CHAPTER III

"DEEDS, AND LANGUAGE, SUCH AS MEN DOE VSE"

The basic principle which Jonson accepted from the ancients and which was further reinforced from his study of Sidney was that comedy should be patterned after real life. Hence his determination to recall comedy from its romantic entanglements "at a time when there was a fear of comedy's vanishing altogether into those fantastic and impossible realms of make-believe". Jonson's endeavour was to bring comedy to the levels of ordinary existence through presenting in his plays deeds, and language, such as men doe vse.

(Every Man in His Humour, 'prologye', l. 21) what he meant by this was that his characters were to live and move and have their being in a world of recognizable experience and that his plays, rendering artistically the real and familiar, would breathe an aura of realism. Thus, proclaiming himself to be a stubborn realist, Jonson was seeking to present men and things as he saw them.

It is, of course, true that "realism was no new element in English comedy". Already change was in the air. A reaction against the excesses of the romantic playwrights had already set in both in theory and practice. Sidney in his Apology for Poetry (1583) had condemned the gross absurdities of the Elizabethan

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stage and clearly discussed the need for realism in comedy. Realism had been present in the early English plays like *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (1552-63) which was truly English in its realism, set in an English village with its miry roads and its cozy but badly kept houses. In the words of Rossiter, "the play deals solely with low-life types in a village rumpus". Lyly's *Mother Bombie* (1590), with its contemporary character, has realistic touches about it. We witness marks of realism in historical plays like *The Famous Victories of Henry V* and particularly in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part I* and its successors. Historical and 'low-life' scenes roughly alternate in *The Famous Victories*. The incidents of the play include the robbery by the prince and his confederates, and their retirement after the robbery to a tavern in Eastcheap, where their riotous mirth leads to a quarrel and the inter-position of the sheriff and mayor of London. There are certainly 'low-life' scenes interspersed here and there in the three parts of *Henry VI*. Then, in *Henry IV Part I*, we have the realistic comedy of London life which the Elizabethan dramatists knew so well. Especially the Eastcheap scenes are steeped in realism. Furthermore, a movement in that direction had already become visible in the plays of Chapman and Porter, particularly in the former's *An Humorous Day's Mirth* (1597).

But the point is that if Jonson was not the first to express the change, he was certainly the first to emphasize the far-reaching importance of realism as an element in comedy.

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As Nicoll puts it "realism, added to intensified 'humour', treated in a satirical spirit, was first given to the theatrical world by Jonson".4

Realism, however, was vital to Jonson's comedy. Jonson's acceptance of humours entailed a certain amount of exaggeration. It meant that his creatures were to be the embodiments of one particular quality, to be the walking illustrations of an idea or a theory. Secondly, it involved the danger of their becoming uniform and standardised and, thus, dramatically unreal like the symbolical figures of the old Morality plays. It was to guard against these dangers that Jonson strove for realism. And in this endeavour he succeeded admirably, thanks to his keen observation, his first-hand knowledge of contemporary life, his grip on concrete facts and his emphasis on individual and local traits and colour.

The term 'realism', as its etymology suggests, denotes attachment to fact, or the tendency to regard things as they really are. In other words, pure realism implies absolute fidelity to nature or impartial transcriptions of the phenomenal world. But such realism is neither possible nor desirable in literature. For, "the idiosyncrasies of human perception, the multiple zones and levels that constitute the real, as well as the alchemy of the creative process, forbid, strictly speaking, any objective account of the world in art".5

Realism at best can only be approximate inasmuch as "art cannot give us 'la chose meme' except by resorting to artifice; the theatre has its trick mirrors, its optical illusions; the playwright, like the painter, manipulates techniques and calculates impressions".  

Jonson endeavours to make his comedies realistic in texture, tone and temper by making the setting, incidents, characters and dialogue realistic. He openly set his scene in London and made his characters English in a systematic way. He had a great belief in the value of English life for the work of the literary man. He frankly and boldly announces:

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

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

The very basis of Jonson's satirical comedy which is the reflection of follies and vices of the contemporary society invites him to draw upon the very world in which he lives for his material. Naturally enough, his plays are rich in details taken from real life and glimpses of actual manners. They are full of contemporary allusions to the theatre, the scholarship, the new Royal Exchange and commerce, the money-lenders, usurers, alchemists and other swindlers which the London swarmed with, to the fashionable pastimes of fencing, hunting, smoking

and living by wits — so popular in Elizabethan-Jacobean London — and to the actual events of the period like plagues.

The early comedies of Jonson - The Case is Altered and A Tale of a Tub⁷ contain only incidental suggestions of the realistic method. They illustrate the formative stage in the playwright's realistic method. The Case is Altered is, in the main, an attractive piece of Jonson's romantic apprentice-work based on the old motive of infant confusion. Though Plautian in plot and introducing personal satire on Munday, it is romantic in tone with its scene set in Milan and its element of averted tragedy. However, the most individual part of the play and the only part which has significance in the light of Jonson's later career is that dealing with the subsidiary 'humours' of Juniper, the cobbler, Peter Onion and their companions.

A Tale of a Tub is far more a Jonsonian work than The Case is Altered in that it concerns itself exclusively with contemporary London types most of which are presented with real wit and appreciation. Limiting its action strictly to the compass of a single day and to the immediate suburbs of London, the play develops quite amusingly a thin story of mutual deceit and misunderstanding.

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7. Both these comedies are essentially Pre-Jonsonian in their nature. The Case is Altered was never admitted by Jonson among his collected 'Works' as it was not approved by his later standards. A Tale of a Tub has come down to us only in the second Folio (1631-40). None the less, "Jonson may have dallied with this 'prima facie' un-Jonsonian kind of matter in the obscure experimental years before the well-defined new departure of 1598" (Herford and Simpson, Ben Jonson, Vol. I, p.283.)
Every Man in His Humour (1598) is Jonson's first mature play. Conceived as a kind of 'domestic panorama', the play is a realistic presentation of a series of sharply contrasted characters - an old father over-concerned about a son, a jealous husband and his wife, a plain squire, a sharp-minded servant, a water-bearer and his wife, a country gull and a town gull and a merry magistrate.

Every Man in His Humour was first set in Italy, but with the revision of the play, the scene was changed to London with the sole purpose of making it more realistic to the English audience. The process of transformation was unquestionably a process of improvement. The names of the characters are changed, vague references are particularised, excesses and imbalances of plot are toned down, and the whole action gains in realism.

