

## The Function of Disguise in Ben Jonson's Comedies

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"What beast is this?" The figure of Sir Pol under the tortois-shell provokes an outcry from the counterfeit mercatoris when he tries to escape the arrest.<sup>1</sup> The metamorphosis lamentably fails in this case, but the idea of "changing of one likeness or shape into another"<sup>2</sup> or disguise implies deception as well as the perversion of the natural order of things. The concept of perversion or deception prevails in Jonson's plays. It ranges from the mere physical change in appearance by clothes, the verbal twist of images by modifiers, up to the distortion of humanity and the commonly accepted religious and ethical values. Strangely enough, however, the characters are made to observe the surfaces of the actions only and from them they try to deduce everything. Brayne-worme's disguise<sup>3</sup> links different episodes and ultimately unties the comic knot of the play. Volpone's famous adoration of gold as his "saint" and "vertue, fame, / Honour, and all things else"<sup>4</sup> sounds blasphemous and sexually perverted only to the audience but not to Volpone himself. A variety of epithets of Dol, Face, and Svbtle are made explicitly pretentious, and the falsehood of their "venter tripartite"<sup>5</sup> would be obvious to their dupes if they were not so blinded by greed. The audience laughs at them and at the same time learns the degree of perversion. Such a clear-cut disparity and such an ironic parallelism between appearance and reality and between words and deeds indicate not only Jonson's talent as a comedy-writer but his profound insight into human follies and vices. Laughter is, indeed, a social corrective,<sup>6</sup> stimulating the human awareness of self and others. Disguise or shifting appearances is given a specific function in his comedies, especially *Every Man in His Humour*, *Volpone*, or *The Foxe*, and *The Alchemist*.

Disguise was, as a matter of fact, a popular dramatic device, used on the English stage during the Renaissance with a remarkable frequency.<sup>7</sup> M. C. Bradbrook and Allardyce Nicoll have pointed out the influences of not only the Continental tradition but the native morality tradition: that is, the disguise device is associated with the vice, whose sole objective is to dupe mankind.<sup>8</sup> This association may have come from the medieval notion that the demons can assume any forms they please and that their natural forms are extremely ugly.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the traditions, the use of disguise enlarges the possibilities of characterization.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, both from the viewpoint of characterization and from that of plot-construction, a character who can take as many faces as he pleases—"the rogue in multi-disguise"<sup>11</sup>—is the most resourceful vehicle for dramatists of Jonson's cast of mind, who want to expose and ridicule vices and follies. The linkage between disguise and the Vice is always enforced in one way or another and the character in disguise in Jonson's plays is described as a failure in observing his "*decorum* or congruity"<sup>12</sup>: as a consequence, such a character is held as morally reprehensible.<sup>13</sup>

What justifies Jonson for creating his characters with shifting appearances, liable to ridicule, is "humour," which has also made his plays misleadingly called works of "the polished veneer"<sup>14</sup> and his characters "the flat-footed dramatic incompetence."<sup>15</sup> Whether or not Jonson adopted the physiological theory of humours to his dramas, so as to render his "Comicall Satyre" a dramatic equivalent for prohibited verse satire,<sup>16</sup> a character in his humour or a character with one "predominating trait"<sup>17</sup> is a convenient weapon for his satirical purposes. His definition of "humour" divides the humour into two kinds—the natural humour and the unnatural humour.<sup>18</sup> Jonson seems to be more concerned with the unnatural or affected humour as the proper object of moral rebuke.

