

Ben Jonson: The Ends of Comedy – A Primer

By James Wallis

Ben Jonson was one of the most prolific playwrights of the early modern age, and not just because his plays were successful (at times they weren't), or because of his continued success in the theatrical world beyond his age (that's debatable). Jonson's career spanned decades, across numerous theatres, including his work at the Court, and begot a canon as diverse as Shakespeare. But Jonson's reputation now rests, mostly, on the success of his four middle comedies: *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair*, and the satire of wit and noise, *Epicene or The Silent Woman*.

"To hear or to read *Epicene*, or any other Jonsonian comedy, is to be jarred, sometimes lightly, sometimes emphatically, by inflation of image and maladjustment of diction, by inappropriate rhetorical schemes and hollow rhythms, all marking the deviation from decorum which defines, as it informs, the comic life of the play." (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, The Yale Ben Jonson edited by Edward Partridge, pg. 11)

Because we know more about Jonson, in comparison to other early modern playwrights, we have some actual thoughts of his about the theatre, his profession, and his aims with genre. What did Jonson think the ends of comedy were? He seemingly took inspiration from the classics, like Cicero: "that comedy is the imitation of life, the mirror of custom, the image of truth...a thing throughout pleasant, and ridiculous, and accommodated to the correction of manners" (translated, quoted in Partridge). "Manners" are also referred to in other circumstances as customs, decorum, or social mores. In Jonsonian comedy, "the emphasis on 'customs' and 'manners' suggests, the 'imitation of what is natural' is concerned with human nature as it expresses itself in society. The life and the truth mirrored in the comic glass is made up of common custom – common not in the sense of a sociological or historical accident or even statistical computation, but in the conceptual sense of a permanent and objective value in human affairs, common to all societies." (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, The Yale Ben Jonson edited by Edward Partridge, pg. 8.)

One of Jonson's earliest successes was a series of comedic satires for various boys' companies. Two of those plays were specifically having to do with the early modern physiological/psychological construct of Humours, which was a pseudo-scientific belief in human bodily functions, like phlegm or bile, that supposedly controlled a person's attitude, mood, or outlook. Jonson's two plays: *Every Man in His Humour* and *Every Man Out of His Humour* lampoon society, audiences of the theatre, and other poets. These plays made Jonson highly regarded in his profession. He became more sophisticated and more ornate with his satire throughout his career but these humoural plays stuck with Jonson, as a way to represent the mores of society in a very funny way. *Epicene* could be argued to be in this tradition, but acts more as a "comedy of affliction," where the humoural diseases are almost without cure.

Epicene was most likely first performed around December 1609, based on the folio title-page. Likely the London theatres (which were closed due to the plague for most of 1609) didn't open until after December 1609, and most likely the play (the first publicly performed

since *Volpone* in 1606, albeit by a children's company) was first performed in 1610, around March.

The play was written for the Children of Whitefriars, a composite children's company of defunct troupes, playing at the newly acquired Whitefriars theatre. The children's companies were not as popular as they once had been, and their "boys" were growing older, with their leading actor Nathan Field probably as old as 21. But there was still a higher-class audience looking for entertainment, satire being one of their favourite genres, which was a specialty of the children's companies, and Ben Jonson. The partnership between the two was fortunate. Jonson seems to have had an acute sense of how to work with necessities of the theatrical space at Whitefriars and his new company: studies have shown how "professionally Jonson had taken into account the physical properties of what was for him an unfamiliar theatre (as he did the qualities of the company, and the nature of its audience) in writing the play." (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, Revels edition of the play edited by Charles Dutton, pg. 53); also, with *Epicene*, Jonson, "clearly exploited the confinement (of the Whitefriars theatre) in terms of its aural effectiveness: the silence that Morose craves is an achievable reality in such concentrated conditions, in ways that could never have been true in one of the outdoor amphitheatres." (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, Revels edition of the play edited by Charles Dutton, pg. 53)

Jonson clearly set out to write a play that was useful for the new company, and one that would attract a certain clientele. Two sources of the play, Ovid and Juvenal, were both highly imaginative classical poets, and satirists. Their work is used by Jonson both directly and indirectly, "passages from Ovid's urbane *Ars Amatoria* occur throughout the play, establishing a casually cynical attitude to women's supposed artifice, extravagance, sexual appetites and so on" (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, Revels edition of the play edited by Charles Dutton, pg. 45); and some scholars, identified "a tension in Jonson himself between Ovid's realistic acceptance of the-world-as-we-find-it and Juvenal's outraged loathing of it" (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, Revels edition of the play edited by Charles Dutton, pg. 45). Jonson believed that literary imitation should "convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use" and therefore, "since *Epicene* is an ironic comedy, not a sermon or a case study, it does not categorically answer these questions but creates an image of life in which different possible points of view are comically represented and judged" (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, The Yale Ben Jonson edited by Edward Partridge, pg. 15). Jonson was a meticulous, classical playwright, using sources, as well as genre, to their full dramatic capacities for his contemporary audience.

