

## *Epicoene* and the Disruption of Established Structures

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Dryden, in praising Ben Jonson in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, produced the first critical analysis of a specific work of literature in English in his "Examen of the Silent Woman".<sup>1</sup> Admiring *Epicoene* for its structure, action, "wit and acuteness of fancy"<sup>2</sup> as well as story, he claimed this to be the best of Jonson's comedies: "The intrigue of it is the greatest and most noble of any pure unmixed comedy in any language."<sup>3</sup>

However, in terms of critical evaluation, this play has not been regarded in the best of terms since then. In the earlier part of this century, *Epicoene* was understood merely to be "pure entertainment"<sup>4</sup> and those regarding it as "revolting in its forced barbarity"<sup>5</sup> were not unusual. In recent years, the sense of the play's value as an intrinsic part of Jonson's "canon" has somewhat been revived, as seen with the RSC's 1989 production, but critics are still far from doing it full justice.

*Epicoene* is quite an extraordinary play, if not for the values upheld by Restoration dramatists, for its anarchic quality as ultimate meta-drama. At the final denouement, when *Epicoene*'s peruke comes off and the audience is told that she was actually a boy in disguise, a fundamental convention of Renaissance Drama, i.e. cross-dressing, is completely broken. The audience who has been diligently following the "rules of theatrical transaction"<sup>6</sup> in suppressing their knowledge about *Epicoene*'s "true" gender is "tricked" by Jonson. This jolting ending self-destructively negates the conventional framework and breaks down accepted structure, thus inevitably forcing the audience into examining conventions they have always taken for granted and to see drama itself in a new light.

Not only is such "education" conducted through

the unmasking of the boy-wife, but it is presented throughout this work in various ways. Jonson, as a creative dramatist, is not satisfied with simply using established type-characters, forms or ideas, but makes use of them in a way that provokes scrutiny and re-examination. He makes use of stereotypical characters, not just so as to reproduce a set lineup for a "humour" play, but to make the audience examine them in conjunction with reality and to emphasize the sterility of empty reliance on cliché. Also, when he borrows classical axioms or conventional ideology from the Ancients, he is not so much showing deference as dismembering the conventions to see if they are actually usable in the real world.<sup>7</sup> Clichéd language that sets up situations or ideas is never accepted as reality here; in *Epicoene*, all types of established structure are taken apart, teaching us finally that nothing can be taken for granted in Jonsonian theater.

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It is the norm to see the Jonsonian "humor comedies" as confined within very rigid structures and using "types" in an established fashion, as his plays are indeed "conventional" in various ways. However, the fact that Jonson is constantly experimenting with types taken from various dramatic as well as non-dramatic materials must not be forgotten. In regard to stereotypes, he creatively uses such "stock" characters to invoke a fruitful rapport between audience and the actors, but also to encourage re-examination of such established portrayals. Firstly, there is the stereotyped couple of Captain and Mistress

Otter, whose relationship is hackneyed material for laughter due to the "reversed", "warped" nature of their interaction (the wife is dominant). They are developed individually in this play and Jonson in cultivating this banality invites the audience to take another look at the situation.

Mistress Otter is the tyrannical shrew-wife stereotype widely acknowledged as a figure to be feared; she reigns over her husband, holding the purse strings and having precedence in language, quite unlike the ideal silent wife of Morose's dreams. She has dynamism as a character through her intense verbal and physical presence on stage, and in this attains a place beyond the mock-threat of many such clichéd types. More significantly, however, her dramatic force demands the audience rethink the possibility of such a stereotype existing in reality. A good example of this is in III.i., where Mistress Otter rebukes the captain for "disobedience" in a torrent of sarcastic questions:

.....Who gives you your maintenance, I pray you? who allows you your horse-meat, and mans-meat? your three sute of apparell a yeere? your foure paire of stockings, one silke, three worsted? your clean linnen, your bands, and cuffes when I can get you to weare 'hem?.....Were you ever so much as look'd upon by a lord, or a lady, before I married you: but on the Easter, or Whitsun-holy-daies?

(III.i.1.38-48)

This specific listing of Otter's allowance, down to his very legwear, as well as the pejorative insistence on his social inferiority is unexpectedly intense. The comic aspects of this: for example, Otter could cower fearfully from the raging wife, diminishing his visual as well as vocal presence (he is completely silent until Truewit's intervention: "How do's my noble Captaine?" (III.ii.1.4)), heighten the grotesqueness of the situation, and we are forced to reconsider the reality of such a stereotype. Needless to say, Jonson is no philogynist but in fact the complete opposite. What he is mocking here is not the misogyny inherent in various traditions, but the clichéd recognition of

dominant females as dangerous and terrifying; thus, he subversively exaggerates the stereotype for the audience to re-examine.

