

'In Minimo Mundus': Ben Jonson's Early Plays

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Abstract

The essay begins by marking out the boundaries of 'early Jonson' with reference to theatre history and bibliography, before providing recorded responses to Jonson in the contemporary theatre. It identifies 1597 as a key year in Jonson's dramatic development, particularly pointing to the influence of George Chapman on Jonson's playwriting and on popular London theatre more generally. *The Case Is Altered*, Jonson's first extant performed play, is analysed in detail, with special attention paid to Jonson's presentation of households on the stage (the carefully delineated status of the steward, his lord, and other servants), and integral use of properties, costume and objects in stage business. The conclusion points to Jonson's skill in crafting little worlds within the theatre, and in bringing London onto the stage.

Keyword word list

clothing ; costume ; household ; stage business ; stage property ; status ; steward
theatre

Writing on Jonson's early plays presents a challenge: what constitutes Jonson's early body of work? For the purposes of this study, the boundaries are set by the reigning monarch, Elizabeth I, who died in 1603. This seems straightforward enough until considering some of the challenges in establishing a clear chronology of Jonson's plays and discovery that the inter-relationship of performance and publishing history resists a straightforward narrative.¹

In performance history terms, *The Case Is Altered* takes precedence, being offered to Henslowe in 1597.² Jonson follows this with *Every Man In his Humour* and *Every Man Out of his Humour* in consecutive years for the Chamberlain's Men, one at the Curtain and the other at the newly opened Globe theatre. So far, so simple. The complications arise with the chronology of printed texts. Despite enjoying some success with *The Case Is Altered*, Jonson did not elect to have it published; it appeared in print in 1609 after some revisions which add a scene involving Antonio Balladino (supposed a satirical portrait of Anthony Munday), and criticism of audiences in the infamous Utopian theatre section; it does not appear in Jonson's 1616 Folio. *Every Man Out* is the first play to be printed in quarto in 1600, the year following its first performance, and its popularity is evidenced by the three quartos printed in the same year. Perhaps on the back of this success, *Every Man In* was published the next year in 1601. The quarto text is often referred to as the Italian version, being set in and around Florence; when it was published in Jonson's 1616 Folio, he converted it to an English location with anglicised speech

¹ Within the limited space, this chapter will focus on *The Case Is Altered*, *Every Man In his Humour*, *Every Man Out of his Humour*, but not *Poetaster* (1600) or *Cynthia's Revels* (1601).

² Ben Jonson, *The Case Is Altered*, ed. by G.A. Wilkes, *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

prefixes.³ The effects of state censorship, self-censorship, and the editing and revision by author and publishers/printers make palpable contributions in resisting a linear production process.

Jonson is frequently conceived of as a difficult playwright to perform or read; several modern theatre practitioners and theatre critics discuss the subject. Nicholas de Jongh suggests that it requires a special kind of actor who can speak Jonson's lines without a 'frequent tendency to slur and swallow words, revelling in the emotion of the speech rather than the sense'.⁴ According to de Jongh, some actors in the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Every Man In* conflated and spoiled Jonson's 'world of poseurs' with 'grossly posing actors'. J. C. Trewin comments that the play's 'construction has a taut-wire quality' which necessitates careful direction.⁵ In direct contrast lie Philip Hedley's memories of the Theatre Workshop company's production at Stratford East's Theatre Royal. Hedley was struck by similarities between East London repartee in a local cafe and the performance of Jonson on the stage: 'I couldn't believe it. The language bursting off the stage had the same liveliness and wit as in the coffee bar'.⁶ This vibrancy and immediacy had passed him by when studying Jonson's plays at university. Theatre director John Caird became obsessed with Jonson's dramatic talent: 'I mean to go on doing Jonson until people are forced to recognise that [sic] a genius he is'.⁷ He comments: 'You can feel him flexing his muscles in *Every Man In his Humour*. It's full of a kind of thrill, like someone

³ Since the Italian quarto version of the text was printed at greater proximity to the play's first performance, this is the version to which I will refer (despite it lacking Jonson's usual authorial preliminaries).

⁴ Nicholas de Jongh, 'Failing the Swan's Way', review of the RSC's production of *Every Man in His Humour*, *The Guardian*, 15 April 1987.

⁵ J. C. Trewin, 'Every Man in His Humour', *Birmingham Post*, 15 April 1987.

⁶ Philip Hedley, 'Dramatic Moments: 21', *The Guardian*, 21 February 1996. The production directly impacted on Hedley's career, leading to his artistic directorship of the same theatre for twenty-five years and award of a CBE for services to Drama in 2005.

⁷ David Nokes, 'Setting Ben against Bill', *The Times*, 11 April 1983.

discovering sex for the first time'.⁸ Such very different accounts of Jonson in performance illustrate what is frequently deemed difficult, impenetrable yet exciting about his plays. Literary study allows the reader to absorb and relish the witticisms and social satire, but their true life exists when embodied by actors because the plays' concerns are principally with population: by people and of (theatrical, urban, social) space.

