CHAPTER VIII

"A PARTICULAR KIND BY ITSELFE": JONSONIAN STRUCTURE

The basic problem for anyone who writes within the dramatic form is, perhaps, the problem of finding proper structure for the play. For, "skill with a verse, insight into character, brilliant individual scenes - all these are likely to precede in the career of any playwright the final product toward which he aims: the structure in which language, character and action meet in unity".1

"Dramatic Unity", as Professor Harold F. Brooks very rightly points out, "was as old in England as the great cyclic dramas. Latterly, some of their component plays, like the Secunda Pastorum, or groups of plays like the Passion group organised and largely re-written by the York 'Realist', began to be developed as unified dramas on their own account; but even so, at least at York and Chester the cycle as a whole remained the full drama to which unity belonged".2 Then, the Elizabethan dramatists in their endeavour to find proper structure searched for ways of achieving a careful design. For instance, "Shakespeare was constantly experimenting in order to find a comic form which

would present several characters or groups of characters in relation and contrast with each other, and which would conclude in a scene which brought these various elements into some stable relationship. Their problem was, thus, the achievement of unity out of diversity, because of their delight in variety and their intense expressiveness in multitudinous ways. Hence they tried a variety of forms such as syllogistic progression, qualitative progression, repetitive form, conventional form and particularly minor or incidental forms like metaphor, paradox, disclosure, reversal, contraction, expansion, bathos, apostrophe, series, chiasmus. They did not always succeed in their attempt but when they did, it was never at the sacrifice of variety.

This is almost equally true of Jonson's drama. Because Jonson too loves variety as much as Shakespeare. He likes abundance of words, characters and incidents. All the same, Jonson solves the problem of finding proper structure in a quite different way. If Shakespeare does it by inclusion and complex harmony, Jonson does it by exclusion and repetition. Again, whereas Shakespeare is fond of many themes and of modulations into many keys, Jonson is fond of one theme or two sharply contrasting themes but always in closely related keys.

This is because of the basic difference between the Shakespearean and Jonsonian comedy although both are highly complex. Jonson himself has described the difference in the conversation between the presenters, Mitis and Cordatus, in *Every Man Out of His Humour*:

M I T. ... the argument of his Comedie might haue beene of some other nature, as of a duke to be in louse with a countesse, and that countesse to be in louse with the dukes sonne, and the sonne to louse the ladies waiting maid: some such crosse wooing, with a clowne to their serving-man, better then to be thus near, and familiarly allied to the time.

C O R. You say well, but I would faine heare one of these autumn-ajudgements define once, Quid sit Comedie? If he cannot, let him content himselle with CICEROS definition (till hee haue strength to propose to himselle a better) who would haue a Comedie to be *Imitatio Vitae, Speculum consuetudinis, Image Veritatis*; a thing throughout pleasant, and ridiculous, and accommodated to the correction of manners:

(III, vi, 195-209)

The comedy described by Mitis has a romantic rather than a critical emphasis. Its principal characters are of blue blood; its theme is love and its aim is entertainment. But the comedy described by Cordatus in Ciceronian terms has a critical rather than a romantic emphasis. Its sphere of observation is the real life of ordinary men and women. Its attitude is satirical, its means pleasurable and its aim corrective. However, the essential difference between the two modes of English comedy - the Romantic and the Satiric - is not so much of realism as of attitude and tone. 6 The emphasis is on an altogether different set of human

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motives. The emphasis in Shakespearean comedy is on the poetic longings for love and adventure whereas in Jonsonian comedy it is on the grosser appetites for wealth and women. And the defining difference of tone is the difference between lyrical sentiment sympathetically expressed and critical satire unemotionally conveyed.  

With this difference in attitude and tone, Jonsonian comedy demands an altogether different structure from that of Shakespearean comedy. Satire has to be evolved from the very action. This is possible only when character, bred by a particular social scene, is conceived as the motivator of action. The intrigue must be more than a clever scheme for entertainment arbitrarily set in motion. It must be initiated by "traits of human nature liable to ridicule and must work itself out to the discomfiture of its initiator." In short, dramatic action must be produced by the very satiric conception of human behaviour.

It is this kind of structure that Jonson seems to have aimed at, and having achieved it, he is greatly pleased. This is made clear from what Cordatus, representing Jonson, says in the induction to Every Man Out of His Humour:

Faith Sir, I must refrain to judge, only this I can say of it, 'tis strange, and of a particular kind by

7. See Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama*, p.149.
8. Ibid., p.168. This type of construction by means of controlling the central design of a play by a satiric conception also appears in Chapman, Marston and Middleton as well as in Congreve and Wycherley.
it selfe, somewhat like *Vetus Comoedia*; a worke that
hath bounteously pleased me.

('Grex', ll. 230-233)

When Jonson thus said of the comedy he was working to develop
that it was "of a particular kind by it selfe, somewhat like
'Vetus Comoedia', he seems to have meant more than critics so
far have given him credit for meaning.