In *Every Man in His Humour* Cob asks, "What is that humour?" Cash answers: "It is a gentleman-like monster, bred, in the speciall gallantrie of our time, by affectation: and fed by folly" (III. iv. 23–5). The humours of medieval physiology connoted proportion and balance in a man's character. If one of the humours was in excess, a man deviated from the normal. In his "Induction" to *Every Man out of His Humour* Jonson presents this humoral unbalance, but it is a natural outcome of the unequal mixture of humours, rather to be pitied. However, here in Cash's statement the dramatist defines the humour as a monster, an unnatural being, which comes of folly and affectation to gallantry. A man in his humour is a fool who pretends to appear what he is not: such a man is preoccupied with his appearance. There arises, then, the violation of decorum or the incongruity between his appearance and reality. The humours must also be fed. The reduction of human psychology to the physical operation of feeding and that of moral values to things in the same proportion now come into existence. Stephen believes that he can learn hawking from a book (I. i. 37–8) and pass for a gentleman by wearing fashionable clothes. His pretentious disposition causes his arrest for stealing Downe-right's cloak full of ruffs. He finally is ordered by Justice Clement to stay in the buttery with Cob and his wife (V. v. 60–3) when others have a wedding-feast in the hall because he cannot throw away his crime like a garment. Kately's jealousy hourly grows more and more monstrous. To him wives' "little caps" (III. iii. 36) are the cause of cuckoldry, and beauty and chastity are treasures "of too good caract" (III. iii. 22) to be left without a guard. At a hint of poisoning he suspects that his wife has poisoned him and instantly gets sick physically and mentally. Excessive paternal cares make a fool of Kno'well. Justice Clement comforts him, saying, "They are like my cap, soone put on, and as soone put off" (III. vii. 85–6). Clement calls for his arms and sword with which to welcome the soldier, Bobadill. At the sight of such a "signe o'the Souldier" (V. v. 49), however, he drops these trappings. The characters constantly delude themselves and they are kept on the string, until Clement's final decree at court, by the skin-deep masquerading of Brayne-worme as Fitz-Sword, Formal, and a City Serjeant. His success in "multi-disguise" intoxicates him: "S'Lid, I cannot choose but laugh, to see myselfe translated thus, from a poore creature to a creator . . . . O, sir, it holds for good politie euer, to haue that outwardly in vilest estimation, that inwardly is most deare to vs. So much, for my borrowed shape" (II.

iv. 1-2 & 5-8). This comment strikes the first recognizable note of the perversion of Christian values through the duplicity of appearance, with the creature pretending to be the creator. Cob's pride in his ancient genealogy descending from the first red herring broiled in Adam and Eve's kitchen, along with the connotation of his very name, a herring's head (I. iv. 14-7), is also the foreshadowing of the later malicious application of animal images to human beings.

As the playwright's manifest purpose of writing this play is "to sport with humane follies, not with crimes" (*Prologue* 24), the audience is genially instructed by Clement as to what a monster humour has made of each character and the comedy ends happily with the wedding-feast for the characters out of their humours and affectations at the Justice's house. At this level, the humours fed by folly and affectation to gentry, the evil of the play, can still be extinguished by "a little puffe of scorne" (I. i. 79).

However, according to the Quarto of 1601, after Matthew's parody of Daniel read by Clement, a terrifying glimpse of a world is inserted: if such a parody be called poetry, then everything else must be "preposterously transchangd" (V. iii. 308). In that world one must "call blasphemie, religion; / Call diuels, Angels; and Sinne, pietie" (V. iii. 305-6). In addition, the rule of such a world is, Kno'well laments, "Get money; still, Get money, Boy; / No matter, by what meanes; Money will doe / More, Boy, then my Lords letter" (II. v. 49-51). The world of shams is also ruled by money. Jonson's declaration that his comedy is "an Image of the times" (*Prologue* 23) is not of a theatrical advertisement but true, assuring us of the establishment of the Capitalist England and the acquisitive attitude of his society described by L. C. Knights.<sup>19</sup> This kind of perversion of the natural grows into the monstrous picture of the reducing of humanity to animals and things in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*.