But early Jonson is a mysterious area for the modern playgoer: there is one record of *The Case Is Altered* in performance at Chicago University on 7 May 1902, and another at Birkbeck College on 12 and 13 December 1924.⁹ *Every Man In his Humour* does better for performance history, with records of performances by the Chamberlain's Men at the Curtain (September, 1598), the King's Men at court (2 February 1604/5) and again at the Blackfriars (17 February 1630/1). It also enjoyed popularity in the Restoration and eighteenth century through Killigrew and Garrick, and in the nineteenth century Edmund Kean, William Charles Macready and Charles Dickens contributed to its performance history. Only one significant twentieth-century production stands out from the records, performed by the RSC in Stratford-upon-Avon (1986) and London (1987). *Every Man Out of His Humour* fares somewhat worse, with performances confined to the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: by the Chamberlain's men at the newly-opened Globe (1599); during the court's Christmas festivities (1599/1600); at James's court (8 Jan 1605) and the Theatre Royal (1675). Despite being popular in its time, there is only one record of *Every Man Out* being selected for performance since: by the Red Bull Players at the

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925-52; 1950), vol. ix, p. 167.

University of Toronto in November 2006.¹⁰ The reasons frequently cited (its length, difficulty or wordiness) are problems generally associated with the conception of Jonson in modern theatre.

Admittedly, *Every Man Out* is a very long text; the title page of the 1600 quarto explicitly states that it contains ‘more than hath been publicly spoken or acted’: the text preserved in print is not an attempt to record the performance script. W. David Kay has defended its popularity as a stage play, emphasising the importance of its repetition at court twice after the Globe; not only was *Every Man Out* the first of Jonson’s plays to be printed in quarto, three editions had to be issued to satisfy demand within the space of 8-12 months.¹¹ In support of Kay’s argument, Helen Ostovich points out that ‘Jonson’s success was both dramatic and literary’; original audiences did not separate these two things.¹² Furthermore, Ostovich identifies the bigger Globe stage as a possible source of inspiration for Jonson’s staging, in which large scenes with several groups of intermingling characters produce a vibrant onstage spectacle, but which are complex for readers to visualise. Ostovich further defends Jonson’s inclusion of the Grex, an apparently literary interpolation:

the play concentrates as much on watching audiences as it does on watching players. The Grex’s commentary is not particularly intrusive. Those comments that begin or end scenes cover natural breaks in the action, and perform other dramaturgical functions pertaining to setting and characterization; and those

¹⁰ Performance Archive, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online* (Cambridge University Press, 2014; updated 2015).

¹¹ W. David Kay, ‘The Shaping of Ben Jonson’s Career: A Re-Examination of Facts and Problems’, *Modern Philology* 67 (1970), 224-237.

¹² Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, ed. by Helen Ostovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 40. This is a highly recommended edition of the play with excellent introductory discussion and annotations.

that interrupt scenes rarely exceed five lines. Jonson virtually insists that the spectators be conscious of attending a theatre performance.¹³

In this sense, Jonson's drama is essentially Brechtian in its confrontation of the audience with stage illusion and his lifting of the dramatic mirror to society; and yet the witty word-play also allows his didacticism liberty to be an enjoyable experience. As Ostovich astutely observes: 'Jonson gained his reputation as the leading 'humorist' of the time as a direct result of his transformation of the light comedy of humours into an effective vehicle for dramatic satire'.¹⁴

Jonson has traditionally been credited with developing 'comedy of humours' or 'humours comedy'. Humours were an integral and influential part of Galenic medical theory adopted by early modern people, whereby each person's body contained a finely-balanced combination of humours or fluids: black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm. Each had their own properties and an imbalance in these fluids had consequences which manifested themselves in a person's physical health and temperament: for example, an excess of black bile made someone melancholic, yellow bile, choleric, blood, sanguine, and phlegm, phlegmatic. Various methods of righting the balance included blood letting or purges. Ordinary people were also advised to pay attention to what they ate: foods possessed specific properties, ingested carefully to correct the imbalance. Discussion and knowledge of humoral theory was common to all, not specifically invented by Jonson. So how did it develop from general knowledge to something featured on the early modern stage? To understand

¹³ Ostovich, p. 43.

¹⁴ Ostovich, p. 40.

this development fully, the biographical circumstances of Jonson's move to the Rose Theatre must be understood.

Martin Wiggins has stated: 'For comedy, the crucial year was ... 1597'. This was also the first key year in Jonson's theatrical development; it turned out to be both his make *and* break year. On 28 July the Privy Council issued a prohibition on both playing and playhouses. *The Isle of Dogs*, a play on which Jonson had collaborated with Thomas Nashe for Pembroke's Men at the Swan theatre, is thought to have been responsible for triggering this knee-jerk response by the authorities: all playing was banned and the playhouses ordered for demolition. Nashe escaped to Norfolk, but Jonson and two of the company's players, Robert Shaw and Gabriel Spencer, were arrested and imprisoned by order of the Privy Council, questioned and held for up to two months. They were released from the Marshalsea on 3rd October.¹⁵

The Isle of Dogs is not an extant play: its content described as 'lewd' and containing 'seditious and slanderous matter'. The authorities never carried out their threat to demolish the playhouses; the ban on playing was lifted on 11th October, soon after Jonson's release from prison, when Henslowe records: 'be gane my lord admerals & my lord of penbrockes men to playe at my howsse'.¹⁶ Andrew Gurr notes that the plays chosen to entice audience back to the Rose were three previous box office hits: *The Spanish Tragedy* (recorded by Henslowe as *Joroneymo*), *Doctor Faustus* and *The Comedy of Humours*. Kyd and Marlowe's plays have established places in the dramatic canon; however, *The Comedy of Humours*, printed as *An Humorous Day's*

¹⁵ This was not Jonson's final run-in with the authorities: his thumb was branded for murdering Gabriel Spencer the following year, and in 1604/5 Jonson's collaboration with George Chapman and John Marston on *Eastward Ho!* caused trouble for satirising the Scots.