Also with Captain Otter, Jonson blows up the "bullied, submissive husband" stereotype as well, but more significantly, he makes Otter's hackneyed speeches into material for reconsideration. His language is full of platitudes traditionally used to put down women; for example his description of Mistress Otter:

She takes her self asunder still when she goes to bed, into some twentie boxes; and about the next day noone is put together againe, like a great *Germane* clocke.

(IV.ii.1.97-9)

is a familiar misogynist image.<sup>8</sup> However, the "elaborate and imaginative" development of this basic formula with specific contemporary references (see 1.91-5), is placed ironically in a context showing total powerlessness on the part of the male speaker, thus bringing into the cliché a new angle of meaning. Captain Otter uses bold words to denounce wives ("...a scirvy *clogdogdo*; an unlucky thing, a very foresaid beare-whelpe, without any good fashion or breeding: *mala bestia*." 1.74-6) but acts pathetically when she is around. This contrast is heightened in the unusual setting of planned eavesdropping in IV.ii., and his ridiculousness as well as the weakness of his set-speeches is emphasized.

Furthermore, the relationship between a stereotype and the hackneyed language he uses is reviewed and caricatured in the climactic physical confrontation where Mistress Otter "falls upon him and beats him" in the general atmosphere of chaos (drums and trumpets sounding; gallants/other characters enjoying the "show"). The strong sense of visual and verbal tumult, culminating in the too-obvious intervention of Morose's phallic sword as assertion of male authority that even berefts Mistress Otter of verbal dominance ( she runs away, only with "Ah!" (IV.ii.1.109)), is a presentation of a stereotyped relationship the audience is conditioned to expect, and here exaggerated to the point of parody.

When Jonson uses stereotypes for his characters, he does not settle for a straightforward presentation of such accepted forms. Paradoxically, while he produces the types in a dramatically creative way, he illustrates the stagnancy of empty reliance on cliché through the usage of stereotypes. This can be clearly seen in the way he depicts Daw and La Foole, dramatic stereotype "town gulls". They lack "manly" virtues as seen in IV.v.-vi. (loss of swords) and are material for laughter for the wits; they use affected language and have a pompous sense of their own self-importance; they believe completely in received ideas, having no hold on the multiplicity of reality and accept the single vision created (usually by the wits). Thus, they put emphasis on clothes or language as signifiers for superiority of class and the integral self, while they are in actuality nothing more than "mushrompe gentlemen".<sup>10</sup>

Amorous La Foole, the new-created knight, is a standard gull, who speaks affectedly, notably in I.iv., with total lack of decorum or comprehensible order. He does indeed speak of his "pedegree", "meat", "guests", and "his fortunes" in a "breath" (see I.ii.1.53-6), and the pattern strains at the seams in practice; the torrent of jumbled subjects that ends up thus:

....I had as faire a gold jerkin on that day, as any was worn in the *Iland-voyage*, or at *Caliz*, none disprais'd, and I came over in it hither, show'd my selfe to my friends, in court, and after went downe to my tenants, in the countrey, and survai'd my lands, let new leases, tooke their money, spent it in the eye o' the land here, upon ladies — and now I can take up at my pleasure.

(I.iv. 1.61-8)

heightens the sense of a fool's disordered mind and his crucial need to rely on established speeches or action that would guarantee his "authentic" title as well as his classification as a "true" gentleman.

The other gull, John Daw, is the bad-poet fool stereotype easily placed by his name. He is a "jackdaw" (bird known to be loquacious and thieving) and a "daw" (simpleton)<sup>11</sup>, fitting into the accepted

dictum Jonson quotes from Plutarch: "A foole could never hold his peace".<sup>12</sup> His poems are totally reliant on hackneyed phrases and commonplace ideas, as can be seen in his "madrigals" (II.iii.) (even the style itself is mechanical<sup>13</sup> and is remarked upon by Clerimont sarcastically: "How it chimes, and cries tinke i' the close, divinely!" (II.iii.1.42)), yet he confidently places himself apart from "the *Wits* that write verses and yet are no *Poets*" (II.iii.1.110-1), and denouncing all the classic writers in score. The classic wisdom we accept soberly in Jonson's *Discoveries*: "A Rhymery, and a Poet, are two things"<sup>14</sup> is made into a joke with this shift in context.