Jonson's use of 'Vetus Comoedia' has generally been taken
to be the 'New Comedy' of Terence. Jonson has almost always
been discussed as if he belonged to the tradition of Menander,
Plautus and Terence. Even most recently Daniel C. Boughner has
stated\(^9\) that Jonson organized the action of his plays in the
quadripartite structure consisting of the 'Protasis', the
'spitasis', the 'catastasis' and the 'Catastrophe'.\(^10\)

No doubt, Jonson defines the function of the 'Protasis' as
a faire Presentmant of your *Actors*? And a handsome
promise of somewhat to come hereafter.

(The Magnetic Lady, I, vii, 'Chorus', ll. 3-4)

Then he warns the audience by means of the prompt Boy's expostu-

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10. 'The four-fold structure', implying a division of the plot
into four distinctive movements was invented by Terence in
Andria. It was further described by Donatus in Comentum
Terence. It was rediscovered and adopted to the Renaissance
stage by Machiavelli in his translation of Andria (1500) as
well as in his original comedies, Clazia (1506) and La Mandragola
(1513). It ultimately received a more adequate description
in the Postica (1501) of J.C. Scaliger. (See T.W. Baldwin,
*Shakespeare's Five Act Structure*, esp. pp.325-41). Ben Jonson,
rejecting the authority of Terence (Harford and Simpson, *Ben
Jonson*, Vol. VII, p.438), studied Machiavelli and not only
imported the quadripartite structure to England but naturalized
it on the English stage.
looke ... for conclusions in a Protasis? I thought the Law of Comedy had resery'd ('hem) to the Catastrophe: and that the Epistasis, (as wee are taught) and the Catastasis, had beene interveening parts.

(Ibid., 11. 8-11)

None the less, Jonson does not blindly adopt the quadri-partite structure as it is. He gives it his own individual colour. He moulds it so as to suit the requisites of his comedy best by exploiting its flexibility with great audacity and ease.

Jonson, in his dramatic practice, takes full advantage of the flexibility inherent in the four-part design and varies the length of the 'Protasis' according to the complexity of the action. Though in Volpone it coincides with Act I, in Every Man In His Humour, Epicene, and The Alchemist it leaps across the act division to continue the dramatic movement into the beginning of Act II without pause. And it extends to the end of Act II in The New Inn in order to allow for the introduction of personages who make their first appearance only in Act II, scene 6.

Furthermore, in Every Man In His Humour and Epicene Jonson brings forward in the 'protasis' a series of themes or sub-actions which form the single action and which are developed separately till they converge at the 'Catastrophe'.

Madeleine Doran takes 'Vetus Comoedia' to be "the Old Comedy of Aristophanes as distinguished from the New Comedy of Menander". Ray L. Hefner too thinks that we might gain more

insight into Jonson's art "If we considered him instead in the quite different tradition of Old Comedy", Jonson would seem to have recognized a dramatic kinship in Aristophanes' fundamentally satiric intention. This is indicated to us in the Apologetical Dialogue appended to the Folio text of Poetaster where Jonson defends himself from the charge that all his writing is "mere railing" by an appeal to the authority both of Aristophanes and of the Roman satirists:

Ha! If all the salt in the Old Comedy
Should be so censur'd, or the sharper wit
Of the bold satyr, termed scolding rage,
What age could then compare with those, for buffons?
What should be sayd of ARISTOPHANES?
PERSEUS? or IUVENAL? Whose names we now
So glorifie in schooles, at least pretend it.

('To The Reader', 1.186-92)

Jonson's method of concentration is certainly classical. Nevertheless Jonson seems to owe as much to the technique of the Morality play as to the New Comedy of Menander and the Old Comedy of Aristophanes. For, even though the allegorical habit of the Morality play "ceased in the eighties to be very common as a distinct form, its effect on the later drama, in the shaping both of attitude and of form was profound". Baskervill suggests that Jonson might possibly be referring to the morality plays in 'Vetus Comoedia'. Jonson himself uses the phrase

'Vetus Comedia' with this sense in *Conversations With Drummond* (11. 409-15) and L.C. Knights makes this identification categorically. Most recently Alan Dessen also explains the unity of Jonson's plays as an adaptation of the technique of the Morality play.

The tightly managed intrigue and the outward shape of the plot in the great comedies are, doubtless, like Latin and Italian comedy. Yet, the motivation of the intrigue in common human impulses of greed and folly makes these plays quite unlike Latin comedy. Especially in their moral-psychological combination of motives, Jonson's plays seem to us to have closer affinity with the tradition of the Morality play.

Whatever might be Jonson's sources - the New Comedy, the Old Comedy or the Morality play - he appears to have worked restlessly until he achieved an original dramatic form capable of conveying his satiric vision. And his art lies in his "manipulation of popular devices and classical tradition to his own purpose".

