CHAPTER II

JONSON'S THEORIES OF COMEDY AND TRAGEDY

All dramatic literature, we may say, broadly divides itself into two kinds - the comic and the tragic - in spite of their frequent inter-mixture. "There are", as L.J. Potts points out, "only two literary modes of thought; tragedy and comedy". All the same, the two cannot possibly be treated in isolation as watertight compartments, for the simple reason that tragedy and comedy are not altogether dissimilar, nor are they fundamentally opposed to each other. Aristotle's conception of tragedy and comedy too accommodates no such fundamental opposition between the two species. For that matter, we may go even to the extent of saying that "there is, in point of fact, more in common between high tragedy and fine comedy than there is between certain types of tragedy and certain types of comedy".

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1. L.J. Potts, Comedy, p.10.

2. "Comedy is an imitation of those who are worse than ourselves, yet not in every sort of evil but only in that baseness of which the ridiculous is a species".

"Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious and complete and has sufficient size in language that is made sweet, and with each of the kinds of sweet language separately in the various parts of the tragedy, presented by those who act and not by narrative, exciting pity and fear, bringing about the catharsis of such emotions". ("The Poetics", Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden, ed. Allan H. Gilbert, pp.74-75).

3. Allardyce Nicoll, An Introduction to Dramatic Theory, p.28.

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As fully developed conventions of art, tragedy and comedy are parallel both in their history and in their character. Both tragedy and comedy took their shape not only at approximately the same time, but out of the same forms. The choral song chanted round the altar of God in Greece developed along the twin lines of tragic and of comic expressions. In England, the services of the church gave rise both to the tragic themes and to the comic interludes.

Again, both the species have been produced by the same nations contemporaneously. In Greece, comedy was allowed to enter consciously and of a set purpose in the flourishing period of tragedy. In France, Racine and Molière were simultaneously producing neo-classical tragedies and sparkling comedies. In Italy, the great comic dramatist Goldoni and the fine tragic dramatist Vittorio Alfieri flourished in the same age.

Also, there have been many individual writers who excelled in the two great branches of drama, and, what is more, combined the two in a single composition. For instance, "Shakespeare has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind, but in one composition". From these observations it is clear that comedy and tragedy are, after all, not fundamentally opposed to each other.

The doctrine that the two species are fundamentally opposed to each other seems largely to be the development of later

criticism. The broad distinction between the two species has
developed not so much from the 'free' criticism as exemplified
in Aristotle and the romantics, as from the 'derivative'
and artificial criticism as exemplified in Horace, whose
Ars Poetica had virtually preserved the substance of Aristotle's
lost discussion of comedy, and in the neo-classical writers
of France. For instance, the Renaissance critics in Italy
made distinctions between tragedy and comedy, advocating a
strict separation of themes of the two species.5

In England the question of dramatic species arose in the
sixteenth century and we find the distinction between tragedy
and comedy made by the early Renaissance critics. The scholas-
tic view of the difference between tragedy and comedy is
expressed by Webbe thus:

There grew at last to be a greater diversirtye
betwenee Tragedy wryters and Comedy wryters, the
one expressying onely sorrowfull and lamentable
Hystories, bringing in the persons of Gods
and Goddesse, Kynges and Queenes and great states,
whose partes were cheefely to expresse most miserable
calamities and dreadfull chaunces, which increased
worse and worse tyll they came to the most
wofull plight that might be deuised. The Comedies,
on the other side, were directed to a contrary ende,
which, beginning doubtfully, drewe to some trouble

5. "Daniello (1535) distinguishes tragedy from comedy in that
the comic poets 'deal with the most familiar and domestic,
not to say base and vile operations; the tragic poets, with
the deaths of high kings and the ruins of great empires'....
Giraldi distinguishes tragedy from comedy on somewhat the
same grounds as Daniello. "Tragedy and comedy" he says,
'differ in that the former imitates the illustrious and
royal, the latter the popular and civil'." (J.B. Spingarn,
A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance, pp.61-62).
or turmoyle, and by some lucky chaunce alwayes ended to the joy and appeasement of all parties. 6

Puttenham also distinguishes between comical poets and tragical poets more or less on the same grounds.

Kyd, who may be said to be the author of Soliman and Perseda (1583), 7 voices his opinion regarding the distinction between tragedy and comedy when Death says to his two companions:

Packe, Love, Fortune, play in Comedies; For powerfull Death best fitteth Tragedies.

(V, v, 29-30)

Kyd gives his verdict regarding the relative dignity of the two species in his stern remark:

A Comedie?
Fie, Comedies are fit for common wits:
But to present a kingly troupe withall,
Gile me a stately written Tragedie; Tragedia cothurnata, fitting kings, Containing matter, and not common things.

(The Spanish Tragedy, IV, 1, 155-60)

Comedy was, thus, apparently classed as a lower form of art than tragedy. And this must have been the popular judgment


7. Though published anonymously, there is sufficient scope for attributing Soliman and Perseda to kyd. The very fact that the story of Soliman and Perseda forms the subject of Hieronimos play in Act IV of The Spanish Tragedy indicates that "it must ... have deeply interested kyd and been looked upon by him as suitable material for the stage". (F.S. Boas, ed. The Works of Thomas Kyd, p.lvi). Also, see James E. Routh Jr., "Thomas Kyd's Rime Schemes and the Authorship of Soliman and Perseda end of The First Part of Jeronimo", MLN, XX (1905), pp.49-51.
as well; or else Kyd would not have spoken before a public audience in that fashion.