¹⁶ R.A. Foakes, *Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2nd edn; p. 60.

Mirth, written by George Chapman, is less well known.¹⁷ But it plays an essential role in Jonson's dramatic development, and more broadly, in the success of 1590s comedy.

On the same day as the Privy Council issued its ban on playing and playhouses, Philip Henslowe recorded both a loan to Ben Jonson and his payment of a share in the Admiral's Men. If Jonson was seeking refuge at the Rose, he found more than he bargained for: if not experiencing close contact with him, he was certainly influenced by Chapman, his fellow new playwright at the Rose. That Jonson's new venture had failed so spectacularly might be viewed as a disaster, but it turned out to be localised. The contact between Jonson and Chapman was the catalyst for the development of a new style of writing which impacted on current trends and had wider-reaching effects.

Chapman's play *The Comedy of Humours* was first performed at the Rose theatre in 1597. Both E.K. Chambers and Andrew Gurr acknowledge the play's popularity and success, also confirmed by Henslowe's decision to re-open the Rose with its performance.¹⁸ Shakespeare's response to Chapman's innovation is evident in his next two offerings to the Chamberlain's Men: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Jonson's contributions more explicitly featured humours in the titles: *Every Man In his Humour* and *Every Man Out of his Humour*. Gurr points to the influence on comedy of *The Comedy of Humours* as 'possibly the clearest single indicator of the power and

¹⁷ For further discussion of Chapman's play see *An Humorous Day's Mirth*, ed. by Eleanor Lowe (Digital Renaissance Editions, 2013): <http://digitalrenaissance.uvic.ca/Library/Texts/AHDM/> [15 January 2018].

¹⁸ Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) p. 240; E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923; repr. 1967) vol. II, pp. 148-149.

intensity of the commercial incentive in company repertories through the whole period.’¹⁹ According to Jason Scott-Warren, ‘Humour rapidly became a marketable commodity’, and Jonson’s success as a playwright had begun.²⁰

Chapman had experimented with this new dramatic idea with his first extant play, *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*, whose main character, the blind beggar, Irus, is promised to be ‘most pleasantly discoursing his variable humours in disguised shapes full of conceit and pleasure’ according to the title page. Chapman’s Irus plays the blind beggar and also the characters of Count Hermes, Duke Cleanthes, and Leon the usurer, differentiated by different garments and humoural traits. Although these kinds of character sketches were not a new, Chapman’s innovation was to use temperament (rather than the medical or theoretical aspects of humoural theory) as the plot’s focal point.²¹ Jonson was an innovator of the new comedy, which influenced playwriting at considerable speed.

Jonson’s next play, *Every Man In his Humour*, reflects the influence of Chapman’s comic innovation and uses character as theatrical building blocks. The prologue expresses interest in ‘human follies, not with crimes’ (l. 24). Jonson populates the stage with a combination of the classical stock characters (the old man, witty servant, swaggering soldier); augmentation with humoural comic characteristics enabled a more nuanced depiction of character. Thus Madeleine Doran notes, ‘Humour characters of this sort are unlike the broad types of classical comedy; they are narrower and sharper’.²²

¹⁹ Gurr, p. 241.

²⁰ Jason Scott-Warren, ‘When Theatres Were Bear-Gardens; or, What’s at Stake in the Comedy of Humors’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54 (2003), 63-82; p. 75.

²¹ Charles Read Baskervill refers the reader to Lyly’s *Woman in the Moon* (c.1592) and Nashe’s *Pierce Penniless* (1592); *English Elements in Jonson’s Early Comedy* (Reprint of University of Texas Bulletin No. 178, Austin, Texas, 1911), p. 37.

²² Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama* (Madison, Milwaukee, London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1954; repr. 1972), p. 231.

The fashion for plays containing characters with strange humours or character traits was relatively short-lived. This is evident in the Induction to *Every Man Out of his Humour*, where Asper scoffs at its popularity and affectation less than five years after its debut on the English stage. Cordatus agrees: ‘Now if an idiot/ Have but an apish or fantastic strain,/ It is his humour’ (Induction, ll. 113-15). Asper’s ‘physic’ is to show the audience in meticulous detail,

As large as is the stage whereon we act,
Where they shall see the time’s deformity
Anatomized in every nerve and sinew,
With constant courage and contempt of fear. (ll. 117-20)

This quotation is at the heart of Jonson’s purpose in writing, that literature should be didactic, i.e. that it should educate its audience with a moral message. Clarification is provided by Asper, who promises to ‘strip the ragged follies of the time/ Naked as at their birth’ (ll. 15-16) and to ‘Crush out the humour of such spongy souls/ As lick up every idle vanity’ (ll. 144-45) in an effort to ‘seize on vice’ (l. 143).

Asper is the main orchestrator of action: he is the ‘author’ of the play and also occupies a starring role as Macilente. While *The Case Is Altered* begins backstage at the Count’s palace, *Every Man Out* is located both front and back of the theatrical house. Asper places and prepares his onstage audience, or grex, which provides an ongoing commentary on the action, framing the audience response. Asper tells them what to think and to have no mercy on the characters of his play. Jonson’s overt meta-theatricality is also present

elsewhere in his work: at the beginning of *Bartholomew Fair* the performance is held up by a fallen stocking stitch, and the Stage-Keeper is thrust forward to fill the gap. In *Volpone*, Corvino *thinks* he has seen the performance of adultery: his wife leaning out of the window to throw her handkerchief down to her mountebank lover. His explosive over-reaction is typical of the classical stock type of the jealous husband, who suspects his wife will make him a cuckold by having an affair behind his back.

