During the last part of Elizabeth's reign, by the middle of the 1590s, there emerged, as successors to the 'University Wits', a new group of writers aptly called the Elizabethan 'Angry Young Men' who brought about a radical change in the world of theatre. They were ingenious and uncompromising literary men who saw life in a new way. Like the 'University wits' they were intellectuals; but unlike Marlowe and his friends they were not bohemians. While their predecessors had been essentially romantic and idealistic, the 'Angry Young Men' were down-to-earth. They were fundamentally serious-minded scholars with a satiric bent of mind. Their interest was pre-eminently in the unvarnished, the odd and even the unpleasant sides of life. Hence their determined effort to use the anti-romantic method with the ostensible purpose of presenting social criticism generally satiric in spirit.

The 'Angry Young Men', however, became dominating men of letters of the day, and their coming to prominence was greatly encouraged by the very spirit of the times. As R.W. Chambers has rightly pointed out, "these later Elizabethan days had been glorious, but yet no 'halcyon days of happy ease'". Owing to

1. Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama, p.97. These were, as J.B. Bamborough explains, "the sons of professional men or of the minor gentry, and many of them had been trained as lawyers in the Inns of Court, the legal colleges in London which formed almost a third University in England". (Ben Jonson, p.97).

various factors - political, social, economic and literary - the obtaining ethos at this juncture was one of anxiety, despondency and disillusionment, as opposed to the buoyancy, radiance, vitality and gusto of the immediately-preceding period.

Politically a sense of insecurity and instability came mainly from "the memory of the crises of the past three accessions and of the series of plots to assassinate the Queen throughout her reign combined with the knowledge that there was no obvious heir to the throne at her death". Consequently dissent of various kinds seemed to disrupt national unity.

Regarding the social aspect, there began to appear a perceptible change in the structure of society of the day. As a result of the all-absorbing excitement of the Spanish wars and the flux of political and social adjustment, "the lines between the different ranks of the people grew hard and rigid, and the world of fashion evolved a code of manners complex and artificial to a degree previously unknown. The opposition between the court and city circles and between town and country habits was sharply, even bitterly accentuated". 4

Then, the economic expansion of the period was accompanied by the severe depressions at home largely owing to the closing

5. This aspect of Elizabethan life has been brought into prominence only recently. E.P. Cheyney describes the 'turbulence' of the years 1596-1597: "There was ... the whole miserable mass of distress, crime and vagabondage that crowded the gallows, prisons, streets and highways of the time". (History of England from the Defeat of the Armada to the Death of Elizabeth, Vol. II, p.35).
of continental markets under Elizabeth's control. As L.C. Knights points out, "in the years 1594-1597 there was a great dearth of corn, tillage was described as being very greatly decayed, and there were frequent bread riots; there was much unemployment in the clothing-trade, and 'the whole trade of the city was described as being much impaired and its traffic greatly diminished'. Plague, moreover, had been intermittent throughout the 'nineties'.

The economic problems, in this manner, became unavoidably obtrusive "placing in relief the individual struggle to retain some control over one's worldly conditions". It was no longer easy to believe that all things were possible to any man. Thus, step by step, the exaltation and confidence of the heroic age seemed to lose its bloom in the last decade of Elizabeth's reign. The sentiment of expectation changed to a sense of weariness, depression and disillusionment. Then, it looked as though the native hue of Elizabethan resolution was already sicklied over with the pale cast of Jacobean melancholy.

Also, the economic instability of the 1590s resulted in the revival of satire. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a few with its corresponding spread of luxury, the


steady drift of gentlemen from the simplicity of country life to the disorder of the town, the domination of the metropolis by a sophisticated and pleasure-loving court - all seemed to cry aloud for the lash of the satirist. And "frustrated in his hopes of patronage, disgusted by the flourishing of social pretenders in City and Court alike, and more conscious than ever before both of the dignity and the insecurity of his calling, the man of letters turned to satire as a corrective of public morals through which he could also give vent to his personal discontent". 8

Besides, the decade of the 1590s was the flowering time of the English Renaissance. The humanist triumph which had been prepared by Wilson's Art of Rhetoric (1563) and Ascham's Schoolmaster (1570) and which had been well advanced in the years following The Shepherd's Calendar (1579) was by now fully accomplished, with the posthumous appearance of Sidney's Arcadia and his sonnets (1590-1) and Spenser's publication of The Faerie Queene (1590-6). 9 In consequence, there came over England a tidal wave of neo-classical inspiration. Writers seemed to vie with one another in listing new English poets for comparison with the famous authors of Italy and ancient Rome. The climate of the period was thus congenial to the flourishing of the 'Angry Young Men'.


, p.99.
On top of that, by the end of the century "professional drama was beginning to show a cleavage along class lines".10 The citizens seemed to take less interest in attending the theatres. Consequently the audiences were made up mainly of courtiers and cavaliers. The theatres were rapidly becoming the exclusive property of the elite. The dramatic companies, therefore, began to concentrate on the private theatres which "evidently attracted more playgoers, since performances in them became more frequent then".11

The Elizabethan 'Angry Young Men' soon found that the private theatres suited them best as they offered them more opportunities than the public theatres. They appealed mainly to intellectuals and to their practical experience. Conceivably they aimed at realistic drama dealing with social vices, follies and foibles thereby deliberately limiting their knowledge to a non-spiritual world of man. The type of drama they attempted was, therefore, to reflect rather the mundane lives of the audience than moments of their heightened experience or their desires and demands. In other words, "the stage, which had interpreted life in terms of universal significance, became the mirror of local prejudice and the scourge of social folly".12


Thus, with the turn of the century a strong reaction against the pure imagination and robust spirit of the Elizabethan drama began to make itself felt in England. The various conducive factors described above gave an impetus to this movement towards satirical and realistic portrayal of life in drama. This movement found a perfect expositor in Ben Jonson who "was at once a rebel against the stage-technique of the public theatre of his day and an exponent of it". He readily absorbed the tone of the age and the opportune times helped him find himself.

