

## Swift and Jonson

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Cecil C. Seronsy wrote an interesting article, "Sir Politic Would-Be in Laputa," in the *English Language Notes*, I (1963).<sup>1</sup> Since few responses to it have been recorded, I'd like to attempt at some comment on it. Sir Politic Would-Be is an ineffective projector and dupe in Ben Jonson's *Volpone, or the Foxe*. Seronsy is anxious to establish some concrete links between Jonson and Swift as points of likeness between these writers have been alluded to, but not elucidated, by so many critics.<sup>2</sup> Referring to Sir Pol's "fondness for impractical projects, his suspicion about political plots, secret codes, and hidden meaning in the most innocent events, and a like preoccupation of mind," he contends that Jonson must take his place as one of Swift's important sources and compares this "ignorant gullible smeller-out of plots and suspicious personages" to Swift's political projectors of Laputa and statesmen of Gulliver's native Tribnia.

Here are some illustrations of Sir Politic's propensity for ferreting out non-existent plots. He asks Peregrine, newly-arrived from England, of ominous rumours. The latter quickly catches his mood and pretends gravely to take in his humour. At his fabricated pieces of information, for instance, the news that a whale had come up the river as far as Woolwich, Sir Pol smells out the whole plot: the whale was "either sent from *Spain*, or the Archdukes."<sup>3</sup> Peregrine also reports that Stone the Fool is dead. Since the dupe regards Stone as "one of the most dangerous heads" within the state, he proceeds to name the various codes by which as a spy he had picked up news:

Why, the meat was cut  
So like his character, and so laid, as he  
Must easily read the cipher.

(III, i. 82-84)

The account of the meat cut into figures for Stone suggests Gulliver's observation of the Laputan habit of cutting food into symbols and geometrical figures. In Tribnia suspected persons' letters and papers are delivered to a set of artists very dexterous in finding out the mysterious meanings of words, syllables, and letters. By this means such an ordinary expression as "Our brother Tom has just got the piles" is deciphered into "Resist, —a Plot is brought home—The Tour."<sup>4</sup>

There is, however, a distinction, Seronsy asserts, between the two authors' creations. "Sir Pol's very human qualities of vanity, jealousy, suspicion, and officious ambition lead him into situations of self-exposure that are downright comic," while Swift's projectors are "grim, sober, mechanical in their absorption, and above all, impersonal; the effect is therefore one of distaste bordering on horror, rather than comic."<sup>5</sup> To this distinction I disagree. To prove my point, I first examine the evidences of Swift's familiarity with Jonson's works which Seronsy enumerates.

The critic's argument is based on his assumption that Swift had easy and direct access to Jonson's works and unquestionably read them. He presents four pieces of evidence. In the catalog of books in Swift's library there is an item—"Folio (359) Johnson, *Ben*. His Works London 1640."<sup>6</sup> Jonson wrote a play and Swift, a prose satire, both with the same title, *A Tale of a Tub*. The pigmies of Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* gave a hint, according to Herford and Simpson,<sup>7</sup> to Swift of the Lilliputians. Finally, Harold Williams attributes a folio broadside in verse, "A Hue and Cry after Dismal" to Swift,<sup>8</sup> which may have some connection with Jonson's masque entitled *The Hue and Cry after Cupid*.<sup>9</sup>

If such are held as the evidences for assuming Swift's intimate knowledge of Jonson's works in general, although Seronsy hesitates, saying that these similarities in title may be accidental, I might add four more. Swift jokingly names three great poets under the reign of James I in his "History of Poetry" thus: "Beaum-ont, Flat-Cheer, the third is Ben-ding a little to stiffness."<sup>10</sup> For his *Intelligencer* paper he misquotes from Jonson's Epigram CXV, "On the Townes Honest Man." Swift's citation runs: "Describ'd it's thus: Defin'd would you it have?/ Then, the World's honest Man's an

arrant knave.”<sup>11</sup> Jonson’s original is “Describ’d it’s thus: Defin’d would you it have?/ then, *the townes* honest Man’s her errant’st Knave.”<sup>12</sup> He also refers to *Volpone* as “an old comedy” in the *Examinaer*, No. 25.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Swift left unfinished an ballad, “To the Tune of the Cutpurse,” modelled on the song of Nightingale the ballad singer in *Bartholomew Fayre*, III, v, which was completed by Lady Betty Berkeley’s addition of a stanza. Nightingale is in cahoots with the pickpocket. While he sings a ballad against cutpurses, the rascal relieves his hearer Cokes of his purse. His song has a refrain:

Youth, youth, thou hadst better bin staru’d by thy Nurse,  
Then lue to be hanged for cutting a purse.

Swift reverses the situation: a friar could narrowly finish a Latin poem by a mysterious help from an “Invisible Hand,” that is, the hand of a cutpurse filling the void space in the middle of a line. Swift makes a more satirical use of the refrain: “Let Censuring Critics then think what they list on’t./ Who would not write Verses with such an Assistant?”<sup>14</sup> Now I might agree to, and more safely acknowledge than, Seronsy that Swift was quite familiar with Jonson’s works.

Now back to Seronsy’s contention that Sir Pol may be the earliest source for Swift’s scientific and political projector. I have found that not only Jonson’s works may have been well read by Swift but that Sir Pol himself enjoyed an enormous popularity among people during the Civil War and the Restoration period as “a generic one for pretenders to political knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> A certain Daniel Feately attacked the newly established parliamentary newssheet, *Mercurius Britanicus*, in November, 1643, saying that there is no more wit in *Britanicus* than there is policy in Sir Pol:

This might have done well to make your great grandfather laugh in his Trunkes, or to be uttered in galloping rimes by a Vice in a Play, or the Clownes part: The Age is growne more knowing now, would it were as honest too, then to be deluded and gulled with

these mockeries of invention, but as men are given to imitation, as there's some in the State that be politike Wouldbees, so some, and those the more ridiculous, are Witwouldbees too.<sup>16</sup>

As far as Sir Pol is concerned, I agree, on the more concrete basis of this historical evidence, that he might very well be the prototype for Swift's projectors.

Another obvious link between the two writers is that both utilize the concept of "humour" and "vapour." Harold D. Kelling's "*Gulliver's Travels: a Comedy of Humours*," *UTQ*, XXI (1952), though its title is itself suggestive of just such a connection, has not explored the matter sufficiently. In *Every Man in his Humour* Jonson draws metaphorically upon the physiology of his time to create a confluence of humours in his characters that make them "all run one way" and so exposes them as "an image of the times" (Prologue, 1. 23). The function of vapours in *Bartholomew Fayre* is similar and derived from the same source. According to Elizabethan psychology the vapours arise from bilious humours in unnatural heat because of physiological disorder or immoderate passions. The vapours rise, cloud and stupefy the brain and produce madness.<sup>17</sup> Though in Jonson's most limited sense, we must admit, "vapours" is simply a game played by several of the characters in Act IV, a kind of drunken mock quarrel explained marginally by Jonson himself as "*non sense*,"<sup>18</sup> the more general meaning—disposition, conceit, caprice, whim—associates it closely with the older Jonsonian word "humour," for which, in fact, it becomes a substitute in this play.<sup>19</sup> James D. Redwine points out that "humour" or "vapour" refers chiefly to a physiological unbalance, which results in the evil moral condition with man's carnal appetite gaining ascendancy over his reason.<sup>20</sup> This state of mind is depicted by Jonson, inside out.

