

HAYNES

The Social Relations of  
Jonson's Theater

# *The Social Relations of Jonson's Theater*

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Jonathan Haynes's *The Social Relations of Jonson's Theater* is about the Elizabethan playwright Ben Jonson as a realist, and as an astute observer of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Many of the forms and purposes of his realism spring from the social dynamics of the theaters in which he worked. Jonson's art arose in circumstances fraught with social pressures, and although his plays cannot be reduced to these pressures neither can his art be understood apart from them. This is a study of the social relations represented *in* Jonson's plays, but it is also about the social relations *of* the plays themselves, of what happened between Jonson and his audience in the theater.

Haynes makes a detailed literary historical argument about the sources and consequences of Jonson's realism. The book polemicizes against the moral and formal pre-occupations of the last two generations of Jonson criticism; it is informed by the new social history and by the sociology of Pierre Bordieu and Norbert Elias.

*The Social Relations of Jonson's Theater*

*for Ann  
and  
for David Konstan*

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**MITIS:** I trauell with another objection, signoir, which I fear will bee enforc'd against the author, ere I can be deliuer'd of it.

**CORDATUS:** What's that, sir?

**MITIS:** That the argument of his *Comoedie* might haue beene of some other nature, as of a duke to be in loue with a countesse, and that countesse to bee in loue with the dukes sonne, and the sonne to loue the ladies waiting maid: some such crosse wooing, with a clowne to their seruimgman, better then to be thus neere, and familiarly allied to the time.

*Every Man out of his Humour*, III.6.191–201

I can assure those unprejudiced readers who are solicitous to become acquainted with the domestic manners and pursuits of our forefathers, that they will find more to gratify their rational curiosity in the dramas of this great poet, than in all the writers of his age.

Gifford, *Jonson's Works*

Le fait théâtral déborde constamment l'écriture dramatique, puisque la représentation des rôles sociaux, réels ou imaginaires, provoque une contestation, une adhésion, une participation qu'aucun autre art ne peut provoquer.

Jean Duvignaud, *Sociologie du Théâtre*



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## Introduction: Jonson's Realism

### "A MEERE EMPYRICK"

In *The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus*, performed at Cambridge University about 1601, Ingenioso and Indicio find time to pass judgment on the current literary scene; eventually they get to "Beniamin Iohnson":

*Indicio.* The wittiest fellow of a Bricklayer in England.

*Ingenioso.* A meere Empyrick, one that getts what he hath by obseruation, and makes onely nature priuy to what he endites; so slow an Inuentor, that he were better betake himselfe to his old trade of Bricklaying; a bould whorson, as confident now in making of a booke, as he was in times past in laying of a brick. (l.2.295 ff.)<sup>1</sup>

"A meere Empyrick" is one who has not had theoretical training in his art, a strange charge to our ears, since Jonson has usually been thought of as the great pedant of Elizabethan drama, or as combining seamlessly and in ideal proportions classical art and English matter. What also strikes us immediately about this speech is its intolerable class condescension:<sup>2</sup> arrogant and stupid, yet clearly representing powerful prejudices, it seems motive enough for Jonson's prickly and defiant project of public self-definition as artist and playwright. But what I want to pursue at the moment is the claim that Jonson "getts what he hath by obseruation." The charge of "Empiricism" is not only a matter of class hatred obscuring Jonson's learning and art, but a backhanded tribute to his realism, which, even if mistaken for artlessness, is taken to be his defining artistic characteristic.

It is not presented as an artistic characteristic, but as stealing. This was a familiar accusation, and probably a reverberation from the War of the Theaters: In the Induction to Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels* (1600–01) a representative of the

<sup>1</sup> J. B. Leishman, ed., *The Three Parnassus Plays* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1949), l.2.292 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Leishman thinks this passage is probably ironic (p. 60), but even if this is true the attitudes it expresses were real, and Jonson would not have been consoled by the sort of irony Cambridge students could afford as they reproduced the prejudices of their class.

audience admonishes playwrights not to glean wit from "obseruation of the companie they conuerse with; as if their inuention liu'd wholly vpon another mans trencher" (183-4),<sup>3</sup> and it must have been in response to an already public slander, or to advance knowledge of Dekker's *Satiromastix* (1601), that in *Poetaster* (also 1601) Jonson has Demetrius/Dekker say of Jonson's own persona Horace, "hee is a meere spunge; nothing but humours, and obseruation; he goes vp and downe sucking from euery societie, and when hee comes home, squeezes himselfe drie againe" (IV.3.104-07). Indeed during the final chastening of Horace in *Satiromastix* he is made to "swear not to bumbast out a new Play, with the olde lynyngs of Jests, stolne from the Temples Revels" (V.2.29).<sup>4</sup> In the Prologue to *Volpone* Jonson defends himself again: "Nor made he' his play, for iests, stolne from each table,/ But makes iests, to fit his fable" (27-8).