Ben Jonson entered the theatre at a time when the "University Wits", on the one hand, and Shakespeare, on the other, were establishing the romantic comedy and the flamboyant tragedy. Beginning with Edwards and Whatstone, followed by Greene, Peele, Nashe, Lodge, Yarington, Lyly, Kyd and Marlowe, a succession of good writers besides many authors of anonymous plays developed the romantic drama evolved from their own genius, as opposed to the classical drama. Particularly Shakespeare played a key role in creating a drama at once popular and poetic.

This dramatic development, while breaking away from classical models, had established no theory or criticism of its own. It had only resulted from the individual innovations

of poets and playwrights who strove to meet the persistent demand of the popular stage. They, no doubt, gave specific character to the 'History play', 'Domestic Tragedy', 'Tragedy of Blood', 'Pastoral Play' and several kinds of comedy. But there were no prescribed rules for all these species. Fervently inspired to give their audiences the thrills and glory of life, these dramatists had dealt with remote places, idealised persons, marvellous adventures, conquests and such other vicissitudes of life. But they had not attempted an ordered analysis and rationalised 'imitation' of life of their day. So, their plays "were neither right tragedies nor right comedies".14

Furthermore, the Elizabethan plays, whether comic or tragic, conforming, in the main, to the fashions of the time, offered much that appeared to be glaringly lawless particularly to those familiar with classical drama. For, these plays conveniently flouted the classical tradition. There were hardly any restrictions guiding the plays. The plots were full of improbabilities and happy coincidences. The dramatists seldom observed the Unities of time and place. Their plays, "where you shall have Asia of the one side and Afric of the other, and so many other under-kingsoms",15 simply discarded these dramatic laws.

Moreover, with the extravagance of energy which unfailingly characterised the Elizabethans in all things, the splendour and

15. Ibid., p.41.
magnificence of the Elizabethan age had their own dangers too. The torrent of Marlowe's eloquence obviously mingled fantastic brutality with sweetness. Shakespeare's tragedies were surcharged with unrelieved pressure of thought, passion and poetry. These things, no doubt, were good in themselves but minor dramatists in trying to imitate them were bound to commit most intolerable excesses. Shakespeare was endowed with such rare dramatic genius that he gave full concession to the popular taste and to the requirements of the Elizabethan theatre, "yet transmuted in the giving, so that what might have been a mere connivance in baseness becomes a miracle of expressive art". Since all the Elizabethan playwrights were not Shakespeares, they could not follow the same method without disaster. There was, however, "a real danger that authority in every sense would be flung to the winds and that every literary fault would be thought justified by genius". Inevitably, therefore, criticism called for classical form and realistic presentation of life in drama.

This clamant call for classical form found its answer in Ben Jonson who could offer the greatly-needed precept and practice through his plays. Jonson began his theatrical career as a strolling player. And the time was ripe for his development. Though he began to write for the theatres as early as

1593, in his nineteenth year, he first challenged public censure only in 1598 with his *Every Man in His Humour* which bore the special stamp of his genius. The play is an important turning point in the course of the Elizabethan drama marking as it does the beginning of a revolutionary movement in dramatic methods. What is more, the play announces Jonson's programme for the rest of his dramatic career apparently signifying a change of plan on his part and his devotion to a new kind of play. This unequivocally pre-supposes that Jonson must have passed through an altogether different period until he reached his characteristic standpoint.

This period from 1593 to 1598 could be said to be the period of Jonson's apprenticeship. When Jonson first threw his lot with the playwrights he frankly followed the current demand for romantic drama, showing no small skill in adopting

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18. It is rather difficult to agree with the most recent opinion, put forth by W. David Kay ("The Shaping of Ben Jonson's Career: A Reexamination of Facts and Problems", MP, 67 (Feb., 1970), p.225), that it is with *Every Man Out of His Humour* that Jonson established himself as a leading dramatist. On the other hand, it is more plausible to think with Herford and Simpson that it is *Every Man In His Humour* "which placed Jonson at a stride in the foremost rank of English playwrights". (Ben Jonson, Vol. I, p.18). Because we have the authentic proof from Aubrey that after some unsuccessful plays produced at the Curtain Theatre, Jonson "undertooke againe to write a playe and did hitt it admirably well, viz: *Every Man .... Wch was his first good one*" (Quoted in Herford and Simpson, Ben Jonson, Vol. I, p.179). Besides, in 'The 'Induction' to The Magnetic Lady (1632) Jonson writes of himself as "beginning his studies of this kind, with *every man in his Humour*". (11.99-100). From this it is clear that Jonson thought of *Every Man In His Humour* as the foundation of his achievement.
the full-blooded romantic manner. He had to share almost equally with Shakespeare in the powerful influences of Marlowe's art. Like Shakespeare, Jonson had to mend imperfect scenes, to furnish additions for plays that were becoming stale, to improve faulty verses and also to take part in the representations on the stage. But, unfortunately, nothing is known to have survived from the authorship of this period.

Nevertheless, Jonson gained from Meres the encomium, "our best for Tragedie", along with several other Elizabethan dramatists. We justly wonder what these plays could be that won for Jonson such a praise. Even Henslowe tells us nothing of these earlier years of Jonson's dramatic apprenticeship. He only refers to Jonson in his Diary as a maker of plots as well as a player. All the same, the plays that Jonson wrote for Henslowe from 1597 in collaboration with his contemporaries give us, in their romantic elements and style, some hints that his early work did not differentiate itself much from the current romantic work of his fellow-dramatists. That Jonson must have adopted the dominant romantic style and


that he was also a master of that style is proved by his 'Additions' to The Spanish Tragedy later. Further evidence that his early work was romantic may be found in the romantic elements of the earliest of his extant comedy, The Case is Altered, which stands quite apart from all the rest of his work. Thus Jonson, like Shakespeare himself, during his dramatic apprenticeship had to deal with romantic plays.