The discarding of the Italian convention by the change of scene, naturally gives point to a picture of London life and

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8. Every Man in His Humour was first printed, in Quarto, in 1601. It was published for the second time in Jonson's edition of his Collected works, the Folio of 1616. Between 1601 and 1616 the play had undergone a thorough revision. When exactly during this period the revision was made is uncertain. However, various dates - 1601, 1606 - have been put forward, but the most convincing is that suggested by Herford and Simpson in their Collected edition of 1925-52. According to them (Ben Jonson Vol. I, p.333) Jonson undertook the revision in the year 1612 when he was busied in the preparation of his plays for the Folio publication. There is every reason to accept their argument that the change of scene from Florence to London was subsequent to Jonson's successful choice of a London setting for Epicoene in 1609 and The Alchemist in 1610.
manners. Transplanted from the imaginary or fantastic Italy, in which at first they lived and had their being, to the actual and immediate atmosphere of contemporary London, the characters gain even more in life-like and interesting veracity or verisimilitude. The people are made livelier and more recognizable, the dialogue more relaxed and realistic, and the whole thing is planted firmly in a London climate. Naturally the play is redolent of London life in its varied aspects. The whole racy action is instinct with the life of Jonson's own time. The jealousy of Kitely, the pretence of Cob, the absurdities of the gulls, Matthew and Stephen, the up-to-date oaths, the skill in the tobacco art and the latest duelling strokes of Bobadill - all these derive from the native sources as well as from Jonson's own imaginative power.

Thus, Every Man in His Humour, in its deliberate and successful adaptation of the Latin methods of realism as opposed to the unregulated and sensational devices adopted by the dramatists of the day, becomes a classic. However sharply it traversed certain romantic proclivities of the stage, it "powerfully appealed to the ingrained realism of the Elizabethan audience and gave them with a vigour and brilliance paralleled yet only in the contemporary glory of Falstaff's Eastcheap what they wanted most". Thus the play was a tremendous success.

Jonson did not simply set out to capitalise on the success of Every Man in His Humour by repeating its effects in the

immediately following 'Humour' play, Every Man Out of His Humour (1599). He now seems to have been more interested in considering seriously what the proper form and role of Comedy were. As a result, despite the similarity of title, Every Man Out of His Humour is a different sort of play from its predecessor.

The action of the play is slight. The stage is crowded with a great variety of strongly defined characters — an envious poor man, a vainglorious knight, a profane jester, an affected courtier, a doting citizen, a proud wife, a light-witted lady, a misanthropical knave - all intensive studies in realism as they are all representatives of social follies in contemporary London. They are kept in their humours till the close of the fourth act and finally every one is shaken out of his humour by suitable exposure.

Though Jonson himself felt that in this comedy "his art appears most full of lustre, and approacheth nearest the life" (IV, viii, 166-67), his realistic method is marred by excess. Here Jonson gets into difficulties by over-committing himself to the mood of Asper. In his zeal for emphasis, he so crowds the stage that he himself justly wonders:

is't possible there should be any such Humorist?

(II, iii, 41)

Also, the unravelling of the humours at the end sounds a little perfunctory. Yet, in spite of its excesses and all the Italian
names. In *Cynthia's Revels* (1600) we have a play only partly realistic, despite its truthfully-presented theme of self-love, because here Jonson combines his realistic comedy with the allegoric and symbolic techniques of the artificial myth-world of the masque, perhaps, by way of evolving a new kind of play.

No doubt, "Lyly had faced the same problems that Jonson was facing in the attempt to write comedy that was at once topical enough for the fashionable, serious enough for the intellectuals, and robust enough for the vulgar, and had managed (especially in his *Mother Bombie*) to combine homeliness, raciness and vigour with the most polished and rigorous artistic control." But

10. All the important characters except Fastidius Biske in the play, so English in its setting, bear Italian names. This has often puzzled the readers. But Jonson's use of Italian names only indicates his belief in their value. In accordance with the habit of comic writers since Aristophanes, Jonson wanted the names to be self-expressive of their characters. Sordido and Sogliardo, for instance, are completely described by their names. It is this great expressive power of their names that seems to have led Jonson willingly to risk puzzling the readers unacquainted with Italian. (See Allan H. Gilbert, "The Italian Names in *Every Man Out of His Humour*", *SP, XLIV* (Jan., 1947), pp.195-208).

11. As an experimental work the play is an ingenious attempt to combine modern satire with the mythological machinery that Lyly had used so successfully. In this respect *Cynthia's Revels* undoubtedly anticipates *The Staple of News* and *The Devil is an Ass* as well as many of the devices Jonson was afterwards to use in his Court productions, including the antimasque.

Lyly was out of favour and his euphuistic style had become a stock subject for parody by the time Jonson wrote *Cynthia's Revels*. So, while making no attempt to reproduce the artifices of euphuism, Jonson follows the symmetry and balance of the characters and plots of Lyly's plays.

In *Cynthia's Revels* Jonson applies classical myth to the dramatic presentment of Elizabeth's court. Naturally enough there arises a 'strange encounter' between the realist and the symbolist in Jonson. The courtly fops and pretenders - Hecuba, Anaxides, Amorphus, Asotus and their ladies - so obviously indigenous to Jonsonian London get mingled in the palace chambers with antique gods and allegorical personifications - Mercury and Cupid, Arete and Hesperus. The very scene of the action, though always in or near the palace, changes its complexion and latitude with the changing persons.

However, with all its heavy mythological and allegorical superstructure and its explicitly-stated moral idealism, *Cynthia's Revels* is not totally devoid of realistic flavour. For, Jonson, all through the play, insists on the existence of universal ideals as well as temporal absurdities. Jonson's direct observation of contemporary human life, no doubt, suffers a large intrusion of fanciful and abstract elements. But, at least clearly in details and in single characters the great realist painter of Elizabethan court cannot be missed. Most of the action is concerned with the courtiers and their ladies who represent the kind of follies and vices - self-love, frivolity,
voluptuousness, impudence, extravagance - that were most pro-
minent at Elizabeth's court.

Poetaster (1601) is a play about poets and their problems.
In spite of its title, "the subject of the play is not bad poets, 
but the good poet and the education of the poet". He does 
not merely devote his energies to attacking his enemies, but 
restates his positive views of the nature of true poetry. 
Taken as a Defence of Poetry, Poetaster clearly states Jonson's 
views of the different 'kinds' in poetry, their relative 
importance, and the value each had for humanity.

However, what in this play Jonson is finally concerned 
with is the relationship between poetry and the body politic, 
poetry and the state. Whenever he is concerned with such lite-
rary problems he chooses to present them not on the usual 
realistic level of action but on a symbolic level, of course, 
implied in the realistic level.

Jonson presents in Poetaster the dissolute society of his 
own age under cover of scholarly reconstruction and imagina-
tive revival of the literary life of Augustan Rome. Through 
that society of historical fiction, Jonson presents "a symbo-
lical picture of the relations of true poets and poetasters 
to frivolous and dissolute London society of the last years 
of Elizabeth's reign". What is noteworthy is that in painting

14. J. Campbell, Comical Satyre and Shakespeare's "Troilus 
and Cressida", p.110.
an accurate picture of the manners, temper and taste of Augustan society Jonson is ingeniously emphasizing the features that resemble the pageant of London life in 1601. The historical setting remains Rome, but the situation is sharply relevant to the actual world of Jonson's England. Thus, in *Poetaster*, Jonson achieves considerable verisimilitude by forcing one period of Roman history to yield its experience to portray the dangerous tendencies in the society of his own day.