It was not only Ben Jonson who was accused of trafficking in stolen jests – the notion that some playwrights, not always of the best social class, were making a living by aping the manners and conversation of their betters was fairly widespread. The humorous Cripple of Heywood's *The Fayre Mayde of the Exchange* (c.1602-07) could (if he were not a paragon of virtue) make enquiry

Where the best-witted gallants use to dine,  
Follow them to the taverne, and there sit  
In the next roome with a calves head and brimstone,  
And over-heare their talke, observe their humours,  
Collect their jeasts, put them into plays  
And tire them too with payment to behold  
What I have filcht from them.<sup>5</sup>

The traffic went both ways: That foolish gallants cribbed matter for social display from literary and especially dramatic professionals was a current commonplace (amply dramatized in the scenes of *The First Part of The Return from Parnassus* in which the fop Gullio employs Ingenioso, and in many other places; in Webster's Induction to *The Malcontent* [1600-01?] a gallant comes to the theater equipped with a notebook, as does, in *Poetaster*, the citizen Albius who wants to learn how to talk to courtiers).

A few preliminary observations are in order. One, that the premise of all this is that life and art had gotten mixed up with one another with peculiar intimacy. It does not need saying that life and art are always intimately mixed up, but the modalities change, and this degree of proximity and lively reciprocity were unprecedented and therefore scandalous and exciting. One could not have

<sup>3</sup> All references to Jonson are from C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, eds., *Ben Jonson*, 11 volumes, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-52). Dates in parentheses are of the first performance, not publication.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Dekker, *Satiromastix*, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, vol. 1, ed., Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1953), V.2.295-6.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Heywood, *Dramatic Works* (1874; rpt. New York: Russel and Russel, 1964), pp. 46-7.

dined out on the lines stolen from *Gorboduc*, nor garnered ideas for *Tamburlaine* from table talk.

Second, the whole business of life and art imitating one another is situated quite exactly in the social world of the London theaters, whose composition and dynamic are the formative influences. The charge of imitation is bound up with negative scrutiny of the artist's (or socialite's) social affiliations and motives. Jonson is an impudent bricklayer; playwrights eavesdrop on their betters; social climbers think they can dine out on play scraps.

Third, this new artistic mode was not yet very well understood, either by its critics or by all its practitioners, though Ben Jonson had a pretty clear idea of what he was about. The satirists constantly needed to defend and explain what sort of art they were practicing.<sup>6</sup> This defense took a standard form: The satirist had high moral purposes and classical antecedents, and intended no topical allusions. Brave words and partially true, and amply glossed by a critical tradition concerned to rescue Jonson from the charge of mere empiricism; but both defense and gloss tend to make us forget what the above examples will remind us of, that this art arose in circumstances fraught with social pressures. Jonson's art cannot be reduced to these pressures, but neither can it be understood apart from them. Our criticism needs to recover a sense of this art *in society* as a weapon, or tool, or organ. This study is about the social relations of as well as *in* Jonson's plays.

There is a tradition of casually dismissing or condescending to the realist function of drama with phrases like "mere realism," seeing it as subartistic and so beneath notice. Perhaps one reason for this is that we take realism for granted, and can hardly imagine a literary tradition without an urban comedy of manners. Another reason is that the importance and interest of this art are as much social as they are literary, and drama and society in the age of Jonson are still usually thought about separately, as separate things, though this is changing rapidly in the wake of the New Historicism. It is no surprise that Jonson criticism, and the books on city comedy (the genre roughly corresponding to the development I am interested in), are with a few exceptions entirely shaped by the great themes of bourgeois criticism, formal and moral analysis. This criticism has accomplished a great deal, reaching a level of interpretation and a degree of consensus about Jonson's art and moral imagination that are unusual; and the categories of the moral and the formal certainly loom very large in Jonson's own thought – I will be arguing in a later chapter that he played a

<sup>6</sup> Maria Gottwald points out that "the abundance of various satirical writings in that period appears to be a natural product of contemporary life; they developed spontaneously, almost without any theoretical foundations," and that English poetics showed little interest in satire. *Satirical Elements in Ben Jonson's Comedy* (Wrocław: Travaux de la Societé des Sciences et des Lettres de Wrocław, Series A, no. 137, 1969), p. 163. But see the summary of ideas about satire in England in Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance*, Yale Studies in English, vol. 142 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), chap. 2.

decisive role in reformulating what they meant for his theater, a reformulation with which New Criticism is historically continuous. But the interesting questions, now, are against what did Jonson have to struggle to reformulate them, and why did he want to?