But whereas Shakespeare continued in that tradition bringing the romantic style to the very height of perfection, Jonson

21. The 'Additions' to The Spanish Tragedy have been ascribed to Jonson on the strength of two entries in Henslowe's Diary to the effect that on "the 25 September 1601" and "the 22 of June 1602", Jonson was paid a substantial sum by Henslowe "for new Adicyons for Jeronymo" (Henslowe's Diary, I, 149, 168). But there have been various objections to Jonson's authorship of the "Additions". (See E.K. Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage, Vol. III, pp.429-30; H. Levin, "An echo from The Spanish Tragedy", MLN, LXIV (1949), pp.297-302). The main objection to Jonson's authorship, however, is internal evidence of style. Herford and Simpson remark that Henslowe's entries "cannot guarantee, if there is strong internal evidence to the contrary, that the work undertaken by Jonson was not carried out by some one else". (Ben Jonson, Vol. II, p.245). Various critics have suggested various probable authors such as Webster, (Lamb, Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, p.11). Shakespeare (Coleridge, Table Talk, p.210) and even Dekker. (H.W. Crundell and R.G. Howarth, NQ, March 4, 1933; April 7, 1334; January 4, 1941). But as far as we know there is no Elizabethan dramatist who wrote quite in this style. Moreover, we wonder what happened to those "new adicyons" for which Jonson was paid in 1601 and 1602, if they are not his? Hence, we are not unjustified in believing that Jonson was the author of the 'Additions' to The Spanish Tragedy.
swerved from that tradition. Shakespeare, with a largeness of vision and flexibility of technique, worked upon the popular dramatic tradition of his time and produced an English poetic drama which developed out of the pressure of its own vitality and its own kind of form and unity without owing much to an external doctrine of correctness. Jonson approached his art from a quite different point of view. Notwithstanding the initial romantic play of his genius and his mastery of that romantic style, Jonson stood apart, as an example of that 'rara avis', with a diverse object and principle backed by his solid classical training and stirred by his zeal for reform.

In thus dwelling apart from his fellow-dramatists, Jonson challenged the judgment of his times. Shakespeare accepted the conditions of the stage of his time. He was quite aware of its shortcomings and defects but seemed to have resigned himself to them with good humour. Jonson, on the other hand, registered his protest against the dramatic practice of his age, against its extravagance and its carelessness. And in angry defiance of the accepted traditions of the Elizabethan stage, Jonson set up his own tastes, ideas and theories assimilated from the ancients against the popular taste. In the midst of that luxuriant romanticism which culminated in Shakespeare, Jonson emerged essentially as a native classicist with the definite purpose of effecting a reform of theatrical taste and convention both by his precept and example. 22

22. Jonson's disciplined, reasoned and restrictive art was, perhaps, precisely what was needed in his day to check the exuberance of the romanticists.
Thus, no sooner had Jonson completed his apprenticeship than he came forward as a pioneer, a law-giver and an innovator in dramatic art, assuming the role of a dictator, a laureate and a censor. Having acquired some credit with the managers, he resolved to embody his own conceptions in his future plays and to model them upon the plan of his ancient masters. He consciously appointed himself a teacher and a missionary of literature with a definite creed different from that of others of the time. Jonson, like Donne, was thus in revolt against the artistic principles of his contemporaries, and he sought in the classics a cure for the romantic excesses of Elizabethan drama. Hence he came forward as the champion of classicism.

It may be argued that while the main tendency of the Elizabethan drama was towards romanticism, neither classicism nor realism had, by any means, been lacking in the earlier drama, particularly in comedy. It is true that though classicism had been driven from the stage to the closet in tragedy, in comedy at least Plautus and Terence were still largely followed as models. The Plautian model was anglicised in Ralph Roister Doister. This had notable copies in Lyly's Mother Bombie and Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors. Besides, not only its stock characters - its clever servants, parasites, misers, braggart soldiers - but also its general scheme of a series of tricks, brought about through disguises, had come to be widely used in the early drama.
But the point is that except in rare cases, the use of classicism and realism in the early drama was more apparent than real. It was, on the whole, external and superficial. "The average Elizabethan writer", says Marchette Chute, "agreed in theory that the classics were very valuable and important, but in practice he used his classical education chiefly as a way of showing off". Writers like Nashe and Greene only scattered bits of classical lore through their writings. They could readily have recited whole pages of Cicero and Horace from their retentive memory but neither of them had any idea as to what those disciplined Romans were talking about. A superficial classicism of this kind was one that any intelligent Londoner could acquire by means of a handbook on mythology and an anthology of classical quotations like Aesop's Fables.

It was left to Jonson, then, to reinforce the classical ideal genuinely on the Elizabethan stage. What made Jonson exceptional was that, unlike most of his contemporaries, he was primarily concerned with the spirit rather than the rigidity and outward trappings of the classics. Also, it was in Jonson, above all the other men of his time, that the classical ideal centred in its application to English conditions.

Jonson's knowledge of the past and his reflective turn of mind, however, enabled him to analyse and take a detached view.

of the fashion of play-making and play-going and, what is more, to appraise it in the light of dramatic history. We may say that Jonson succeeded in conveying an adequate impression of the drama of his time better than any other author of the period. For Sidney was obviously too early and, moreover, did not have the actual experience of playwriting. Compilers like Meres and Bolton were too categorical. Pamphleteers like Gosson were too prejudiced. Later men like Suckling in his Sessions of the Poets were too trivial and superficial in their points of view. Shakespeare was too deeply absorbed in his swift act of creating to take an objective view of his art. But, Jonson, coming to playwriting with a critic's instinct and with a good knowledge of dramatic history and the rules of dramatic structure, was in a competent position to judge and appraise the contemporary drama. The defence of his art of analysing, estimating and appraising the contemporary drama is so clearly and frequently expressed by him in the course of his plays that one can never go wrong in understanding it.