If Jonson has preferred London to Italy for the scene of action of *Every Man in His Humour* with a view to gaining more in realism, he prefers Venice to London for the scene of action of *Volpone* (1605) with the same view. Here Jonson takes for his theme the most universal passion of mankind susceptible of indefinite exploration - the inflation of the will at the expense of the spirit.

However, it is not as though "in choosing such a subject as this Jonson ... necessarily abandoned one of his surest holds

15. Jonson lays the scene of *Volpone* in Venice because the custom of making presents to someone in the hope of becoming his heir - the motif which plays a key role in the play - was not an English but a Roman custom known as 'captatio'. Besides, the exorbitances and enormities of evil he has chosen to depict and repudiate would have gained but little credence if the action had taken place in London instead of in Venice "where flourished, in popular knowledge, an autonomous judicial system sufficiently severe and righteous to frustrate and to punish the villainy its society presumably tolerated". (Richard H. Perkinson, "Volpone and the Reputation of Venetian Justice", M L R, XXXV (Jan., 1940), p.11).

It should, however, be noted that 'captatio' is no more a prevalent abuse of Venice than of Jonson's England.
upon the play-going public, his powerful presentment of the London life at their doors". Because the worlds created by such consummate artists as Jonson could not be merely fanciful inasmuch as "they have a logic of their own; and the logic illuminates the actual world, because it gives us a new point of view from which to inspect it".

The subject of Volpone need not necessarily be the narrow theme of avarice as presented in the masterpieces of Plautus and Molière, but can be considered as a more spacious one - the attraction and power of effective wealth - which compels even a jealous husband to procure his virtuous wife, an old gentleman to disinherit his own dutiful son, an advocate to perjure himself twice in open court, and an Italianate English lady to risk her reputation. Almost every scene in the play is so designed as to exhibit the consequences of wealth, the insolence which it breeds and the infamies which one would commit for the love of it. Hence, in the modern theatre one would find an opulence of production and 'décors' as necessary to emphasize the preoccupation with affluence and acquisitiveness which the play exposes.

The subject of Volpone can also be related to Jacobean London. Volpone presents a powerful picture of the moral depravity of the age. The issues with which Jonson deals here -

17. T.S. Eliot, Elizabethan Dramatists, p.78.
gold-fever, passion for sensuous beauty, craving for sensual pleasures with a spirit of revolt against conventional morality. "were among the most deeply ingrained preoccupations of his age". They were all the offshoots of the English Renaissance which, here, are 'deglamourized'.

Moreover, with the introduction of the three English characters - Sir Politic Would-be, Lady Politic Would-be and Peregrine - Jonson fully recovers the normal temper of his realistic comedy. Sir Politic is a contemporary satirical portrait of the English traveller, and Lady Would-be a minor Mrs. Malaprop. Turning from the Venetians of his invention to those quaintly refreshing English personages of his familiar experience, Jonson is reflecting the life in Fleet street and Westminster.

Thus Volpone is in essentials as English as it is Venetian while superficially taking advantage of the current fascination of Italy as a land of supposedly exotic and sensational crime. So Jonson loses little in immediacy and realistic flavour because of the foreign setting. On the other hand, as David Cook rightly argues, "the very slight distancing which does result from the foreign mise-en-scène partly explains why the satiric sweep is bolder and larger in Volpone even than in that tremendous comedy The Alchemist, which is so vividly localised in London".

Epicene (1609) is Jonson’s "first play fully and frankly set in London and dedicated to a realistic representation of contemporary society, distorted only to the limits of probability". 20 Yet, there are some critics who consider it as a farce. 21 This is chiefly because the plot of the play turns upon a mere trick - the entrapping of Morose, the hater of noise, into marriage with the supposed silent woman, Epicene, who turns out to be most loquacious and proves ultimately to be a boy. The fun drawn out of this is said to be so wildly improbable as to be out of place in a comedy. But these critics seem to have missed the rich symbolic suggestion of the whole play which lends it realistic significance.

The point is that the title, Epicene, as Partridge very rightly suggests, "refers to much more than a central twist of the plot in which Morose's wife turns out to be a boy". 22 It symbolically applies to the aberrant and topsy-turvy society represented in the play. Below the farcical surface action of the play can be found the serious themes of courtly affectation, unnatural sexuality and pretence to authority. Fundamentally concerned with deviations from a norm, the play explores, in the main, the question of decorum of the sexes.


and the decorum of society. Its various scenes explore
comically and searchingly certain standards of what is
masculine and what is feminine, as well as what is natural and
what is artificial in dress, behaviour and beauty, standards
which the spectators bring to the theatre with them. This
kind of thematic approach, as Slights rightly observes, "helps
to account for the complexity of thought which is easily over-
looked when the play is compared to the rather simple continent-
ental farces of the early sixteenth century".23

Almost every one in the play is epicene in some way or
other. The Collegiate Ladies are portrayed as too bold to be
feminine. They look like women but act like men. Truewit
describes how they are

an order betweene courtiers, and country-madames,
...... with most masculine, or rather hermaphroditicall
authoritie:

(I, i, 75-80)
The epicene natures of the women throw the masculine natures
of the men out of gear. For instance, Tom Otter's nature is
dislocated by his wife's masculinity. La Foole, the man,
apparently speaks in an effeminate manner.

Then to observe how the play explores the question of what
is natural and what is artificial, we have to note the allusions
to the prodigies and to the strange, the unnatural and the
monstrous. Just as Morose thinks that any one (except himself)

23. William W.E. Slights, "Epicene and the Prose Paradox",
who makes noise is a prodigy, Truewit thinks that complete silence is a prodigy. He says

There was never such a prodigy heard of.

(I, ii, 3)

Epicoene's loquacity which seems 'monstrous' impertinency to Morose, appears quite normal and natural to the Ladies Collegiate, because they themselves are most loquacious. Furthermore, the famous song —"Still to be neat, still to be drest" — Clerimont writes being offended by Lady Haughty's artificial beauty, highlights the dichotomy between nature and artifice. Clerimont upholds simplicity and nature because the artifices of powder and perfume may only conceal what is not sweet and sound. The natural to him is to be simple, careless and free. Approached in this fashion, Epicoene, comes to us as a comedy about nature, normality and decorum.

