

The Alchemist as a Satire and Comedy

Mrs.M.Kokila¹, T.Akhila²

¹M.A, M.PHIL (Assistant Professor), Nadar Saraswathi College of Arts and Science, Theni

²M.A. (English), Nadar Saraswathi College of Arts and Science, Theni

Abstract- The Age of Jonson, the age in which the great dramatist matured and created, covers roughly the last quarter of the 16th century and the first 37 years of the 17th century. Thus, in a way, Jonson is the connecting link between the glorious age of Queen Elizabeth and the Puritan age which is followed. It was an age of disillusionment, of increasing gloom and Pessimism, and this melancholy and gloom of the age colours the literature of the Period. "Drama reflects life", and in order to appreciate the spirit of Ben Jonson's plays it is essential to form an idea of his age. He is a classic Scholar, though he went a university, Jonson was well educated. By self-study he had acquired wide and deep Knowledge of classics. All stores of ancient literature were open to him; and he was familiar not only with the perfect productions of the Greek dramatists, but even with the fragments that lay scattered among the works of the grammarians, The Case is Altered and Every Man in His Humour offer ample evidence that Jonson came to playwriting fresh from the study of Plautus and Terence.

Index Terms- Gloom, Humour, Playwright, Knowledge, Melancholy, Disillusionment.

INTRODUCTION

Satire comes from the Latin *Satura*, meaning originally a medley or miscellany; there is no etymological connection with 'Satyr'. Satire may be described as a literary form, invented by the Romans. We may trace its beginning in early Greek writer—Archilocus, Semonides of Samos, Hipponax as they step out of lampoon and private abuse to a censure of general vices with a view to improving the morals of the society. When the drama emerges as an independent literary form from the Bacchic festival, there is a blend of satire and poetry, as we find in the work of Aristophanes. But satire as a characteristic genre is mainly a creation of the Latin writers. Caius Lucilius may be said to have invented satire, and was followed by Horace who wrote realistic, humorous,

satiric poems directed against social abuse, but sometimes shifting to more general and philosophical topics. Persius, a Stoic with predominantly philosophical interests, was wedded to uncompromising realism and cultivated a vivid, slangy, rugged style, which may be compared with that of the seventeenth century English successor, John Donne, Juvenal, the greatest of Roman satirists, introduced the heightening effects of rhetoric and tragedy into satire. But Roman satire is as a rule characterized by the moral seriousness of its purpose and the unrestrained violence and rugged strength of its means of expression. In the middle Ages direct imitation in Latin of the patterns and devices of the Roman satirists did not produce any good result—and it was due to sterility of form and a dull moral bias. In the renaissance the real meaning of classical form was rediscovered, and satire, barring writers like Jean de Meung, in his continuation of the Roman de la Rose, and William Langland, in *Piers the Plowman*, came to its own when it was separated out, as a distinct element, from religious and philosophical didacticism or love-poetry. The satiric epigram, like that of Martial, influenced Donne, Dryden and Johnson. The influence of Juvenal was equally evident. Jonson's notable contribution is to blend satire and comedy. He might have invented the humor comedy in which some personal idiosyncrasies are laid bare, the purpose being to ridicule such character. We may refer to his conception of 'humor' in his *Every Man out of His Humour*:

"When someone peculiar quality

Doth so possess a man that it doth draw

All his effecta, his spirits and powers

In the their confluitions, all to run one way

Is less perceptible than fun and humour which seem
to run riot everywhere.

We cannot deny a real artistic sense to Jonson,

However he might depart for the romantic model;

We may miss in him the romantic thrills and fantasy,

The romantic wonder and sentiment. He is after all a really

This may be truly said to be a humour.”

After all it is some unbalance in character which Jonson eposes to our view. The reader may sometimes get tired of an over-elaboration of uninteresting characters and a too detailed exposition of folly, which, it should be remembered, could not have been avoided if the satire, underlying his comedy, were to score a hit at all. And perhaps this over-elaboration is a part of his technique. It should be noted too that Jonson has a serious moral purpose like the Roman satirists; and deliberately cultivates ruggedness of style, but unlike the medieval satirists, this moral purpose is rather latent; to tell the truth, the didactic element in his comedies is a list. He follows the Plautain pattern, and introduces stock characters—clever servants, parasites, misers, braggarts, soldiers and resorts to a series of tricks accomplished through disguise. The Plautain pattern gives him plenty of scope for realism—and the comedy of intrigues and manners. Coarseness and vulgarity may often appear in his comedies, necessarily dragged in by his realistic trend, which, however, does not submerge his artistic instinct. As an instance we point out here to his subordinating the moral purpose to comic fun and laughter, which are the essence of his comedies.