Swift's vapours are, likewise, responsible for most of the mad, absurd, and hostile actions of mankind. Every species of madness, according to the "Digression" on the subject in *A Tale of a Tub*, "proceeds from a redundancy of vapours":

If the Moderns mean by Madness, only a Disturbance or Transposition of the Brain, by Force of certain Vapours issuing up from lower Faculties; Then has this Madness been the Parent of all those Mighty Revolutions, that have happened in Empire, in Philosophy, and in Religion.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast with Sir Pol's relatively harmless projects, Swift's account of the Laputan scientists is the more realistic, for it is a satire on various experiments reported in *The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*. One political projector has hit upon the ingenious idea of cutting the brains of the statesmen opposing to each other into two equal parts:

then let the Occiputs thus cut off be interchanged, applying each to the Head of his opposite Party-man...: the two half Brains being left to debate the Matter between themselves within the Space of one Scull, would soon come to a good understanding, and produce that Moderation as well as regularity of Thinking, so much to be wished for in the Heads of those, who imagine they came into the World only to watch and govern its Motion.<sup>22</sup>

The Laputan scientist thinks solely of the evil of factions but forgets that if a man's brain is cut into halves, he will die. His experiment is verging on homicide and he is, totally absorbed in his humour of annihilating factions on the motive of public good, mad. Indeed, his humour "works by the apparent and paradoxical abdication of [his] power or willingness to judge normally of things. The judgments that in the present instance [he abdicates] are the ethical ones."<sup>23</sup>

To Swift, such a humour is agreeable but so it is as a satiric weapon:

It is certainly the best Ingredient toward that Kind of Satyre, which is most useful, and gives the least Offence; which instead of lashing, laughs Men 'out of their Follies and Vices.<sup>24</sup>

This association of humour with satire as a social corrective through ridicule may surely have been in Jonson's mind when he proclaims the

aim of his comedy to "sport with human follies, not with crimes" (*Every Man in his Humour*, Prologue, 1. 24). Humour is of English breeding, for no other climate breeds it better as Jonson and William Temple, Swift's patron, testified, though each with a different intention.<sup>25</sup> Swift, it has been assured by Stuart M. Tave, in fact, belongs to the tradition of Jonsonian "Comical Satyre" employing "humour."

In Jonson "humour characters" do not, however, remain so harmless as Seronsy thinks of Sir Pol. In discussing old English humour, T. S. Eliot gives an epithet "savage" to the humour of Jonson, too harsh for Sir Pol and his kinsmen in Jonson's comedies earlier than *Volpone*, and wonders at what point the comedy of humours passes into a serious drama.<sup>27</sup> The catastrophe that befalls the protagonist of *Volpone* has, indeed, worried critics as it evidently worried Jonson himself. Jonson judges it may be too grim for comedy:

And though my *catastrophe* may, in the strict rigour of *comick* law, meet with censure, as turning back to my promise: I desire the learned, and charitable critick to haue so much faith in me, to thinke it was done off industrie: For, with what ease I could haue varied it, neerer his scale (but that I feare to boast my owne faculty) I could here insert. But my speciall ayme being to put the snaffle in their mouths, that crie out, we neuer punish vice in our *enterludes*, &c. I tooke the more liberty; though not without some lines of example, drawne euen in the ancients themselues, the goings out of whose *comoedies* are not alwaies ioyfull, but oft-times, the bawdes, the seruants, the riualls, yea, and the masters are mulcted: and fitly, it being the office of a *comick-Poet*, to imitate iustice, and instruct to life, as well as purities of language, or stirre vp gentle affections.<sup>28</sup>

*Volpone's* life is, in his view, one of rich, lavish self-indulgence in the satisfaction of his carnal appetite, but in another perspective it is, in reality, a kind of living death, as he "faines sicke, despaires" (The Argument, 1. 1). In the medieval and Renaissance vocabulary, "despair" means to be abandoned by God eternally without any hope for salvation.<sup>29</sup> Toward the end of the play *Volpone* is literally forced to deny himself when he forfeits

his complete identity, along with his fortune, by having himself pronounced dead. The theme of *Volpone* is, as it were, as much of an "infinite jest"<sup>30</sup> on death as the Swiftian projector's pursuit is in his experiment. All the characters, including Sir Pol the poll parrot, who mimicks and foils Volpone, are infected with the deadly humour of avarice, abdicating ethical judgments. This sort of world view is just the same as Christopher Marlowe's Mephistophilian perspective, "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it."<sup>31</sup> Here we have a type of drama for which we have no strict definition, where horror and laughter are one and where "the aim of the comic and the tragic dramatist is the same: they are equally serious."<sup>32</sup>