Corvino views his wife as an actor performing for those assembled in the street, as an actor might on stage before an audience. *Volpone*'s meta-theatrical moment exposes this fear and ridicules it. Corvino's response is disproportionate:

...let me not prosper, whore,
But I will make thee an anatomy,
Dissect thee mine own self, and read a lecture
Upon thee to the city and in public. (2.5.69-72)

The word 'anatomy' works in two ways: Corvino references a 'corpse for dissection' upon which he will base his lecture; he also means 'a subject for moral analysis', the display of vice and folly on the stage, much as a doctor might do of a literal anatomisation at a public dissection in an anatomy theatre.

At the same time as satirical drama became popular there was a surge of interest in public medical dissection. Linking the two, Devon L. Hodges notes that 'with violent determination, writers of anatomies used their pens as scalpels to cut through appearances

and reveal the mute truth of objects.’²³ Scott-Warren has further pointed to accounts of blood sports as entertainments, such as animal baiting, which place value in the documentation of animals’ characters during the fight and notes how they are ‘regularly anthropomorphized by way of their surprising qualities’.²⁴ Perhaps as with animal baiting, there is an objective distancing effect provided by the stage, so that as ‘bearpits and cockpits enabled animals to become objects of knowledge, exposing their inner natures to outward view’, Jonson’s audience is distanced from the treatment his characters endure because of the medical framing device provided by the play’s title.²⁵ Humours comedy stripped superficial layers, permitting ‘privileged glimpses into private selves’²⁶ and also satisfied Jonson’s specific desire to use theatre as a didactic tool through the creation of critical distance.

In doing so, Jonson also rejects another form of art. Early on in the Induction to *Every Man Out*, Asper promises to ‘strip the ragged follies of the time’ as if in imitation of a doctor of dissection. His entrance onto the stage, mid-conversation, is despite the protests of Cordatus and Mitis:

Who is so patient of this impious world
That he can check his spirit, or rein his tongue?
Or who hath such a dead unfeeling sense
That heaven’s horrid thunders cannot wake?
To see the earth, cracked with the weight of sin,
Hell gaping under us, and o’er our heads
Black rav’nous ruin with her sail-stretched wings,

²³ Devon L. Hodges, *Renaissance Fictions of Anatomy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), p. 2.

²⁴ Scott-Warren, p. 71.

²⁵ Scott-Warren, p. 74.

²⁶ Scott-Warren, p. 77.

Ready to sink us down and cover us:
Who can behold such prodigies as these
And have their lips sealed up? Not I. My soul
Was never ground into such oily colours
To flatter vice and daub iniquity,
But with an armèd and resolvèd hand
I'll strip the ragged follies of the time
Naked as at their birth... (Induction, ll.2-16)

Asper provides a striking opposite image with which to compare his stripping of folly: the grinding down of a precious stone or pigment to mix it with oil, creating the paint with which to enhance features and cover up imperfections. His hand carries the scalpel not the brush, and the art to which he aligns himself is medical, educational and physiological, rather than the superficial skill of painting canvases or skin. It is a stark, unforgettable image. Jonson returns to demonstrate its message time and again, in the painted construction of Mistress Otter, whose teeth, eyebrows and hair are segregated into small boxes each night, or in the use of clothing as disguise for deceit and personal gain. That Mistress Otter can be packed into boxes also hints at her demise, and returns us to the image of the anatomised mortal body so familiar from Vesalius' drawings.

Material Culture

Throughout his career, Jonson frequently returns to observations of material culture and superficiality. The first scene of *The Case is Altered* illuminates this concern in more subtle ways than subsequent attacks: the servants make reference to the wearing of livery coats, traditionally made of cheap blue-dyed wool, which in the house's current

circumstance are exchanged for mourning coats of black, exemplifying the cloth and livery society described in some detail by Peter Stallybrass.²⁷

At the beginning of Act 2, Jaques delivers a speech which ends with his confession. It begins with his fright at being visited by men (wooers of Rachel) whom he mistakes for treasure-seekers. The cold sweat which emanates from his brow and bosom draws attention to his clothing (poor, in line with his beggarly status) and suggests a material metaphor with which to explain his weariness:

Look on my coat, my thoughts; worn quite threadbare,
That time could never cover with a nap,
And by it learn never with naps of sleep
To smother your conceits of that you keep. (2.1.9-12)

Jaques puns on 'nap' as a short sleep and the raised fibres on cloth, which on Jaques' outer clothes have been worn away by use. Jaques wishes for sleep to bring with it layers of forgetting. Shakespeare uses a similar metaphor when Macbeth refers to 'Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care' (2.2.35); similarly, Macbeth uses textiles in relation to the good quality sleep of innocence which gathers together the fine particles of silken worry.²⁸ It is a sleep neither he nor Jaques can luxuriate in as murderer and thief, respectively. A few years later, Jonson equated bachelordom with sartorial quiet when Thorello ponders why he married, since before marriage, his mind was 'attired in smooth, silken peace' (3.3.17), anticipating Morose's experience of marriage in *Epicene*.

²⁷ Peter Stallybrass, 'Worn Worlds: Clothes and Identity on the Renaissance Stage', in Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass (eds.), *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 289-320; p. 289.

