaning of the plays and reform. Jonson was actually taking a great risk, since these people were bound to be offended rather than reformed by the view of themselves on stage, or simply miss the censorious and hortatory values of the play.²⁷ Yet, in the Epistle he prefixed to the text of *Volpone* in 1607, Jonson had described himself as someone who labored "to reduce not only the ancient forms, but manners of the scene: the easiness, the propriety, the innocence, and last the doctrine, which is the principle end of poesy, to inform men in the best reason of living." (HS, V, 20).

In *Volpone*, *Epicoene*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*, the off-stage world merges with its onstage representation, and diminishes the distance between spectators and onstage characters—the distance necessary for establishing a clear critical perspective of the dramatic action. Commenting on the relationship between the audience and the dramatic fiction in Jonson's middle plays Katharine Eisman Maus observes:

As his comedy becomes more and more insistently low-mimetic, however, both more pessimistic about human potential and at the same time less rigorously censorious, Jonson begins to close the gap between the spectators and the action they witness. *Epicoene*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*, set in contemporary London and crammed with local reference, stress the continuity of the world on stage with the world in which the author and his audience really live. A sense of distance from the characters becomes more difficult to sustain.²⁸

cant role in Jonson's drama after the *Poetaster*, and eventually they disappear entirely. Jonson becomes increasingly fascinated with a kind of protagonist who proves supremely stageworthy, but for whom he is unable to provide a moral justification." *Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 49.

27. The author's many apologies, explanations, and addresses to his readers/spectators and a history of problems of reception may be understood partly as attempts to avoid such risks. As Dutton observes "time and again Jonson was to protest that he intended no such direct allusions to contemporary persons and events, and each time we may take it with a pinch of salt—may even suspect that it is an oblique invitation to the audience to discover in the work precisely what he is disowning." (52).

28. Maus, 147.

The identification of stage world and audience, the excess of depravity, as well as the absence of a visible ethical pattern in Jonson's onstage representations of reality, result in ambiguities and subversive conclusions that obscure the satirist's reformist intentions.

The ideological assumptions underlying the formal realism of satire that is deployed in Jonson's comedies belong to the context of idealist poetics that the Renaissance inherited from classical models, especially Aristotle, Horace, and Cicero. As Sidney had suggested in "The Defence of Poesy" the didactic function of literature, and in particular of satire, can function only in the context of an idealist belief in the existence of timeless values, an essential human nature, a divinely controlled universe, and the just operation of Providence. This traditional framework, as already argued, is not visible in the representation of Jonson's society --not even as a mere possibility-- rendering thus problematic the reformist function of his satire (HS, V, 20). These difficulties suggest a serious artistic problem. For the poetics of classical satire that Jonson employs in these comedies, finally fail to establish an appropriate context within which contemporary realities can be represented and evaluated in relation to a set of ethical and reformist principles.

The lack of aesthetic completeness and ethical resolution in Jonson's major comedies point to the problematics raised by Jonathan Dollimore in his study of the ideological parameters of the drama in this period. The critic locates the problem in the unstable status of Renaissance idealist poetics at an age in which traditional ways of explaining reality were already regarded with skepticism, while a wide debate about the nature of the real was already under way: "the literary theory of that period gives this struggle a particular focus, especially the debates over poetic versus actual justice, poesy versus history, the fictive versus the actual representation--in short, idealist mimesis versus realist mimesis."²⁹ Caught in the whirlwind of such developments, Jonson attempted to reconcile the idealist set of ethical and metaphysical assumptions that underlie the formal poetics of classical satire, with a realist mode of representation that bluntly contradicts all of the above. The problem is of an artistic order and may be understood as a violation of decorum: a jarring discrepancy between the ideological significations of the artistic medium and the object of mimesis.

Jonson continued to advocate the ideals of a traditional order that was long past. It was a desperate venture because a new emerging order had already dominated the social scene. Referring to the economic enterprise that went on behind the scenes of Jonson's theater, Peggy Knapp notes: "if he is

29. Dollimore, 82.

to castigate the capitalistic new way, he must write plays for the notoriously undependable and itself capitalistic public stage."³⁰ Even the court, the last stronghold of tradition, writes Richard Burt, had given in to the new reality in order to preserve its former status quo: "the division between elite and popular, high and low, could never be fully secured because the court was in the contradictory position of having to license cultural innovations in order to conserve older cultural practices threatened by enclosure."³¹

Jonson's "true" picture of contemporary society, fails to evoke traditional order, because it suggests a new perspective of reality and a different mode of apprehending it. In addition to being an historical index of crucial developments in the philosophical, artistic, and social contexts of seventeenth-century England, this difficulty is a marker of Jonson's desperate position as a man of tradition at the margins of a new culture he could not possibly endorse.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ayers, Peter K. "Staging Modernity: Chapman, Jonson, and the Decline of the Golden Age." *Cahiers Elisabethains: Late Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 47 (April 1995): 9-27.
- Barish, Jonas. *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy*. Cambridge, Mass. 1960.
- Barton, Anne. *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Ben Jonson*. Edited by C.H. Herford, P. Simpson, and E. Simpson. 11 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-1952.
- Burt, Richard. *Licensed by Authority, Ben Jonson and the Discourses of Censorship*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Creaser, John. "Enigmatic Ben Jonson." *English Comedy*. Edited by Michael Corder, Peter Holland, and John Kerrigan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 100-118.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf (1984), 1989.
- Dutton, Richard. *Ben Jonson: To the First Folio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

30. Knapp, 178.

31. Burt, 84.

- Kernan, Alvin. "Acting and Alchemy: The Major Plays of Ben Jonson," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, II (1973): 1-22.
- Knapp, Peggy. "Ben Jonson and the Publicke Riot: Ben Jonson's Comedies." *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*. Edited by David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass New York: Routledge, 1991. 164-180.
- Knights, L. C. *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, Peregrine Books (1937), 1962.
- Lever, J. W. *The Tragedy of State*. London and New York: Methuen, 1981.
- Maus, Katharine Eisman. *Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Patterson, Annabel. "Censorship and Interpretation." *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*. Edited by David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass New York: Routledge, 1991. 40-48.
- Partridge, Edward B. *The Broken Compass: A Study of the Major Comedies of Ben Jonson*. London, 1958.
- Riggs, David. *Ben Jonson: A Life*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Stallybrass, Peter and White, Allon. *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Tennenhouse, Leonard. *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres*. New York and London: Methuen, 1986.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *Our Halcyon Days: Pre-revolutionary texts and Post-modern Culture*. Madison: University of Wisconsin. 1989.
- Wayne, Don E. "To Penshurst": *The Semiotics of Place and the Poetic of History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1984.
- Womack, Peter. *Ben Jonson*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.