Let it be noted again that Jonson set out to reform the stage, which does not mean that he wanted to break away from the popular theatre and cultivate academic or closet drama. In fact he seems to reflect and interpret the changing spirit of the times. He observed all that was absurd and lawless in romantic drama—the frequent change of place, long duration of times, absence of a unified plan or coherent structure, mingling of force and tragedy, clowns and kings. He recommends the classical standard as a cure for this lawlessness—and his objective is to of the times. Chapman anticipates him in satirical comedy, such as, *A Humorous Dayes Mirth* or *Al Fools*. Marston also takes to realistic comedies of manners. Satires begin to be written at this time such as those of Marston, Donne, Hall; and they were certainly significant of the new spirit. In any case Jonson was a leader in the movement for realistic and satirical comedy. We may find his satirical purpose unambiguously set forth in these words:

“I will scourge these apes
And to these courteous eyes oppose a mirror,

As large as is the stage whereon we set;
Where they shall see the time’s deformity
Anatomized in every nerve and sinew,
With constant courage, and contempt of fear.”

The deformities of character are follies and when these follies and vices are mercilessly exposed, they are meant to be corrected. But true to his creative character, Jonson does not parade his ethical purpose. Jonson is noted for his wide and piercing observation of manners, whether of city or of court, and for his ingenious and methodical construction of plots; of course he follows the classical models and rules in delineating characters, but he sets forth each character, it may sometimes detract from the interest of the situation. He seems to be most interested in the dramatic unfolding of character. It is at the same time related to the actual life of the day while he is concerned with sensational absurdities of character and incongruities of manners. In *The Alchemist* at any rate he preserves the balance between personality and circumstances. The play is a satire on alchemy; it is also a satire on Puritanism. Jonson paints the London of his times. So he puts in the ‘Prologue’ to the play.

“Our scene is London, ‘because we should make known,

No country’s delight is better than our own,
No clime breeds better matter for your whore,
Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more
Whose manners, now called humours, feed the stage;
And which have still been subject for the temper
Or spleen of comic writers. Though this pen
Did never aim to grieve, but enhanced men;
However the age he lives in doth endure
The vicar that she breeds, above their cure.”

The follies and vices of London life are the theme of his comedy—and these are exposed and satirized in the category of ‘humour’. The satisfaction of the ‘spleen of comic writers’ is not all that he aims at in caricaturing humours; he has a graver purpose, and it is to correct these follies and vices—it is to ‘better men’. Now the lust of gold is a general human weakness, which Jonson satirizes in *The Alchemist*. The infatuating greed of man could not have been exhibited than by setting up Sable, the alchemist, and Face who is to act as his agent: it is by the circulated report that they are on the way to discover the philosopher’s stone by which they attract a multitude, and the two rogues are so clever in their tricks that

their clients are easily duped. We do not know whether we should pity those who are fooled, or admire the two clever rogues. In any case there is much fun out of the folly of men who are so blinded by their love of gold. After all, money is a means to an end in itself. And Jonson's play may produce upon the readers, if anything, a sobering effect. Perhaps he intends no more than this after providing all the fun and frolic that a comedy aims at.

Then there is the issue of Puritanism. The Puritan's, Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome, are typical figures, full of cant, prudery and humbug. They too, in spite of all their profession of righteousness and pious zeal, are attracted by the lure of gold. But they need money for a holy purpose, that is, to establish the supremacy of Puritanism in England—and this they expect to accomplish by hiring troops from abroad, and bringing magistrates. Ananias seems to have some scruple about this—accomplishing a holy purpose by unholy means; perhaps it is not more than a quibble. Jonson might have foreseen that cult of Puritanism was a menace to throne of England, through it might have been little realized at his time. In the play Jonson exposes the canting hypocrisy as well as the secretly cherished design of the Puritans in getting into power, if possible, by upsetting the present order of things. R.J.L. Kingsford writes: "Even from this skeleton of the play it can be seen how much the action is interwoven with everyday events of Johnson's time; he had, in fact, a plot which provided him with exceptional opportunities of satirizing two social pests of the age : Puritanism and the profession of alchemist."

REFERENCE

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