But, more often than not, Jonson is misinterpreted in his attitude to the work of his contemporaries and recent predecessors. The "War of the Theatres" was particularly responsible for such a misconception. The bad temper on both sides in the 'quarrel-plays' has been exaggerated and over emphasized with the result that personal animosity is supposed to colour all his criticism of the contemporary stage. But if Jonson's

specific expressions of opinion are put together and judged disinterestedly, they show a well-supported and constructive criticism based upon sound aesthetic principles.

Jonson's main indictment of the conditions of the Elizabethan drama is precisely formulated in the 'Prologue' to Every Man in His Humour. With his unshaken belief in the validity of the classical Unities of time and place Jonson considers it ridiculous

To make a child, now swadled, to proceede
Man, and then shooe vp, in one beard, and weede,
Past threescore yeeres:

(ll. 7-9)

Jonson also ridicules the flagrant absurdities of historical plays with their

three rustic swords,
And helpe of some few foot-and-halfe-foote words,
Fight over Yorke, and Lancastors long iarres:
And in the tyring-house bring wounds, to scarres.

(ll. 9-12)

Further, Jonson condemns the use of the 'Chorus' to waft you ore the seas as a device rendered necessary by


25. The 'Prologue', which might be said to have replaced Lorenzo Junior's Defence of Poetry of the Quarto version, was added to the play for the first time in the Folio version. There is every reason to accept Herford and Simpson's argument (Ben Jonson, Vol. I, p.333) that the Prologue belongs to 1612 when Jonson was almost certainly writing the revised version of Every Man in His Humour as part of his preparation for the 1616 Folio. The Prologue, however, was very important to Jonson because in effect it prefaced his entire Folio collection.
failure to observe the unity of place. He disapproves of other such stage artifices as the "creaking throne" let down when Gods interfered, the "nimble squibble .... to make afear'd/The gentlewomen", the "roul'd bullet .../To say, it thunders", or again the "tempestuous drumme/to tell you when the storme doth come"; (11. 16-20) - all melodramatic devices called into being by the nature of extravagant plots. Following in the track of Whetstone and Sidney, Jonson, in this manner, attacks the inartistic methods of the pure romantic school.

Jonson was equally vexed with the bombast and ranting in the revenge tragedies. He ridicules the bombast of Kyd's Spanish Tragedy in the light of Bobadill's "ill-judged praise of its well-penned lines":

I would faine see all the Poets, of these times, pen such another play as that was! they 'll prate and swagger, and keepe a stir of arte and devices;.... ... they are the most shallow, pittifull, barren fellowes.

(Every Man in His Humour, I, v, 50-54)

Jonson, thus, disapproved of the course that the English drama had taken since Tamburlaine and The Spanish Tragedy. He sought to regulate the creative energy of his age which was often apt to tend in the direction of extravagance of language and exuberance of style. For he hopefully felt that, however great might be the talent and genius now employed on the Elizabethan stage, it was still necessary to introduce a more regular drama than had hitherto appeared. Hence he "applied himself continually to the task of defining
and redefining the forms which dramatic art in his own time
might naturally and properly assume.26

Before proceeding further, we may ask the question whether
Jonson's stand was justified. When we think of Shakespeare in
whose "hands, the traditions have been overlaid by a new and
more comprehensive dramatic purpose",27 we, no doubt, find
Jonson rather rigid and categorical. But the point to bear
in mind is that Shakespeare was a singular exception. He
outdistanced his contemporaries. Whatever he touched he ren-
dered, by dint of his rare genius, into pieces of great art.
So, to a real genius like Shakespeare he sanctioned liberty
and had "lov'd the man" and honoured "his memory (on this side
Idolatry)" (Discoveries, I. 654-5) and certified that "he was
not of an age, but for all time".28 Nor was Jonson blind to
the glories of English literature. He only saw danger in its
unbridled course. A Shakespeare or a Bacon had his own lights
to guide him. But what about the rest? Therefore, the

26. J.A. Bryant, Jr., "The Significance of Ben Jonson's
First Requirement for Tragedy: 'Truth of Argument'",
SP, XLIX (Jan., 1952), p.195.

27. John Russell Brown, Shakespeare and His Comedies, p.36.

28. All the same, it has often been questioned by Jonson's
contemporaries like Leonard Digges whether Jonson gave
Shakespeare "his due". (See, John Freehafer, "Leonard
Digges, Ben Jonson and Shakespeare Idolatry", SQ, XXI
(Winter, 1970), p.66). However, G.E. Bentley has correc-
ted these misconceptions about Shakespeare's seventeenth-
century reputation in Shakespeare and Jonson: Their Reputa-
tions in the Seventeenth Century Compared. (1945).
restraints and standards that he set were obviously meant for those who belonged to the average level, but claimed licence too easily. From this it is clear that Jonson scarcely failed to realise the greatness of his age or to appreciate the really deserving poets. He knew the strength as well as the weaknesses of his contemporaries. It was only against an unbridled romanticism that Jonson raised his voice.

Jonson's watchword was reform. He earnestly intended to rescue the Elizabethan world of letters from its sloppy and emotional ways. He wanted "to wrest both tragedy and comedy out of romantic extravagance and sloppiness". But his main concern was to free comedy from its romantic entanglements. He, therefore, bent the whole strength of his mind, critical as well as creative, to supply the element of art to the exuberant literature of his age, to ensure its proper development and progress.

Jonson dwelt upon the Greek principle, 'nothing too much', when he was surrounded by writers who commonly sought to do much more than enough. He pleaded for election and a mean, for proportion, fitness and propriety. He advocated a strict and succinct style wherein "you can take away nothing without loss". He proclaimed it to be his sacred office to

raise the despis'd head of poëtrie againe, and stripping her out of those rotten and base rags, wherewith the Times haue adulterated her form,

restore her to her primitue habit, feature, and
majesty, and render her worthy to be imbraced, and
kist, of all the great and master-spirits of our
world.