In the opening scene, Volpone addresses a hymn to his gold, in which gold is transformed into his saint, his permanent mistress, the world's soul. He continues: "The price of soules; euen hell, with thee to boot, / Is made worth heauen!. Thou art vertue, fame, / Honour, and all things else!" (I. i. 24-6). The hymn embodies a new religion in the transchanged world where the metaphysical is measured by the physical, especially gold. The logical end of Volpone's piety is "to confound hell in Elysium."<sup>20</sup> Volpone, indeed, represents "the creation of a world," which T. S. Eliot has dedicated to Jonson's art.<sup>21</sup> To such an aristocratic Machiavellian the mere possession of gold means nothing: his relish is in the power it brings to invert humanity and in the manipulation of fools proselyted into the religion of gold. As the founder of the sect, Volpone even preaches, "What a rare punishment / Is auarice, to it selfe?" (I. iv. 142-3).

The characters have lost their identity as men, seiged by the humour of greed. They visit Volpone, who feigns sickness, expecting his death at every moment in hopes of getting his fortune. Whatever the sources of the legacy-hunting,<sup>22</sup> in the work men feed on men. Each character is ironically and indecorously given an epithet suggesting his animal nature: Volpone the fox, the cunning Machiavellian, Voltore the vulture, Corbaccio the raven, Corvino the crow, Mosca the fly, and Sir Pol the parrot. For

animals to feed on a dying fox is all natural, but for a gentleman to lose his reason and identity as a man and become an animal is quite unnatural. This reduction of man to the lower level is expanded by Nano's song on the transmigration of Pythagoras from Apollo, going down the Great Chain of Being from the god to man, animals, back unto a Puritan, a fool, and finally to an hermaphrodite, Androgyno, the most blessed (I. ii. 6-57). Volpone's misbegotten offspring—Nano, Androgyno, and Castrone—stands for the perverted aspects of Volpone's world and also symbolizes the monstrosity of their father in visual terms. None of them are capable of a normal relationship with the outside world. Nano's song as well as the deformities of these creatures illustrates the equation of the fool with moral and physical deformities.

Volpone's history of the cosmetic, the covering of the rotten inside, goes with the transmutation of Pythagoras. The powder which made Venus a goddess, next, Helen a half-goddess, went down the scale of being to the French ladies for mending their teeth. In wooing Celia, too, Volpone, proud of his power of "multi-disguise," imagines changing shapes in acting "Ovids tales" (III. vii. 221). The confusion of sexes symbolized by Androgyno, Volpone's metamorphoses as Scoto of Mantua, Antinovs, and a commandadore, Lady Wovld-bee's error in thinking that Peregrine is a woman in disguise indicate the kind of abnormality and the deformity of the atmosphere of Volpone's world wavering between beasts and men. Edward B. Partridge has justly contended, in fact, that "[Volpone's] disguises, then, reveal his perverted nature throughout the play."<sup>23</sup>

The inversion of the natural values goes further according to the ethics of gold and the humour of greed. The father is willing to disinherit his son. The husband consents to sell his wife. In proportion to the degree of his greed, Corvino's concept of honour changes. He is somewhat similar to Kately in his humour of jealousy. He feels dishonoured that Celia has shown herself to the mountebank, but blinded by Volpone's gold, he declares, "Honour? tut, a breath" (III. vii. 39), in Falstaff's fashion.<sup>24</sup> To Volpone conscience is "the beggers vertue" (III. vii. 211): hell is a loss of sexual appetite and innocence impotence. To these men honour and virtue are made to seem things that can be put on and put off or that are, like gold the medium of exchange. Celia's being touched by Volpone is like gold being touched and Celia's being looked on by Volpone is like clothes being looked on: neither gets worse. The most serious phase of the perversion is seen in the trials at court. Celia, who never apes or changes and has repudiated Volpone's ethics of gold with Christian morality, is called a jennet and a chameleon. Bonario, who has shattered the sham values with his true evaluation in calling Volpone's gold "this drosse," his house "the den / Of villany," and the fox "the libidinous swine" and the "impostor" (III. vii. 272-274 & 267-268), is called a viper and accused of patricide. Both are labelled adulterous. Thus to fool the court and divert the force of justice upon the innocent youths gives the villain a greater pleasure than the sexual intercourse with Celia (V. ii. 10-1).

