



Ben Jonson's Contribution and Influence on the 'English Comedy'

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Abstract:

In the history of literature, Ben Jonson has gone down as a figure, rather than as a writer. Critics call him by his first name upon very slight acquaintance. The strength of this impression and testimony to the malice of one of his friends. Jonson is commonly conceived as a man who wrote comedies because he had a theory about why comedy out to be written. This article discusses on what influence did Jonson's Theory and Practice of comedy exercise on succeeding dramatists, Jonson's contribution to English Drama, Comedy as an independent literary form, the nature and function of Comedy, and Jonson Influence.

Keywords: Ben Jonson, Theory and Practice of comedy, Jonson Influence, Comedy of Manners.

Introduction

Drama is the western world begins with ancient Greece. Where each of its great branches. After the decline of Greek drama, the development of dramatic literature was carried on by the Romans who wrote both comedies and tragedies on the lines which the Greeks had laid down. Most of the Latin dramatic literature has perished. In England also he becomes instantly popular first in scholastic circles and in the court, and then in popular theatre. The Roman tragedies are also very important because it was these imitative productions and not the works of original Greek masters, which several as models for the neoclassical dramatists of Sixteen and Seventeenth Centuries.

The Drama of England, like that of all other countries of western Europe, had its ultimate origin in the services of the church, though other influences came in time to shape and defect it from its major purpose, representations of portions of the scriptures for religious and moral deification. The beginnings of modern drama lie at the heart of the ritual of the church. In the Middle Ages, the services of the church used to be in Latin, and the Bible was not easily accessible to the laity. The scared drama now passed from the church to the street, and from clergy to the laity.

The theme of the play passes through five stages up to its conclusion. They are – Exposition, Complication, Climax, Denouement, and Catastrophe. This may also be called the Dramatic Line. Benjamin Jonson, (1573 - 1637) know by his own preference and that of posterity as Ben, although the exact year is doubtful. Jonson's

career proper as a dramatist, as he himself conceived it, began with *Everyman in His Humour*, which was produced by the Lord Chamberlain's men with great success at the Curtain Theatre in September 1598. The last year of Johnson's life was overshadowed by sickness and debt, in spite of unbroken friendships and sometimes generous financial relief.

Jonson was an arrogant and quarrelsome man, who hardly courted popularity. That he was so respected is a tribute to the solidity of his achievement and to his essential warmth and humanity. He is remembered and valued for his understanding of poets who were very different from himself, for his brilliant formulation of sound and practical critical principles, his genius for subtle and witty characterization, his magnificent craftsmanship in versification and dramatic structure, and, perhaps above all, because permeating all his work and transcending his faults, his sound good sense. He is certainly one of the most outstanding figures in the history of English Literature, and his plays are fresh, delightful, and appealing today as they were during his own-lifetime.

Jonson's Contribution to English Drama

Ben Johnson was probably the most learned of the Elizabethan – Jacobean playwrights. He was very popular and influential in his age, and people loved, admired, and honoured him for his dignified bearing, courageous spirit, highly powerful intellect, wide and deep scholarship, careful consideration and formulations on the nature and function of drama, and especially of comic drama, and for the neat and polished art of his own plays. He exercised a deep and profound influence on the people of his age. Jonson was leading spirit and entered into the renowned wit-combats with Shakespeare. Even in his last years, when Jonson's life was overshadowed by sickness and debt, and when there was an evident decline in the quality of his work, there was no decline in his reputation and influence in the literary world.

Jonson was a classical dramatist. In theory and practise he adopted the models set up by the ancients. His classical sensibility revolted against the crudities of Elizabethan romantic drama. He was a conscious artist and theorist, and wanted to purge and contemporary drama of what he considered its fantastic absurdities its improbabilities of plot and inconsistencies in character its flagrant violation of the unities, its stress on make believe and its concern with scenes and characters remote from reality. Referring to Jonson's reaction against the Elizabethan romantic drama,

Allardyce Nicoll says: "Jonson appeared at a time when the University Wits and Shakespeare were established upon the stage the romantic comedy and the flamboyant tragedy" (149) he found a romantic comedy he must have regarded as foolish, a farcical type lacking in definite purpose, a crude revenge tragedy full of romantic grotesquery and a superman tragedy wanting in all calmness and restraint. He succeeded in making himself the greatest figure of his age.

Comedy as an independent literary form:

Jonson's true claim as an innovator rears on his recognition of comedy as an independent literary form, not to be treated in mere contrast with tragedy, and on the rules and principles he framed for the fuller expression of comic spirit. What is really new in practice of the stage, as set forth in Jonson's comedy of humours, is that is based on the likeness rather than on the contrast of the two great dramatic kinds. Jonson writes in his Discoveries, are the same with a tragedy, at the end is partly same. For they both delight and teach.

This parallelism of tragedy and comedy had been urged with increasing insistence in later Renaissance criticism, and a definition of comedy had been framed in some such terms as these that its purpose is to create laughter to the end that men's lesser faults may be made appear ridiculous and so may be avoided. As tragedy works out its morality by sporting as Jonson puts it, with follies, not with crime. In both the process is reformatory and corrective, but the material on which they work differs. The one deals with things greater and rare, the other with the lesser matters, familiar in general experience, the one works with the emotions and with incidents produced by their clashing with each other and with fate, the other with the contrasts set forth dramatically. Jonson based his theory and practice of comedy. If he owed the rules to others, there is no disputing the fact that the English stage owed its knowledge of them to him.

Jonson's Influence

Realism. Added to intensified humours treated in a satirical spirit was first given to the theatrical world by Jonson. The general effect of his critical attitudes has been very wide and pervasive. No doubt, Jonson said little that Sidney and Elizabethan critics had not said or hinted at. But we may claim for Jonson that he is the protagonist in the movement towards classicism not so much by awakening of contemporaries to an understanding of what the critical doctrine involved, as by enforcing by his own example a respect for more elderly and precise craftsmanship. If at all, his originality lies in his being the first to interpret the classical longing in the practise of letters, his influence was provocative and intensive rather than absolute, general rather than direct and personal.

Jonson had a wide influence not only in his own but also on succeeding dramatists. He was imitated by a number of writers. Chapman, Brome and Field were direct imitators in his own time, and Shadwell in the Restoration period. He also had marked influence on the Restoration comedy of Manners. Jonson's exemplars, their learning, their satirical excess and in its Restoration phase, their ethical sanity.

Conclusion

Indeed, we may honour Jonson as much by thinking of him as a founder of the 'Comedy of Manners' as the exponent of the Comedy of Humours. His genius for subtle and witty characterization his magnificent craftsmanship in versification and dramatic structure, and perhaps above all, because permeating all his work and transcending his faults, his sound good sense. He is certainly one of the most

outstanding figures, in the history of English Literature, and his plays are fresh, lively, and enjoyable even today.

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