(Volpone, Dedication, 11. 129-134)

Thus, Jonson's primary purpose was to alter and reform the
current practices of the stage, first, by a strong reaction
against all absurdities of current forms of drama, and then,
through a recourse to classical standards as a cure for its
lawlessness, thereby establishing a comic and tragic form
based on rational plan. With this purpose, he attempted to
inculcate sounder dramatic methods for comedy and tragedy both
by his theory and practice. He boldly claimed to write such
plays "as other playes should be" (Every Man in His Humour,
'Prologue', 1.14), by observing "the lawes of time, place,
(and) persons", and swerving "from no needfull rule". (Volpone,
'Prologue', 11. 31-32).

But this does not mean that Jonson was a slave to the
laws of drama derived by the neo-classical theorists from
Aristotle and from the practice of the ancient dramatists.
Nevertheless, Jonson's primary fault is said to be "a too servile
imitation of the classic models".30 Some recent critics, even
after what Eliot and Harford and Simpson have done to place
Jonson in the proper perspective, subscribe to the same view of
Jonson. Mary Suddard, for instance, refers to Jonson as

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"this over-docile disciple of antiquity".  

Edmund Wilson categorically states that Jonson "was a pedant whose cult of the classics had little connection with his special kind of genius".  

David Daiches thinks that Jonson is "pedantic (and) imitative .... in his learned art".

First of all, the view that Jonson is little more than an imitating and translating scholar is far from being true. On the other hand, he is genuinely creative within the self-imposed limits. It is true that Jonson derived motives and ideas and phrases from classical literature, but at the same time, he did not borrow them directly without their passing through a remoulding process in his hands. The point, however, is that Jonson had an altogether different attitude to borrowing from the classics as well as from native sources. To translate a fine classical phrase aptly Jonson regarded as almost an original work while he scorned to steal phrases from Arcadia. What is more, this translation is managed with admirable freedom. Jonson did not need to dovetail or weld his borrowings into one another. For, having fused them in his mind, he poured them forth into the mould of his thought. "Jonson's effort", in the words of F.R. Leavis, "was to feel

Catullus, and the others he cultivated, as contemporary with himself; or rather, to achieve an English mode that should express a sense of contemporaneity with them. It is this intellectual process behind his borrowing which determines its significance. Jonson certainly "did not copy the Roman writers, he identified himself with them; he did not steal their thoughts, he thought them and felt them, and when he used their words, it was because no fitter ones would naturally occur to him." This kind of borrowing from classical treasures, we should remember, was accounted to be no robbery in that age.

According to Jonson the poet may seek material anywhere so long as he unifies it, thus making it his own by his art. This is the essence of originality for Jonson. He himself illustrates this when he says that a poet should

bee able to convert the substance, or Riches of an other Poet, to his owne use (and) .... Not, to imitate servilely .... but, to draw forth out of the best, and choicest flowers, with the Bee, and turne all into Honey, worke it into one relish, and savour:

(Discoveries, 11. 2467-78)

As long as Jonson is able to do so, whatever he borrows, the thought, in a genuine sense, is really Jonson's own, being made so by right of complete assimilation.

35. Elizabath Woodbridge, Studies in Jonson's Comedy, p.18.
Thus Jonson had carried scholarship to its highest stage and turned it into a new creation. This creative borrowing and this splendid energy to compass and surmount his sources was one of Jonson's chief gifts. His Discoveries is a triumphant metamorphosis of borrowings. How thoroughly the material of Discoveries became his own is shown by the very way in which he handled it, sometimes fusing several sentences into one, changing the order, transferring remarks, blending the material of different authors into a more or less coherent whole. This extraordinary ability of Jonson to make the treasure of the past his own was appreciated in his own time. To cite but one instance, T. Carew applauded Jonson's ability

to bring the booty home:
Nor think it theft if the rich spoils, so torn
From conquer'd authors, be as trophies worn.

(To Ben Jonson, II. 40-42)

We may conclude that imitation to Jonson only meant a coming into harmony with the literary instinct, the refined taste, the mode of thought and the art of the master imitated, thus making all that he followed purely his own. Hence there is nothing wrong if Jonson "invades authors like a monarch"

as long as "what would be theft in other poets, is only victory in him". 37

Also, the view that Jonson was a pedant is not correct. In reality, Jonson was no pedant and was far from being a slave to antiquity. For, in his zeal to denounce the extravagance of romantic drama he did not tend to be a neoclassicist of the rigid and pedantic type. His common sense was far too strong to allow him to imitate the ancients blindly.

Jonson always deprecated an unintelligent subservience to antiquity. Jonson himself points out that the unhappy ending of Volpone is not in accordance with "the strict rigour of comick law". (Volpone, Dedication, l. 110). He asserts that his breach of the law had been intentional and had been dictated by his own doctrine that "the office of a comic-Poet (was) to imitate justice, and instruct to life". (Volpone, Dedication, ll. 121-122). Again, he says that in Every Man Out of His Humour he has not followed "the lawes of Comedie":

the equall division of it into Acts, and Scenes, according to the Terentian manner, his true number of Actors; the furnishing of the Scene with GREX or CHORVS, and that the whole Argument fall within compasse of a dayes business,

on the ground that

these are too nice observations.

(Grex, ll. 237-242)

Jonson was thus bold in his readiness to modify classical 'lawes of Comedie'.

Further, though Jonson adhered to the three Unitities, he would never allow himself to be bound by them. As David Cook has rightly pointed out, "characteristically Jonson did not accept the Unities as laws, but welcomed them as optional aids to artistic discipline". That is why he carefully moderated them so as to suit his dramatic requirements. For instance, the day of twenty-four hours might, on a suitable occasion, extend to two days as happens in Every Man Out of His Humour. In Sejanus, as history requires Jonson changes the scene completely from Rome to Caprae. In Catiline there is a flight from Rome to Tuscany. Thus, though the action of most of his plays generally passes within twenty-four hours and avoids all violent changes of scene, Jonson makes no attempt to stick to the Unities blindly, perceiving that such adherence causes greater absurdities than it avoids. We can, therefore, safely conclude that Jonson observed rules as far as he thought it necessary, and ignored them when he thought fit. Jonson not only knew classical drama better than any of his contemporaries but he tried to adapt intelligently and not slavishly its principles and rules to the peculiarities of the English theatre.