²⁸ *Macbeth*, ed. by Stanley Wells, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Jaques' metaphor illustrates the dramatic uses to which Jonson puts textiles; their silken threads are woven through the textual stuff of his didacticism. In *Every Man Out*, sartorial anxiety causes the law student Fungoso to swoon when his hero, Fastidius Brisk, enters wearing yet another new suit whilst Fungoso is still in deep debt for copying the previous outfit. Here, and throughout Jonson's plays, money and land are translated into clothing which literally and symbolically betokens wealth through the skill of the tailor and the expense of the material (sometimes interwoven with real gold or silver) or decorated by lace or embroidery. In *The Case Is Altered* 4.9, servants Juniper and Onion understand the equivalence of gold with status in the purchase of basic signifiers: sumptuous clothing in the form of a selection of suits (servants were often allocated one set of clothing per year by their master as part of pay), a foot-cloth (decorating a horse, itself a status item), and the ultimate sign of gentlemanly status, a coat of arms. Ironically, though, Onion describes this 'badge' in the only way he understands its use, as a 'cullison' or marker worn on a servant's clothing as part of his livery, signifying his master.

When Jaques discovers the theft of his gold, he suspects Juniper of having it secreted about his person. This would be perfectly possible since a pair of Elizabethan trunkhose had sufficient space within which to hide various items without detection, as early modern accounts demonstrate. While Jaques suspects the money of being *in* the breeches, Juniper and Onion will turn money *into* clothing and wear Jaques' wealth on their backs. When the two servants reappear in 5.6, they bear the outward signs of having spent a vulgar quantity of money, rather than achieving elevation in actual status: they wear 'rich suits', carry rapiers, and are drunk. However, they haven't accounted for the decorum and education which necessarily complements the wearing of status symbols: just as Stephano complains that he has equipped himself with all the necessary accoutrements to go

hawking, he lacks the knowledge of what to do with them (*Every Man In*, 1.1); likewise, Juniper and Onion have their rapiers, fashionable outward signs of gentlemanly status, yet they are unaccomplished in how to wear, walk or behave with them.²⁹ These practices, as the wearing of upper class clothing, require education and skill. In the final scene, Maximilian's judgement is 'Onion, you will be peeled'; his layers of clothing and trappings of wealth are easy on and easy off, since he is untitled to them.

In *Every Man Out* 4.4, the law student Fungoso has spent beyond his means on shoes, hat and suit and is unable to pay his haberdasher and tailor in full. A little too late he realises his lack of ribbons for his shoes and points for his suit; points are laces often with metal tips for ease in threading them through eyelet holes on both the breeches and doublet, thus lacing a man into his suit. Fungoso's error in forgetting to factor these vital components into his budget exposes his naivety; he might also need someone to help lace him in. He calls the tailor back to return some of his payment so he can buy points and ribbons, but the tailor refuses, offering instead to send some for him, probably nervous that the already part-paid bill will remain outstanding for some time to come.

Count Ferneze's daughters are dressed in mourning clothes for their mother's death, and the younger, Phoenixella, has taken the bereavement hardest. The elder, Aurelia, chides her sister by likening her to a piece of 'true-stitch' embroidery, whose embellishment is the same both sides of the cloth and requires skill to avoid the tails and irregularities of one-sided embroidery. Aurelia figures this particular piece of blackwork as intensive work, but not necessarily attractive to 'buyers':

What, true-stitch sister? Both your sides alike?

²⁹ Eugene Giddens discusses the novelty of rapiers in the 1590s in 'Masculinity and Barbarism in *Titus Andronicus*', *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 15.2 (2010-11), paragraph 16.

Be of a slighter work: for of my word,

You shall be sold as dear, or rather dearer. (2.3.15-17)

Aurelia's point is that while Phoenixella might be mourning both internally and externally (as signified by her clothing) it will ultimately cost her suitors, and she should instead be true to her natural inclination to mourn, rather than what is dictated by custom. Just as Jaques' placement of Rachel in the doorway forces her into position as a vulnerable commodity, so too does Aurelia conceive of the situation of herself and her sister as of commodities looking for buyers. Later in the same sequence, Angelo comments on Aurelia's interest in the superficial by suggesting she would rather appear 'hard-hearted' than 'hard-favoured', i.e. unattractive (2.4.16).

Jonson presents clothing as equivalent to money, literally and metaphorically: money equals lands sold off to acquire the latest fashions, and clothing can be pawned, as in *Every Man In*, where Bobadilla and Matheo pawn an earring jewel and silk stockings (instead of using money) to have Giuliano arrested. Identification for the arrest is based on a given description of his cloak (of russet silk and russet lace). The plays document Jonson as steward of company stage properties, not simply possessions of the theatre company but as representative of London society; Jonson turns commodities out of early modern shops and pockets and onto the stage. He manages and deploys these multiple props, exercising the skills of stage management in marshalling objects and directing plots with which to populate the stage. This material stewardship which Jonson exhibits in his early comedies sets a pattern which he follows throughout his career.

The Case Is Altered

In the same year as Chapman's innovative *The Comedy of Humours*, Jonson offered Henslowe *The Case Is Altered*, which has received passing curiosity but lacks generous critical attention.³⁰ It will form the focal point of the subsequent part of this study, paying attention to its form and content, and the evidence of Jonson 'flexing his muscles'. Count Ferneze, the widowed Count of Milan, has two sons: Camillo, lost in infancy, and Paulo, whom we meet as he is to join the war against the French. Paulo is in love with a beggar's daughter, Rachel, whose over-protective father is Jaques; he is later discovered to have stolen Rachel and gold from Lord Chamont of France. The plot is resolved when a captured prisoner is revealed as Ferneze's long-lost son Camillo, and Rachel as Chamont's sister. The play ends with the unification of a family and anticipation of nuptial celebrations for Paulo and Rachel (now Isabel).