Almost envying the licence and freedom enjoyed by the Ancients in handling the dramatic form Jonson refuses to

15. See L.C. Knights, Drama and Society in The Age of Jonson, p.188.


bee tyed to those strict and regular formes, which
the nicenesse of a few (who are nothing but forme)
would thrust vpon vs.

(Every Man Out of His Humour, Gree, ll. 268-70)

and says enthusiastically:

I see not then, but we should enjoy the same licence,
or free power, to illustrate and heighten our inuention
as they did.

(Ibid., ll. 266-68)

With his firm belief that "wee have better meanses to pro-
nounce ... if wee will use, and apply, our owne experience ... 
to all the observations of the Ancients" (Discoveries, ll. 134-137),
Jonson was determined to "make further discoveries of truth and
fitness" (ll. 2101-03). One of the principal 'discoveries' he
made is the organic form which has at its base a concern with
physical as well as symbolic situation. And, however indebted
Jonson was to the classical and Morality traditions, the form
he finally achieved is distinctly his own - "a particular kind
by it selfe".

Critics since the seventeenth century have agreed that
Jonson is a master of comic structure. But there has been a
good deal of disagreement concerning the precise kind of
structure in which Jonson supremely excels. In discussing
the structure of Jonsonian comedy we may speak of two schools
of criticism - one focusing attention on the classical linear
structure and the other on the thematic or symbolic structure.

The first school is represented by Dryden's famous comments
in An Essay of Dramatic Poesy which has been duly supported by
the Oxford Editors of Jonson, and the second by Freda Townsend's stimulating study of Jonson's baroque technique in her *Apologia for Bartholomew Fayre: The Art of Jonson's Comedies* which has been ably seconded by Ray L. Heffner, Jr. and Edward Partridge.

Dryden, to whom Jonson was pre-eminent among English dramatists by virtue of obeying the neo-classical rules of unity of time, place, and action, sees an essentially classical structure, with a logical order proceeding through a consistently rising action with the events of each act 'greater' than those of the preceding act. The 'examen of *The Silent Woman*' emphasizes that there is immense variety of character and incident but that "the action of the play is entirely one."

Almost falling in line with Dryden, Herford and Simpson take the view that Jonson's structure, at its best, is the structure of Roman comedy, that is, singleness of action. They speak of the unity of action in *Every Man in His Humour* as being not simplicity, but the oneness of many parts. They think that the unity of the great plays like *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* "was won not by surrendering the multiplicity of minor actions so congenial to his Elizabethan passion for profusion, but by

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compelling them to become integral parts of the single all-embracing action". Miss. Doran may have kept in mind this notion of Jonson's structure when she comments on Jonson's "remorseless logic" in the unravelling of his plots. She says that he "creates a wholly logical world in which the interplay of the interest of his characters moves the plot towards a necessary conclusion". Judging thus the form of Jonson's comedies from the classical point of view it is almost unanimously agreed that Jonson was a conscious artist guided in his drama by the models of Plautus and Terence.

But this picture of a regular, neo-classic Jonson, especially in the matter of plot structure, is disputed by the other school of critics of recent years. They find in Jonson what might be called a symbolic structure, a structure predicated on the use of central themes or symbols rather than line, as the ordering principle. Freda L. Townsend takes a strong objection to the view of Jonson's structure as singleness of plot. She argues quite persuasively that none of Jonson's great comedies has the unified action characteristic of Terentian comedy and enjoined by neo-classical precept. She finds a different kind of structure unifying the variety in Jonson. Granting that the matter in Jonson is as richly varied as that of Shakespeare or Beaumont and Fletcher or Middleton or

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22. Madeleine Doran, Endeavours of Art: A Study Form in Elizabethan Drama, p. 335.
Heywood she says - "yet variety does not mean forfeiture of order. 'The complex whole of the web asserts itself above every thing else'; ... The careful hand of the craftsman weaves together his many actions; characters appear and disappear according to a large plan which holds them all in order. Artistry is everywhere apparent - in execution of detail, in richness of effect, and, subtle unity".23 Comparing Jonson's art with that of Ariosto and the baroque painters she sees Bartholomew Fair rather than The Silent Woman as the culmination of his development away from a simply unified comedy toward one which involves the intricate interweaving of as many different interests as possible.