Not only is Daw a false poet, he is also a false scholar. Titles of books are taken by him to be names of authors, yet he persists in using pompous oaths as "As I hope to finish Tacitus" (IV.v.1.50-1) to assert his identity as an intellectual. Indeed, he uses names and titles randomly, as if that will prove his learning, and the audience is called to laugh at him in the full. Daw tries to negate tradition to show his originality, for example, minimizing the contents of the *Iliad* and the *Georgics*; but having no "matter" of his own, he does not succeed.

It is evident that Jonson used Daw and La Foole in demonstrating the infertility/inflexibility of cliché, as Dauphine's comment illustrates:

They'll beleeve themselves to be just such men as we make 'hem, neither more nor lesse. They have nothing, not the use of their senses, but by tradition.

(III.iii.1.97-9)

The simple acceptance they show of the wits' words (III.iii., IV.v.) leading to the non-existent fight shows that they are always led by others and lack initiative of their own, and we acknowledge their complete faith in received ideas as folly. In IV.iii. they contribute to the sequence by what they believe to be "witty remarks", but what are actually "mechanical clichés"<sup>15</sup>:

Daw: Is the *Thames* the lesse for the *dyers* water, mistris?

La Foole: Or a torch, for lighting many torches?

## (IV.iii.1.34-6)

and speaking in what they believe to be the language of "amorous gallants" in V.i., they end up as braggarts that have had "favours" from Epicoene. This use of received ideas to create reality eventually leads to their downfall.

These stereotypical characters try to use "mechanical clichés" to get what they want, namely "favours" from the loose Collegiate women in IV.iii., and in order to make it seem as though they "governe the ladies" and "carry the feminine gender afore" them (V.i.1.30-1), but finally, reality is never as simple as they make it out to be. Morose is another such believer in cliché, fooled to such an extent that he is deflated completely at the end when the bride's "perruke" is taken off and reality breaks down his narrow-minded, literal view of the world.

Morose, needless to say, is a mixed stereotype created from various traditions; he is the humour play grotesque with an incontinence of humours that creates "systematic disorder"<sup>16</sup>, in this case, an intense aversion to sound made by others (II.i.); he is also the "miserly father figure"<sup>17</sup> of the city comedies to be overthrown by the young; and, to a lesser degree he is a type of malcontent figure. From this angle, the audience anticipates Morose's defeat (being reduced in money, land, by his nephew Dauphine, the "prodigal gallant") from the beginning, but it might also be surmised from his sheer dependence on received ideas. He revels in his vision of Dauphine's future as a pauper (II.v. "it knighthood" soliloquy), through his bland and moralistic concept of upwardly-mobile young gallants buying titles and consequently being punished for it. In reality, however, Dauphine has already succeeded in his plan to take over financially, in the moment of Morose's decision to marry Epicoene.

Indeed, in his first encounter with Epicoene, Morose exhibits all the qualities of a believer in cliché, as well as an adherent of convention. He believes in the popular, trite conception of the ideal woman: "exceeding faire, and of a speciall good favour; a sweet composition, or harmony of limmes" (II.v.1.17-8), soft-spoken, silent with fitting birth and

good education, and totally submissive to her husband ("I'll leave it to wisdom, and you, sir." (1.84)). He tests Epicoene to see if she fits this "type", and solicits her with a conventional/literal conception of love:

I beseech you, say lady, out of the first fire of meeting eyes, (they say) love is stricken: doe you feele any such motion, sodenly shot into you, from any part you see in me? ha, lady?

(II.v.1.26-9)

As Barish notes, this is an "absurd attempt to translate an amatory conceit into a literal event"<sup>18</sup>, and shows up the shallowness of Morose's grasp on reality.

When Morose believes Epicoene to be fitting, he dismisses her "bad quality", of being "poore, and her friends deceased" (II.v.1.90). What is ironic about his supposed magnanimity is that her "bad quality" lies elsewhere; before anything else, she is not a "she" at all. But when he finds out that she can "speake", he merely puts a different label on his predicament, changing his self-identity as blessed lover into that of a pitiable husband tormented by the "worst type of wife": "assertive, capricious, quarrelsome, scolding, inconstant, foolish and extravagant in dress"<sup>19</sup>. The shift comes first in III.iv. where he comes face to face with "the shrew", an opposite stereotype of the ideal wife he thought he had gained:

She is my Regent already! I have married a Penthesilea, a Semiramis, sold my liberty to a distaffe!