For the plot, Jonson adapted two plays by the Roman dramatist Plautus: in *Aulularia* he found a miserly man's obsession with a pot of divinely-bestowed gold, and the romantic triumph of two lovers (one of them the old man's daughter); the second play, *Captivi*, details the predicament of a wealthy gentleman (Hegio) who recovers his two lost sons as the result of an unexpected deception between a prisoner of war and his servant. *The Case Is Altered* provides ample evidence to refute T.S. Eliot's statement that Jonson's dramatic skill 'was not so much skill in plot, as skill in doing without a plot'.³¹ Jonson deftly interweaves the two plots, re-casting the young lover of the first as a captive soldier in the second, and thus uniting the two comedies.³²

³⁰ Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 31.

³¹ T.S. Eliot, 'Ben Jonson' in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932), p. 155.

³² Robert L. Mack, 'Ben Jonson's Own "Comedy of Errors": "That Witty Play": *The Case Is Altered*', *Ben Jonson Journal* 4 (1997), pp. 47-63; p. 51.

Perhaps one of the play's most obvious flaws is Jonson's occasional over-engineering of the plot to force the point home: thus the two wooers of Plautus' comedy become five wooers of Rachel, producing, as Richard Allen Cave notes, a range of potential rivalries (between father and son, friend and friend, master and man); three lost children are recovered, and the final scene provides 'no fewer than five opportunities for characters to remark pointedly that "the case is altered"'.³³ The combined effect is somewhat mechanical, and, as Barton also points out, 'it is in no sense a Shakespearean vantage point, a place from which the various betrayals and the suffering of five long acts can be reinterpreted and understood'.³⁴ While the plot might be symptomatic of Jonson's much later concerns (of re-uniting a family and ambitious plot) in *The New Inn*, theatre audiences were unappreciative of both plays. Jonson does not neatly tie up all loose ends: four suitors remain unsatisfied at the end of the play (reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*).

A summary which focuses on plot presents Jonson as the trained (dramatic) bricklayer, assembling a composite plot from classical bricks, yet there is much to commend in *The Case Is Altered*. The play's opening, which features the cobbler Juniper 'sitting at work in his shop and singing', made an impression on Thomas Nashe who mentions it directly in his *Lenten Stuffe* of 1598. The printed play has no frame, no prologue, and the reader/audience are thrust backstage at Count Ferneze's Milanese palace, into what Barton describes as 'the realistic clutter of Ferneze's house'.³⁵ Juniper the cobbler is entreated by Peter Onion, groom of the hall, to assist with the serving of dinner:

'God's lid, man, service is ready to go up, man; you must slip on
your coat and come in; we lack waiters pitifully.' (1.1.16-17)

³³ Barton, p. 39; Richard Allen Cave, *Ben Jonson* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 10.

³⁴ Barton, p. 39.

³⁵ Barton, p. 32.

For Onion and Juniper, allegiance and obedience are represented in donning a livery coat. The impact of the Countess's death is visible on the stage and page: the ritualised impression of a grand dinner offstage is captured in Jonson's stage direction: 'Enter an armed sewer; some half-dozen in mourning coats following, and pass by with service'. In passage to and fro across the stage, players convey a sense of the Count's busy household, and represent affiliation to its management and function in sartorial distinguishing marks.

Jonson takes advantage of the bare stage's flexibility: it becomes the hall, the beggar's house, the rooms of a Count's palace; but he also demonstrates additional skill in marshalling his characters on, off and around the stage, also later demonstrated with ambitious complexity in *Every Man Out* 3.1, and likened by Ostovich to the choreography of dance.³⁶ In *The Case Is Altered*, the visual effect is augmented aurally: in 1.7 several servants are engaged in finding Paulo, and their calls to each other heighten the impression of a busy, 'occupied' household in the middle of a frantic hunt. It's the sort of noise and busyness which would so annoy Morose in the later play *Epicene*. The first scenes give a distinct impression of decorum and status as befits the servants and masters of an upper class household. Onion says the Count is 'above', as appropriate to his status, and the informality of the servants' hall with its banter and work contrasts markedly with the Count's quarters, no less busy (so that Paulo cannot escape to find five minutes alone with his friend) but not so convivial.

³⁶ Ostovich, Introduction, 'Illustrating Place and Meaning: Paul's Walk', pp. 59-68.

Status is also reflected in Jonson's use of 'value' tokens to assess the assembled characters. Rachel, an attractive well-behaved young woman, elicits differing responses from her suitors: is she desired for a quiet marriage, because other men want her, for her beauty, or for lustful reasons? Similarly Jaques' stolen money embodies contrasting forms of value for characters of differing status and expectation: for Juniper and Onion it buys rich suits and enough drink to become inebriated; for Jaques the hoarding of the gold becomes the end in itself, becoming his very being: 'Oh thou thievish cannibal,/ Thou eat'st my flesh in stealing of my gold' (5.5.8-9). His exclamation 'The thief is gone: my gold's gone, Rachel's gone' (5.5.20) is painfully reminiscent of Shylock's cry of 'O my ducats! O my daughter!' reported by Salanio in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (2.8), performed the year before this play.

The stage is utilised as a house in several of the plays: doors are knocked on, the stage conceals and contains, but secrets are also overheard and exposed. In *Every Man In*, Thorello's house is comprised not just of the building, but also of the people within, and the master and his mistress govern both its management and mood. Thorello's is governed by jealousy, its humour pervading each room until Thorello believes his wife could poison him by cup or clothing. The common-sense Bianca comments: 'If you be sick, your own thoughts make you sick' (4.3.39).³⁷ Households also provide the main locations for *The Case Is Altered*; Jonson presents the Count's household stifled by grief but segmented by status and bustling functionality in contrast with Jaques' humble, quiet abode.