Ray L. Heffner thinks that we may gain more insight into Jonson's art if we consider him rather in the tradition of Aristophanes - of Old Comedy than in that of Menander, Plautus, and Terence - of New Comedy. He is of the opinion that in Jonson the comic structure is centred not on a plot but on the exploration of an "extravagant conceit". He says that in each of his major comedies Jonson "explores an idea or a cluster of related ideas through a variety of characters and actions. And the central expression of the unifying idea is usually not in a fully developed plot but in a fantastic comic conceit, an extravagant exaggeration of human folly, to which all of the more realistically conceived characters and incidents have reference", and concludes

that "the essential unity of Jonson's comedy is thematic".24

Edward B. Partridge explains the structure and unity of Jonson's plays in terms of image clusters. He says that a certain unity is given to Jonson's play by the characteristically Jonsonian tone which is created partly by the imagery employed. He shows us how Jonson, by means of epithets, allusions, metaphors, and precisely chosen words, gives us "the proper comic perspective: cold, hard, and merciless, yet clear, free of cant, and massively controlled".25

This modern view of Jonson's technique is, perhaps, best summed up by T.S. Eliot when he says that the "immense dramatic constructive skill", that Jonson employs, "is not so much skill in plot as skill in doing without a plot", and concludes: "the plot does not hold the play together; what holds the play together is a unity of inspiration that radiates into plot and personages alike".26

These are the two fairly traditional ways of looking at the structure of Jonson's comedies, one the linear and the other the thematic or symbolic. Although Miss. Townsend and Mr. Heffner seem pretty well convinced that their view is correct while Dryden's is not, that the structure is essentially baroque, not

classic, we may take the stand that the views of the two schools of criticism are not mutually exclusive. There is no reason why in such a highly complex comedy as Jonson's there cannot be both a linear and a thematic or symbolic structure each complementing the other. A close study of Jonson's plots from this angle would show how their structure is at once linear and thematic - 'two levels of meaning carried on a single action', if not in the early plays, which are experimental, at least from Volpone onwards.

Every Man in His Humour is built on a rapid Plautine intrigue. The plot is thin but perfectly original. The plot is a complex of several actions which are ingeniously tangled together. But beneath its apparent complexity the main threads of plot which hold the action together are simple. The first thread is the suspicion of elder Knowell that results in following his rakish son into town to check his wild doings and getting inveigled into a compromising situation at Cob's house through the trickery of the servant, Brainworm. The second is the determination of the jealous husband, Kitely, to find his wife out and his ultimate awakening to the foolishness of his fears. The third is the thin love intrigue between young Knowell and Bridget. The three threads are interwoven mainly through the agency of the versatile Brainworm, each character being led to the Justice's house for the 'outing' of the 'humours' and the apportioning of rewards and penalties. The skilful manner in which the various threads are interwoven bears ample evidence of Jonson's constructive ingenuity.
All the same, the plot in itself has no sufficient strength
to hold our interest. It has no central climax or turning point
or any opposing force. While it continues, it does not propor-
tionately develop. Nevertheless, Every Man In His Humour can be
said to find its structural unity through the unity of tone
based on a careful preservation of uniform tone in the comic
element of the play. It should, however, be noted that the
unity of tone is attained not in the original version but in
the revised one. For, in its first version, young Lorenzo's
passionate denunciation of the enemies of poetry as well as the
savage punishments inflicted on the gulls towards the close
greatly impaired the unity of comic tone. But, when Jonson
revised the play he not only lightened the penalties of the foibles
but made a very significant excision by cutting Edward Knowell's
eloquent defence of poetry thereby preserving the comic tone
of the play. Though the play is not radically reshaped in the
latter version the whole effect is quite different because of
the two principal changes brought about. Thus after a stringent
revision, Every Man in His Humour is left as a piece of pure
comedy. This forms unmistakably a clear index to Jonson's
development in his endeavour to achieve structural unity in
his drama.

There is little or no plot in Every Man Out of His Humour.
The action of the play itself is slight and quite meagre but
seems to be sufficient for its purpose. The episodic plot is
made up of characters - the would-be gallants, Fastidious Briske,
Fungoso and Sogliardo, a ridiculous wife of a citizen, Fallace, a shallow court lady, Saviolina, a fantastic knight, Puntarvalo, and others—whose false social and intellectual standards are held up to ridicule. Jonson starts with these eccentric people for each of whom he has planned a little plot that will first show him off and then break up his characteristic habit of mind. Strutting on the stage, each one exhibits in his conduct the falsity and worthlessness of his social and intellectual standards. While the commentators, Mitis and Cordatus, ridicule him his discomfiture is brought about, and he is dismissed from the play. Thus the unity is brought about not only by bringing together a great variety of characters but by contriving to apply to one and all of them the same kind of purge.

Nevertheless, however well Jonson avails himself of the opportunities which drama offers for elaboration of the characters and for expansion of the action, one cannot but admit that he is somehow not able to disguise the mechanical way in which he assembles the characters and marshals them through and out of the play in a kind of single file. Besides, the arbitrariness of entrances and exits and the repeated exposing of 'humours' contribute to the feeling of immobility in the action.