(III.iv.1.56-8)

In these sequences, the comedy is ensured by such clever use of clichés, while the stagnancy in believing that they equal reality is also indicated. Morose is never creative enough to be able to "extemporize" (see III.v.: his curse on Cutbeard that is deflated by the intervention of Truewit's dynamic language) or to see beyond cliché, and is inevitably punished severely for his naive belief in structure at the end:

Now you may goe in and rest, be private as

you will, sir. I'll not trouble you, till you trouble me with your funerall, which I care not how soone it come.

(V.iv.1.214-7)

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The ending has, indeed, many surprises in store for the audience, one of which is the fact that Truewit does not turn out to be the familiar stereotype of "wit-gallant manipulator". His actions throughout the play, in playing upon the gulls, Otters, Collegiates, and creating misery for Morose, as well as his name itself (true-wit) give material for the audience to assume that he is in control of the situation. Jonson exploits this reliance in creating this "pseudo-wit" and by silencing him at the end like everyone else, shows the stagnant, fake quality of the clichéd structure. While the play is on, however, the trustworthy, clever character that the audience identifies with is used as a medium to call for a re-examination of clichés by placing classical axioms in a different/unsuitable context.

By classical axioms, here I mean a maxim or a proposition that is regarded as self-evident truth, and is authorized by quotations from the Ancients. As Dryden notes, Jonson borrowed boldly from the classics (both Greek and Latin) in his works<sup>20</sup>, but in order to re-examine such statements from another angle and not simply to accept their "established wisdom". The first parodying of classical axiom is, in fact, the very first verbal/visual contact Truewit makes to the audience. This is in I.i., where he makes his appearance with the words of a stoic philosopher:

Why, here's the man that can melt away his time, and never fees it!...Well, sir gallant, were you strooke with the plague this minute, or condemn'd to any capitall punishment to morrow, you would beginne then to thinke, and value every article o' your time, esteeme it at the true rate, and give all for't.

(I.i.1.23-31)

He speaks against the follies of youth and how the young never value or use time wisely. This is a familiar theorem, following the traditional European values of "memento mori" and "carpe diem".

Here, however, it is used in mockery, as Truewit is the gallants' peer and part of their group which "wastes" time. He answers Clerimont's "Why, what should a man do?" (1.32) with:

Why nothing: or that, which when 'tis done, is as idle.

(I.i.1.33-4)

and continues to list the "sinful" pastimes of the court. The serious "wisdom" of Seneca<sup>21</sup> is broken up by being used by one of the idle gallants as he continues to bombard Clerimont with variants on the same theme (1.50-5/ 57-61) that he does not take seriously at all. Truewit abruptly ends the "persuasive" discourse when Clerimont has had enough of the joke:

Well, sir. If it will not take, I have learn'd to loose as little of my kindnesse, as I can. I'le doe good to no man against his will, certainly. When were you at the colledge?

(I.i.1.68-9)

The audience sees dictums being thrown away when they become boring and tiresome — even when they are used in mockery. Jonson shows these much repeated axioms in a new light, by lining them up with reality where gallants do not listen but see them as trivial and tedious.

Jonson is skilled in creating burlesque out of classical axioms, as he is aware that they do not always portray the truth. An interesting example is to be found in II.ii., again presented by Truewit. This is the memorable scene where he goes into Morose's house to expound on the undesirability of women, arguing against marriage. The densely packed misogyny to be found in the speeches (II.ii.1.20-149) comes largely from Juvenal, and covers a wide range of illustrations about women, from their sexual deviance to their irritating behaviour after marriage. This scene, however, is not a simple incorporation of

Juvenal's "wisdom" into a dramatic context; there is a "curious shift in tone"<sup>22</sup> as Truewit uses this piece in a comic situation. The continuous flow of language as a verbal assault upon Morose creating laughter, and the parodic presentation of the platitude, "marriage is worse than death" (holding a halter throughout the scene) coupled with it, cuts into a new dimension of the worn axiom used.

The attempt to categorize all women is obviously a narrow stance to take. Truewit says:

Nay, suffer valiantly, sir, for I must tell you,  
all the perills that you are obnoxious too.