The monstrosity of Volpone's world is intricately combined with foolishness. To gain "a rare meale of laughter" (V. ii. 87), Volpone falls into the same folly which he

has been laughing at. He feigns death and thus loses his status, either as a fox or as a Magnifico. Mosca, the outgrowth of Brayne-worme in "malicious intelligence,"<sup>25</sup> has become in love with his dear self and his parts. Taking advantage of Volpone's voluntary loss of status, he betrays him. The real greatness of Volpone who has been extremely unwilling to discover his true self is seen in "vncasing" himself (V. xii. 85) in the final trial scene, to show his inviolable superiority to Mosca and expose the reality of his gullible clients:

I am Volpone, and this is my knaue;  
This his owne knaue; this, auarices foole;  
This, a *Chimaera* of wittall, foole, and knaue. (V. xii. 89-91)

Volpone's punishment permanently fixes upon him the sickness that he has been feigning and his properties are ironically transferred to the *Incurabili*. Mosca is sent to the galleys, being of no birth. Sir Pol and his wife, representatives of humours fed by affectation to be a Volpone and a Venetian courtisan and, consequently, of English folly in comparison with Venetian vice, go home, "melancholique too, or mad" (V. iii. 60), purged of their humours. Voltore is confined to the monastery of *San' Spirito*, while Corvino is ordered to row round Venice, "Wearing a cap, with faire, long asses eares, / In stead of hornes" (V. xii. 130-1 & 135-8). No further tender relation between Bonario and Celia accused like martyrs is suggested. Justice in Venice is quite mild. Yet the most dreaded punishment for Volpone is to expose his real self out of disguise and thus to make his appearance become one with his reality. He is revealed, robbed of his fortune, and thus mortified! (V. xii. 125). Venetian justice, frankly speaking, is as corrupt as the people they try. Voltore the lawyer changes his testimonies again and again. The fourth avocatore is ready to give his daughter to Mosca if he proves to be the heir to Volpone and if he is not legally persecuted. The first avocatore wonders: "These possesse wealth, as sicke men possesse feuers, / Which, trulyer, may be said to possesse them" (V. xii. 101-2). None of the characters, who affect to be beasts, seized by the humour of greed, are capable of recognizing what is true and what they really are. Affectation is, in fact, equated by Plato with self-ignorance or loss of identity,<sup>26</sup> while ignorance is in Jonson's view "a pernicious *evill*: the darkner of mans life: the disturber of his *Reason*, and common Confounder of *Truth*."<sup>27</sup> The surface of the action, the mere presence of the couch, the furs of the fox, and the caps convince the legacy-hunters that Volpone is dying. The deceptiveness of appearance—the "multi-disguise" of Volpone and Mosca—twists all the surfaces to their own profits and pleasures. In such a perverted world there exists its own rule: "Mischiefes feed / Like beasts, till they be fat, and then they bleed" (V. xii. 150-1). After the first court hearing the monsters begin to bleed. Volpone's left leg has a cramp and he feels "a dead palsey" (V. i. 7) attacking him. He who wants to be "a sharpe disease vnto" others (V. iii. 117) has now one to himself. Disease imagery in *Volpone* is always associated with folly and affectation—self-ignorance and loss of identity. Volpone's inner emptiness is "vn-masqu'd" (III. vii. 278) and his surface becomes one with his reality because it is all there is in him. The natural biological process of fattening and bleeding

of non-rational beasts, not the law of man's devising, restores order and justice.

