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Douglas Duncan

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Jonson's art of teasing

Volpone, *Epicoene*, *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair* are by common consent Ben Jonson's most successful comedies. Acted or read, they succeed by being funny and at the same time serious, so that to explain their success one must be able to connect the laughter and the thought they provoke. They are also more 'ironic' than Jonson's earlier and later comedies, which makes it likely that this irony, whatever it may be, contributes to their success and their peculiar brand of serious humour. Irony, alas, is a fractious term which literary critics are struggling to put to bed after a long and exhausting day, one of several such terms which this study cannot hope to avoid. Its commonest application to drama, as we know, describes the situation when a playwright shares a secret with his audience at the expense of his characters; its pervasiveness then depends on how many of the characters are deluded for how much of the time, and its depth depends on the meaning to be drawn from their delusions. But in explaining the effects of Jonson's major comedies we have to deal also with another form of irony which is directed against us, as spectators or readers. Far from being invited to share its secret, we are challenged to see that it exists. Its meaning is to be found in our own responses, and its pervasiveness in the fact that we are, or should be, engaged all the time. If we fail to perceive it, it is we who are deluded; we become its victims.

Every writer is an ironist at the expense of his public when he bids for a response without drawing attention to what he is doing. That is to say that irony was implicit in the humanist notion of literature as rhetoric. Here are the second and third of our fractious and overwrought terms, both of which will be used in simple, traditional senses. Of all English dramatists

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Jonson was the most fully a 'humanist' in being dominated by the urge to embody in his work what he had learned from his study of the Greek and Latin classics. A part of what he learned was that Aristotle and Cicero, still the recognized authorities on rhetoric in his day, had defined it as the art of effective communication by which an expert persuades or instructs the populace. Needless to say, the function of rhetoric was normally thought of as being carried out in an open and straightforward manner, as when Jonson himself distinguishes 'Poets' from 'Poetique elves' by their mastery of the rhetorical process:

All that dable in the inke,
And defile quills, are not those few, can thinke,
Conceive, expresse, and steere the soules of men,
As with a rudder, round thus, with their pen.
He must be one that can instruct your youth,
And keepe your *Acme* in the state of truth,
Must enterprize this work.¹

But more secret and devious uses of word-power were encouraged by the humanist assumption that the writer was wiser than his public, an assumption which Jonson was prone to accept, especially when addressing a theatre audience. This irony was not, of course, motivated by the diabolical purpose of misleading or making monkeys out of ignorant spectators, though it sometimes came dangerously close to that in practice. Properly used, what we shall call the 'art of teasing' was a process of educative testing, variously playful or hostile, whereby the moral intelligence of the public was to be trained by being subjected to attempts to undermine or confuse it. In drama, particularly, it took the form of alerting audiences to the moral anomalies which are apt to arise in the theatre when natural instincts and sympathies are allowed to respond freely to the authority, wit, glamour or eloquence of the actors on stage.

No doubt one reason why Jonson's plays can be seen in this light is that we have become accustomed to the hostility of writers and film-makers who exploit our eagerness to be entertained at all costs in order to shock us into forms of uncomfortable awareness, while at the same time exposure to commercial advertising has made us sensitive to the hidden persuaders of devious rhetoric. But our first and simplest

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reactions to the four major comedies make clear that we are not reading into them techniques of the twentieth century. Why, for instance, since *Volpone* is a monster of evil, are we encouraged to share his amusements and even to see his downfall as heroic? Why the trick-ending of *Epicocoene*? What about the applause for Lovewit and Face? And if Quarlous in *Bartholomew Fair* becomes the mouthpiece of a plea for tolerance, why is he presented as a sharking opportunist?