Besides, Jonson's attitude to the classical writers and their precepts was liberal because while revering their memory he refused to be fettered or enslaved by them. For instance, he read Scaliger and admired him but he was well guarded against

the extremes of Scaliger's dogmatism. Again, although he had a deep reverence for Aristotle as the first law-giver in antiquity to evolve and systematize the theory of literary criticism, he could not concur with the tendency of blind worship and deification, which was current in the Middle Ages. He was dead against the whole principle of dictatorship in art. He felt that

Nothing is more ridiculous, then to make an Author a Dictator, as the schooles have done Aristotle.

*(Discoveries, II. 2095-97)*

The same sturdy independence colours his remarks in respect of rules and precepts. In pursuance of the prescriptions by the ancients, Jonson was quite aware of the scope for the poet's liberty. For, he says:

I am not of that opinion to conclude a Poets liberty within the narrowe limits of lawes, which either the Grammarians, or Philosophers prescribe.

*(Discoveries, II. 2555-57)*

Above all, the ancients were there only as guides but not as commanders to Jonson, for he says:

It is true they open'd the gates, and made the way, that went before us; but as Guides, not Commanders:

*(Discoveries, II. 137-39)*

Again, however greatly Jonson admired the ancients, his final authority was not the ancients but Truth. With his conviction that "truth layes open to all", Jonson reiterates his stand:

Stand for Truth, and 'tis enough

*(Discoveries, II. 158-59)*

Therefore, if at all Jonson was a slave to any creed it was to
Truth. His devotion was not so much to any particular tradition or model as to Truth. With him it was a question not of authorities but of Truth.

From these observations "it is clear that classical rules were never a strait-jacket for Jonson". As a matter of fact, he never believed that the salvation of English literature lay in slavishly following the classical ways. He held the principles of the ancients in solution in his spacious memory but "with an intelligent recognition and liberal interpretation of those principles in their adaptation to the needs of contemporary English conditions". This is chiefly because, like Milton, Jonson claimed the right of free thought in the realm of letters as others claimed it in the domain of religion. Small wonder if he made departures from classical practice thereby giving his independent and deliberate assent to the classical standards. Hence we may safely hold the view that Jonson was usually a classicist but there is a 'substratum' of sanity, moderation and native good sense about his opinions. Also, as a most recent critic points out, "the emotional content of Jonson's art is much more substantial and immediate than one might suppose in a (normal) 'classicist'".

39. Ibid., p.16.


Jonson's classicism was, therefore, altogether different from the empirical classicism of men like Sidney and Barnes who experimented with Greek and Roman measures in English lyrical poetry. Also, such classicism as Jonson's was certainly above the reach of the early imitators of and borrowers from Seneca and Plautus. Jonson's classicism, with its unique grasp, understanding and intelligent use of the ideas, the technical practices, the subject-matter and style of the ancient authors, may be called assimilated classicism. For, Jonson assimilated classicism to such a degree that ancient authors like Quintilian, Pliny, Plutarch, Plautus, Juvenal and Terence became part of his imaginative reaction to the present life. They were woven, as it were, into the very web of his thought. It was as if the classics lived with him.

There is another misinterpretation of Jonson's classicism. The fact that the ancient authors have been the source of Jonson's inspiration and his dramatic power has been often overstressed so as to imply that "Jonson owes everything to classicism".42 This view is not correct totally denying as it does the originality of Jonson. That Jonson was for originality, for exploring new paths is made clear when he says:

Let Aristotle, and others have their dues; but if we can make farther Discoveries of truth and fitnesse then they, why are we envied?

(Discourses, 11. 2101-03)

Jonson could really "make further Discoveries of truth and fitness" by making use of his own personal experience, by his rich knowledge of contemporary English life and also by his close touch with the literary movements of his day.

In formulating critical standards, besides the observation of the ancients, Jonson felt the necessity of utilizing personal experience:

For to all the observations of the Ancients, wee have our owne experience: which, if wee will use, and apply, wee have better meanes to pronounce.

(Discovers, 11. 134-137)

Therefore, if Jonson eschewed enchanted islands and impossible sea-coasts for the background of his plays, and refused to make his plays hinge on freak circumstances such as "of a duke to be in love with a countesse, and that countesse to bee in love with the dukes sonne, and the sonne to loue the ladies waiting maid: some such cross-wooing", (Every Man Out of His Humour, III, vi, 195-199) confusions of identity and misunderstandings, it is not because of his 'trust' from the ancients, but because that part of 'our owne experience' which activated him was observation of human follies in a familiar London setting, rather than the ethereal reaches of the imagination and the emotions.

Hence, the view that Jonson was obsessed with the thought of the ancients is unsound. However interested Jonson was in the literature of the past, he was, by no means, preoccupied
with it. In fact, he was more concerned with the contemporary literature which he tried to reform in the light of the principles which those models embodied in them. So, Jonson's interest was not so much in probing the methods of the Greeks and Romans as the methods of the Elizabethans. He only felt the weight of literary tradition while remaining within the current of contemporary life. In short, what Jonson wanted was not to surrender himself to Greece and home, but to rival them and to wed ancient form to contemporary substance.