Volpone's ethics, the worship of gold as a god, an eternal mistress, the elixir of life, and business are embodied in alchemy. In *The Alchemist* Sir Epicure Mammon believes that gold can transform the commonwealth into a "*nouo orbe*" (II. i. 2). The visions of illimitable wealth, perpetual youth, and love with the philosopher's stone give him a gorgeous dream. His lordly talk is "all in gold" (IV. i. 25). He boasts, "Siluer I care not for" (IV. i. 4), and he will build a commonwealth of gold, "fright the plague / Out o'the kingdome, in three months" (II. i. 69-70), and transform old men into Marses. His "happy word" is "*be rich*" (II. i. 7). In his excessive humour of avarice and lust, however, he gradually deviates from the normal human perspective. On the argument of food he is splendid yet his delicacies are hardly eatable: the tongues of carps, dormice and camels' heels in the dishes of agate with spoons of amber. For clothes he wants "gloues of fishes, and birds-skins, perfum'd / With gummes of *paradise*, and easterne aire" (II. ii. 93-4), all of which are so stinking to be treasured. He is not only sensual but perverse and hellish. He will have a harem like Solomon's and in his oval room he will walk "Naked betweene my *succubae*" (II. ii. 47-8), who are said to suck human blood. His baths will be "like pits / To fall into" (II. ii. 50-1), which certainly reminds the audience of the pit of fire in hell. He wishes to cuckold a good citizen by robbing him of his "sublim'd pure wife" (II. ii. 55) and have "the pure, and grauest of Diuines" (II. ii. 60) as his flatterers. He has a treatise penned by Adam on the philosopher's stone in High Duth, and also "a peece of Iasons fleece/Which was no other, then a booke of *alchemie*" (II. i. 89-90). In him there is an undistinguishable blending of lies and honesty as well as of the classical and Christian worlds, for his first name is of a Greek origin and his second of the Christian tradition. Both, however, are connected with materialism, lust, and greed, and both are condensed into one modern caption, "Be rich." The visions of splendor are completely illusions created by the impostors in the mind of the dupe, less substantial than Volpone's morning hymn to his gold. It is Svrly's role to pull down this Quixotic dream to the plague-stricken reality with "The decay'd *Vestall's* of *Pickt-hatch*" (II. i. 62), the "confederate knaues, and bawdes, and whores" (II. iii. 248), disguised as the "*venter tripartite*," and "a pretty kind of game, / Somewhat like tricks o'the cards, to cheat a man" (II. iii. 180-1) on the pretense of alchemy.

In the light of such splendid visions, Svbtle justly claims that he has "*sublim'd*," "*exalted*," and "*fix'd*" a man in the "*third region*, call'd our *state of grace*" (I. i. 68-9). In other words, the alchemist (Svbtle) becomes a bathetic imitation of the Creator, and religious values are measured by physical scales. Svbtle manipulates the alchemic jargon in disguise of the Christian terminology. The religion of gold or alchemy has its Trinity. Svbtle tells Mammon: "Bright Sol is in his *robe*. / We haue a med'cine of the triple *Soule*, / The *glorified spirit*" (II. iii. 29-31). Face also explains of the philosopher's stone: "'Tis a *stone*, and not / A *stone*: a *spirit*, a *soule*, and a *body*" (II. v. 40-1). The colour of the baser metals in the alchemic process changes: the colour of the last stage is "the sanguis agni" (II. ii. 28), which is associated with Christ's blood. The Puritans,

Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome, act as figures of special significance. "They stand not merely for hypocrisy, but for acquisition with a good conscience."<sup>28</sup> Ananias, whose name reminds even Svbtle of the false Christian "That cossend the Apostles!" (II. v. 73),<sup>29</sup> introduces himself as "a faithfull Brother" (II. v. 7) and Tribulation as a "very zealous Pastor" (II. v. 48). To them the "Casting of dollers is concluded lawfull" (IV. vii. 43) because the dissenters "know no Magistrate" (III. ii. 150) and the elixir, gold, can cure the ills of the world. Dapper's "Fly," his guardian angel (a spider, in reality) only in gamling, must be fed on his right wrist once a week, for which Dapper the gull, has been cheated of all he had by the cozeners who pinched him, "*Titi, titi, titi, titi*" (III. v. 35), until he gave up all his money. Dapper believes in it, without a single bit of suspicion, in his humour of avarice. The god of gold needs such ignorant men to devour and invert the law, and alchemy is, indeed, related to religion, medicine, sex, and business.