Jonson, however, proves himself able to transcend this jarring picture of man in *Bartholomew Fayre*. It exposes the folly of trying to correct one's fellow men, and thus, in a sense, forms a criticism of Jonson's own earlier comedies in the same way as Swift ridicules the reformer of society as a fool standing on his head in his *Meditation upon a Broomstick*. In this play there are three characters who set themselves up as moralists: Justice Overdo, who comes to the Fair to investigate its "enormities": Waspe, who tries to control his master Cokes, and Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, the fantastic Puritan. Before the play is over, they are all beaten or are put in the stock, or both. Vapours do all the work. Waspe imagines the interior of Cokes's head as a kind of idiot wasteland, "hung with cockleshells, pebbles, fine wheat-strawes, and here and there a chicken's feather, and a cob-wob" (I.v.95-97). When Win-wife proposes to visit the Fair, forecasting "excellent creeping sport," Quarlous agrees: "A man that has but a spoonefull of braine, would think so" (I. v. 141-143). Here the mind becomes something one might measure with a spoon, as Prufrock habitually does.<sup>33</sup> Here the reduction of the spirit to the flesh is complete by means of vapours as in Swift through the mechanical operation of the spirit caused by vapours rising from the lower parts of the body. The satiric technique for using vapours is the same to both writers—a *reductio ad absurdum*, or what Pope calls the art of sinking, necessary and useful for satire. Waspe is the first to realize the limitations of the flesh in man, saying, "I must thinke no longer to raigne, my/gouernment is at an end. He that

will correct another, must/want fault in himself" (V. iv. 98-100). The final advice to Justice Overdo by Quarlous is: "and remember you are but/*Adam*, flesh and blood! you haue your frailty, forget/ your other name of *Ouerdo*, and inuite vs all to supper" (V. vi. 96-98). It is for the archetypal puppet, Cokes, to pronounce the closing words of the play in a holiday ritual manner, which carry the human comedy indefinitely forward into the future: "and bring the *Actors* along, we'll ha' the rest/o' the *Play* at home" (V.vi.114-115). Now in *Bartholomew Fayre*, it can be said, Jonson has gained a kind of moral health through the comic catharsis of compassion on the clay of human limitations. Humours and vapours are symbols of the overwhelming fact of the limiting physical basis of human nature and of the beclouding process that can obscure the awareness of the fact. Jonson's comedy is, in truth, the Renaissance realization of "Imitatio vitae, Speculum consuetudinis, Imago veritatis."<sup>34</sup>

Now Jonson and Swift made use of humours and vapours in the same way and both showed a very serious and deep penetration into, and criticism of, man. However, Jonson's humour could achieve at last maturity and sanity and mellowed into forgiveness and compassion. On the contrary, Swift did not quite come up to that stage of sanity and compassion, though he, likewise, perceived the folly of chastising others in making the Tale Teller, Gulliver, and political and scientific projectors the butts of their own satiric ridicule by adopting the instrument of Jonsonian humours or vapours and by using Sir Pol as one of the sources for his characterization. The purpose of *Gulliver's Travels*, as Swift professes, is "to vex the world rather than divert it,"<sup>35</sup> in place of Jonson's dictum that the poets should mix "utile dulci." The reason for this difference in their attitudes toward the *imago veritatis* perhaps lies in the fact that Swift experienced the aftermath of the sava-geries and blood-shed treacheries of the Civil War. It is no wonder that the epitaph written by Swift himself on his tomb of black marble goes:

Hic depositum est corpus Jonathan Swift huius ecclesiae cathedralis  
decani ubi saeva indignatio cor ulterius lacerare nequit. Abi, viator,  
et imitare, si poteris, strenuum pro virili libertatis vendicem.<sup>36</sup>