Thus, critical theory and theatrical practice combined in devoting more attention and importance to tragedy than to comedy. Let us examine the reasons for this phenomenon. In the first place, Aristotle himself may be said to be responsible for this. While devoting the greater part of his Poetics to tragedy thereby sufficiently stimulating others to devote more attention to its problems, Aristotle dismissed comedy almost in a few sentences. This naturally resulted in making the coming generations of critics concentrate on the tragic form. Consequently comedy tended to receive only perfunctory treatment. Secondly "until very lately there has been a failure to recognize the existence of several distinct strains or kinds within the general field of the comic". This, in turn, has resulted in the production of many comedies marred by uncertainty of fundamental objectives. Lastly, the looking down upon comedy was due to the common equation of comedy with laughter. So the comic in the field of drama was obviously associated merely with the idea of merriment.

However, even to the time of Scaliger, it was traditional in criticism to begin with tragedy and end with tragedy only with sporadic references to comedy. The approach to comedy had been a negative one since it was allowed to exist simply

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because it was akin to no other form of literature. Similarly comedy was granted its individual rights as a literary genre only because such rights could not be claimed by tragedy. Comedy was also considered unfit to hold an honourable place beside tragedy and epic.

On top of that, notwithstanding the romantic extravagance of English tragedy, there were rules governing its composition, but "to such a disordered thing as English comedy no tests had been applied, for none had been seriously sought". 9 Besides, the relationship of comedy and tragedy, both in criticism and in the writing of plays, had been considered only from the point of view of their antithesis. Thus, for long, comedy had been viewed as the opposite to tragedy. And by the close of the sixteenth century, the differentiation between the two species had grown more and more artificial.

At this critical juncture appears Ben Jonson on the scene, upholding the view that the English theatre has misunderstood the functions of comedy. No doubt, Sidney had already discussed the differences between comedy and tragedy along classical lines. But Sidney's criticism of the English stage could make very little impact on acted drama, because it was merely academic. Hence Jonson's earnest attempt to translate a persistent doctrine of study to the practice of the theatre. In all Jonson's work the pressure of his literary conscience is

9. Gregory Smith, Ben Jonson, p. 76.
clear, but it is in comedy that it is more pronouncing and
its working most deliberately disclosed. Disapproving of
the conventional views, Jonson unequivocally declares that
the parts of a Comedie are the same with a
Tragedie, and the end is partly the same.

(Discoveries, II. 2626-26)

Thus, in Jonson's conception of the relations of tragedy and
comedy, the fostered opposition between the two species disappears.
This is not, however, surprising, because "wherever a critic
of the neo-classical school breaks away into a more independent
or natural position there vanishes from him the necessity for
any strict division between the two moods or species". 10

Therefore, in Jonson's critical view, if tragedy works out
its morality by the effects of pity and fear, comedy achieves
its aim, which is also ethical, by mockery of baseness and
folly in their lesser degrees. In both the genres the process
is cathartic and corrective but the material differs. Tragedy
deals with greater and rarer things while comedy deals with
lesser and more familiar matters. And, if tragedy works with
the emotions and with incidents produced by their clashing with
each other and with Fate, comedy works with contrasts in
character and with incidents or intrigue. It is on this analogy
that Jonson based his defence of comedy.

As an Elizabethan dramatist, Jonson had before him two
traditions of comedy - the intrigue or satiric comedy, and

the narrative or romantic comedy - with different antecedents. As Professor John Russell Brown points out "intrigue comedy was the purer form deriving principally from classical and neo-classical models; narrative comedy was both the more pervasive and, being of very mixed origin, the more fluid form. In the broadest sense the former may be said to have aimed at making a certain number of characters look ridiculous, the latter to have aimed at telling a story." 11 So, Jonson, like any dramatist in Elizabethan England, could choose between these two basic comic forms. And "faced by a choice in such matters, a writer is wise if he follows his temperament. .... Shakespeare reached for his Chaucer. ... Ben Jonson knotted his cat-o'-nine-tails". 12 Thus, if Shakespeare exemplifies the Romantic comedy Jonson exemplifies the Satiric comedy existing in Elizabethan times. There were hybrids: but Jonson is undoubtedly a pioneer in the critical comedy of his time.

In his attempt to define the chosen kind of comedy, Jonson naturally went to classical antiquity in search of models. He made a meticulous study of the Greek and Roman masters of comedy. He clearly derived some of his ideas of comedy from the works of Renaissance adherents to the Aristotelian tradition in dramatic theory. He seems to have known best the critical theories of Scaliger, Pontanus, Heinsius and Vossius. He was intimately

acquainted with the early Italian commentators on Aristotle, like Robortelli and Vittori, and the creators of complete critical systems like Minturno. Also, Jonson appears to have been familiar with Plato's ideas of comedy, particularly as they found expression in the *Philebus* and the *Laws*.

All these concepts had worked their way into the main current of English Renaissance criticism. The Renaissance view of comedy, offering no antithesis to tragedy, shows that "the ends of either form are often alike, namely ethical, both in theory and practice". The English Renaissance critics are of the almost unanimous opinion that punishment of vice is the proper object of comedy. George Whetstone expresses his view thus:

For by the rewards of the good the good are encouraged in wel doinge: and with the scowrge of the lewde the lewde are feared from euill attempts.