It seems to me that the emphasis on the moral and the formal in Jonson has been extreme and is now – may I say? – worn out, if only because of its own successes. Discussions of Jonson's historical situation are governed so entirely by these terms that the situation becomes inert and undialectical, mere material toward which Jonson could take moral and formal positions.<sup>7</sup> Historical relationships get turned into a morality play about the Artist and the World. Symptomatically, two recent books on Jonson<sup>8</sup> and on city comedy<sup>9</sup> share essentially the same argument, that Jonson's theater endlessly reflected on social and generic stereotypes, and always to the same end: to transcend them. One needs to be steeped in refined moral and formal analysis to be able to make such an argument; one also must have lost all sense of the theater as a place where real social conflicts were going on. Roughly the first half of this book tries to recapture that sense of conflict and ritualized combat as pervading the theater, and of Jonson's drama as rooted in it.

I should make it very clear, before going any further, that I am interested in Jonson's realism not for empiricist purposes, but for dialectical ones: The

<sup>7</sup> Both L. C. Knights' *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1937) and Brian Gibbons' *Jacobean City Comedy*, 2d ed. (London: Methuen, 1980) segregate the historical material in separate chapters, as background. Knights' book retains its power as historical analysis, and is a provocation to debate with a materialist historical criticism ("The exasperating haziness of all those who have attempted to make some correlation between economic activities and culture is not due merely to the lack of a satisfactory definition of the latter term. Perhaps it is due . . . to the fact that 'the materialist interpretation of history' has not yet been pushed far enough," p. 4.) In Gibbons it is pretty clear that the historical chapters are a dutiful gesture, and he never really returns to them. On another level, Kernan has written the most eloquent description we have of Jonson's materialism, of how crowded with things his world is, and of how incessant is change within it – but this is presented undialectically as a universal and unsited cyclical change that never changes the world, and leaves the moral observer looking for a place outside it from which to look down on the spectacle (*The Cankered Muse*, pp. 168 ff.). The cyclical character of Jonson's thought, which is certainly real enough, is discussed in the context of his idea of history by Achsah Guibbory, *The Map of Time: 17th Century English Literature and Ideas of Pattern in History* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1986), chap. 4, and specifically in the context of social conflict by Gail Kern Paster, who says that the predation of city comedy is cyclical and so by its nature cannot change anything (*The Idea of the City in the Age of Shakespeare* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985), pp. 158–9.

<sup>8</sup> Robert N. Watson, *Jonson's Parodic Strategy: Literary Imperialism in the Comedies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Levinwand, *The City Staged: Jacobean Comedy, 1603–13* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

object is not to show that Jonson's realism reflected social reality in an unproblematic way (though I do believe we can learn about Elizabethan life by observing Jonson, a position perhaps less unfashionable today than it was recently, now that we have a history of everyday life to make our curiosity respectable), but to show that it was part of a historical process of social representation.<sup>10</sup>

The object of my study is Jonson-in-the-theater. I hope a clear sense of Jonson's personal contribution will emerge. His personality and personal status became public issues to a highly unusual degree which makes them an inevitable topic, but my emphasis is on what happened *between* Jonson and his audience. I intend a more detailed analysis of the sort found in some radical pages of Muriel Bradbrook's *The Rise of the Common Player*, where the development of the most fundamental features of Elizabethan drama is seen as depending on the establishment of new dramatic conditions with the founding of the commercial theaters:

[R]egular performances created a regular audience; this produces a quite different kind of attention and response with more trained and expert attention to the actors. . . . To transform their social "commoning" or intercourse to attentive watchfulness at the theater meant a shift of social habit in the audience: to transform their art from the narrative to the dramatic form was a more exacting test for the poets. . . . Alongside the transformation of the Minstrel into the Comedian, a transformation in the social presentation of literature replaced narrative by drama. Elizabethan drama was created on the common stages, by fusing the art of orator or presenter with that of the mime, so turning a recital accompanied by gesture and costume display into a complete action. . . .