Besides, the milieu of the play is quite realistic. The scene of action is London. The plot itself depends strictly on the facts of the local setting. The characters - idle gallants, ladies of pleasure, a barber, a page, a henpecked captain - are all recognizable London types. What is more, the subjects of their conversation are the fashionable topics of the day. Thus "in its grace, its verve, its hard-won realism, and its appeal to the coterie instincts of a social elite Epicoene became almost a model for future English Comedy".24

Rooted in the Jacobean London of Jonson's own day, and based on an actual event of the times, *The Alchemist* (1610) gives us a tremendous impression of reality, transmuting some of the everyday affairs of Jonson's own contemporary surroundings into poetry, poetizing the affairs of cheats, conjurers, panders, knaves and gulls. It has the vigour and veracity of *Volpone* with none of its bitterness. Jonson attempts here another large canvas of tricksters and gulls. He shows how the desire to become suddenly rich brings a grocer, Drurger, a lawyer's clerk, Dapper, a city knight, Sir Epicure Mammon, a country squire, Kastrill, the puritans, Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome severally into the clutches of a pseudo-alchemist, Subtle. We watch with astonishment the unfolding of the realistic action which continues with increasing complexity through a series of crises to the return of Lovewit, the houseowner.

*The Alchemist* stands apart from all Jonson's previous comedies in sheer realism of subject. For, when Jonson turned to alchemy as a subject for his realistic comedy he found "the material ready to his hand of the right admixture of pretentious learning and bizarre humbug perfectly suited to his comic genius".25 He uses alchemy as one of the principal means toward the amazing complication of the simple tight plot. The multiplicity of cants and high-flown jargon of the alchemists go a long way in making the play realistic. Subtle and Face

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are masters at juggling the various meanings of such words as 'grace', 'virtue' and 'price' in order to befuddle their dupes. Face, for instance, confides to Dapper:

You do not know
What grace her Grace may do ye in cleane linnen.
(I, ii, 174-75)

The plot of the play hinges upon an actual event - the plague that visited London in the summer of 1610, the year in which it was written and produced. Besides, the play is full of contemporary allusions to commerce, the money-lenders and swindlers, the cheats and tricksters, the gamblers and the gambling houses. It also points to the practice of rich country people coming to town to learn fashions, the mathematical aspect of fencing, the new Royal Exchange, the new water works, the famous scholars of physics and mathematics and the coins like Harry's sovereign. Interwoven thus with everyday events of Jonson's time, The Alchemist is a brilliant picture of London life in 1610.

After *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) Jonson reverts, in *The Devil is an Ass* (1616), to a fervently popular class of subject, the devil lore - a crude supernaturalism inherited from Mysteries and Moralities. Jonson himself ridiculed those who would

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26. *Bartholomew Fair*, does not, as in the following chapters too, figure here as Chapter IX is exclusively devoted to it with a definite purpose.
desire rather to see fools, and devils, and those antique reliques of barbarisme retriu'd with all other ridiculous, and exploded follies:

(Volpone, Dedication, ll. 79-81)

Yet, he himself now seems to "retrieve" the "antique relic" by producing a devil play, but only to "make comic capital out of the dust and cobwebs of its antiquity".27 This he achieves through a constant interplay of literary caricature and realistic portraiture.

The Devil is an Ass concerns itself with the adventures of a minor devil, Pug, during a day's sojourn on earth, his purpose being to introduce new corruption into the affairs of men thereby to gain new and greater triumphs for hell as well as glory to himself.28 But the main theme is provided by the projectors, monopolists and patentees whose activities had alarmingly increased by the middle of the reign of James I.29

That Jonson presents the contemporary world in all his plays we are conscious. But, perhaps, never before has he handled a major political issue of the day so effectively as he


28. The basic idea of a devil coming to earth to tempt mankind and finding men are a good deal worse that he is, was not, however, a new one. It had been already used in the anonymous play, Grim the Collier of Crowdon, and in Dekker's If it be not a Good Play, the Devil is in't, but it was still capable of development.

L.C. Knights, Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson, pp. 211-218; 254-255.
does in the present play. If in *Volpone* he has concerned himself with attitudes and impulses permanent in human nature, now he brings the events themselves upon the stage with the result that "a study of the leading characters in *The Devil is an Ass*... would be by far the best introduction to the economic history of the period". 30 Meercraft, for instance, was an absolutely contemporary figure, making use of a notorious economic abuse of the day.

If *The Devil is an Ass* were merely a political pamphlet, it would have been ephemeral and would have died a natural death. The effectiveness and success of the play is due to the fact that it is much more than a political pamphlet. However close the play is to the contemporary scene, Jonson's incisive handling of the satiric material raises it well above the level of a mere documentary. The projects presented in the play are carried through in such a way as to keep close to reality. The audience is kept "shifting uneasily from fantastic caricature to sober truth, and back, until reality itself is seen in the same critical light as the caricature". 31 Thus the combination of the traditional, the contemporary, and the timeless is brilliant in *The Devil is an Ass*.

*The Staple of News* (1625) is not simply a hasty putting-together of ill-assorted parts. There is much lively comic

invention as well as a serious intellectual theme in it. The play treats a quite recent feature of London social life - "hunger and thirst after publish'd pamphlets of News ... no syllable of truth in them". ('To The Readers', 11. 12-15). 32 The staple office, we may say, is a variant of the alchemist's laboratory devised for the fabrication of news instead of gold. The staple is built upon money greed and it collapses upon the failure of funds. Jonson's imaginary office of the staple had such a bland air of reality about it that he had to add a note to his readers:

Wherein, although our Title, Sir, be Newes Wee yet adventure, here, to tell you none; But shew you common follies, and so knowne, That though they are not truths, th' innocent Muse Hath made so like, as Phantasie could then state, Or Poetry, without scandal, imitate.

('The Prologue for the Covrt', 11. 9-14)

thus assuring them that the whole thing was a joke and that his parody of European news had no sinister interpretations.

The notion of the staple, however, permits Jonson to satirize the new news industry as well as the behaviour of those who buy and sell the news. Jonson's "technique is to make the Staple Office a holiday joke in which the new business of newsmongering is blown up into a large-scale monopolistic enterprise like the venerable Wool Staple". 33 News is issued

32. Jonson had already written a brief and graceful satire on the growing news business in the court masque entitled News from the New World Discover'd in the Moone (1620).

under the 'Office-Seales' as 'Staple Commodittie'; And as
Fitton exclaims

... if a man will assure his Newes, he may:
Two-pence a Sheet he shall be warranted,
And have a polacie for't.