Sir Philip Sidney defines comedy as

an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he representeth in the most ridiculous and scornefull sort that may be; so that it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one.\(^{16}\)

George Puttenham discussing the name and nature of comedy says how comedy deals with

merchants, soldiery, artificers, good honest householders, and also .... (with) unthriftie youthes, yong damesels, old nurses, bawds, brokers, ruffians, and parasites, with such like, in whose behaviours lyeth in effect the whole course and trade of mans life, and therefore tended altogether to the good amendment of man by discipline and example.\(^{17}\)

Jonson adopted these concepts for his own theory of comedy, but not in toto. For, steeped in earlier native drama, Jonson could never have abandoned the English traditions. Moreover, "popular taste still demanded the kind of satisfactions provided by native drama, and only the closet dramatist could afford to ignore this demand completely".\(^{18}\) Hence, Jonson's endeavour to achieve a harmonious fusion of the classical and native traditions in the theatre, and the combination of the two is a marked characteristic of Jonson's work. Besides, with his intellectual independence, Jonson was willing to accept Renaissance critical theory only when it agreed with what he himself believed to be true. Further, he had the courage to

\(^{16}\) "An Apologie for Poetrice" (1583), Ibid., pp.176-77.
modify the classical theories so as to suit his own dramatic purposes and genius. All this only testifies to the extent to which Jonson realised the truth that "tradition without the individual talent cannot make an important artist". He was certainly "one, that knowes the strength of his owne muse" (Postaster, 'Prologue', 1. 24), and so he

... presents quick comodie, refined,
As best Criticks haue designed,

(Volpone: 'Prologue', 11. 29-30)

The comedy that Jonson "presents" is the realistic, satirical comedy which is generally known as the 'Comedy of Humours', openly opposed to the general romantic species. The 'Comedy of Humours', however, is not so much a novelty as an elaboration of a long accepted dramatic practice. Naturally it derives itself largely from the didactic content of the Mirth Interludes which ridiculed conceit and braggadocio as in the Thersytes and Ralph Roister Doister. It also draws on the didactic content of the youth Interludes such as Heykescorner and the Interlude of Youth which portrayed the conflict of the spirit with the excesses and lusts of the flesh, with their Vice and Deadly Sins. It may also have derived from the didactic element of still later survivals of the Moral Interludes such as Trial of Treasure directed against cupidity, and as Lupton's All for Money. In all these, the Vice is but a 'Humour'. Besides, Robert Wilson's reorganized Moral Interludes such as Three Ladies and

The Lords and Ladies contained in germ the critical and satiric which were so powerful as to affect the development of the 'humours' school.

But, in spite of the fact that the 'Comedy of Humours' owes a great deal to the old Morality plays, the period of its gestation was between 1590 and 1598 when Chapman, Porter, Marston and Jonson were associated as playwrights in Henslowe's Company. Chapman was the first to achieve success in the critical school of 'humours'. He preceded Jonson, as has already been observed, in putting a comedy of 'Humours' upon the stage as Henslowe himself evidently stated. But despite Henslowe's statement, we cannot possibly agree with Kreider that Chapman's An Humourous Day's Mirth is "a 'bona fide' 'Comedy of Humours'". 20

What, in this regard, we have to bear in mind is that Chapman was only an experimenter who did not develop any finished product illustrative of the genre - 'Comedy of Humours'. Only the 'humour motif' is clearly evident in the entire range of his comedies. His earliest extant play The Blind Baggar of Alexandria (1596) is described on its title page as "most pleasantly discoursing the variable humours of Irus in disguised shapes full of conceite and pleasure". The words 'humour' and 'humours' are conspicuous in the dialogues. Particularly the character Cleanthes, like the women in Lyly's Women in the Moon, has as many 'humours' as disguises.

20. Paul V. Kreider, Elizabethan Comic Character Conventions as Revealed in the Comedies of Chapman, p.146.
No doubt, in his *An Humorous Day's Mirth* the technique of the genre, 'Comedy of Humours', is displayed to a great extent. All persons characterised are dominated by humours. Chapman, moreover, devotes entire scenes to character-exposition even neglecting to advance his story. Particularly the two characters, Blanuel and Dowsecer are genuine creatures of 'humours'. Also, in his *All Fools*, Cornelia, the jealous husband of Gazette, is largely a 'humours' type. Again, in his *Sir Giles Goosecap* the three characters - Sir Giles, Captain Foulweather and Sir Cuthbert Rudesby - are good studies in 'humours'. Thus, in all of Chapman's comic plays are present characters and situations dependent on 'humours'. All the same, it cannot be maintained that Chapman perfected the genre - 'Comedy of Humours'. At best it can be said that he inaugurated the 'Comedy of Humours'.

However, Chapman was not the only humour dramatist in 1597, nor necessarily the first to offer Henslowe a comedy of Humours. Henry Porter had already sold his *What Will Be Shall Be* on December 26th, 1596 to the Admiral's Company, the play that bears some resemblance to the 'Comedy of Humours'. Then followed his famous play *Love Prevented* on May 30th, 1598, a humorous comedy of historical distinction. Later, but certainly before *Every Man In His Humour*, he wrote in collaboration with Chettle and Jonson another play evidently of 'humours' - *Not Anger Soon Cold*. 
But the point is that the leaders of the critical school of humours were themselves not free from uniting with the portrayal of 'humours' the interest of romantic intrigue also. Although Chapman's The Blind Beggar advertises itself as "pleasantly discoursing the variable humours", its plot is an absurd romantic intrigue. The best of his later comedies, including An Humorous Day's Mirth, involve extravagant romance. Chapman made very little attempt to bring his plot into organic relation with his 'Humours'. The central interest in the plots of Chapman is provided by the tricks of mischief. But the tricks themselves are of a fantastic ingenuity, far removed from everyday homeliness. Such fantastic romance and passion are peremptorily excluded from Jonsonian 'Humour' plot. In Jonson alone does the 'Comedy of Humours' become conscious and it is closely consistent with the fundamental requirements of the genre.

Finally, Chapman's An Humorous Day's Mirth though mentioned by Henslowe as a 'Comedy of Humours' was "a piece of no distinction and of no perceptible influence in its own day". On the other hand, Jonson's much better thought out and better constructed comedy, Every Man in His Humour, ushered in a new era, creating a new epoch in dramaturgy thereby firmly establishing the 'Comedy of Humours' as a dramatic form. Therefore, though Chapman anticipated Jonson in using the 'humour motif' in drama, he was not the innovator of the 'Comedy of Humours'. Ben Jonson,

then, was, in the highest degree, responsible for the 'Comedy of Humours' regarding both the structural form it took and the critical principles,

deedes, and language, such as men do use:
And persons, such Comedy would choose,
When she would shew an Image of the times,
And sport with humane follies, not with crimes.