A Tale of Two Stewards

³⁷ Ben Jonson, *Every Man in his Humour*, ed. by Robert S. Miola (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

Noble households were managed by stewards, extremely high-ranking servants, and the play offers two case studies of men occupying this role: Christophero in Count Ferneze's household, and Jaques de Prie, formerly known as Melun, steward in Lord Chamont senior's household. The backstage realm of the house is a populated space, full of business and busyness: the serving of dinner, mending of shoes, of dishes carried back and forth, and correct attire to be donned in accordance with status. Jonson works hard to present a noble household at dinner time, perhaps one of the most ritualised, labour-intensive focal points of the day, requiring timing, co-ordination of servants, objects and cooking, and the clockwork execution of the meal as befitting the Count's status. Christophero is in charge of this daily operation and representative of the steward in upper-class households of the time.

Evidence from *Viscount Montague's Household Book* of 1595, which documents detailed instructions for the best government of his household, supports this impression.³⁸ The book lists the steward as chief of all household officers, a man responsible for the entire management of the Montague house: for its money and allocation to various more junior officers for the purchase of food supplies, furniture and repairs to the various households and estates; he is also responsible for the proper conduct of the servants, and is himself answerable only to Viscount Montague, who states: 'my will is that he ... assist me with sound advice on matters of most importance, and greatest deliberation, and therein faithfully keep all my secrets.'³⁹ A steward, then, was a lord's most trusted right-hand man, his deputy, supervising and superior to all other household servants, accountable for

³⁸ *Viscount Montague's Household Book*, reproduced in *Cowdray and Easebourne Priory in the County of Sussex*, William H. St. John Hope (London: Country Life, 1919), Appendix II, pp. 119-134. See also Eleanor Lowe, 'Duty and Authority: Malvolio, Stewardship and Montague's Household Book', in *Shakespeare and Authority: Citations, Conceptions and Constructions*, ed. by Katie Halsey and Angus Vine (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming 2018).

³⁹ *Viscount Montague's Household Book*, p. 122.

the upkeep, smooth running and provision of materials in the house, with large responsibility for the whole operation.

We do not know much about Melun's record whilst in Chamont's employ, apart from its termination in the theft of gold and Chamont's two year old daughter, Isabel, whom Jaques renames Rachel. He justifies his actions because the baby 'would leave/ The nurse herself to come into mine arms' (2.1.38-39), and mysteriously comments that she would 'sure have died' (1. 40) had he not taken her: justification after the fact, or a steward's responsibility for his human charges? His subsequent lack of concern for his 'daughter' is miniscule in comparison with his affection for the gold; in fact, Rachel functions as keeper of the gold whilst Jaques is away on his mysterious business.

When Jaques leaves the house, he is torn between locking the door against intruders, suggestive that the house is empty and leaving it open to attack, and making Rachel's presence explicit. He decides on the latter, ordering her to sit in the doorway:

Ope the door, Rachel, set it open, daughter;

But sit in it thyself: and talk aloud,

As if there were some more in the house with thee. (11.61-63)

In attempting to protect house and gold from suspicion, Jaques unwittingly leaves Rachel exposed to approaches from male visitors. Her placement, in the doorway of the house, explicitly warns that the house is occupied, but also makes *her* vulnerable to their attentions. The doorway provides a frame, suggestive of a shop window, further implying that Rachel is herself advertised and available. Such presentation might remind the Rose audience of other staged shop scenes or recall visits to Cheapside across the river. Similar concerns regarding women sitting in shop windows are echoed in other examples from

Early Modern drama. Leslie Thomson identifies that the increase in consumerism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries created a larger role for woman in their husbands' city businesses, often behind the counter and visible through the window or opening.⁴⁰ With increased liberty and responsibility, such positions also allowed women to be figured as objects of desire, even for sale, along with goods behind the counter in the shop.

If this comparison can be drawn with Rachel's placement in the doorway of Jaques' house, then his fatherly care is negated by risking her presentation as a target of desire; her presence will draw attention *to* the house and its contents, rather than disinteresting those seeking precious bounty. Thorello in *Every Man Out* shares a similar concern: leaving his house also leaves his treasure (his wife) unprotected. The Count remembers first falling for Rachel's beauty when he 'spied her, lately, at her father's door' (2.6.36). When Jaques' dishonesty and theft is later identified he rejects all ties to Rachel, calling her 'harlot' and referring to 'her customers', i.e. wooers. Jaques frames Rachel as a prostitute, one who trades sex for money, but rejects any responsibility for being the one responsible for literally 'framing' her in his doorway, equating her with sexual commerce rather than innocence.