The author we have to explain is a consistent moralist who assaults our powers of moral discrimination, a satirist who plays on our susceptibilities, an ironist who lures us into false or incomplete or compromising reactions to what passes on stage. He is a born dramatist, but one who came close to equating 'good theatre' with moral delusiveness, and wrote many of his best scenes when he did so. He is a master of farce, but typically used that medium to illumine a serious issue, simultaneously tempting us to laugh it out of mind. He is not, in short, an author who asks to be trusted or loved. Empathy with his characters is far from impossible – is indeed often forced on us – but is always perilous, since to feel for them naïvely and then complain of problems is to acknowledge the discomfort of a trap. This is not to suggest that the right way to experience a play like *The Alchemist* is with a worried frown of mental concentration, as though one were crossing Niagara on a tightrope or having one's soul examined. The essential is to recognize the nature of the game, which requires, above all, a sense of humour, but also the capacity to balance our laughter with awareness of its implications. It calls for total involvement, but of a moral and intellectual as well as an emotional kind. Jonson assures us that all can play and win who have 'the wit, or the honesty to thinke well of themselves';² anyone, that is, who can trust his own judgement or conscience. And a factor which makes playing more pleasant – though it clearly defeats Jonson's purpose – is that most of us enjoy measuring fiction by more rigorous standards of morality than we normally apply in real life.

It would be a mistake, however, to rush blindfold into the labyrinth of Jonson's comedies, questing for ironies, ambivalences and traps. If this study is to be useful, it should concentrate

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less on uncovering particular moves than on finding out more about the nature of the game. What were its rules, and who had played it before? An answer to the first question will arm us with some critical terms, and the second may lead us to see our object more clearly in the context of a literary tradition.

Many have managed to explain Jonson's irony without recourse to the tradition studied here. Recently, after a period when criticism focussed mainly on his satiric vision and his language, there has been a return to emphasis on his satiric techniques – a revival of the question raised by L. C. Knights in 1937 when he wrote of the 'double attitude' which an audience must adopt toward *Volpone*.³ It will be clear, for example, that Alan C. Dessen sees an author similar to the one just described:

Jonson does not, in his best plays, resort to moral extremes...but offers his audience complex situations that challenge and perplex...*Bartholomew Fair* (or *Volpone* or *The Alchemist*) shows us the satiric manipulator forcing his audience into untenable positions and making them find their own way out. The laughter evoked by moral comedy is carefully controlled so that eventually it turns back on the laugher...Only by forcing the viewer to see himself in the glass of satire can moral comedy succeed.⁴

But Dessen writes this after applying to Jonson the approach which has been so fruitfully applied to renaissance drama in the past twenty years, seeing his comedy as a development of the popular tradition of Morality plays. Since we are dealing with a synthesizing author, the value of that approach does not need to be questioned. There is no doubt that the medieval Vice-figure, taunting and joking with his audience, forecast the insidious threats of Jonson's rogue heroes, and prepared his public to regard the theatre as an arena of temptation. It is certain, too, that Jonson's perplexing techniques worked often by upsetting the expectations of those who were familiar with Morality patterns. Thus the anticipated conflict of vice with virtue is replaced by a conflict of vices; figures who seem to be labelled Goodness or Justice turn out to be impotent or tarnished; wry epilogues subvert reliance on safe, homiletic conclusions, and so forth. But more explanation is needed of the spirit in which Jonson worked on those materials and the satiric mode which he followed. Parody and inversion are sophisticated

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plays. It is probable that, in feeling his way toward a new style of comedy in *Volpone*, Jonson would not be content with the guidance of popular tradition alone but would seek to reinforce it from the example and authority of more learned writings.

A case used to be made in this connexion for the influence of Roman comedy, the witty slaves of which do indeed contribute to Jonson's early plays. Their role, however, had been assimilated earlier on the English stage with that of the Vice and was stereotyped by the 1590s. Apart from the licensing of social indecorum, common to most comedy, the Roman playwrights offered little precedent for close, critical engagement with an audience. We must look elsewhere to find 'learned' precedent for Jonson's practices, and not necessarily to drama at all. The terms which have been used to describe his procedures will have been familiar to all who have grappled with Swift. It seems reasonable, then, to direct our search to some of Swift's forerunners: particularly Lucian, Erasmus and More.