Now, to do so tremendous a "venter" as to transmute men, the impostors must assume some authority. They achieve this with a variety of epithets, the use of alchemic jargon, and disguises. Ieremie, the butler of Lovewit, has taken advantage of the plague and his master's refuge in the country and organized the "venter *tripartite*" with Svbtle and Dol until on Love-Wit's return he formally "Determines the *indenture tripartite*" (V. iv. 131). In their temporary residence of business their epithets develop as the alchemical experiment progresses: the base metals, such as a whore, a pander, a quack, are constantly elevated into finer metals—the "*Queene of Faerie*," the "*republique*" (I. i. 110), the "*Douer pire*" (III. iii. 19); Captain Face, a general, the "precious king / Of present wits" (V. iv. 14); a divine instructor, the "Priest of Faery" (III. v), a *Favstus*, and a man who "will thunder [men], in peeces" (I. i. 60). Finally the elevation ends, as the experiment is blown up *in fumo* (IV. v. 58), in a return to the original state of base metals—Svbtle's "flitter-mouse" (V. iv. 88), a rogue, and a cur. The epithets, political, martial, and religious, envelop the cozeners in some authority and expose their reality out of their "multi-disguise." There is such an indecorous disparity between the characters and their actions and languages in a mock-heroic fashion that it shocks the audience into laughter who see through their skin-deep transmutation by means of clothes and epithets. The most ridiculous incongruity between appearance and reality lies in the mock love-scene between the "Don of *Spaine*" (III. iii. 10), Svrly in disguise, and Dol. It is described as the don's "battray / Vpon [their] Dol" (III. iii. 17–8). She asks, "How fares our campe?" (III. iii. 33). She is advised by Face to kiss him "like a scallop, close" (III. iii. 69). Svbtle's amorous worship of alchemy, superior to nature in manufacturing gold out of the "*hermaphroditie*" (II. iii. 164) of female sulphur and male mercury, is confirmed by its daily practice in "[begetting] bees, hornets, beetles, waspes, / Out of the carcasses, and dung of creatures" (II. iii. 172–3). The art is, however, comically crashed down by Svrly's definition: "*Alchemie* is a pretty kind of game, / Somewhat like tricks o'the cards, to cheat a man / With charming" (II. ii. 180–2). The elixir is, also, defined by Ananias as "a worke of darknesse, / And, with *Philosophie*, blinds the eyes of man" (III. i. 9–10).

The dupes are so completely alchemized and blinded by the religion of gold and lust that nobody unmasks the rascals disguised by clothes and their change of visors in such a small house. As in the first trial at court in *Volpone*, even in the scene where Svrly discovers their tricks, it is Svrly himself that is defeated by Kastril because Face has told him that Svrly has abused his sister, and by Ananias because his ruff of pride in his disguise makes him look like "a *Spanish* fiend" (IV. vii. 57) and his "leud hat" an "*Antichrist*" (IV. vii. 55). Dame Pliant, too, cannot distinguish one man from another simply because both Svrly and Love-Wit wear Spanish clothes. Mammon's erotic intercourse with Dol gives her accomplices an excuse for blowing up the works because the stone must be used for pious purposes only. Mammon dutifully repents: "O my voluptuous mind! I am iustly punish'd" (IV. v. 74). Furthermore, intimidated by Love-Wit that he should prove the goods in the cellar his own "by publique meanes" (V. v. 67), "the king of *Bantam*" (II. iii. 320) some time before sadly confesses that the commonwealth has lost the hope for a new London and that he "will goe mount a turnep-cart, and preach / The end o'the world, within these two months" (V. v. 81-2).

Face the wittiest alone has tided over the comic reversal of fortune and is pardoned by Love-Wit for his wit. Svbtile and Dol run away: the fools are fooled. Ieremie, Captain Face, the pander, Lungs, Zephyrus, Ulen Spiegel, the Spanish don, and always the general and the king of the commonwealth of fools and dupes—Face is the one that the neighbors cannot detect through his metamorphoses as Ieremie because he has not actually existed except appearances. Edward B. Partridge says of him: "In one sense Face alone remains what he was—that is, nothing in himself, but living only in the disguises or 'faces' which he assumes."<sup>30</sup> Love-Wit takes Face's place both as the husband of Dame Pliant and as the manipulator of the dupes. He is no judge of the rascals in the sense that he takes the same Spanish disguise as Face and Svrly have done so as to marry the rich widow, and that he declares the absolute possession of all the goods in the cellar, cozened from Mammon by Ieremie and his company. However, he is the legal owner of the house and without labour or cozenage of alchemy he acquires "such happiness" (V. v. 47)—riches and youth in his rich "yong wife" and the "good braine" of his servant (V. v. 155).

