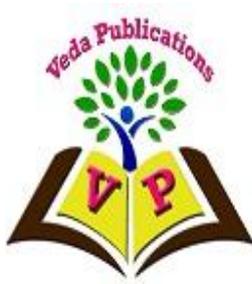


**WOMEN AND HUMAN FOLLY IN BEN JONSON'S PLAYS**V.Pandimeena¹, E .Janani²¹(Lecturer Department Of English, Nadar Saraswathi College of Arts and Science, Theni.)²(M.A English Student, Nadar Saraswathi College of Arts and Science, Theni.)

Email: jananielango1995@gmail.com

doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.61.17>**ABSTRACT**

Ben Jonson was the foremost man of letters in England. Largely self-taught, the dramatist developed a style that united his love for the classics with an innate bent for satire. The agreement among some present researchers is that Jonson plainly practices and advocates misogyny in his dramas. Such theorists suggest that Jonson both embodies and promulgates the anti-woman rhetoric of his time, basing their position on contemporary cultural material, religious tracts, and the writings of King James I. A more productive method of determining misogyny in Jonson's dramaturgy is to look into the plays themselves. The following analysis will examine Jonson's work in order to advance the position that Jonson treats his women characters no better nor worse than the men. By definition, the purpose of satire is to ridicule human folly for the purpose of instruction. Jonson's dramatic vision prizes wit over foolishness, yet Jonson does not ascribe gender to this binary.

Keywords: *Misogyny, Human Folly, Wit, Gender.*



Ben Jonson was the first literary dictator and poet-laureate, a writer of verse, prose, satire, and criticism. As a youth he attracted the attention of the famous antiquary, William Camden, then usher at Westminster School, and there the poet laid the solid foundations of his classical learning. Jonson always held Camden in reverence, acknowledging that to him he owed, "All that I am in arts, all that I know:" and dedicating his first dramatic success, "Every Man in His Humour," to him. "Every Man in His Humour" was an immediate success, and with it Jonson's reputation as one of the leading dramatists of his time was established once and for all. Jonson's comedy of humours, in a word, conceived of stage personages on the basis of a ruling trait or passion (a notable simplification of actual life be it observed in passing); and, placing these typified traits in juxtaposition in their conflict and contrast, struck the spark of comedy. Jonson's source for his condition of humour is Galen's medical theory. Galen and his followers believed that perfect health depended on the balance of four humours—bile, phlegm, choler, and blood. When a humour exceeded its proper boundary, it generated systemic disruptions: for example, a ruddy complexion accompanied by a burning fever meant that choleric humour had gained ascendancy. Jonson adopted a simpler, bipolar scheme based on psychological disorders associated with choler and blood. In Jonson's taxonomy, choler manifests itself in excessive anger and is the foundation of the irascible and concupiscent temperament. Captain Bobadil and Matthew are personifications of such a humour.

Current scholars opine that Jonson overtly practices and advocates misogyny in his dramas. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term "misogyny," meaning "hostility to women," was not coined until 1656. Clearly, what the feminists refer to is a codified system, patriarchy that holds men to be superior to women. In *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, Lawrence Stone writes: The growth of patriarchy was deliberately encouraged by the new Renaissance state on the traditional grounds that the subordination of the family to the head is analogous to, and also a direct contributory cause of, subordination of subjects to the sovereign. (152)

Jonson treats his women characters no better nor worse than the men. By definition, the purpose of satire is to ridicule human folly for the purpose of instruction. Jonson's dramatic vision prizes wit over foolishness, yet Jonson does not ascribe gender to this binary. Men are not always

clever nor women always silly in Jonson's dramatic world. This is not to assert that Jonson is always kind to his female characters, for certainly he is not. But many male representations feel the keenness of their creator's knife as well. If Jonson's handling of female characters appears uneven, so is his depiction of males. That is because, unlike Shakespeare, he does not develop character through the course of his drama. Hidden motives do not interest Jonson; rather, his characters are envisioned on a spectrum of mental acuity, a measure that in Jonsonian drama is fixed. Dim-witted characters do not become enlightened, and clever characters are only displaced by those with more savvy. The plot develops as a result of interaction between the cheaters and the cheated.

Although the two tragedies *Sejanus, His Fall* (1603) and *Catiline, His Conspiracy* (1611) feature extremely able women, notably the murderous Livia, a focus on the satiric element of Jonson's drama dictates that the scope be limited to comedy. Certainly Jonson's earlier work—such as *Every Man in His Humour* (1598)—is short on female characters, but the seeds are planted that develop into the stronger, more-fully developed females of his later work. Viewed in this light Bridget in *Every Man in His Humour* is important because she incarnates into Grace in *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), and finally develops into the sensible Pru in *The New Inn* and the dynamic Frances in *The Devil Is an Ass* (1616).