(I, v, 64-66)

Jonson, however, mixes this matter-of-fact business of the
piece with the allegory of Lady Pecunia and the Pennyboys in
which again money and its various uses and abuses are the pri-
mary theme. Hence the play involves a curious mixture of
allegoric abstraction and moral symbolism - the elements that
seem so discrepant. None the less, Jonson brings to this
problem he has created all the resources of his tried stage-
craft and of his invention and shows an astonishing talent for
giving abstractions - Gossips, Tattle, Mirth, Expectation, and
Censure - the semblance of life. Like Beaumont's Citizen and
his Wife, these lively characters "remain a credible and vivid
depiction of unsophisticated theatre-goers, speaking for ever
in the colloquial forms and rhythms of early seventeenth-century
Londoners".34

The New Inn (1629) has been cordially damned by critics
simply as an old man's whim for romance. The play has simply
been taken as Jonson's "unique attempt to give dramatic expression
to idealized love".35 C.B. Tennant concludes that Jonson here
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34. D.R. Kifer, "The Staple of News: Jonson's Festive Comedy",
S E L, XII (Spring, 1972), p.387.
bumbles in trying to write a 'Comedy of Humours' with a theme of love and valour which was unfit for such satiric treatment. 36

The adverse criticism of the play, perhaps, for want of salutary perceptiveness, has thoroughly failed to grasp the play's exact argument and its tone. What precisely the critics have missed to notice here is the consistent ironic tone of the play. The play is essentially an ironic reflection on the current theatrical medium itself. As Douglas Duncan has recently pointed out Jonson by now was "sadly aware that 'the drama's laws the drama's patrons give', and his burlesqued romantic revelations suggest wry recognition that the theatre in a declining age was bound to have more in common with a puppet-show than a philosophical feast". 37 Hence, irony seems to have been the only solution to the 'serious dramatist's dilemma', the only means by which the cook - to use Jonson's favourite metaphor - could please his own taste - as well as the guest's.

The entire action of the play, The New Inn, takes place in the inn. If the inn on the realistic level is a place of resort, frequented by all kinds of people from all walks of life, on the symbolic level it represents the theatre. This is specifically indicated to us when the Host describes himself

36. See G.B. Tennant, ed. The New Inn (Yale Studies in English) p.XXXII.

as watching life like a comedy being enacted in his inn:

If I be honest, and that all the cheat
Be, of my selfe, in keeping this Light Heart,
Where, I imagine all the world's a Play;
The state and means affaires, all passages
Of life, to spring new scenes, come in, goe out,
And shift, and vanish; and if I have got
A seat, to sit at ease here, i' mine Inne,
To see the Comedy; and laugh, and chuck
At the variety, and throng of humors,
And dispositions, that come rustling in,
And out still, as they one droue hence another:

(I, iii, 126-131)

This reminds us of Cynthia's Revels and Bartholomew Fair where
again the stage becomes respectively the court and the fair,
both of which in turn are shown to be mirrors or microcosms
of society as a whole.

The New Inn, then, is not a romance of love and valour,
but an ironic representation of the contemporary state of the
theatre which gave undue concession to the cheap demands of
its audiences. This is made clear in the ironical assurance of
Jonson to the audience of the play:

You sha' not looke
Long, for your bill of fare, but every dish
Be serv'd in, i' the time, and to your wish:

('The Prologue', ll. 4-6)

The action of The Magnetic Lady (1632), Jonson's last
'Comedy of Humours', is relatively simple, as it does not
depend much on irony or symbolism. The realistic action is

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38. The Magnetic Lady is in a consistent line of development
from Jonson's earliest work, looking back not merely
to The New Inn, but nearly thirty-five years, to the
first 'Humour' plays.
Inherently amusing dealing as it does with "the fantastic tricks which the neighbourhood of a young woman with a fortune will induce in a worldly community, the jealousies of rival suitors, the plots and counter-plots of domestic factions, the opinion-activeness of guardians, the partisanship of aunts and the craft of nurses".39

The play seeks to present marriage purely as a financial affair, dramatizing the story of a wealthy heiress, Placentia, who is sold off to the highest bidder. Compasse, observing Sir Moth Interest, Bias and Practise talk about marrying Placentia to Practise, says:

't will be a bargaine, and sale;

(II, v, 51)

Practise only confirms this when he concludes the "Contract" with the statement:

A direct bargaine, and sale in open market.

(II, vi, 23)

The play is fully realistic in so far as it reflects the institution of marriage in the seventeenth century England in which contracts were used and money and property were exchanged. Thus the material of Jonson's comedy is soaked in realism.

The realism of the matter naturally demands an equal realism in its expression. Hence Jonson's determination to have the 'deeds' of men couched in such language "as men doe vsse"

In his programmatic effort to evolve a vital comic speech out of the raw materials of everyday conversation, Jonson forms one of the pillars of the comic tradition. StrONGLy seeking to copy 'nature' Jonson displays an increasing pre-occupation with life-like speech. He endeavours to make his characters talk no better or worse than they do, or, at least, to give the illusion of doing so. Similarly Shakespeare achieved 'a lively image of life' in his plays. "This achievemenT", as John Russell Brown explains, "is in large part due to his ability to imagine total human reactions and write down words that give actors and readers the power to create from the words that full reality: verbal utterance in his plays is part of a complicated illusion of life". 40

However, when Jonson said that he would write his comedies in "language such as men doe use", we should bear in mind that he was not simply stating a need for verisimilitude in language. He was in part echoing the commonly held opinion that a man's talk was the clearest revelation of his personality. Jonson himself says elsewhere:

Language most shewes a man: speake that I may see thee,
It springs out of the most retired, and inmost parts of us, and is the Image of the Parent of it, the mind. No glasse renders a mans forme, or likenesse, so true as his speech.

(Discoveries, 11. 2031-35)

The same idea underlies his proclamation that he aims to provide

40. John Russell Brown, Shakespeare's Dramatic Style, p.32.
Words, above action: matter, above words.

*(Cynthia's Revels, Prologue, 1.20)*

in his comedies. In saying this he is clearly indicating that he proposes to create his characters not so much by what they do as by what they say.

This, we know, is purely a Renaissance doctrine where the concept of Decorum is involved:

In Comedies, the greatest Skill is this, rightly to touche All thynges to the quicke; and eke to frame eche person so, That by his common talke, you may his nature rightly know: A Royster ought not to preache, that were too strange to heare,
But as from vertue he doth swerve, so ought his woordes appeare:
The olde man is sober, the yonge man rashe, the Lover truimphing in joyes,
The Matron grave, the Harlot wilde and full of wanton toyes. Which all in one course that in no wise doo agree:
So correspondent to their kinde their speeches ought to bee.

So, it was vital to the dramatist that he should be able to master the varieties of common speech in this way and thus reveal character in language. Jonson is at great pains to give his characters a vocabulary and style appropriate to their nature and profession.

Committed as he is to critical comedy, Jonson tends to present a world composed of fops and eccentrics. The language of the critical comedy naturally demands attention not merely to its own agility and gusto, but to its own absurdity. The speakers of his comedy being endowed with 'humours' or 'vapours',

all speech in the Jonsonian theatre tends to tingle with absurdity latent if not explicit. Telltale quirks of diction, tag ends of phrase, bits and pieces of expletive associated with recognizable social attitudes, spring to the surface. Jonsonian comedy, then, takes the total moral reprehensiveness of language as a major premise and activates it so as to create 'a circuit between language and folly'.