Furthermore, pre-eminently an Englishman of his own day, Jonson had immense belief in the value of English life for the work of the literaryman. This is clear when he says:

Our Scene is London, 'cause we would make knowne,
No countries mirth is better than our owne,
No clime breeds better matter, for your whore,
Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more,
Whose manners, now call'd humors, feed the stage:

(The Alchemist, 'Prologue', 11. 5-9)

Further, Jonson proclaims that his avowed purpose in the composition of The Sad Shepherd was to garner

such wool

As from mere English flocks his Muse can pull

This shows how Jonson was a rugged Englishman with a sardonic relish for the varied and colourful London life of his day. Whatever its relation to any Latin or Greek originals, in Jonson's work "the English poet, who remains not the less English and of his own time, enters into an ideal community, conceived of as something with which contemporary life and
manners may and should have close relations". But for his English fibre at heart, Jonson might have been easily transmuted into the slavish follower of outworn classical forms and usages. Jonson's characteristic classicism may, therefore, be said to be "a kind of native classicism .... - obscene, yet moralizing, caustic, thorny, immediate, Londinian and topical .... It was Roman satiric technique applied to London vice ... or recreation of the classic model".

Though Jonson swerved apart, he never stood aloof from the literary movements of his day. However much he stressed his mission as a teacher of classic art, Jonson was in the closest touch with all contemporary literature. He was an Elizabethan by birth as well as by apprenticeship. As a practical playwright eager to appeal to the men of his time, and as a critic who claimed conformity with the local conditions as the prerogative of the poet or dramatist, Jonson had to be responsive to the literary movements of his day. As L.C. Knights observes, "the more we study in minute detail the more clearly Jonson appears both intensely individual and ... at one with his contemporaries". In developing his characteristic type of play, Jonson almost unconsciously seized upon

44. W.K. Wimsatt Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism, p.175.
45. L.C. Knights, Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson, p.196.
ideas and methods which had run through English literature of the time. For instance, when Jonson interweaves the two Latin stories - the *Captives* and the *Aulularia* - in *The Case is Altered*, it is in accordance with the current usage of the Elizabethan stage. Jonson seems to be an ultra-Elizabethan when, in the same play, he crowds the canvas with figures, multiplies their motives and marshals almost all the men as rival lovers of Rachal de Price. Further, when he tries to present the theme of love, it looks as if he was an English Plautus trying to write in the Elizabethan style. Hence Jonson's classicism is one that springs from the strength of a native tradition with all its rooted and racy Englishness.

That is why the arguments as to whether Jonson is to be more correctly regarded as a 'classical' writer on the continental model or as a 'romantic' English writer are beside the point. We may say that he was both as he endeavoured to combine the best in both the traditions. Jonson seems to have wished to have the seriousness of purpose, the polish, the concentration, the restraint and the precision of the classics without losing the richness, the vitality and the raciness of the freer native drama. It is because of this rare phenomenon that Jonson appears to be at once classical and romantic. We may, therefore, conclude that Jonson's classical work, on the whole, is thoroughly English in spirit and tone and conforms, in the main, to the prevailing currents of English literature.
Possessed of the assimilated knowledge of ancient literature together with a wide knowledge of contemporary English life and literature, it must have seemed quite possible to Jonson that he could bring back single-handed the original function of the poet and dramatist as Sidney had described it, and that he could reform the contemporary theatre by raising it to the level of Greek and Roman theatres.

But in view of some presumptions that Jonson did not have any higher education, that seven years of his formal education had been merely spent in learning to lay bricks, and, what is more, that his sole experience in the theatre had been only as a hired actor and as a hack writer for Henslowe, it has often been assumed that Jonson had given himself "an impossible assignment" of reforming the English drama. But Jonson, being what he was, had never thought so. No doubt, Jonson set himself to a great task and his claim was quite bold. All the same, he had no doubts of his abilities to carry out the self-appointed task. A man who could write a play for presentation before the Queen and end it with the injunction:

By (—) 'tis good, and if you lik't, you may.

(Cynthia Revels, 'The Epilogue', 1.20)

could hardly have suffered from any lack of self-confidence. We may, by all means, say that Jonson was eminently fitted to carry out the task he assigned to himself however difficult the task might be.
Jonson came to the theatre possessed of many advantages. He was already a great master of learning although he had not received any university education. Jonson's learning was not only wide, varied and deep but solid and thorough. He was worthy of being the pupil of Camden and the friend of Selden. He had, like Milton, an unusual thirst for learning and scholarship. All the treasures of ancient literature were open to him. He was familiar not only with the perfect productions of the Greek dramatists but with the fragments among the works of the sophists and grammarians. His studies, while by no means confined to the Greek and Roman classics, included the Greek philosophers as well as the Roman historians and poets.

Then, we are simply astounded at the wealth of Jonson's knowledge. Having studied the most minute details and understood the true spirit of ancient life, his knowledge was vast and as deep as it was accurate. He was not merely satisfied with the best writers. He dug into the orators, critics, scholiasts and compilers. He seemed to have a speciality in all branches of knowledge and to have acquired a very considerable degree of information of every topic connected with the arts then known and cultivated. Yet, his massive learning and vast knowledge in no way marred his vigour.

While his diversified learning bore him into nobler spheres of comprehension, Jonson's keen power of observation gave him rich experience of men and manners. In the course of
his life he had passed through vicissitudes of fortune. He had been a student, a tradesman and a soldier before he became a public actor and dramatic author and an agent in the amusements of the court. He had travelled widely. He knew something of the Flemish plains and Paris streets. He lived for twenty years with the beauties and wits of the court. He was closely familiar with London. Thus, Jonson had a good knowledge of life down to its lowest haunts.

But, all these - his solid learning, rich knowledge, accurate observation, first hand experience of men and life - are merely the instruments a dramatist works with. A successful dramatist is also expected to be in possession of certain requisites of the stage.