That Jonson was apparently well aware of the dramatic shortcomings of his experiment in Every Man Out of His Humour, although he never admitted any feeling of disappointment, is indicated in a new set of dramatic techniques he adopts for his next play, Cynthia's Revels. How he tries a new type of construction
for his plot, by joining Greek myth to contemporary and courtly issues. He chooses a mythical framework in which all the scenes embodying the material he wishes to satirise - the corrupt and shallow, the ridiculous and silly values the Court and the higher ranks of society sometimes use for standards - are symbolically unified into a coherent whole.

But the use of the classic myth in *Cynthia's Revels* is said to have got in the way of its "action as a coherent whole".27 Even the sympathetic critics like O.J. Campbell think that the mythological elements are at best "an attractive decorative novelty".28 These views seem to ignore the fact that the Renaissance, like the Middle Ages, was prone to consider classical mythology as allegory concealing the wisdom of the ancients.29 Familiar with conventional moral interpretations of classical myth, Jonson uses the Echo and Narcissus myths only in order to reflect the ethical maxims he attempts to inculcate. As E.W. Talbert rightly believes, the moral expositions of mythology in many speeches (I, ii, 23-53; 80-100; V, xi, 14-17; 18-26) "unify the mythological elements Jonson uses" 30 closely related as they are to the moral ideas he purports to convey.

Approached as a hastily constructed document in the 'War of the Theatres', Poetaster has inevitably seemed to lack coherence and to be a mere collection of disjointed elements. Herford and Simpson say: "in respect of dramatic technique the Poetaster marks no advance whatever on its predecessors. The plot is little more than a hurried amalgam of more or less effective motives; and its technique ... is a loose mixture of different technical methods for the most part already employed in one or another of the previous comedies". But it would be rather strange if Jonson in his third effort to compose his new form of 'Comical satyre' achieved no closer dramatic unity than that credited to him by critics. Poetaster is certainly more dramatic than its predecessors. The swiftness of its execution has greatly tempered the over-elaboration which plays havoc with Every Man Out Of His Humour and Cynthia's Revels.

Discarding the completely undramatic scenes of Every Man Out Of His Humour and the allegory and masque-like staging of Cynthia's Revels, Jonson, in Poetaster, bends the historical matter of the Augustan age into a stout framework for action.

33. This Jonson himself tells us explicitly (Envy's 'Prologue', l. 14). Poetaster was finished in fifteen weeks owing to circumstances of unusual urgency. "Humours had reached Jonson that his enemies, stung by the unmistakable references in 'Hedon' and 'Anales' (in Cynthia's Revels) were preparing a signal revenge; ... He resolved to parry this attack by a counterstroke of his own". (Herford and Simpson, Ben Jonson, Vol. I, p.415).
The material turned into a drama is not a story, not even a plot in the conventional sense of the word, but a series of related ideas that go to make up an 'ars poetica'. So, the unity established for the play lies "less in a closely-knit, simply moving action than in a succession of intellectual attitudes that were adjacent in the minds that determined the nature of Renaissance culture".34

The play centres in the little group of rival dramatists who plot and persecute under the transparent masks of Crispinus, Demetrius and Horace. Jonson develops the comedy, in the main, by running the gamut of the poetasters from the clumsy Albius to the malicious Lupus, by manipulating the situations upon the stage in such a way that his butts exhibit their folly for laughter. The play shows no "disorderly composition". On the other hand, it clearly reveals, when it is read as a defense of poetry, "the careful and original 'inventio' that Jonson exercised in developing his own particular humanistic variations upon Renaissance thought and portraiture".35

Examined thus, the 'Comical Satires' are not really defective in structure as they are generally thought to be. Jonson's satiric bent, as has been shown, makes its way into a specific kind of structure in these plays, the characters being set up

34. O.J. Campbell, *Comical Satyres and Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida*", p. 117.

and moved about in accord with a preliminary frame of mind which has prejudged them. In each of these three plays there are, no doubt, brilliant dramatic moments and episodes but in general the critical interest has usurped the dramatic. Then, it seems that Jonson in these essentially satirical plays is temporarily distracted from his real course of development ushered in in Every Man In His Humour. None the less, the 'Comical Satires' are highly developmental and also interesting inasmuch as they show Jonson's search for an adequate dramatic structure which is at once thematic and linear.

The early Plautine comedies, The Case is Altered and Every Man In His Humour, followed by the static critical plays of the 'War of the Theatre', were thus in the nature of experiments. Jonson, however, found his true form with Volpone. Discarding the experimental devices of Every Man Out of His Humour, Cynthia's Revels and Postaster, Volpone has no chorus, no commentators, no historical story to confuse the issue, no antithetical allegory and no rigid framework taken from Latin comedy.

It looks as though Jonson, with his experience and maturity now attained after a considerable period of deliberate and self-conscious development, chose to be less cosmic than his predecessors and less quantitative and more selective and exhaustive. The

36. It is, however, not possible to say whether the critical interest of these plays was determined by "the theatre for which they were written or whether they were presented by the Children of the Revels because they had been so written". (Wallace A. Bacon, H L Q , XIX (1955-56), p.134.
following major comedies unequivocally reveal Jonson's impressive mastery of the art of limiting and of completeness within those limits. The resulting form of the plays in his middle period from 1605-14 is curiously tight.