Rhetoric, therefore, becomes "the most suitable expression for Jonson's realism". 42 Some kinds of rhetoric are, no doubt, incompatible with realism but the rhetorical speech which is characteristic of Jonson is the language of life as Jonson sees it. In the words of John Russell Brown, "similes, metaphors and other figures of speech, when read in conjunction with the rhythm and tempo of speech, can indicate physical performance. .... But, perhaps more powerfully, images also display a general, overall excitement, a state of being in which fantasy becomes real". 43 Hence simile, metaphor, image, jargon and hyperbole become integral parts of Jonson's language and enhance the comic irony he aims at. The language also constantly plays upon the dramatic situation and enriches its meaning. It is this kind of richness that if Jonson's distinction.

In his early comedies, the themes of which have a closer affinity with everyday life, Jonson uses a greater amount of

42. Alexander H. Sackton, Rhetoric as a Dramatic Language in Ben Jonson, p.167.
prose and even when he uses blank verse he avoids all unnecessary ornament. The quality of his verse is eminently suited to the everyday tone of the plays and the prosaic character of the speakers. Let us take, for example, Old Knowell’s speech in Every Man in His Humour:

I Cannot loose the thought, yet, of this letter, Sent to my sonne: nor leaue t’ admire the change Of manners, and the breeding of our youth, Within the kingdome, since my selfe was one. When I was yong, he liu’d not in the stewes, Durst haue conceiu’d a scorne, and ytter’d it, On a grey head; age was authoritie Against a buffon: and a man had, then, A certaine reverence pai’d vnto his yeeres, That had none due vnto his life. So much The sanctitie of some preuail’d, for others.

(II, v, l. 11)

while the norm of five accents to the line is generally kept, there is no stiff monotony; the verse flows into brief yet varied periods with an almost colloquial ease. It is unadorned, incisive and terse, but there is no stiffness or monotony.

Even the poetic speeches of Sir Epicure Mammon, the dreamer of magnificence, are realistic reflecting as they do his true nature. Let us examine his most poetic speech in the play:

I will haue all my beds, blowne vp; not stufte: Downe is too hard. And then, mine oual roome, Fill’d with such pictures, as TIBERIVS tooke From ELEPHANTIS, and dull ARETINE But coldly imitated ....

**** My meat, shall all come in, in Indian shells, Dishes of agate, set in gold, and studede, With emeralds, saphyres, hiacynths, and rubies. The tongues of carpes, dormise, and camels heeles, Boil’d i’ the spirit of SOL, and dissolu’d pearle,
(APICIUS diet, 'gainst the epilepsy)
And I will eat these broaths, with spoones of amber,
Headed with diamant, and carbuncles.

(II, ii, 41-49; 72-79)
Thoroughly poetic though the passage is, we cannot say it is unrealistic. Here dramatic poetry is performing an essential function by delightfully, concisely, and sharply displaying the personality of the speaker. In the sort of situation Mammon is placed, only such poetic speeches, through variations in rhythm, phrasing, and mannerisms, can convey his inner reality rather than 'the miserable words of everyday speech'. "To use spoken poetry for the medium of drama, is, therefore, to obey, simply and without violence, the fundamental nature of drama right through, from the first conception to ultimate expression".

When the occasion and character of the person demand it, Jonson can also rise to great heights of poetic magnificence as in passages like Volpone's morning invocation to gold:

Good morning to the day; and, next, my gold:
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.
Haile the worlds soule, and mine. More glad then is
The teeming earth, to see the long'd-for sunne
Peepe through the horns of the celestiall ram,
An I, to view thy splendor, darkening his:
Thy, lying here, amongst my other hoords,
Shew'st like a flame, by night; or like the day
Strooke out of chaos, when all darkenesse fled
Into the center.

(I, i, 1-10)

and Mosca's description of Celia's beauty:

“O, sir, the wonder,
The blazing starre of Italie! a wench
O! the first yeere! a beautie, ripe, as harvest!
Whose skin is whiter than a swan, all over!
Then silver, snow, or lillies! a soft lip,
Would tempt you to eternitie of kissing!
And flesh, that melteth in the touch, to bloud!
Bright as your gold! and louely, as your gold!

(I, v, 107-114)

If such passages are rare in Jonson's dramatic work it is because
the situations and characters deserving them are rare.

However, much of the dialogue in Jonson's plays is in
prose, a vigorous and basically colloquial prose which bears
the impress of the idiosyncrasy of the speaker. A high per-
centage of it is cast in speeches of less than one line.
Uncommitted to any prior metrical pattern, Jonson's prose
rhythm "permits the rhythms of live speech to be traced inti-
mately, and it accommodates with less strain the masses of petty
detail, the tautologies and slovenly usages, with which daily
speech is loaded". Also the prose is singularly free from
false wit. There are, here and there, a few clichés and pert
phrases but they are certainly rarer than the fashion of the
day allows. Again, the words usually follow in the just and
measured cadence of a thought that is trained but not over-
powered by scholarship.

Moreover, there are no literary flourishes in Jonson's
prose, as was the vogue in the first half of the seventeenth

45. Jonas A. Barish, Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy,
p.274.
century. His prose style carefully avoids all ornamentation, all unnecessary graces. Witty wording for its own sake is eschewed. The sparkle of promiscuous epigram is unsought for. Although it lacks the brilliance, the polish and the sparkling wit, so abundantly found in the style of the Restoration comic writers, Jonson's prose is sinewy, incisive and lucid. It may want in relaxed sureness of Shakespeare's best prose. It may seem tense and high strung to the last. But within his range Jonson achieved a remarkable success. Jonson's prose is a monumental achievement in that it "gives definitive shape to one aspect of the language of a generation, and makes that language not merely an adjunct of comedy, but comedy itself".46

Jonson's prose is essentially racy of the soil. It is eminently fitted to the situations and the speakers. It reflects the commonplace actuality of the language of characters who are drawn mainly from low life. The complete matter-of-factness of Jonson's prose is achieved in no small measure by his use of words and phrases and allusions, slang expressions and oaths and colloquialisms peculiar to contemporary London. Bobadill's speech, propounding his scheme of killing forty thousand enemies of the queen, illustrates this best:

"Why thus, sir. I would select nineteene, more, to my selfe, throughout the land; gentlemen they should bee of good spirit, strong, and able constitution, I would choose them by an instinct, a character that I have; and I would teach these nineteene, the speciall rules, as your 

46. Ibid., pp.297-8.
Thus Jonson's colloquial prose runs without effort. It carries its meaning without strain. "In a sense Jonson, like more than one Renaissance poet, let the colloquial language itself 'poeticize' for him". 47

Thus, Jonson uses both verse and prose for his dramatic medium. And one cannot possibly discern any single principle governing his use of prose and verse. Jonson appears to have made his decision regarding the use of prose or verse separately for each play in accordance with its individual nature. Where he found the mixed form suitable he freely employed it as in the two Humour-plays and in Poetaster; where a single medium seemed preferable, he used prose for Epicoene and verse for The Alchemist. Thus he wrote two plays - Epicoene and Bartholomew Fair - entirely in prose, and two plays - Sejanus and Volpone - entirely in verse but for a few prose passages.