The immediate purpose of this book is to argue that the serio-comic balance and teasing rhetoric of Jonson's middle comedies mark a conscious adaptation to the stage of satiric techniques which are found in such works as *The Praise of Folly*, the *Colloquies*, and *Utopia*, and which Erasmus and More associated with their favourite Greek author, Lucian. More generally, however, we shall explore what can be learned about Jonson from reading him with those writers in mind. Since they are not in the minds of all students of drama, relevant aspects of them will be treated discursively in Part 1, which will also try to sketch the fortunes of 'Lucianism' between the early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Luckily, this background is neither difficult nor dull. Part 2, dealing directly with Jonson, will pursue the approaches and apply the terminology made familiar in Part 1. These later chapters presuppose knowledge of Jonson's plays and are not meant as comprehensive critical accounts of them.

Limiting our study for the most part to a very few writers may make the tradition described seem narrower than it actually was. Lucian was not the only model for humanist *joco-serium*, nor were Erasmus and More its only practitioners. Jonson did not

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give these authors undivided attention, as might seem to be suggested, nor was his art of teasing an isolated phenomenon. Since the term *joco-serium* (Greek *spoudogeloion*) was associated with Menippus, our subject will be seen to impinge on the history of 'Menippean' fiction. Also, since the term is paradoxical, we shall skirt the field of humanist paradox so boldly charted by Rosalie Colie.⁵ And recalling Donne's description of paradoxes as 'alarums to truth to arme her'⁶ – as helpful obstacles on the roundabout climb to Truth's summit – we shall recognize that Jonson's placing of obstacles in the way of his audience is related to that process of educating the reader by 'intanglement' which is now being widely discovered in renaissance literature, following Stanley E. Fish's approach to *Paradise Lost*.⁷ This book may contribute a little to the study of that process. Essentially, however, it draws on Jonson's comedy to build on the conclusions of H. A. Mason⁸ by arguing that it was Jonson who renewed and transmitted to English writing the most vital achievement of sixteenth-century literary humanism, the engaged and engaging irony of Erasmus and More. In pursuit of that aim, these pages will not hesitate to suggest rather more than they can prove, rating stimulus to discussion above fear of rash judgement or of heresies in method. Donne also wrote of paradoxes that 'if they make you to find better reasons against them they do their office'.⁹ It is in the belief that there is room for that spirit in literary criticism that the following study is offered.

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PART ONE

Lucian and Lucianism

Est hoc nimirum sanctissimum fallendi genus, per imposturam dare beneficium

Erasmus, *De Utilitate Colloquiorum* (LB, I, 901F)

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CHAPTER I

Lucian



From the late fifteenth century until well into the nineteenth, Lucian held his place among the most widely translated and imitated of Greek authors. He later came to be banished from the pantheon of nineteenth-century Hellenism, partly because he was a 'silver' Greek – or rather not a Greek at all but a Syrian of the second century A.D. who had copied the styles of an earlier age – but mainly because of his ambiguous attitude toward the nobler ideals of Attic culture. His status today typically reflects the split between the scholar and the general reader of ancient literature which the decline of classical education has brought about. The object of recondite and forbidding monographs on the shelves of university libraries, he also appeals directly, with his agile and mocking wit, to a larger public which encounters selections of his work in attractive contemporary versions.¹ There is need for a scholarly study of Lucian which would unite the interests of his readers in a common focus on his satiric art, and also provide a basis for a thorough assessment of his impact on European literature. Neither of these functions can be attempted here, but even a sketch may indicate the perils of ignoring him altogether. Although his influence on master-satirists, from Erasmus and More to Fielding and Voltaire, has often been noted and in some cases analysed in detail, it remains true that the average student of literature uses his name less often and less confidently than those of Horace and Juvenal.