(Every Man in His Humour, 'prologue', 11. 21-24)

upon which it was mainly based. These critical principles which mainly constitute Jonson's 'Comedy of Humours' unmistakably align it with the satiric tradition of comedy - where comedy is didactic offering as it does moral correction, and is concerned with people placed low in the social scale, people of the city and the streets.

The 'Comedy of Humours', however, is "one of the most confusing for critical analysis, mainly owing to the fact that all comedy, be it of 'humours' or of romance or of manners, deals with types of character rather than with personalities, and therefore employs what are, to all intents and purposes, the 'humours' which are often assumed to be the sole property of Ben Jonson".22 Hence, it becomes imperative to specify the elements which particularly distinguish the 'Comedy of Humours' from the other types of comedy so that the specific title given to this kind of drama is seen fully justified.

Surprisingly enough, Jonson, who is always at pains to explain and elucidate the principles of his dramatic technique,

is silent regarding the origin and history of the term 'humour'. The general idea, until recently, has been that the 'humour' is purely Jonsonian in origin as well as in development. Critics have been inclined to think that Jonson's most characteristic use of the word humour was at any rate new in the drama and that the 'Comedy of Humours' sprang full-grown from the brain of Jonson in Every Man in His Humour. This idea is incorrect since 'humour' was already a catchword in literature when Jonson began to write, although it was carelessly used.

Spingarn thinking that the origin of this term, as that of all other critical ideas throughout the sixteenth century Europe, must be looked for in the aesthetic literature of Italy, traces the origin of Jonson's conception of humour to the definition of 'humour' given by Salviati in his manuscript lecture "Del Trattato della Poetica" in about 1586. But, it is not likely that Jonson owed any direct debt to the Italians or to Salviati. The use of the derived meanings of 'humour' in England much earlier than Salviati's manuscript lecture, and the prevalence of the idea of humour in the didactic literature of England belonging to the last twenty years of the sixteenth century prevent us from considering the

24. The word 'humour' occurs with several meanings in stories, in Greene's numerous treatments of jealousy, in plays as in Lyly's Women in the Moon and in character sketches as in Lodge's Vital Missouri and Nash's Pierce Penilesse.
Italian influence on Jonson's conception of 'humour' as likely. As Baskervill points out "both the conception of humours and the corresponding treatment of character may well have been independent of foreign influences, though doubtless Italian and classical ideas had the effect of crystallizing native tendencies".25

The conception of 'humour', however, did not begin with Jonson. The term is not of literary origin at all.26 Like many metaphors in England, the idea of humour comes from Medieval physiology. According to the Medieval physiologists like Galen "there are four elements or simple bodies in creation—earth, fire, air and water which are thought to possess certain qualities. Corresponding with these four elementary qualities are the four bodily humours, namely, melancholia, cholera, phlegm, and blood, generated in the brain, heart, liver and stomach. And arising from the compounding of these humours in the body come four complexions or temperaments of men, viz., the melancholic, the choleric, the phlegmatic and the sanguine".27 In average and normal persons these conflicting elements were blended in varying proportions to make for individual variations. But this normal balance was sometimes disturbed when a man came

to possess one element in excess over the others. Then it was regarded as plethora or in the Italian phrase, an over-boiling of the dominant 'humour'.

English literature in the late sixteenth century was full of metaphors and allusions derived from the physical idea of 'humour'. There was a flourishing crop of humour books. The term 'humour' was immensely popular. But in popular parlance 'humour' did not long retain its technical meaning of psychological master-bias rooted in the very nature of the individual. It had passed from the physiologists and doctors into common speeches and pursuits and was used very loosely. It came to express any tendency or disposition. Any mood, condition or habit, for that matter, might be called a 'humour'.

And, by 1598 'humour' lapsed into a catchword to connote sheer extravagance or eccentricity. What is more, it had become a tiresome social convention - a cloak worn threadbare by a fop or the mere apish strain which led a coxcomb to don or anything that he tried to flaunt. The most common meaning of the word was that explained by Cash in Every Man in His Humour. To Cob's question, "what is that humour?", Cash replies:

"Mary, I'le tell thee, .... It is a gentleman-like monster, bred, in the speciall gallantrie of our time, by affectation; and fed by folly".

(III, iv, 18-22)

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It was characteristic of Jonson that he endeavoured to formulate the inexact and ill-used term and to present it as the symbol of a literary type. He had no English theories to guide him. He took the popular term and gave sharpness of definition. The clearest statement of what Jonson intended to be the true idea of 'humour' is embedded in the induction to Every Man Out of His Humour by way of enlightening an undiscriminating public. His purpose was

To give these ignorant well-spoken dayses,
Some taste of their abuse of this word Humour.

To those who were compelled

Daily to see how the poore innocent word
Is rackt, and tortur'd.

he offered a definition:

Why, Humour, (as'tis eng) we thus define it

... "...
As when some one peculiar quality
Doth so possesse a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confluctions, all to runne one way,
This may be truly said to be a Humour.

(Every Man Out of His Humour: 'Grex', 11, 78-109)

So, 'humour', according to Jonson, is not an aberration from average human nature but an intensification of one trait in human nature. Giving his own standpoint thus defined, Jonson glanced at the popular misconception of 'humour':

But that a rooks, in wearing a pyed feather,
The cable hat-band, or the three-pild ruffe,
A yard of shoocye, or the Switzers knot
On his French garters, should affect a Humour! 0, 'tis more than most ridiculous.