One would wonder why Jonson introduced prose passages into these two plays otherwise in verse. In *Sejanus* the first four acts are without prose. But the opening of *V, x*, in which Jonson presents a meeting of the senate, and Tiberius' letter, which during the meeting proclaims the fall of Sejanus, are in prose. An explanation for this could be that the circumstances under which the letter in prose is read contribute to the vigour and movement of the scene. The whole of *Volpone* is in verse but for Volpone's sales-talk, in the Mountebank scene (II, i), which is in prose. The reason is that Jonson wants here a street-scene which his instinct compels him to portray realistically. Similarly, for reasons of convention and dramatic necessity we have in *The Alchemist* two scenes (IV, i and ii) in which prose figures. These scenes present Surly in his Spanish disguise, speaking Spanish prose. Thus, what appears to underline Jonson's way of restricting himself to prose or verse in his dramatic medium is a certain self-consciousness about his craft.

Jonson's plays thus display his exquisite mastery of linguistic realism as well as linguistic satire. To conclude with Jonas A. Barish, "if linguistic realism is a valuable artistic technique, no playwright before Jonson copied live speech more tellingly, and few since have more powerfully worked it into a design that transcends mere realism. If linguistic satire is a perennial feature of European comedy, no dramatist has perceived its relevance to life more acutely
or plumbed its possibilities more exhaustively, or elevated it into such a major comic insight. None, certainly is more responsible for making it one of the hallmarks of English dramatic literature".48 However, in his deliberate aim to keep the language as true to life as possible for an artist, Jonson, more than any other Jacobean playwright, has anticipated Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy.

Jonson's learning is often said to make his medium difficult. It is true that Jonson's verse, like his prose, carries allusions from classical mythology. And there are references to medieval medicine and natural sciences, folklore and contemporary events. But, Jonson, like all neo-classicists, wanted his borrowings, allusions and other references to be recognized and enjoyed by the educated listeners. Much of Jonson's learning, however, is embedded in consciously written rhetorical speeches which are normally understood by the audience to have a rhetorical purpose. Perhaps, as Partridge points out, "we think Jonson's language laboured and excessively learned because we have become ignorant of the things he knew about - the fine points of Latin history, alchemy, medicine, law, food, London low life, and ancient high life. His alleged laboriousness may be only our real ignorance". 49 The learned playgoers of Jonson's day must have thoroughly enjoyed his plays. And even today


the audience would, more or less, equally enjoy Jonson's plays if only they take the trouble to find out before they come to the theatre what Jonson refers to in a particular play.

In a way, even Jonson's learning proves to be of great help in creating verisimilitude. As Alexander H. Sackton rightly points out "the abundance, even the excess of learned terms or allusions is often Jonson's artistic intention".\(^{50}\) For instance, it was definitely the scholar in Jonson that enabled him to put into Subtle's mouth something more than the usual jargon of a swindling alchemist or an astrologer, and also made him give Subtle as erudite a case as a confirmed adherent of alchemy could have put forward. Moreover, as a critic most recently suggested, "without the aid of his learning, his self-consciousness would have been without an adequate vocabulary, and Jonson would have been just another neurotic".\(^{51}\) Although Dryden could think that Jonson wove his language too closely and laboriously, by the time of Coleridge the works of Jonson called forth great praise. "The more I study his writings", says Coleridge, "the more I admire them; and the more the study resembles that of an ancient classic, in the 'minutiae' of his rhythm, metre, choice of words, forms of connection etc., the more numerous have the points of admiration become".\(^{52}\)

\(^{50}\) Alexander H. Sackton, *Rhetoric as a Dramatic Language in Ben Jonson*, p.166.


\(^{52}\) *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. T.M. Raysor, p.49.
Thus, dealing with "deeds, and language, such as men doe use" Jonson succeeds well in fulfilling his aim of creating verisimilitude, a semblance of life in his characteristic comedy. No doubt, he portrays excess and abnormality for the purpose of correcting human lapses, but the roots of his art are firmly grounded in the normal and the representative. This kind of realism that he achieved had its own advantages. It raised among the spectators a feeling of affinity with the new comedy with which he had come forward. In his comedy they saw almost their own deeds and language as well as the deeds and language of their fellowmen. His use of local colour and his more general national sentiment as well as his patriotic pride in his use of London as the material of his comedy, gave his plays a generous reception and a more sustained vogue.

Jonson's realism as revealed in his treatment of background, subject-matter and language is undoubtedly most minute and convincing. And his comedies could even be considered as invaluable social documents since they present a brilliant picture of life in England during the great Elizabethan-Jacobean age.

But we shall be doing great injustice to Jonson the dramatic artist if we think of him as a literal-minded transcriber of mere fact. It is not as if his plays were heavy transcripts of real life chopped into an arbitrary shape as some have felt. For, his realistic comedias themselves would have been less great if they had been only realistic in this narrow sense. As his
plays bear ample evidence, Jonson's power over the real was invariably accompanied by an almost equal command over the world of fantasy. Though a realist in thought, Jonson was never a slave to the pedantry of realistic technique. Even though the passion for things classical had gone deeper into Jonson's mind than with most of his contemporaries, the imagination of an Englishman remained in him, though disciplined by the Roman virtues of form and order. As a most recent critic puts it, "the compulsive Asper of Every Man Out of His Humour closely resembles the satirist-playwright in his moral vigilantism, reflecting Jonson's imagination in its most neurotic aspect". 53

Jonson's Horatian pose of sanity and moderation seems to have been considerably subdued in the genesis of his dramatic art. 54 To realise this one has only to recall how grotesque are some of the conceits Jonson invents for his comedies - the obsessive fear of noise in Epicene, the alchemical con-game in The Alchemist, the Boschian world of Bartholomew Fair, the staple of news and the magnetic lady which form the titles of the two plays respectively. "These are the products", in the words of


54. We have evidence that Jonson, according to legend at least, often wrote under the inspiration of wine. We have in "Memorandums of the Immortal Ben" the following remarks attributed to Jonson: "I laid ye Plot of my Volpone, & wrote most of it, after a present of 10 dozen of palm Sacke .... The first Speech in my Catiline, spoken by Scylla's Ghost, was writ after I panted from my Boys at the Devil-Tavern; I had drunkes well yt night, & had brave notions". (Harford and Simpson, Ben Jonson, Vol. I, p.188).
Marotti, "of a bizarre imagination flirting with a vision closer to madness than rational calm". 55

The conceits of Jonson's invention are exquisitely dramatised in the 'infected imaginations' of many of his characters. We have Morose of Epicoene with his daylight nightmares, Kitey of Every Man in His Humour who refers to his troublesome "imagination" (III, iii, 50), Littlewit of Bartholomew Fair, who most enthusiastically exclaims: "I do feel conceits coming upon me more than I am able to/take tongue to" (I, i, 31-33), and Peirce in The New Inn who remarks: "we are all mortall/And have our visions" (III, i, 129-30).