For the first time in Volpone since Every Man In His Humour our interest is attracted to the play instead of being directed outward from it to a generalized society. The plot of Volpone carries an interest in itself rather than being simply an excuse for the playwright's comments. The plot centres rather than radiates our interest so that the attention is constantly focused on the aesthetic experience even while variations are played upon the central theme of avarice.

Furthermore, it is in Volpone for the first time we are restricted largely to a single house permeated with the personality of a single individual who acts consistently as a "magnetic centre" attracting others to him. The structure of the play consists in the growth of Volpone's and Mosca's triumphs in gulling through variation of tricks within the set environment, the legacy hunters - Voltoire, Corvino, Corbaccio, and Lady Politic Would-be. And Jonson successfully manages to relate character and environment in such a way that the two interact and interdetermine the structure of the play. Thus, we have in Volpone the unity of theme expressed, through unity of environment as determined by the magnetic centre.
All the same, the structure of Volpone is supposed to have been greatly marred by the lack of overt connection of the sub-plot with the main plot. The sub-plot which centres round Sir Politic Would-be, Lady Would-be and Peregrine has generally been dismissed by critics as irrelevant and discordant, loosening the fabric of the play. Even the most sympathetic admirers of Jonson have not been able to account satisfactorily for the presence of the three characters except by styling them a kind of comic relief to offset the 'sustained gloom' of the main action of the play. They approached the problem exclusively in terms of physical action. But it is on the thematic level that their presence can be justified and their actions integrated with the main plot.

The thematic structure of the play finds its way through the author's use of the beast fable or bird lore. If Volpone is the fox, Mosca the fly, Voltore the vulture, Corvino the raven, Corbaccio the crow, Sir Politic is the chattering poll parrot and his wife a deadlier specimen of the same species and Peregrine is the pilgrim falcon. Like parrots the Would-bes not only chatter but mimic. With Sir Politic, an effort to Italianize himself takes the form of his obsession with plots, secrets of state and Machiavellian intrigue. Lady Would-be apes the local styles in dress, cosmetics and reading. Peregrine,

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38. See D.A. Scheve, "Jonson's Volpone and Traditional Fox Lore", R E S, New Ser., I (1950), pp.242-44.
like the mythical hawk,\textsuperscript{39} pursues the truth, striking at the ignorance of Sir Politic.

The Would-bes are also related to the main plot in another way. While imitating their environment they quite unwittingly travesty the actions of the characters of the main plot thereby caricaturing them.\textsuperscript{40} Sir Politic Would-be functions as a comic distortion of Volpone. As his very name implies he is the would-be politician, the unsuccessful enterpriser whereas Volpone is the real politician, the successful enterpriser. Sir Politic, like Volpone, nurses his get-rich-quick schemes. But none of these ever progresses beyond the talking stage while every one of Volpone's schemes comes out quite successful loading his coffers with treasures. Again, while confiding to Peregrine that his money-making projects need only the assistance of one trusty henchman in order to be put into instant execution, Sir Politic is evidently hinting that Peregrine, by undertaking that assignment, should play Mosca to his Volpone. The antics of Lady Would-be caricature the more sinister gestures of Corvino Voltore and Corbaccio. She is jealous like Corvino. She is as meaninglessly and perversely erudite as Voltore. And like Corbaccio, she makes compromising proposals to Mosca. Furthermore,

\textsuperscript{39} In Jonson's Epigram LXXXV (Herford and Simpson, \textit{Ben Jonson} Vol. VIII, p.66) the hawk is described as a bird sacred to Apollo, since it pursues the truth, strikes at ignorance, and makes the fool its quarry.

\textsuperscript{40} See James A. Barch, "The Double Plot in \textit{Volpone}". \textit{M.P., LI} (1953-54), pp.93-101.
Lady Would-be stands an ironic contrast to Celia just as Sir Politic does to Volpone. She is strident and parrot-like while Celia is meek and decorous. Thus the sub-plot of Sir Politic and Lady Would-be which seems at first to have little connection with the main plot turns out, on closer scrutiny, to be an ironic echo of the main plot. It certainly adds a fresh dimension and a profounder insight to the play.

However, when Jonson came to *Epicoene* he appears to have abandoned the conventional double plot in favour of proliferation of character, event and talk, in order to concentrate on a narrower range of possibilities. In composing within more highly integrated scenes, and calling attention to the qualitative gradations of tone and meaning, he places stricter limits on time, place and event. He limits the potential formal constituents. The older quantitative method of achieving copiousness is thus displaced by a more selective variety and contrast, gradations within strict limits. The emphasis now falls upon a seeking out of all things within a limited subject, as means of achieving fullness.