(Ibid., 11, 110-114)
This shows that Jonson was only angry with the people who mistook a 'humour' for a mere trick of speech or dress.

But Jonson's actual depiction of 'humours' is supposed not to be in conformity with his own definition of humour as given in the Induction to Every Man Out of His Humour. Gregory Smith says that Jonson "does not always follow his own counsel." Baskervill thinks that many of the 'humours' in Jonson are but affectations. Paul Mueschke and Jeannette Fleisher point out that in his definition of 'humour', "Jonson himself ... limits the use of the term 'humour' to a psychological masster-bias, but in practice he uses it to apply also to more superficial attributes."

To this crux Jonsonian critics have come because they have somehow missed seeing the relationship of the definition to its context in the Induction. A close and careful study of the Induction reveals that Jonson intended to portray affected and eccentric 'humours' as well, 'humours' which are not in accord with his own definition along with the 'humours' of his own definition. When Asper gives examples of affectations as not

genuine but pseudo-humours. Cordatus adds:

He speaks pure truth now, if an Idiot
Have but an apish, or phantasticke straine,
It is his Humour.

(Every Man Out of His Humour, 'Grex', ll. 115-117)

Asper's immediate rejoinder is the key to an understanding of
Jonson's meaning:

Well I will scourge those apes;
And to these courteous eyes oppose a mirror,
As large as is the stage, whereon we act:
Where they shall see the times deformitie
Anatomiz'd in every nerve and sinew,
With constant courage, and contempt of feare.

(Ibid., ll. 118-122)

Asper, the mouthpiece of Jonson, unequivocally says here that
in the play those apes will be well scourged, that is, their
affectations and their eccentricities will be portrayed as
'humours' in the popular sense of the word. In other words,
Jonson through his presenter tells us that he is fully aware
of the meaning of 'humour' in the genuinely psychological sense
and that he defined it for us. But, at the same time, he says
that those apish and 'phantastic' strains ridiculously called
'humours' in those times would serve not only to show the age
its vices and vanities going under the guise of 'humours' but
incidentally to give those "ignorant well-spoken days" some
taste of their abuse of the word 'humour' and to illustrate
how the "poor innocent word is rackt and tortured".

So to speak, when Jonson called his plays 'Comedies of
Humours', he did not mean that he was going to represent the
'humours' only in their limited genuinely psychological sense of
which he was fully aware. What he meant was that he would represent 'humour' in its affected apish sense as well, as was in vogue in his times thereby seizing an opportunity not only to mirror the contemporary social follies and foibles but also to anatomize and scourge them with a whip of steel. Then, "like Aristotle's doctrine of catharsis which it strikingly resembles, Jonson's theory of 'humours' is less analytic than apologetic, less a system of literary criticism than an exercise in ethical justification".

To illustrate the critical principles upon which the 'Comedy of Humours' is based, Jonson's first care was to insist on the need for realism so as to bring comedy into closer touch with life. He was of the firm view that unlike tragedy which dealt with far-off, stately and portentous matters, comedy ought to deal with the familiar, immediate and ordinary surroundings that a play-goer could see about him. Hence he genuinely felt that

to present all custard, or all tart,  
And have no other meats, to beare a part,  
Or to want bread, and salt, were but course art.  

(The Silent Woman, 'prologue', 11. 16-18)

Considering the contemporary dramatic art to be "course", he confesses that

Hee is loth to make Nature afraid in his Playes, like those that beget Tales, Tempests, and such like Drolleries, to mixe his head with other mens heeles,

(Bartholomew Fair, 'The Induction', ll. 128-131)

Making, thus, clear to his audience how he differs from his fellow playwrights, he asks them not to looke backe to the sword and bucklerage of Smithfield, but content himselfe with the present.

(Ibid., ll. 116-117)

Jonson, in this manner, wants his audience to concern themselves not with the things of the past but with those that occur in the present.

Further, Jonson states, almost with a dig at the most unrealistic romantic comedies of his day, that in his comedy

...neither Chorus wafts you ove the seas; Nor creaking throne comes downe, the boyes to please; Nor nimble squibbe is seene, to make afeard The gentlewomen; nor roule'd bullet heard To say, it thunders; nor tempestuous drumme Rumbles, to tell you when the storme doth come;

(Every Man in His Humour, 'Prologue', ll. 15-20)

Instead, Jonson purports to give only deedes, and language, such as men doe vse

(Every Man in His Humour, 'Prologue', l. 21)

So, the Jonsonian comedy is to deal only with the ordinary and familiar things most common to human experience.

Jonson's comedy, as the line quoted above indicates, is also to employ only such language as is normally used by people in daily life. For, in Jonson's view,
though ... language differ from the vulgar somewhat; it shall not fly from all humanity, with the Tamerlanes and Tamer-Chams of the late Age, which had nothing in them but the scenicall strutting, and furious vociferation,

(Discoveries, ll. 775-79)

Thus Jonson pleads for realism in his comedy through the treatment of common things in common language. One can easily discern how Jonson’s vigorous plea for realistic presentation of things is almost in conformity with Sidney’s statement that we “delight .... in things that have a conveniency to ourselves, or to the general nature”.34

Regarding the scope or province of his comedy, Jonson thinks that it is to be

neere, and familiarly allied to the time,
because he

would have a Comedie to be Imitatio Vitae Speculum consuetudinis, Image Veritatis;

(Every Man Out of His Humour, III, vi, 200-207)

So Jonson intends to hold the mirror to the world:

And to these courteous eyes oppose a mirrour, 
As large as the stage, whereon we act: 
Where they shall see the times deformitie

(Every Man Out of His Humour, ‘Grexe’ , ll. 118-120)

In other words, the scope of Jonson’s comedy, to put in a nutshell, is to

shew an Image of the times

(Every Man in His Humour, ‘Prologue’, 23)

Regarding the object of his comedy, Jonson was fully in agreement with Horace that

The poet's aim is either to profit
or to please, or to blend in one
the delightful and the useful. 35

So, the Horatian couplet

Aut prodesse volunt, aut delectare poetae
Aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae.