Furthermore, we have an interesting anecdote in which Jonson says that he

consumed a whole night in lying looking to his great toe, about which he hath seen turks & romans and Carthaginions flight in his imagination.

(Conversations with Drummond, II. 322-34)

This sort of night-time day-dreaming seems to lie behind much of Jonson's work. But, as Freud suggests, the creative artist has got to soften the egotistical character of his daydream in order to transform his private vision into his art. 56 We may say that Jonson accomplishes this in his dramatic practice by putting his 'poetry of the agitated imagination' into the mouths of some of his characters. There is, for example, the

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veritable explosion of fancy in Volpone's seduction speech to Celia:

The heads of parrats, tongues of nightingales,  
The brains of peacocks, and of estriches  
Shall be our food; and, could we get the phoenix,  
(Though nature lost her kind) shee were our dish.

...  
Thy bates shall be the iuyce of iuly-flowers,  
Spirit of roses, and of violets,  
The milke of unicornes, and panthers breth  
Gather'd in bagges, and mixt with gretan wines.  
Our drinke shall be prepared gold, and amber;  
Which we will take, untill my roofs whirle round  
With the vertigo ...

(III, vii, 202-205; 213-219)

Volpone elaborates his fantasy further, dreaming as he does a succession of disguises which he and Celia can wear for their love-making:

....... we may so, trans-fuse our wandring soules,  
Out at our lippes, and score vp summes of pleasures,  
That the curious shall not know,  
How to tell them, as they flow;  
And the envious, when they find  
What their number is, be pant.

(III, vii, 234-39)

In this most fascinating poetry given to Volpone we find what Jonson himself specially identifies as artistic vices - far-fetched metaphors, rhetorical amplification and hyperbole, "faint, obscure, sordid, humble, improper, or effeminate Phrase"; (Discoveries, II. 798-39) - become 'delightful viciousness'.

We have the same kind of fascinating poetry given to Sir Epicure Mammon in The Alchemist. Though a man of "voluptuous mind" (IV, v, 74), too, Sir Epicure is more spontaneously and hyperbolically fantastic than Volpone. Particularly when he
dreams of the kind of life the philosopher's stone can create for him, his profligate imagination is excited. He fantasizes 'the perfect setting for the banquet of sense', yearning for a luxury beyond luxury - an "oual roome" (II, ii, 42) filled with pornographic art, mirrors cut in ... subtill angles, to disperse/And multiply the figures, as I walke/Naked betweene my succubae (II, ii, 46-48), perfumed mists, and baths "like pits to fall into" from which he and his harem can emerge to dry themselves "in gossamour and roses" (II, ii, 52). For his food he longs to have

The tongues of carpes, dormise, and camels heeles,
Boil'd i' the spirit of SOL, and dissolu'd pearle,

... The beards of barbels, seru'd in stead of sallades;
Oild mushromes; and the swelling vntuous paps
Of a fat pregnant sow, newly cut off,
Drest with an exquisite, and poynant sauce

(II, iii, 75-6; 82-86)

For his dress, he craves for "shirts of taffeta-sarsnet, soft and light/As cob-webs" (II, ii, 89-90), "gloves of fishes, perfum'd/With gems of paradise and eastern aire (II, ii, 93-94). Thus, Jonson reaches his loftiest poetic heights in creating 'the Hollywood-extravaganza visions of voluptuous bliss' which Sir Epicure means to enjoy on gaining the sweet fruition of the philosopher's stone.

It is, however, in the course of Sir Epicure's courtship of Dol Common that Jonson attains the highest effect a comic poet can:
HAM. Above the art of AESCULAPIVS,
That drew the envy of the Thunderer!
I know all this and more. DOL. Troth, I am taken, Si
Whole, with these studies, that contemplate nature.

HAM. It is a noble humour. But, this forme
Was not intended to do so darke a vse!
Had you beene crooked, foule, of some course mould,
A cloyster had done well; but, such a feature
That might stand vp the glorie of a kingdome,
To liue recluse! is a mere scloeigma,
Though in a nunnery. It must not be.
I muse, my lord your brother will permit it!
You should spend halfe my land first, were I hee.
Do's not this diaman t better, on my finger,
Then i' the quarrie? DOL. Yes. HAM. Why, you are
like it.

You were created, lady, for the light!

(IV, 1, 92-106)

Particularly, the last line, "you were created, lady, for the light!" has the perfection of Chaucer's comment on Chauntecleer's passion for Pertelote:

He loved hire so that wel was hym therwith.

(The Nun's Priest's Tale,
1. 110)

and would adorn Antony and Cleopatra and The Duchess of Malfi.
Thus, in the intensely poetic speeches given to Volpone and Sir Epicure, Jonson, to put it in the words of Mosca, "make(s) so rare a musique out of discordes" (V, ii, 18).

Thus, Jonson's plays could be approached even as products of poetic imagination no less than of permanent human experience. A recent critic has rightly pointed out: "if the follies, mean-
nesses, affectations, and lesser vices of mankind provide the subject-matter for comedy, than the comic poet is he who can transmute these ingredients into poetry".57 We may say that

Jonson achieved this alchemy as fully as a dramatic poet can. Written in blank verse of amazing variety and vigour that rise at times to intoxicating splendour, particularly plays like *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* have power to charm us into a state of comic ecstasy.

Yet, they are related to reality in the same manner and to more or less the same degree as Shakespeare's tragedies. For, Jonson's fantastic exaggerations like Volpone's explosion of fancy to seduce Celia, Sir Epicure's dreams of the kind of life the philosopher's stone can create, or Morose's hatred of noise and Troubleall's search for a warrant, provide the lenses through which the behaviour of more realistically conceived characters can be observed and brought into focus.

Therefore, one need not necessarily regret with Herford and Simpson the "deep-seated contrarieties in Jonson's own artistic nature, where the bent of a great realist for truth and nature never overcame the satirist's and humorist's weakness for fantastic caricature". As in Aristophanes, we have in Jonson a deliberate mingling of realism and fantasy as well as a comic structure centred not on a formal plot but on the exploration of an exaggerated conceit. It is chiefly in his grand comic conceits that, what T.S. Eliot calls, Jonson's "unity of inspiration" resides, for in them the interplay of realistic satire and fantastic caricature is most highly concentrated. It is this interplay between realism and fantasy which seems to give Jonson's comedy not only the unity but also the universality of great art.