It was a search for literary form, which should capture and display the social relations between player and audience as they shared together the imaginative acts which the poet had conceived for them.<sup>11</sup>

The attention of the audience is the *materia prima* of the theater and it has a great deal to do with such things as whether the audience is sitting down or not: The entirely seated audience at the Blackfriars was different from the partially standing audience at the Globe, and the innyard Red Bull theater was different again, where "opportunities for coming and going into the private rooms

<sup>10</sup> For a sophisticated brief discussion of this point see Kate McLuskie, "'Tis but a Woman's Jar: Family and Kinship in Elizabethan Domestic Drama," *Literature and History* 9:2 (Autumn 1983), 228-39. See also Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985): "The critical intensification of collective life represented and experienced in the theater, and the possibility it creates for action and initiative, is the subject of this book" (p. 3).

<sup>11</sup> M. C. Bradbrook, *The Rise of the Common Player: A Study of Actor and Society in Shakespeare's England* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962), pp. 98, 118-19. A similarly radical sense for the primacy of the audience informs Jean Duvignaud, *Sociologie du Théâtre: Essai sur les ombres collectives* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965).

opening on the galleries, the full provisions for eating and drinking . . . must have given the audience a life of its own, distinct from that of the play."<sup>12</sup> My study is not of the variety of theaters Jonson worked in, but of his exploitation, exhortation, denunciation, and seduction of the modes of attention his audience brought with it – social modes being mixed up with aesthetic ones. This is the matrix of Jonson's realism.

### JONSON'S REALISM

Since the term "realism" means nothing until it is defined, I had better say now what I mean by Jonson's realism. The most serious discussions of Elizabethan realism, like Bradbrook's, center on realism of character and the integration of word and action into a fully dramatic whole. Robert Weimann explicitly denies that it is a realism of subject matter.

Rather, it is a new sense of the interdependence of character and society, and a fully responsive interplay between dramatic speech and dramatic action in the process of reproducing the cause and effect of human behavior that defines "realism" in the Renaissance theater.<sup>13</sup>

This is true of the realism of *Tamburlaine*, but the satiric realism of the turn of the century was a realism of subject matter, a social realism whose direction was guided by the social dynamic in the theater no less than by the moral reaction L. C. Knights found to be the ideology of drama in the age of Jonson. If *Tamburlaine* is a product of a theater that expressed the conditions of the Elizabethan settlement, the satirical realism of city comedy was a major instrument of social thought in a period of intensified social competition. It was a sharper realism, the cutting edge of artistic intervention in the social imagination.

It seems to me that the five interrelated elements Raymond Williams says form the basis for bourgeois realist drama, and which he finds for the first time in Restoration comedy and mid-eighteenth century tragedy, are all essentially present much earlier, in Jonsonian comedy: (1) contemporary and (2) indigenous subjects, (3) the generalization of quasi-colloquial speech, (4) a new social extension and inclusiveness, and (5) a secularism that does not necessarily deny supernatural agency but conspires to get along without it.<sup>14</sup> It will be convenient to discuss these five elements in some detail.

First, contemporary and indigenous subjects pertaining directly to the world the audience would walk out into – meaning, more or less, London – appeared precisely in the first years of Jonson's career as a playwright. In *Every Man out of his Humour* (1599) Jonson registers the novelty of this new dramatic project through the critics he has positioned on stage. Mitis wonders whether some

<sup>12</sup> M. C. Bradbrook, "Shakespeare and the Multiple Theatres of Jacobean London," in *The Elizabethan Theatre VI*, ed., G. R. Hibbard (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978), p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), p. 197.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken, 1982), p. 166.

will not think comedy should concern itself with a (Shakespearean) romantic confusion among the aristocracy:

some such crosse wooing, with a clowne to their seruimgman,  
better than to be thus neere, and familiarly allied to the time.  
*Cordatus.* You say well, but I would faine heare one of these *autumne* judge-  
ments define once, *Quid sit Comoedia?* if he cannot, let him content  
himselfe with Ciceros definition (till hee haue strength to propose  
to himselfe a better) who would haue a *Comoedie* to be *Imitatio*  
*vitae, Speculum consuetudinis, Imago veritatis.*

(III.6.199–207)

A stronger defense than this seems called for, however; *Speculum consuetudinis* tends to be overshadowed by its neighboring terms, reduced to dressing up the eternal in contemporary fashions. The connotation of traditional manners that hangs over *consuetudinis* obscures the novelty of the fashions paraded over the Elizabethan stage. The reflection of the times in constantly changing dress is not a constant in comedy. The Italian *comedia erudita* sometimes ignored it, and in the Roman *comedia palliata* the dress never changed. In the history of the drama its subjects are quite commonly not contemporary and indigenous.<sup>15</sup> The hunger for contemporary realism and novelty on the Elizabethan stage needs a specific historical explanation.