The trick of Jonson's method of achieving such fullness lies, according to L.A. Beaureline, in his "mastery of variations within limits: he makes the episode seem absolutely exhausting,

41. A possible reason for this change in Jonson's artistic strategy could be found in Jonson's disapproval of mere variety. He seems to have felt that mere variety or novelty was a sign of luxurious decadence.
completely degrading, massively thorough. The full strength of Jonson's illusion lies, however, in the tissue of the plot. It progresses in a compact series, by ringing the changes, by turn and counterturn, creating the impression that all the possibilities are being wrung out of the scene. Such seems to be the aesthetic of completeness attempted by Jonson to create the illusion of fullness or plenitude within arbitrary limits set on the material. And a consideration of this sort of impulse toward a kind of controlled completeness brings us, perhaps, closer to Jonson's characteristic design.

_Epicoene_, a delight of the Restoration stage and the 'critical darling of Dryden', exemplifies Jonson's endeavour to attain to a further closeness of construction. Characterised by brilliance of structure and psychological deftness, both linear and thematic, the play's argument is completely self-contained. There is, in _Epicoene_, the beautifully-ordered plot structure which Dryden most enthusiastically describes and there is also the symbolic structure well described by Heffner and Partridge.

_Epicoene_ accomplishes what it sets out to do with an absolute minimum of extraneous material. Jonson works out variations on a plot which has at its core a relatively simple, coherent story. Morose, a hater of noise, marries in order to disinherit his hated nephew, but the nephew, Dauphine, outwits him. The

securing of Morose's estate is the central aim of the whole. Around this thread Jonson arranges characters, episodes, and recurrent motifs which are connected to it and to each other according to the total design of the play.

But, it seems to be much more accurate to consider Epicoene as consisting not of a Terentian plot held together by the 'noble intrigue' depending upon the delayed completion of a single, well-defined objective as Dryden analyzes it, but of a welter of characters and episodes whirling within a central theme. Because, there are points at which our attention gets radiated rather than focused. First of all, the settling of Morose's estate on Dauphine is not the ostensible aim of the action after Act III. Again the LaFoole-Daw gulling which provides the matter for part of Act IV seems to come dangerously close to being simply a stopgap in the action. Even the Ladies Collegiates, for that matter, tend somewhat to develop an interest of their own. It is really the unity of theme which holds these links in the chain in position.

The thematic structure of the play will be clear when we know that the title, Epicoene, is applicable to much more than, the central twist of the plot. As Partridge points out "nearly every one in the play is epicene in character in some way".43 The Collegiate Ladies "with most masculine or rather hermaphroditical authority" (I, 1, 80) are too bold to be feminine.

They appear so far from the feminine that Morose cries out:
"O, mankind generation" (V, iv, 22). Mistress Otter who "falls
upon" her husband, Captain Otter, and "beats him" is certainly
masculine. The epicene natures of the women in the play natu-
really extinguish the masculine natures of men. Captain Otter
becomes epicene as Mistress Otter becomes Captain Otter himself.
Morose, in order to get rid of his wife, shows his willingness
to become a eunuch. He tells the Ladies:

I am no man, ladies ... Utterly un-abled in nature, by
reason of frigidity, to performs the duties, or any the
least office of a husband.

(V, iv, 44-47)

Also, La Foole speaking, as he always does, in an effiminate
manner appears to be more feminine than masculine. Thus
Epicoene can be said to find its thematic unity in the epicene
nature of its characters.

The Alchemist offers, perhaps, the clearest example of
Jonson's artifice of controlled completeness with a restricted
field, a set number of characters and some simple principles for
a "confidence game". The plot is of the simplest, observing all
the Unities, especially the Unity of 'place' with even greater
strictness than in Epicoene. Like Volpone, The Alchemist "is
built on the double theme of lust and greed, and the whole play
is constructed so as to isolate and magnify the central theme.
The extraordinary complications of the plot all centre on
Subtle and Face, and all work to one end. The play is completely
self-consistent". The dramatic action of the play thus evolves from the very satiric conception of human behaviour.

Carried on with unabating vigour from the opening, the action of *The Alchemist* is varied but compact. There is a sparkling variety of interest but all the interests, pointing in one direction, are but parts of a dominant whole. There is a tremendous variety in characterisation also, but every character is an integral part of the whole, contributing its own share to the development of action.

The plot is built forming a compact series, with repeated turns and counterturns with successively greater crises, and more and more people crowding on-stage. The whole fabric, building climax on climax, is so plausibly presented that we forget its departures from the possibilities of life. Such art is "the epitome of Jonson's skill - to vary, to press a matter to its greatest potential, to please us at the same time that we stand admiring the subtle means by which our feelings are manipulated".