(Ars Poetica, ll. 333-334)

forms the basis for many of Jonson's formal statements about the profit and pleasure which he included in his comedy.

Uncompromisingly asserting "the impossibility of any man's being the good Poet, without first being a good man", Jonson reveals the function of his comedy when he says that "the office of a comic-poit" is "to imitate justice, and instruct to life, .... or stirre vp gentle affections". 36 He also says:

I haue labour'd, for their instruction, and amendment, to reduce, not onely the ancient formes, but manners of the scene, the easinessse, the propriety, the innocence, and last the doctrine, which is the principall end of Poesie, to informe men, in the best reason of living.

(Volpone, Dedication, ll. 22-123)

When Jonson says that instruction is the "principall end of poesie" he implies that there are possible subsidiary ends.

Pleasure is such an end. Again believing with Horace that

35. Allan H. Gilbert, ed. Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden, p.139

the man who mingles the
useful with the sweet carries the day.37

Jonson announces that

In all his poems, still, hath been this measure,
To mixe profit, with your pleasure;

(Volpone, 'Prologue', 11. 7-8)

With most of his contemporaries the amusement of the play-
goers was the chief end. But with Jonson, however pleasant
comedy was in its aim and in its method, laughter was not its
chief end

Nor, is the moving of laughter alwaies the end of
Comedy, that is rather a fowling for the peoples
delight, or their fooling. For, as Aristotle, saies
rightly, the moving of laughter is a fault in Comedie,
a kind of turpitude, that depraves some part of mans
nature without a disease.

(Discourses, 11. 2629-32)

Delight is the first consideration and laughter may be a means
to it. He finally declares that

The ends of all, who for the Scene doe write,
Are, or should be, to profit, and delight.

(Epicoene, II 'Prologue', 11. 1-2)

Even towards the close of his career he tells us how he has
had this "double scope" maintained in his plays:

Thus hase you scene the Makers double scope,
To profit, and delight.

(The Staple of Newses, 'The Epilogve', 11.1-2)

Then, Jonson has a definite aim in writing comedy. He
starts saying how

37. Allan H. Gilbert, ed. Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden, p.139
of old, the art of making plaies
Was to content the people; & their praise
Was to the Poet money, wine, and bayes.

(Epicoene, 'Prologue', ll. 1-3)

Further, he complains how

in this age, a sect of writers are,
That, onely, for particular likings care,
And will taste nothing that is populare.

(Ibid., ll. 4-6)

But Jonson categorically says that his intention is not to play

a 'rival' to such 'a sect of writers' that

make themselves a name with the multitude, or
(to draw their rude, and beastly claps) care
not whose living faces they intrench, with
their petulant stiles;

(Volpone, Dedication, ll. 72-74)

Moreover, he appeals to his judicious spectators that he

is not there

    to begge your patience,
Or servilely to fawne on your applause,
Like some drie braine, despairing in his merit:

(Every Man Out of His Humour, 'Greg', ll. 57-59)

Because his Muse never

hunts .... after popular applause,
Or fomie praise, that drops from common iawes:

(Cynthia's Revels: 'Prologue', ll. 13-14)

Hence, Jonson's aim is not to hanker 'after the applause' of the

audience but to

    Sport with humane follies, not with crimes

(Every Man in His Humour, 'Prologue', l. 24).
in keeping with Sidney's "common errors". Jonson could discover classical warrant too for embarking upon this enterprise. He found such sanction in Renaissance theories of "vetus comoedia" and its relation to 'Satyra' and Latin Satire.

As regards the dramatis personae of his comedy Jonson has a particular view. He considered the characters of the contemporary drama as 'stage monsters'. He was sorry that the drama had nothing but kings & princes in it.

(The Case is Altered, I, ii, 69)

Jonson further furiously complains:

> take anie of our play-bookes without a C V P I D or a M E R C V R I E in it, and burne it for an heretique in Poatrie.

(The Staple of News, 'Induction', ll. 47-49)

He was also vexed with the conventionality of certain characters like fool and devil.

Besides, in the creation of characters the contemporary art aimed at the portrayal of personalities blended with a multiplicity of motives as they usually are in life. It is here that Jonson diverged most radically from the English drama in his age. Jonson's contention was not to present the characters that the dramatist would choose to, but to present only persons, such as Comoedia would chuse

(Every Man in His Humour, 'Prologve', l. 22)

So, unlike his fellow-dramatists of the romantic school, Jonson would start with characters set, already formed, fully developed and absorbed in specific 'humours'. These characters he seeks to unfold before our eyes in the course of the play.
Finally, regarding plot-construction in his comedy, Jonson has his own definite views. To him plot must be original. Unlike Shakespeare, he does not believe in borrowing plots from other sources and bettering them. Being sensitive of his right to his own invention of his plots, Jonson was proud of his originality. He proclaims:

In this alone, his MVSE her sweetnesse hath,
Shee shunnes the print of any beaten path;
And proves new wayes to come to learned eares:

(\textit{Cynthia's Revels}, 'prologue', ll. 9-11)

Further, Jonson lays down two principles for plot. The first principle deals with the bound or extent of a play that it should not exceed "the compasse of one Day", but

there be place left for digression, and Art.
For the \textit{Episodes}, and digressions in a Fable, are the same that household stuffe, and other furniture are in a house.