(II.ii.1.65-6)

and goes on to list types of husband-tormenting women — "If she bee faire, yong and vegetous...", "If foule, and crooked", "If rich", "If noble", "If fruitfull", "If learned", "If precise" (1.66-85). Although the dramatic entertainment is heightened through the sense of endlessness of this list, and the stale axioms receive renewed power by such innundation of language, this list paradoxically shows up the superficiality and the limitation of determining rigid formulas in regard to wives.

Also in IV.i., the misogynistic exercises continue, with the commonplace lesson on "women's shallowness" as well as "how to win a woman" straight from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, within the conventional context of "formal discussion on love". Truewit is the central figure here and lets his oratory flow in answer to Dauphine's "I would thou would'st make me a proficient" (IV.i.1.49-50). The parody lies in the fact that none of these gallants are serious about their romantic pursuits. As seen in I.i., Clerimont is not the stereotyped lover languishing for his mistress, and his regard for Haughty fluctuates; here he appreciates her for her "dressings" ("Me thinks, the lady Haughty lookes well to day, for all my dispraise of her i' the morning. I thinke, I shall come about to thee againe, Truewit." IV.i.1.32-4). Dauphine laughingly claims he loves all the Collegiates (1.138) and his lack of seriousness becomes further apparent in V.ii. when all of them flock to seduce him in vain.

Truewit is, of course, using traditional misogyn-

istic material to enhance his position as creator of laughter, yet his presentation of citations from Ovid provokes us to re-examine set ideas. When Truewit presents the hackneyed excuse for rape ("though they denie, their desire is to be tempted" 1.73-4), it grows further into a monstrosity:

It is to them an acceptable violence, and has oftentimes the place of the greatest courtesie. Shee that might have beene forc'd, and you let her goe free without touching, though shee then seeme to thanke you, will ever hate you after: and glad i' the face, is assuredly sad at the heart.

(IV.i.1.86-90)

The idea of rape as answering women's hidden sexual desires, as McLuskie notes, self-reflexively reveals its grotesqueness to the extent that "it calls into question the value of the whole exercise"<sup>23</sup>. Reality does not work with set formulas, and Truewit's lack of answer to Dauphine's question:

On what courtly lap hast thou late slept, to  
come forth so sudden and absolute a courtling?

(IV.i.1.129-30)

makes us doubt his actual encounters with women; we suspect he is only following Ancient "authority".

With regard to this theme of "love", Jonson not only shows he distrusts conventional set ideas by his attitude of mockery, but also by breaking apart the romantic ideology/convention familiar to the Elizabethan audience. The play opens with a disrupted version of the "lover" bidding his page sing the song of love. The young lady in question is no passive idol to be worshipped (as at the beginning of *Twelfth Night*), but plays with the page quite unmodestly:

Page: .....The gentlewomen play with me, and throw me o' the bed; and carry me into my lady; and shee kisses me with her oil'd face; and puts a perruke o' my head; and askes me an' I will weare her gowne; and I say, no: and then she hits me a blow o' the eare, and calls me innocent, and lets me goe.

(I.i.13-8)

and Clerimont, as noted before, is no love-stricken man-turned-poet. He thinks lightly about being in a disadvantageous position in comparison to his page:

...well sir, you shall goe there no more, lest I  
bee faine to seeke your voyce in my ladies rushes, a  
fortnight hence. Sing, sir.

(I.i.120-2)

Jonson's awareness of the physical side of love as more rudimentary than showy decorum (see *Discoveries* 1.59), creates a mockery of the too-often used ideology of romantic love. Thus, Clerimont does not praise the virtues of his lady, but makes blatant sexual jokes (I.i.1.8-12). Furthermore, there is even a sense of sexual affiliation between Clerimont and his page, which is vocalized with Truewit's entrance ("...what between his mistress abroad, and his angle at home..." 1.24-5), but also may be presented visually/verbally prior to this statement through the actors' actions and the tone of voice.

Clerimont's song also plays a significant role in the breaking down of the romantic, as it is far from the kind of lover's song the audience would have been conditioned to listen to in such circumstances. Here, the song is only a mock medicinal of unrequited love. Clerimont writes, not of praise or protestations to his lady Haughty, but presents a lighthearted condemnation of Haughty's "putting on of face" as a flippant lover:

*Still to be neat, still to be drest,  
As, you were going to a feast;  
Still to be pou'dred, still perfum'd:  
Lady, it is to be presum'd,  
Though arts hid causes are not found,  
All is not sweet, all is not sound.*

*Give me a looke, give me a face,  
That makes simplicitie a grace;  
Robes loosely flowing, haire as free:  
Such sweet neglect more taketh me,  
Then all th'adulteries of art,*

*They strike mine eyes, but not my heart.*

(I.i.191-102)

Clerimont places women who do not "toil" with their faces above those who rely on "painting, perfuming, washing, scouring".