Also ironic is Jaques' ignorance that his daughter's beauty (and not her sexual services) attracts men from a wide social spectrum: her suitors range from the lowliest servants, Onion and Juniper, to the Count himself, by way of Paulo, Angelo and the steward Christophero. Just as the gold attracts all men, regardless of their status or possessions, so too does Rachel. She has something special in her looks, which several of her suitors

⁴⁰ For a full discussion of this subject, see Leslie Thomson, "'As proper a woman as any in Cheap": Women in Shops on the Early Modern Stage', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 16 (2003), 145-161.

comment on as an inherent beauty betokening birth of greater dignity than that of a beggar. The Count notes: 'And if I did not see in her sweet face/ Gentry and nobleness, ne'er trust me more' (2.6.37-38). Jaques does not comment on it: he is the only character who knows the truth about her birth and origins, and yet fails to value his precious charge as highly as the gold. Instead he professes to 'enjoy' his gold, but this enjoyment involves worshipping it rather creating further happiness. Both Rachel and the gold serve as touchstones for the characters who idolise them: for Juniper and Onion, Rachel is an object of lust and physical enjoyment, while Paulo's relations with her suggest the mutual respect required for a lasting partnership. Likewise for Juniper and Onion, the gold is equal to instantaneous pleasures: translation into expensive suits, drink, the service of pages, and swords. All of these superficially denote figures of status, yet Juniper and Onion miss the point that behaviour and respect are fundamental.

This is also the case in Jonson's *Epicene*, where bearing arms is thought to signify standing and nobility, yet only succeeds in equating to brash overstatement. When Count Ferneze is told of Jaques' theft, he remembers that two of his servants had recently and suddenly come into inexplicable sums of money, thus fulfilling his noble role as master of the household. The gold is returned to Jaques because Chamont has no desire for it, delighting only in his sister's rediscovery; Rachel/Isabel belongs to Paulo, the only suitor to demonstrate respect and good behaviour (both to her and his fellows) in his wooing. Jaques' story of Rachel's theft is framed as the act of a kind steward, but he gives no justification of this statement. The most famous steward in early modern drama is perhaps Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, which was performed within a few years of *The Case Is Altered*. His inflated pride famously comes before his downfall, and by the end of the

play he is ejected from the very household which he controls. Jaques' former role is revealed once we have observed Christophero as controller of Ferneze's household. However, Christophero, like Jaques, is also guilty of double dealing: he agrees to support the lower servant Juniper's petition to Rachel, but immediately hatches a plan to have her for himself:

This wench will I solicit for myself,
Making my lord and master privy to it;
And if he second me with his consent,
I will proceed, as having long ere this
Thought her a worthy choice to make my wife. (2.1.45-49)

He will cross Juniper and use his advantageous position to gain the Count's favour (little knowing that the Count will also woo Rachel for himself). Christophero voices a common concern about the ability of married servants in the workplace:

Aye, but your lordship may imagine now
That I, being steward of your honour's house,
If I be married once, will more regard
The maintenance of my wife and of my charge
Than the due discharge of my place and office. (2.6.13-17)

The best servants are thought to be those who are unmarried, since they have no concerns of their own other than their duty in the household they serve. In one sense, Malvolio's fantasies are not simply to move up the social ladder and bag himself Olivia, lording it over Sir Toby and his cronies in the process; such a scenario would also allow him to keep his position in charge of the house, in double function as its former steward and new lord.

But Christophero is in turn crossed by his master, the Count, so that the episode functions not so much as a specific comment on stewards, but on men more generally. The dramatisation of the two stewards serves to exemplify the inherent power in such a role: Jaques confesses his crimes early on to the audience, but of the other characters it is Count Ferneze who ultimately proves his status as head of the household, unravelling the mystery of the stolen gold using knowledge that two of his servants have ‘become’ gallants overnight. In this case, the steward has taken his eye off the ball, and fallen short of Viscount Montague’s strict recommendations.

In his role as educative playwright, Jonson documents and satirises the perceived risks to society: the fear of change on behalf of the authorities and the desire for social mobility amongst the population. It is represented by the nuts and bolts of social interaction, clothing, activities such as bowing, dancing and smoking tobacco, and conceit, self-approval, an inability or unwillingness to self-judge. Perhaps this is because Jonson’s early drama reflects a lack of confidence in authority figures: Count Ferneze makes little impression in the second half of *The Case Is Altered*, Doctor Clement crowns Musco as a sort of lord of misrule in *Every Man In*, and Jonson imposes a critical author and commentary team on his audience of *Every Man Out*.⁴¹ But the delight which saves Jonson’s drama is also the detail: for example, in the recognition of Ferneze’s lost son Camillo, who around his neck wore a silver globe, below inscribed with the words ‘in minimo mundus’, ‘a world in the smallest’ (5.12.39).

⁴¹ Jonson later returns to domestic politics through the figure of the steward in both *The Sad Shepherd* and *The Magnetic Lady*; the latter also sees Jonson revisit humours comedy.

Jonson's plays create an inventive world of characters, settings, and language, in which the world outside is brought into the small realm of the theatre. Camillo's silver globe is paralleled with his father's world of grief at losing him; the silver globe is tarnished, just as Jonson's career in the theatre was later to be tarnished. Valentine's speech on Utopia's 'common theatres' captures Jonson's later concerns:

A man shall have such a confused mixture of judgement poured out in the throng there as ridiculous as laughter itself: one says he likes not the writing, another likes not the plot, another not the playing. (2.7.34-36)

This anxiety is repeated by Jonson throughout his writing career, and is observed in the character of Asper who guides and bullies his audience through the Induction to *Every Man Out*. Jonson experienced the real sting of an audience's rejection when several gallants walked out of a performance of his play *The New Inn* in 1629, which subsequently flopped; to rub salt in the wound, his amanuensis, Richard Brome, was at that very point in time enjoying enormous success with his first (non-extant) play, *The Love-Sick Maid*. But at the end of Elizabeth's reign, Jonson was in the ascendancy, and continued to illuminate wider issues, commodity, culture, and reputation, with the perceptive insight of a dramatic steward which left a precious lasting theatrical legacy.

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