(\textit{Discoveries}, ll. 2747-49)

The second principle is concerned with the complexity and unity of the plot. Repudiating the single plot as practised by the Greek tragedians, Jonson insists on the necessity of having more than one strand of action, and these different strands being related, a higher unity is then attained. Jonson reiterates that the plot should be one, and intire. One is considerable two waies; either, as it is only separate, and by it self; or as being compos'd of many parts, it begins to be one, as those parts grow, or are wrought together.

(\textit{Discoveries}, ll. 2751-54)
However, recent critics like Harold F. Brooks are rightly of the view that Jonson's paramount concern, so far as we can deduce from his dramatic practice, was with the 'dramatic design' of each play as a whole. And 'dramatic design' can be regarded as, in a certain sense, plot inasmuch as it belongs to the dramatist's plotting of his play. When Aristotle regards ethos ('character') as subordinate to mythos ('plot'), mythos is a good deal nearer to 'design' than to what we designated 'plot' in the narrow sense of 'intrigue'. We may say that Jonson is Aristotelian and subordinates characterisation, with rare exceptions, to design.

This is, in brief, Jonson's theory of comedy - the 'Comedy of Humours'. We cannot possibly agree with the view that "there is indeed, little that is original or peculiar in Jonson's humours, or the theory of comedy which he constructed upon them". Most of the elements of this new comedy, as has already been shown, may be found sporadically in previous drama as early as Tudor Interludes and as recent as the first comedies of Shakespeare, but never before had they deliberately been sought and brought together as the essential matter of comedy and systematised. Hence Jonson could justly claim that in the 'Comedy of Humours' he had evolved something new, something different from ancient comedy. In his plea for realism and moral elevation through satire, in his adoption of 'humours' as the basis of his character-creation, in his observance of

the Unities and in the originality of his plots, Jonson, beyond doubt, made a departure from the native tradition of comic writing.

Jonsonian comedy, then, is essentially an intellectual, not an emotional, affair. Naturally, its appeal is to the head and not to the heart. It is to be 'an interpretation of life, a criticism of society and an embodiment of values'. Its supreme interest is in character which is sometimes stressed at the expense of plot. Its chief concern is with the dramatic design of each play as a whole. It is this combination of features that gives a distinct character to Jonsonian comedy and not merely the use of 'humours' which has been given "a somewhat fictitious importance in criticism". Perhaps, Jonson was right in choosing a realistic satirical comedy, since in the work which he made characteristically his own he had no equal, whereas in the realms that he abandoned he would have had even a superior.

When we turn from Jonson's theory of comedy to his theory of tragedy, it looks almost as if we had passed from a great talker to a mute. Because Jonson is quite reticent on the theory of tragedy though he is said to have been a good tragedian. Even long before he wrote Saisanys and Catiline, Jonson was named by Meres in 1698 as one of the nine poets who

"were our best for Tragedie". Moreover, even after he had found his strength in comedy in 1598 Jonson did not renounce tragedy altogether. He collaborated in 1599 with other playwrights in the missing Page of Plymouth and Robert II., King of Scots. Even as late as 1602 he was engaged in his preparation of Richard Crookeback and his 'Additions' to The Spanish Tragedy. Notwithstanding this considerable work he did and the high reputation he earned in writing tragedies Jonson, surprisingly enough, is silent about his achievement in tragedy.

This most unusual silence on the part of Jonson has puzzled critics and has taken literary critics like Atkins by surprise. Atkins comments: "in view of this serious attempt to legislate for a new English comedy it is somewhat surprising to find that Jonson has but little at this date to say regarding tragedy". The surprise on the part of critics becomes all the more intensified especially because of greater popularity of tragedy at this date. Following Aristotle, Italian critics wrote at length on tragedy and, what is more, it was tragedy that had been the greatest of Elizabethan triumphs.


42. Ibid., pp.182-203.

Nevertheless, a close examination of Jonson's dramatic career would certainly dispel all our sense of surprise over his unexpected reticence on the theory of his tragedy. We may say that tragedy was merely an accident in Jonson's dramatic career. Because, but for the unfriendly and discouraging attitude on the part of the public to his Comic Muse, perhaps, Jonson would not have turned to tragedy and we would not have had his two Roman plays. His first regular comedy Every Man in His Humour (1598) was a tremendous success and was a "proof that his theory could be translated into practice, even on the popular stage". But with Every Man Out of His Humour (1599) Jonson got into difficulties by over-committing himself. In Cynthia's Revels (1600) and Postaster (1601) he became too peremptory and too keen to anatomize, to receive good reception from the audience. The public showed a thoroughgoing disregard of his plays and Jonson was greatly disappointed and even disgusted, so much so that he wanted to forsake the very dramatic form - comedy for the time being, and try his luck in tragedy. This he makes clear in the 'Apologetical Dialogue' that immediately follows Postaster:

And, since the Comick M V S E
Hath prou'd so ominous to me, I will trie
If Tragoedie have a more kind aspect.

(11. 222-24)

This is how and why Jonson took to the writing of tragedy by mere force of circumstances and out of sheer necessity.

44. Gregory Smith, Ben Jonson, p.100.
We have no tragedies of Jonson surviving except Sejanus (1603) and Catiline (1611). Also, curiously enough, not a line remains of the tragic work to which Meres alludes in Paladis Tamia. Naturally enough, critics like Palmer have gone to the extent of doubting whether Jonson had ever written "a full tragedy single-handed except for the two which he acknowledged." This kind of questioning can hardly be brushed aside as there is no evidence or support other than that of Meres to prove that Jonson ever wrote complete and original tragedies of his own in those early years.

Even if Jonson had really written some tragedies earlier, it was not by his will and pleasure, but by force of circumstances. After all, Jonson had to work for Henslowe to earn his livelihood. So he had to do any work that was assigned to him whether he had aptitude for that sort of literary work or not. Whatever Jonson wrote before 1598 (before he became independent) he wrote for a fee and he wrote in the current fashion. Perhaps he did not wish that his apprenticeship work, particularly the tragedies, should survive.