The event must have appeared as something radically and spectacularly new to playgoers, though theater historians have given it little attention. Even ten years later the contemporary London setting was so standard it must have been hard to remember a time before it was invented. Plays had been set in all manner of exotic locales, from Scythia to Italy to pastoral Arcadias; comedies were set in the English countryside; chronicle histories presented a realistic England, and sometimes London, but a London of the historical past.

The excitement of discovering the contemporary London scene swept through all the theaters at once starting about 1598 (William Haughton's *Englishmen for my Money* of late 1597 or early 1598 is thought to be the first London comedy). The fairly compact fraternity of playwrights worked in close collaboration and competition, exploring together this new source of dramatic power and interest. A new power was on the loose in London, setting off explosions of satiric realism in one neighborhood or social milieu after another, exciting the audience, worrying the authorities, and getting its handlers in trouble.

It was all good business: The dynamics of the literary historical event are obviously bound to the exploitation and marketing of a fashion, a fad. The thinly disguised *ad hominem* attacks of the War of the Theaters spiced with topicality a more fundamental fascination with contemporary social life, also (still) thinly disguised as Gargaphie or Rome or the London of King William Rufus. The theater had entered into a qualitatively new relationship with society: When it began representing contemporary manners it began participating

<sup>15</sup> Williams makes this point in *The Sociology of Culture*, pp. 161, 166.



more directly and powerfully than ever before in the creation of manners and fashions of all kinds – a participation noticed equally by those who denounced and those who defended the theater.

One might object that given their weakly developed sense of anachronism, English playwrights in fact had difficulty imagining any time and place besides their own. The contemporaneity of the scene had a new character, however, which should be distinguished from the anachronistic insertion of contemporary local matter into a scene ostensibly set elsewhere. This last had been going on since English shepherds found their way into the Palestine of the *Second Shepherd's Play*; it was particularly liable to happen in the subplot with its lower-class characters. When London figured in history plays or in celebrations of London heroes like Simon Eyre or Dick Whittington, there was little effort to distinguish London's past from its present; and Julius Caesar was dressed up like an Elizabethan.

One might object further that the morality play tradition intended to represent the world its audience lived in, and if this was by definition not thought of in secular terms, the allegorical tradition fostered, as the complement to its abstraction, an often extreme topicality that sponsored a kind of realist tradition employing advanced techniques of mimicry. Nashe reports that a Cambridge play in Latin carried an impersonation of Gabriel Harvey as far as stealing his gown to play in.<sup>16</sup> Such topicality in the Tudor interludes was intended to rile and challenge the audience. As Craik says, the Tudor interlude was on closer terms with its audience, physically and one might say sociably, than either the medieval theater or the Elizabethan; it could literally talk to the audience more easily.<sup>17</sup>

Jonson's drama grows straight out of this tradition. I will have more to say about that historical connection in the next chapter; I will say here only that the principle that makes Jonson's drama different and new is its secularism (which brings us to the fifth of Williams' elements of realism). The method of the

<sup>16</sup> In *Have with you to Saffron-Walden*, quoted in Leishman, p. 37. Such topicality, Bradbrook suggests, is inherent in the genre: "The difficulty of a moral play is that there is no necessary particular action for such an abstraction as Love, Conscience, or Lucre, except the reflection of some highly topical and local event." *Rise of the Common Player*, p. 269. There was also a genre of plays on current events, a sort of dramatic journalism that was topical in the extreme. Chambers quotes a letter from R. Whyte to Sir R. Sidney on 26 October, 1599: "Two daies agoe, the ouerthrow of Turnholt, was acted vpon a Stage, and all your Names vsed that were at yt; especially Sir Fra. Veres, and he that plaid that Part gott a Beard resembling his, and Watchet Satin Doublett, with Hose trimd with Siluer Lace. You was also introduced, Killing, Slaying, and Ouerthrowing the Spaniards; and honorable Mention made of your Service, in seconding Sir Francis Vere, being engaged" (*Sidney Papers*, ii. 136; quoted in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), p. 322).

<sup>17</sup> T. W. Craik, *The Tudor Interlude* (Leicester: Leicester Univ. Press, 1958), p. 24.