Not only is this song used as an anti-romantic piece to add to the effect of the whole sequence, but it becomes the base on which Truewit builds and calls attention to the necessity of developing and re-examining conventional axioms too often taken for granted. Although it is difficult to see this as a straight satire on cliché due to the elusiveness of Clerimont's character, this touches upon the whole theme of reality examined through the play, aligning pretence with trickery and seeing reality as truly important and meaningful. However, since the song itself is not "new", being modelled on a Latin poem from the *Anthologica Latina*, and this idea of nature above art is a well-established one, there is not very much that is original about it.

This only becomes interesting when coupled with the intervention of Truewit. He breaks this up with a totally opposite idea:

And I am, clearly, o' the other side: I love a  
good dressing, before any beautie o' the world. O, a  
woman is, then, like a delicate garden; nor, is there  
one kind of it: she may varie, every houre; take  
often counsell of her glass, and choose the best.

(I.i.1.103-7)

He continues to develop the theme until it appears to take on a life of its own and go on ceaselessly (I.113-37). Actually, he is repeating yet another classical idea, based on the misogynistic concept of women as needing cover-up: "an equally familiar topos of the beauty of cultivation"<sup>24</sup> taken from Ovid. This becomes a battle of clichés demanding language to take on a dynamic quality that goes beyond a formal dialectic exercise. Truewit inevitably wins in this, as he is able to utilize tradition in an original manner. Clerimont has nothing left to say at the end, but can only acknowledge his triumph: "Well said, my Truewit." (I.127)

As Jonson advocates in his *Discoveries*:

I know *Nothing* can conduce more to letters, then to examine the writings of the Ancients, and not to rest in their sole Authority, or take all trust from them;...It is true they open'd the gates, and made the way, that went before us; but as Guides, not Commanders...<sup>25</sup>

Established axioms or ideas can thus be fruitful tools for artistic creation, provided they are not relied upon to hide unoriginality or simply accepted as reality. Truewit is given higher status compared to the other characters until the dénouement, because he can be creative with set axioms and ideology. Such an attitude is necessary in the world of Jonson's theater, in order to avoid the stagnation and negation of multiple possibilities always present.

— 3 —

In *Epicoene*, Jonson deals not only with the problem of classical axioms and conventional ideology but also with accepted understanding (situations or ideas created by clichéd language that are accepted as true), in claiming that they are not necessarily "real". An example of this is in IV.iv. where Epicoene, the gallants, and Collegiates pretend Morose is ill. In order to classify him in that state, they use commonplace expressions<sup>26</sup>:

Epicoene: They say you are run mad, sir...  
Lord how idly he talks, and how his eyes sparkle!  
He looks greene about the temples! Doe you see  
what blue spots he has?

Clerimont: I, it's melancholy.

(IV.iv.1.47-59)

This use of accepted signifiers, no matter how established, can not be substantial without a correspondance to reality. Morose is however, not ill and runs out with Dauphine. Of course, the dynamic aspect of all this, is that such use of cliché coupled with the thing Morose hates the most— i.e. noise— is

powerful and binding enough to truly drive him out of his mind, and is comic in that it is able to cut Morose down to size.

He can not deal with the flood of language that is threatening to break apart his integrity of being, and replies ridiculously to his mate's words:

Epicoene: You are not well, sir! you looke very ill! something has distempered you.

Morose: O, horrible, monstrous impertinencies! would not one of these have serv'd? doe you thinke, sir? would not one of these have serv'd?  
(IV.iv.1.34-8)

He is also entirely powerless to deal with even the gibes of the gulls:

Daw: The disease in *Greeke* is called *Mavia*, in *Latine*, *Insania*, *Furor*, *vel Ecstasis melancholia*, that is, *Egressio*, when a man *ex melancholico*, *evadit fanaticus*.

Morose: Shall I have a lecture read upon me alive?

(IV.iv.1.68-71)

He is eventually at a loss for words with which to claim his sanity, as the discussion on cures is carried on continuously. Truewit acknowledges the power of this: "You'll make him mad indeed, ladies, if you pursue this." (IV.iv.1.153-4) As the audience sees Morose's inability to defy situations forged by clichéd language, the gap between received ideas and reality can be re-examined at the same time.