All the same, the artistic beauty of the plot of *The Alchemist* is said to be marred by the inartistic ending of the play. When

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44. L.C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, p.207.
Lovewit, who entirely disappears from our interest during the course of the action, crops up conveniently towards the close at a climacteric moment in the action, probability is said to be stretched to the breaking point. Lovewit's appearance at the end is thus supposed to be not necessitated. W.A. Bacon complains that "the ending in this sense is not determined by the interaction of character and environment, but by an accident not strictly relevant to the environment". Thus, the ending is supposed to break the logic of the design of the play.

But it should be remembered that Lovewit's return is prepared for at the beginning of the play itself. And it is essential that this should be almost, perhaps quite, forgotten before he actually does return, as the structure of the play depends partly upon successive crises in the unstable alliance of Subtle, Face and Dol. Also, we may say with Madeleine Doran that "in this world of human baseness and its consequences, accident is allowed, to be sure, in a not illiberal use of coincidence, but it becomes simply part of the data which the intriguer manipulates. It is the accident of the fly entering the spider's web". We should bear in mind that it is also by sheer accident that Dragger, Dapper, Kastril, and his sister all arrive at the Alchemist's laboratory on the very morning that Mammon and the Puritans are pressing for "projection". But, Face only weaves these lesser dupes into his scheme with

brilliant improvisation. In the same way Face uses the unlucky arrival of his master on the same day to save his own face. Unable to hush up all that has taken place in the house, Face is compelled to confess everything. He readily begs his master's pardon and offers him the hand of a rich young widow, Dame Pliant and gets his pardon and a reward too. Thus Lovewit's unexpected arrival is used by Face to save his own face as he has done in the case of the other characters. That Jonson himself believed this to be in the fitness of things is indicated when Face addressing the audience says that though

My part a little fell in this last Scene,
Yet 'twas decorum.

(V, v, 158-59)

If The Alchemist, thus, has the "rising" and "vertical" structure described by Dryden and Ellis-Fermor respectively, it also has the thematic structure. As alchemy works well as a metaphor for art, The Alchemist can be taken as not only about London confidence games but also about the relationship between art and nature, which by implication will refer to the relationship between the comic artist and the audience, as indicated in Subtle's speech:

Beside, who doth not see, in daily practice,
Art can beget bees, hornets, beetles, wasps,
Out of the carcasses, and dung of creatures;
Yea, scorpions, of an harbe, being ritely plac'd.

(II, iii, 171-74)

The "art" which Subtle specifies is apparently comic art. So Subtle can be regarded as the symbolic comic artist-alchemist who, (like Jonson, the comic artist himself) strips nature of
its superficialities and impurities and reduces it to its quintessence all within the context of the purest comedy. The representatives of the major social classes of Jacobean England - Dapper, Drugger, Sir Epicure - who appear in the play to be exposed by the alchemist, Subtle, also appear in the theatre to be reformed by the arch-alchemist, Jonson. Thus alchemy as a metaphor for comic art unifies the whole action of the play into a thematic whole.

It is generally felt that in his last plays - The Devil Is An Ass (1616), The Staple of News (1626), The New Inn (1629) and The Magnetic Lady (1632) - Jonson's constructive powers decrease. One of the main charges levelled against these last plays is that they lack unity. It is true that these plays lack the unifying force of a central satiric motive, such as is exhibited in Volpone and The Alchemist. They may not conform to the pattern of the linear-thematic structure which has so brilliantly characterized the middle comedies. Nevertheless, a certain unity is given to these plays by the characteristically Jonsonian tone which is created partly by the imagery.48

Somehow, Jonson's plots have not been properly understood nor appreciated by some critics. "It would be difficult", observes William Archer, "to find worse-constructed plays

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48 Edward B. Partridge attempts a satisfactory explanation of the unity of the last plays, barring The Devil is An Ass, in terms of image clusters. See The Broken Compass, pp.178-212.
outside of Jonson's works". Edmund Wilson, "Morose Ben Jonson", pp. 50–51. Nothing could be more fallacious than this short-sighted view, which is totally blind to Jonson's 'dramatic design' of each play as a whole. These critics do not appear to have realised that different types of drama require different kinds of dramatic unity. The fallacy, however, rests on the common notion that the plot of a comedy ought to be the same kind as that of a tragedy. As L.J. Potts points out "when people speak of a plot, they usually have in mind a logical sequence of significant events, like the events that lead from the return of Oedipus to his native country up to the death of his wife and his own blindness, or from Macbeth's military successes to his murder of Duncan and on to his own death". It is with this erroneous notion in mind that critics like Archer and Wilson have found fault with Jonson's plots. They seem to be unaware of the fact that comedy in general and the Jonsonian comedy in particular at once justifies and demands a different structure - 'a particular kind by it selfe'.

49. William Archer, The Old Drama and The New, p. 81.
51. See Harold F. Brooks, "The Name of Action in Komos".
52. L.J. Petts, Comedy, p. 117.