Explicit acknowledgments of debt to Lucian, and precise definitions of his character as a satirist, are not as common in the highways of literature as a writer on this subject might wish. Had they been more common, the subject would have been long ago exhausted. In fact, as will later be shown, educated people

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in the sixteenth and following centuries had a clear idea of the general characteristics of 'Lucianism', though they disagreed about its moral usefulness and rarely analysed its methods. Lucian's influence is readily detectable by those who have read him, especially (though not necessarily) if they can share with earlier ages an appreciation of his beautifully light, lucid and flexible Greek. And a likely reason why it was not more often openly acknowledged is that writers assumed that it would always be recognized as clearly and intuitively as it was in their day. Many a witty ghost such as Swift's has been vexed as a result of that assumption. But if we ask why renaissance criticism transmitted no image of Lucian as vivid or definite as those of the Roman verse-satirists, we must look for an explanation to the varied, and in one sense anonymous, nature of his work.

The writings attributed to Lucian are numerous but short, and were printed by his earliest editors in a single Folio. (The beautiful *editio princeps* of Lascaris appeared at Florence in 1496, that of Aldus at Venice in 1503.) The renaissance critic, trained to classify authors in terms of genre, was faced with a baffling diversity of pieces, ranging from various forms of rhetorical display through narrative, biography and epistle to several distinct types of dialogue. In his influential *De Satyra Graecorum Poesi atque Romanorum Satira* (1605), Isaac Casaubon classed Lucian as a 'Menippean' or 'Varronian' satirist because a mixture of prose and verse is found occasionally in his dialogues and because Menippus himself, the Cynic philosopher, appears in a few of them. Another factor which led to that classification was Lucian's claim to have invented the Comic Dialogue by uniting the serious connotations of philosophical dialectic with the wit and fantasy of Aristophanic comedy, a claim which Casaubon associated with Strabo's description of Menippus as *spoudogeloios* and Cicero's somewhat similar characterization of the writings of Varro.² Properly defined, the concept of *spoudogeloion*, or *joco-serium*, is distinctly relevant to Lucian, but without close definition it could fit other satirists equally well, and since the intermixture of verse in Lucian's prose is almost always by way of parodic quotation, little but

Lucian

confusion could result from linking him in that respect, as Casaubon did, with such different writers as Petronius, Martianus Capella and Boethius. ‘Menippean/Varronian’ was probably the best single label that a classifying critic could stick on Lucian, and it has been endorsed by Northrop Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism*. But its clarity and usefulness are diminished by the fact that the satires of Menippus and Varro have almost totally perished; nor is it applicable to many of Lucian’s unless we interpret it, as Frye does, very broadly indeed. To read all of Lucian is to perceive the first reason why he has never been definitively typed in terms of genre. The immediate impression he gives is of dazzling variety, and such constant factors as are present throughout his work resist analysis in formal neo-Aristotelian terms. They are of a kind which renaissance authors were better able to imitate than to define critically.

One of these constant factors, the evasiveness of his personality, provides the second and more important reason for the failure of critics to clarify Lucian’s image. We are taught that the images which Horace and Juvenal present of themselves in their satires were carefully-modelled *personae* which ought not to be mistaken for autobiography. None the less, the masks are so memorable – in Juvenal’s case so forceful and in Horace’s so subtle – that the temptation to treat them as self-portraits has always been irresistible. This is less true of Lucian, and not solely because of his fondness for the dramatic method. Ultimately it makes little difference to the character of a Lucianic piece whether the author presents himself in it or not, and whether in the first person or in the third, but it is worth noting for a start that he does, in fact, present himself often. Thus, to take random examples, there are *The Dream, or Lucian’s Career* and *To one who said ‘You’re a Prometheus in words’* in which he uses the first person to tell of his choice of career and his invention of the Comic Dialogue respectively; there are pieces which he introduces as Lucian (*Nigrinus*) or in which he refers to himself as Lucian (*A True Story*); and there are many dialogues such as *Hermotimus*, *The Double Indictment* and *The Dead Come to Life, or The Fisherman* where he disguises himself thinly as Lycinus, the Syrian, or ‘Frankness’. He shows no reluctance to talk about