In terms of genre, *Epicene* is highly satirical but also farcical, which Jonson had melded in the past with *Volpone* and would end up using again in the later play *The Alchemist*. Farce, as a genre, some would say, lacks "moral or critical edge." Therefore, Jonson's satire must compensate because "farce's remorseless exposure of weaknesses, inadequacies, embarrassments, pomposities, and hypocrisies, may be entertaining but it finally suggests that these are the sum of the parts of the human being – take it or leave it." (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, Revels edition of the play edited by Charles Dutton, pg. 65). The question remains, unlike other comedies by Jonson, does *Epicene* reach any kind of satirical instruction? Because of the likely audience at the Whitefriars, and the play's own relationship to current events, it cuts at deeply embedded, high class representations of wit,

privilege, and conduct: “Jonson has gone out of his way to make these wits readily identifiable images of the target audience at the Whitefriars theatre: young gentlemen of talent and education, with the hope (if not quite expectation) of living a life of leisure. These are characters whom an audience might *choose* to support, if not indeed identify with” (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, Revels edition of the play edited by Charles Dutton, pg. 67); and, “few plays, excluding others by Jonson, control and vary an audience’s great enjoyment of comic irony the way *Epicoene* does” (*Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, The Yale Ben Jonson edited by Edward Partridge, pg. 4). Because of the mingling of satire and farce, besides the verbose wit and over-the-top rhetoric that the characters use, *Epicene* is enigmatic in its impact, and tests the audience’s sympathy, not only because of the characters’ actions but also the lack of moral superiority from any character. The satire is all-inclusive, which could include the audience as well.

The play’s deepest thematic concerns can be defined with a definition of the Latinate title *Epicene*, which is, “having characteristics of both sexes or no characteristics of either sex; of indeterminate sex” (*OED*). This idea of gender confusion was a prevalent theme, mostly pejoratively, in Jacobean theatre. “Mannish women and womanish men were, of course, familiar satirical targets, condemned in Deuteronomy, fulminated against by Puritan writers, and ridiculed in any number of Jacobean plays” (*Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, New Mermaids edition of the play edited by Roger Holdsworth, pg. xxxi). At its core *Epicene* is a “play of paradoxes,” which show dualities of class, relationships, religion, and gender.

The play abounds with examples of social mores, and how the gender roles constructed by society create and affect relationship status’, and sexual decorum or impulse: “The play asks not only ‘what should a man do?’ but also, how should men and women behave, both as fit examples of their sex, and to one another?” (*Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, New Mermaids edition of the play edited by Roger Holdsworth, pg. xxix). This blanket satire, crossing both genders, is both arresting and flat, “Jonson’s satire is not reserved for his women: indeed, that women as such may be a subsidiary issue in the play, their follies merely a consequence of the failed ‘manliness’ of their lords and masters. *Epicene* herself is never ‘really’ a woman: she is always a projection of men’s fantasies, positive and negative” (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, Revels edition of the play edited by Charles Dutton, pg. 89). And the satire is about sexuality of the characters, both in how the conduct of the sexes is expected in society, and how a diversion from that expectation can cause disorder, “in one way or another most of the satirized characters lose or distort their sexuality” (*Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, Regents Renaissance Drama edition edited by L.A. Beaurline, pg. xv). We see into the cruel sexualized games of these characters, but do we appreciate or applaud them? Jonson, like many other playwrights, seemed intimately aware of societies sexual evils, “Jonson associates social mobility with sexual monstrosity and sexual monstrosity with women’s attempt at equality...thus it would seem that traditional Renaissance sexual values – polarization of sexual roles, the subordination of women, and marriage based on a balance of affection and property – constitute the norm against which the play’s biting satire operates” (*The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* by Mary Beth Rose, pg. 58). Again, we see Jonson in the play, but are not certain of his lesson.

The play is unique in its representation of a class of rich, bored men, that would have frequented the theatre for this play. How he characterizes these men is interesting, “the

play voices blatantly misogynistic attitudes, and its depiction of women is wholly unsympathetic...the play is surprisingly relaxed about male-male relations, some of which are intensely homosocial: some might well be described as homoerotic" (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, Revels edition of the play edited by Charles Dutton, pg. 88). *Epicene* is set in what is a fashionable London, where the three gallant wits Truewit, Cleimont, and Dauphine would find their entertainment. This London was "a place of seeing, being seen, of buying, selling, performing social rituals: in short, a place of activity and noise...Jonson measures his characters by the social geography of London" (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, Revels edition of the play edited by Charles Dutton, pg. 12); London was a crowded, noisy place and, "the play places the same stress on the humanizing power of speech by regularly associating silence with unnaturalness, disease, and death...Moreover, silence is anticomic, and in two senses; comedy naturally backs the vital and expressive, and, more fundamentally, without speakers there would be no play" (*Epicene or The Silent Woman*, New Mermaids edition of the play edited by Roger Holdsworth, pg. xxxv). The situation of Morose and his aversion to noise, speaks to the satire of a city capsizing into itself because of over population, economic disparity, and other social problems, which then leads to people taking advantage, and the ensuing sexual and collective debauchery.

So, what, if anything cogent, is Jonson going after with this play; what are the ends of this comedy? It's best, in my opinion, to see Jonson's comedies including both a reflection of a society he knew, and his own personal calculated commentary about that society. Like the other "big three" comedies by Jonson, *Epicene* is a play full of biting, harsh satire, but also enjoyable theatrical situation; his witty prose speaks with a ravishing power, but the ideas, certainly the ideas of an obvious misogynist like Jonson, are disgusting, but then Jonson makes sure to place them in the mouths of people, whom were not supposed to completely agree with; and, finally, the comedies leave you with a certain feeling, a wry understanding of a world that is corrupt, but knows so, and therefore self-consciously takes everything it can from a society that allows them to.

The ends of Jonsonian comedy seems to vacillate paradoxically between indifference and astonishment, and contains lessons for enjoyment and scorn.