Jonson was thoroughly conversant with the stage conditions of both the public and private theatres of the time. (As W.A. Armstrong points out "no Jacobean playwright had a richer knowledge than his of the various amateur and professional stages of the period".) He had an acute sense of the theatre. He had been an actor himself. He was undoubtedly a past master of the stagecraft - the art with which the playwright selects and integrates the various physical media such as the architecture, machinery, properties, the conventions of the stage, the voices, gestures, attitudes, movements, stage-business and

dress of the actors which would enable him to communicate what
he has written to an audience in a theatre. Jonson seems to
have watched performances by his fellow-pupils while he was at
Westminster school, and Dekker's *Satyromastix* reveals that he
was a professional actor in the provinces and at the Swan
Theatre in the early 1590s. Moreover, his collaboration with
Inigo Jones, the eminent designer of stage machines, scenery
and costumes in the production of the court masques, must
have greatly helped him in mastering the stage-craft. Small
wonder, therefore, if "Jonson was acknowledged to be the great
and cunning craftsman of the Elizabethan Age, both in his own
time and after". 47

(Besides, Jonson's knowledge of human nature was extensive
and profound. He was next only to Shakespeare in this regard.)
Jonson was also a man of "correct judgment", "strong crabbed
sense", "retentive memory", "great honesty", and, above all,
'fidelity of description' which made it possible for him to
reproduce his thorough knowledge of human nature faithfully
and fully.

Jonson also had the necessary literary gifts. He had
industry, constancy, versatility, a powerful and original vein
of humour, nimbleness of wit, a keen sense of satire, a quick
and almost intuitive faculty of discerning the ridiculous and
an insight into contemporary life and manners. But these alone

47. E.E. Stoll, "The Old Drama and the New", *MLR*, XX
(April, 1925), p.150.
could not have made him a great dramatist. For, it is necessary that the application of these should be directed by a high purpose and informed of original genius.

Regarding high purpose, Jonson had a deep conviction of the sacredness and gravity of his vocation. He was a great moralist, and "of all styles he loved most to be named Honest". Jonson, like Sidney, "conceived of the poet as a poet-moralist, a poet-preacher, and adhered to the Renaissance 'credo' that comedy was an instrument of ethical reform". Although, as a practical playwright, Jonson found it necessary to please in order to be successful, transitory applause was never the goal of his ambition. He was strongly determined to satisfy only competent judges, for, as he himself says:

To judge of Poets is only the facultie of Poets; and not of all Poets, but the best.

(Discoveries, 11. 2578-79)

Jonson had a highly original dramatic genius. He had an astonishing power for inventing plots. While his fellow-dramatists, particularly Shakespeare, were busy in borrowing plots from other sources, Jonson exerted himself in making his own plots. He could construct with lucidity and effectiveness. He was an adept in the art of comic characterisation. In fact, Jonson was the only dramatist of the day who was not either


directly produced or very greatly modified by Shakespeare. He remained the most original of the dramatists of Shakespeare's age. Of course, it is true that Jonson was not original in the same way as Shakespeare was original. But after a fashion of his own, Ben Jonson is most truly original.

Jonson was particularly fitted for the task of reforming the Elizabethan drama by virtue of his being "a born-critic". Jonson's own learning, the influence of the Renaissance humanism, and his own distinguished temperament led him to put careful and studious craftsmanship before imaginative boldness both in his theory and in his practice. This helped to make Jonson "one of the most significant 'neo-classic' critics in English."

It was Jonson who for the first time, systematized the classical critical ideas and the classical practice into a set of rules for guidance. For, Puttenham's treatise, The Art of English Poesie, made only a beginning in this regard narrowly scholastic as it was. Sidney's Apology for Poetry gives us "the poetry rather than the art or the theory of criticism". Spenser's treatise is lost to us. We have only his correspondence with Harvey, dealing in a narrow spirit with the minor question of rhyme and metre. It was Jonson who worked

50. David Daiches, Critical Approaches to Literature, p.177.
out a set of principles which have all the inner consistency of a system.

Apart from what he says in his Prologues, Epilogues or Inductions to his plays, Jonson's critical utterances include his translation of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, his *Conversations with Drummond*, and his *Discoveries*. About two thirds of Jonson's *Discoveries* are concerned with literary criticism. The most sustained literary discussion is that on poetry, tragedy, and comedy.

Jonson is the first English critic who deliberately faced the practical problems of contemporary literature. He stood in the full stream of the vigorous literature of his age, fully alive to its problems and inherent dangers. Being conscious of his critical mission, he bent the entire energy of his erudite mind to its fulfilment. His greatness lies not so much in the originality and novelty of his critical precepts

52. Jonson's translation of *Ars Poetica*, 'an Ars of his own', is supposed to have been lost when his library burned in 1623. See Leah Jonas, *The Divine Science*, p.16.

53. These consist of a few pungent 'obiter dicta' upon English contemporaries made when Jonson walked to Scotland in 1619, and conversed with the poet, Drummond.

54. "As the title suggests, the work is a stock book of established classical ideas collected and translated, somewhat at random, by a practising man of letters for his several purposes". (W.K. Wimsatt, Jr & Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism*, p.176). Though borrowed, *Discoveries* represents essentially Jonson's own critical inclinations. Hence it may be treated as Jonson's own.
as in the soundness and discrimination of his judgment in selecting the right principles, and the persistent vigour in enforcing them for the guidance of the creative literature, particularly drama, of his age. The discipline he sought to impose upon the wild and reckless growth of contemporary literature was timely, because it underlined the dignity and seriousness of the craft of letters and the perseverance and preparation required for its proper practice. He wisely struck a balance between nature and art, freedom and restraint, and imitation and originality. Jonson showed the way towards an intelligent synthesis between respect for authority and freedom to go forward in the direction determined by the changing conditions of the times, thereby achieving a harmonious fusion of the best in the academic and popular traditions.

Thus, with his many-sided acquirements, embracing all that was best in the literature and criticism of antiquity as well as in the contemporary writers on the continent, combined with his artistic conscience, his sturdy independence of spirit, his refined literary sensibility, his impersonal urbanity and poise and his instinctive love of order and neatness in the composition, Jonson was well fitted for the task he set before himself, namely, reformation and regeneration of the Elizabethan drama. And what Dudden says of Fielding as a novelist, we may as well quite appropriately say of Jonson that no dramatist "ever proceeded to his task with a finer intellectual outfit". 55