If Jonson's handling of female characters appears uneven, so is his depiction of males. That is because, unlike Shakespeare, he does not develop character through the course of his drama. Hidden motives do not interest Jonson; rather, his characters are envisioned on a spectrum of mental acuity, a measure that in Jonsonian drama is fixed. Dim-witted characters do not become enlightened, and clever characters are only displaced by those with more savvy. Viewed in this way, Celia, the afflicted wife in *Volpone* (1606), is an innocent victim in a vicious game between Volpone and Corvino. Arguably the most helpless female in Jonson's canon of female characters, Celia is not overly-endowed with coping strategies. In spite of her limited mental resources, Jonson never suggests that she deserves her fate, and in the conclusion Celia is treated kindly by the



playwright, for she is allowed an escape from her difficult circumstances. Other female representations might be seen as targets of Jonson's misogyny, notably the Collegiates in *Epicœne*. On closer inspection, it is evident that Jonson has an entirely different strategy in mind, for the foppish male characters, in that comedy, receive the same or worse, caustic delineation. It may be said that the purpose of such a negative portrayal of the Collegiates is to foreground the more detestable character of the males. Moreover, Morose the alleged misogynist is actually a misanthrope, a fact that suggests a different reading of Jonson's dramatic purpose.

With the advent of new historicist criticism, recent scholars approach Jonson's dramaturgy with a predetermined view that male characters are active and strong while female characters are passive and silly. The assertion continues that Jonson's overt misogyny is evident in the creation of ridiculous female characters. The quality of wit, in such a view, is an exclusively masculine trait that is heightened in the face of so much female folly. This conclusion is patently false, for Jonson portrays many foolish males from Kitely in *Every Man in His Humour* (1598) to Sir Diaphanous Kilkworm in *The Magnetic Lady* (1632), characters who are out-manuevered by smarter representations. Yet, wit is not necessarily intelligence; rather, it is common sense coupled with ingenuity or cunning: the ability to "think on one's feet." Nor is such mental acuity gender specific as the following discussion will make clear. In "Identifying Ethical Values in *Volpone*" C. J. Gianakaris proposes a taxonomy that neatly describes degrees of wit to form a hierarchy in *Volpone*. The first level, the witless, is made up of creatures who lack the capacity for independent action; Celia and Bonario are two such characters. The middle level is distinguished by figures of intelligence who, to an extent, control their own behavior. These characters range from the simpleminded Sir Pol to the versatile Voltore. Unfortunately, their mental acuity is superficial, and they are victimized by still shrewder characters. The top echelon is composed of near-brilliant figures who direct the actions of all the other characters; *Volpone* and *Mosca* fit into this category (46). Careful consideration will reveal that the theme centering on

a hierarchy of wit is not just confined to *Volpone* but exists within the dramatic world of all Jonson's plays, for the cheater/cheated thematic device rests solely on such a hierarchy of mental prowess.

In the posthumously published *Discoveries*, Jonson notes that the quality of wit is variable. Delineating the characteristic, Jonson employs the Latin term *ingenium* (genius) in order to denote the inborn nature of the trait (HS 8.637). Jonson, like Gianakaris, proposes a three-tiered hierarchy: good, mediocre, and imos—the downright bad—and insists that good wit is "thin and rare among us." He sums up the exegesis on the infrequency of such a trait by citing Justice Clement's speech at the conclusion of *Every Man In His Humour*: "It is only a king or a poet that is not born every year" (8.637).

Jonson's satiric intent is openly didactic; he portrays situations in which characters overestimate their abilities and therefore suffer from pretension, and, at the other end of the wit-spectrum, he shows characters who, lacking common sense, are born victims. Within Jonson's three-tiered framework, female characters can be evaluated on the basis of wit as well as men. Dol Common, a coney-catcher in *The Alchemist*, is one character who embodies the ability to effect a given course of action. For most of the play Dol not only adeptly performs in her various roles, but she also serves as peacekeeper between the bickering males. Ursula in *Bartholomew Fair* and Polish in *The Magnetic Lady* are also active planners whose manipulation directs the behavior of lesser characters. In other words, women of superior wit control not only their own behavior, they control the actions of others; however, they come across as sympathetic figures. Ursula, like Dol, is the only woman in a cadre of male tricksters, yet she enjoys the affection and respect of her male cohorts. Polish, on the other hand, directs a group of women as she brazenly attempts to switch her own daughter with another for the sake of an inheritance. All three of these superior female wits—Dol, Ursula, and Polish—are treated sympathetically by Jonson who refuses to punish them unduly for any crimes they might commit in their leadership capacities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1]. Barish, Jonas A., *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963.



- [2]. Bambrough, J. B. *Ben Jonson*, London: Hutchinson, 1970.
 - [3]. Barton, Anne. *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
 - [4]. Butler, Martin. *Representing Ben Jonson: Text, History, Performance*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.
 - [5]. Carlton, Charles. *The Court of Orphans*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991.
 - [6]. Dutton, Richard. *Ben Jonson: To the First Folio*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.202
 - [7]. *Niewoonder, Sherry Broadwell, Ben Jonson and The Mirror: Folly Knows No Gender*. scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2384&context=dissertations
-