It is interesting to note that in this play, Jonson presents hackneyed ideas verbally before they are visually dramatized for the audience to perceive. Thus, on the surface, accepted understandings seem synonymous with reality, but ultimately, the contention between cliché and reality to override each other ends with the latter getting the upper hand, as happens at the end of the play itself.

The obvious illustration of this is the negative theorems about women abounding in *Epicoene*. The idea that women are talkative/loud expressed by Truewit in I.ii. (1.19-20,34-5), together with other



numerous negative qualities explained from Juvenal in II.ii. is followed up in III.i. and ii. by the verbal/visual presence of Mistress Otter. She is everything that Juvenal warned against, "commanding all at home": "If rich, and that you marry her dowry, not her; shee'll raigne in your house, as imperious as a widow." (II.ii.1.70-2) and Morose fears her strongly ("Is that Gorgon, that Medusa come? Hide me, hide me." III.vii.1.21-2). Also, the Collegiates in giving advice to Epicoene talk about their power over men (IV.iii.1.19-28); a power which is similar to that described by Truewit in II.ii. Even Epicoene makes her debut as "manifest woman" in III.iv.,v.,vi., as she attains ascendancy verbally and domestically:

Speake to him, fellow, speake to him. I'll have none of this coacted, unnaturall dumbnesse in my house, in a family where I governe.

(III.iv.1.53-5)

turning out to be Morose's worst nightmare of a shrew-wife.

As accepted perceptions about women are presented with an almost immaculate interchangeability with "reality", it is easy to see the two as one. However, all this building up turns out to be a denial of cliché in the striking ending where Epicoene's peruke comes off and Dauphine tells us quite placidly — "She's a boy." This denouement inevitably comes to hold two important revelations. The first is that those who try to keep personal reality intact by clichés invariably fail. Daw and La Foole, who supposed themselves to "governe" ladies (Epicoene mainly — IV.vii.1.89-91) become disgraced for having falsely claimed to have slept with Epicoene, in actuality, a male. Likewise, the Collegiates can no longer think of themselves as a powerful threat to men, as they have revealed all their secrets to a boy ("but here stands shee, that has vindicated your fames." V.iv.1.244-5).

Secondly, this unmasking touches upon a greater revelation that holds a sense of disruption. When Dauphine takes away the peruke to "discover" a boy, the audience is reminded of the fact that all the characters on the stage were invariably played by

males. Realism is bared to its skin, as the fundamental convention of cross-dressing in Jacobean drama, that the audience has been taking for granted all along, is taken apart. Thus, these "women" are in fact, just boys. Jonson brings about this disintegration of clichés as they are stagnant and "fake", showing that accepted understandings are not interchangeable with reality.

Another illustration of this is found in the lawyers-stereotype as talkative and argumentative, presented in IV.vii., where Morose expresses horror at the noise in the court:

.....such speaking, and counter-speaking, with their severall voyces of citations, appellations, allegations, certificates, attachments, intergatories, references, convictions, and afflictions indeed, among the Doctors and Proctors! that the noise here is silence too't! a kind of calme mid-night!

(IV.vii.1.15-9)

This comic account of verbose lawyers is followed up with the appearance of Otter and Cutbeard, disguised as "divine" and "canonist". The sequence where they pack their speeches full of latinisms, speak pretentiously and argue every legal detail with each other (V.iii.) is perhaps one of the most dynamic and memorable scenes in the whole play:

Cutbeard: Who cannot *uti uxore pro uxore*, may *habere eam pro sorore*.

Otter: Absurd, absurd, absurd, and merely apostaticall.

C: You shall pardon me, master Parson, I can prove it.

O: You can prove a Will, master Doctor, you can prove nothing else. Do's not the verse of your owne *canon say*, *Haec socianda vetant conubia, facta retractant* —

C: I grant you, but how doe they *retractare*, master Parson?

Morose: (O, this was it, I fear'd.)...

(V.iii.1.197-206)

They become an instrument of torture to Morose, by their redundant speech, endless decorum, argument,

and inability to free Morose from *Epicoene*, fitting the preconceived ideas of what lawyers are like.