However, if Jonson took to the writing of a tragedy, soon after Postaster, it is because in his state of deep despair and unabated impatience he suddenly, rather accidentally felt that

There's something come into my thought,
That must, and shall be sung, high, and aloofe,
Safe from the wolves black jaw, and the dull asses hoole.

(\textit{Postaster}, 'To The Reader', ll. 237-39)

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The "something" that had come into his thought was Roman tragedy as he would have been attracted by Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1600) which was still one of the resounding successes of the day. We may believe with Robert Ornstein that "Sejanus was Jonson's attempt to rival the tremendous success of Shakespeare's drama of Roman conspiracy, *Julius Caesar*."

In view of the foregoing points, it is less surprising to find that Jonson has but little to say regarding tragedy. However, what Jonson does say is highly significant. Jonson's conception of tragedy may be gathered from his claim to have embodied in *Sejanus* what he regarded as the essential qualities of that dramatic form.

In the preface to *Sejanus* Jonson briefly enumerates the technical points which a writer of tragedy must observe. He begins with a confession that *Sejanus* is "no true Poema" in that it has not observed, judged by ancient standards, "the strict Lawes of Time", and "the want of a proper Chorus". At the same time he pleads quite reasonably that "in these our Times, and to such Auditors, as commonly Things are presented", it is not needful or almost possible "to observe the oulde state, and splendour of Drammatick Poemes, with preservation of any popular delight". (ll. 6-15). Now he says that he has "discharg'd the other offices of a Tragick writer", in observing the laws of

"truth of Argument, dignity of Persons, gravity and height of Elocution, fulnesse and frequencie of Sentence", 47

('To the Readers', ll. 18-20)

The primary reason why Jonson put "truth of Argument" in the first place is the belief that fiction is naturally displeasing in a serious work. "Truth of Argument" implied to Renaissance critics a historical argument capable of being presented with verisimilitude. Jonson's view too encompasses this traditional definition with its corollary but takes a step further. According to Jonson "the argument of a tragedy must not only be drawn from history; it must also be historically verifiable - not merely in the main outline, but even in small, significant details". 48 Jonson himself elaborates his point in the same preface. He says that though he abhors the method of the use of quotations in a play, he has done it in Seianus only "to shew my integrity in the Story" with the purpose of "(saving) my selfe in those common Torturers, that bring all wit to the Rack" (ll. 28-30). And in the words of the Oxford Editors Jonson meant 'truth of Argument' and 'integrity in the Story' "in a sense and to a degree which no one before him in the English drama had attempted". 49 For, the Elizabethan joy

47. The importance of these criteria in the criticism of the Italian Renaissance is discussed by J.E. Spingarn in A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance, pp.74-81.


in sheer abundance and multiplicity which Jonson so openly displayed in his comedies is, in his conception of tragedy, fortified by the scholar's meticulous particularity in rendering historic facts.

The second tragic law, 'dignity of Persons', refers to the kind of characters that the Jonsonian tragedy treats. The 'persons' for his comedy are those 'such as Comedie would chuse'. Similarly Jonson might have meant that the persons for his tragedy are those such as tragedy would choose. If his comedy chooses already-formed types from low life, his tragedy is to choose characters that come from high life with gravity and sobriety.

The third essential quality of Jonson's tragedy - 'gravity and height of Elocution' - is clearly a reference to a lofty style. Jonson used 'gravity' in the sense of the Latin 'gravitas', a peculiarly Roman quality denoting both weight and dignity. If the characters of his comedy speak in the ordinary, simple language of day-to-day life, the characters of his tragedy are to use an elevated language with heightened diction.

The last tragic law - 'fulnesse and frequencie of Sentence' - adverts to the didactic function of the Jonsonian tragedy. The tragedy is to be fraught with sententious precepts. 'Fulnesse and frequencie of sentence' is also a Roman tradition. The sentence, or moral maxim expressed with point and brevity, is a legacy of Seneque, and it was popular in Elizabethan writing.
And, 'fulnesse and frequencie of Sentence' is quite analogous to the dictum, 'to imitate justice and instruct to life', of the Jonsonian comedy.

From this brief theory of tragedy it is clear to us that Jonson has in mind the Senecan conception of tragedy, a conception previously illustrated by Sidney in his Apology for Poetry, rather than the Aristotelian conception. Also, it is obvious that Jonson's conception of tragedy was largely dictated by the same considerations as had given rise to his idea of comedy. And "we cannot say that the qualities which made Jonson triumphant in comedy were unsuited to tragedy".50 A close study of Jonson's theory of comedy and of tragedy, however, would certainly confirm his idea that "the parts of a Comedie are the same with a Tragedie, and the end is partly the same" (Discoveries, II. 2625-26) Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between Jonson's comedies and tragedies. While the follies of his comedies are concerned with human motives, speech and actions, the crimes of his tragedies almost duplicate historical fact. In other words, when Jonson represents idealized folly on the stage he produces comedy, but when he presents on the stage actions which have actually occurred one time or other in history, he produces tragedy.

Disapproving of the conventional conception of the relations of comedy and tragedy, Jonson thus comes forward with his own

definite theories of comedy and tragedy wherein the fostered
opposition between the two species disappears. Like Dryden,
Pope, Wordsworth, Arnold and T.S. Eliot, later in the sphere
of poetry, Jonson was potent in moulding the taste of his own
age as well as the course which English drama was to take in
times to come.

Both in view of the contemporary plight of comedy and by
virtue of his own genius for comedy, Jonson focused all his
attention on the theory and practice of comedy. In the follow-
ing chapters, an attempt is made to discuss how far Jonson's
theories of comedy have been applied and worked out in his
plays.