## Notes

1. Cecil C. Seronsy, "Sir Politic Would-Be in Laputa," *ELH*, I (1963), 17-24.
2. To name a few: Harold D. Kelling, "Gulliver's Travels: A Comedy of humours," *UTQ*, XXI, No. 4 (July, 1952), 362-374; Edward B. Partridge, *The Broken Compass* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958); S. L. Goldberg, "Folly into Crime: The Catastrophe of *Volpone*," *MLQ*, XX (1959), 233-242; Jonas A. Barish, "Bartholomew Fair and Its Puppets," *MLQ*, XX (1959), 3-17.
3. Ben Jonson, *Volpone, or the Foxe* II. i. 50, in *Ben Jonson*, eds. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-1952), V. 47. All quotations of Jonson are from this edition.
4. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels in The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, eds. Herbert Davis and Irvin Ehrenpreis (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939-1968), XI, 191-192. All quotations of Swift's prose works are from this edition.
5. Seronsy, p. 23.
6. Harold Williams, *Dean Swift's Library* (Cambridge: The university Press, 1932), p. 23.
7. *Ben Jonson*, II, 305.
8. Harold Williams, "A Hue and Cry after Dismal," *RES*, VI (1930), 195-196.
9. Seronsy, p. 18.
10. *Jonathan Swift's Prose Works*, IV, 273.
11. *Ibid.*, XII, 38.
12. *Ben Jonson*, VIII, 74.
13. *Jonathan Swift's Prose Works*, III, 71.
14. Jonathan Swift, *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 76.
15. Gerald E. Bentley, *Shakespeare and Jonson: Their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1945), p. 127.
16. Ernest Sirluck, "Shakespeare and Jonson among the Pamphleteers of the First Civil War: Some Unreported Seventeenth-Century Allusions," *MP*, LIII (1955), 92.
17. Edward Dowden, "Elizabethan Psychology," *Atlantic Monthly*, C (1907), pp. 394-397. Jonas A. Barish, p. 9.
18. *Ben Jonson*, VI, 97. Jonson writes, "Here they continue their game of vapours, which is *non sense*. Euery man to oppose the last man that spoke: whethe[r] it concern'd him, or no."
19. Barish, p. 8.
20. James D. Redwine, "Beyond Psychology: The Moral Basis of Jonson's Theory of Humour Characterization," *ELH*, XXVIII (1961), 330.
21. *Jonathan Swift's Prose Works*, I, 107-108.
22. *Ibid.*, XI, 189.
23. Louis Cazamian, *The Development of English Humour* (Durham, North Carolina: 1952), p. 156.
24. *Jonathan Swift's Prose Works*, XII, 33.

25. Ben Jonson acknowledges, "No climate breeds better matter, for your whore,/ Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more,/Whose manners, now call'd humors, feed the stage," in his "Prologue" to *The Alchemist*, in *Ben Jonson*, V, 294. William Temple is the first to develop the concept of humour as one of the English properties. He asserts that humour is "a Vein natural perhaps to our Country," and "a Word peculiar to our Language too," in his "Of Poetry," in *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J. E. Spingarn (London : Oxford University Press, 1908), III, 103-106.
26. Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humourist* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 116-117.
27. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 157.
28. Ben Jonson, V. 20.
29. Douglas Cole, *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 192-193.
30. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V. i. 203-204.
31. Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* iii. 80.
32. T. S. Eliot, "Shakespearean Criticism: I. From Dryden to Coleridge," in *A Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, eds. H. Granville-Barker and G. B. Harrison (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 302.
33. T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," l. 51, in *Modern American Poetry*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1953), p. 381. The line runs: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons."
34. *Every Man out of his Humour*, in *Ben Jonson*, III, 515.
35. Jonathan Swift, *Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. F. Elrington Ball (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1910), III, 276.
36. Jonathan Swift, *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Padraic Colum (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1967), p. 126.

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