If the two were actual lawyers, then, the strength of the stereotype/accepted understanding would stand. However, the audience knows they are only Otter and Cutbeard who are transformed by means of disguise and "smatterings" of Latin: "Clap but a civill gown with a welt, o' the one; and a canonical cloake with sleeves o' the other: and give 'hem a few termes i' their mouthes." (IV.vii.1.43-5) and they are duly "unveiled" with *Epicoene* at the end by Dauphine who thanks them for their play-acting (V.iv.1.211-2). Jonson again laughs at clichéd conceptions at Morose's expense, and simultaneously takes drama to its limit in revealing along with *Epicoene*'s denouement that Otter and Cutbeard are not lawyers, nor are they bear-baiter or barber — they are just actors on the stage.

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*Epicoene* is a play that anarchically breaks down all kinds of established structures. The ending most obviously does this, as the startling denouement works, not as a straightforward dramatic "relief" that enables the audience to take their minds off "sexual aggression" in the storyline as Sweeney suggests<sup>27</sup>, but rather, as a defiant challenge to dramatic convention too easily taken for granted. The audience is encouraged to laugh at the fool- and grotesque-types, as well as the "wits" (see their petty quarrel over who is to be master-manipulator — IV.v.1.142-9), and is led to have confidence in their judgement about the plot. However, the abrupt bargaining of Dauphine to become heir with an allowance of "five hundred" (1.180) and revelation of why the marriage is invalid:

Then here is your release, sir; [ He takes of Epicoenes perruke] you have married a boy, a gentlemans son, that I have brought up this halfe yeere, at my great charges, and for this composition, which I have now made with you.

(V.iv.1.204-7)

is an unforeseen outcome that denies the audience any reliance on accepted forms or received ideas.

Thus, Jonson's efforts to break away from the rigidly structured aspect of theater dependent on clichéd convention are strongly manifest in *Epicoene*. The play itself is, indeed, full of a dynamic examination of set-structure, as throughout the action, stereotypes and received ideas are used to mock the stagnancy of cliché as well as to examine its reality; the integrity of classical axioms, conventional ideology, and accepted understandings is closely scrutinized.

In *Epicoene*, Jonson's "creative yet potentially anarchic comic imagination"<sup>28</sup> is fully at work, and this play certainly deserves to be revalued again as one of his "four Great Comedies". Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to say that for a full understanding of Jonson, a thorough reappraisal of *Epicoene* as a play that explores and educates on the theme of cliché and reality, while breaking open the integrity of the theater, is mandatory. This exciting piece of drama has a right to our "plaudite", keeping us fascinated with the man who was proclaimed the most "learned and judicious writer which any Theatre ever had" and that "something of art was wanting to the Drama, till he came".<sup>29</sup>

— Notes —

\*\* All quotes from *Epicoene* are taken from Herford, Simpson and Simpson, *Ben Jonson V*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937).

1. Introduction in *Epicoene*, R.V.Holdsworth, ed. (London: Ernest Benn, 1979), xxi.
2. *Essays of John Dryden Vol.I*, W.P.Ker, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 86.
3. *Ibid.*, 83.
4. L.C. Knights, "Tradition and Ben Jonson", *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1937) in *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Jonas A. Barish, ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 36.

5. Edmund Wilson, "Morose Ben Jonson", *The Triple Thinkers*, Edmund Wilson, ed. (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1948) 62.
6. Peter Womack, *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 111.
7. See Robert N. Watson, *Ben Jonson's Parodic Strategy: Literary Imperialism in the Comedies* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), 99.
8. See Herford, Simpson and Simpson, *Ben Jonson X*,
9. Note in Holdsworth, 100.
10. Ben Jonson, *Everyman Out of His Humour* (l.ii.l.162), *Ben Jonson III*, 449.
11. See note in Holdsworth, also the Oxford English Dictionary.
12. Ben Jonson, *Timber: or Discoveries in Ben Jonson VIII*, (l.366), 574.
13. See note in Holdsworth, 41.
14. *Discoveries*, (ll.2448-9), 638.
15. See note in Holdsworth, 104.
16. Womack, 49.
17. Michael Shapiro, *Children of the Revels: the Boy Companies of Shakespeare's Time and Their Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 56.
18. Jonas A. Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 161.
19. Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 90.
20. Dryden, 82.
21. See note in Holdsworth, 14.
22. Kate McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 165.
23. *Ibid.*, 170.
24. *Ibid.*, 166.
25. *Discoveries*, (ll.129-42), 567.
26. *Ben Jonson X*, 37.
27. See John Gordon Sweeney III, *Jonson and the Psychology of Public Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 115-6.
28. Brian Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy* (London: Methuen, 1968), 6.
29. Dryden, 81-2.