All the characters are fools and knaves to the end, indeed. In spite of their tragic reversal they remain monsters ready to pervert the natural. We feel as Svbtile does toward Face: "To deceiue him / Is no deceit, but iustice" (V. iv. 102-3). We cannot pity Mammon because of his dreams of inverted splendor and his easy lying in order to gratify his lust. Through the ironic contrast and juxtaposition of appearance with reality, and of words with deeds, we learn that there is a limit to the Faustian aspiration as well as the gap between the ugly reality of the plague raging and the promised riches and perpetual youth. Not to see it is foolish. "To bee a foole borne, is a disease incurable" (*Volpone, or The Foxe* II. ii. 159): we laugh at the dupes' gullible avarice and enjoy the witty management of them by the cozeners.

The justice of the play is scarcely working. Some critics have been troubled by such an *unpoetic* justice.<sup>31</sup> Edward B. Partridge analyzes Face's last plea to the audience



for applause in terms of a horrible perspective where more of the same hoax and cozenage is still to continue.<sup>32</sup> Face addresses to the audience in the epilogue of the play:

And though I am cleane  
Got off, from Svbtile, Svrly, Mammon, Dol,  
Hot Ananias, Dapper, Drvgger, all  
With whom I traded; yet I put my selfe  
On you, that are my countrey: and this pelfe,  
Which I haue got, if you doe quit me, rests  
To feast you often, and inuite new ghests. (V. v. 159-165)

Such an appeal declares that the audience is Face's "countrey," in the legal sense of "jury," and his "nation to be exploited."<sup>33</sup> His invitation of "new ghests" to a feast of his "pelfe," in the pejorative sense of "refuse," proves that Face is "the refuse of society"<sup>34</sup> and that Face the businessman is keeping "a sharp eye on those (=the audience) with whom he will trade in the future."<sup>35</sup> Partridge, thus, demonstrates, as Alvin Kernan has claimed, that "there is no sense of a better and more stable society having evolved."<sup>36</sup>

Now, while laughing we are shocked into the revelation that we are ourselves sharing the punishment of being labelled fools and knaves. The irony is more harsh than that of an ordinary satire in which "*Beholders do generally discover every body's Face but their Own*,"<sup>37</sup> for we discover that we are no longer spectators but involved in the very folly acted on the stage. To gain this culminating moral effect of his attack on human follies and vices which nobody escapes, Jonson has been busy measuring and exploring that vital gap between appearance and reality, until this last revelation, where the dividing line between the two is blown up "*in fumo*."

Primarily, the comic stage presents *imitatio veri* or an illusion of the life that the audience is experiencing, but the world of Jonson's comedy is so "preposterously trans-changed" that it appears at some comic distance from the audience's world and that the audience watches the action with a completely objective detachment, for Jonson has inverted the commonly accepted values and provided with the inverted ones the world that he has dramatically created. The technical basis of the twist is humours, the unbalanced presentation of human qualities and moral infirmities outdoing reason and causing the loss of self, which in the Christian theology is regarded as evil<sup>38</sup> and ridiculous "*sub specie eternitatis*."<sup>39</sup> Humours are, of necessity, defined as ugly monsters, the deviation from the natural to the extent that they affect to appear what they are not. Disguise is necessary to mask their inner moral emptiness. In the Jonsonian monsters "the surface is the reality, because that is all there is."<sup>40</sup> Jonson's humours are, in fact, a ready formula for exploring the degree of perversion of decorum and the natural and the incongruity between appearance and reality and between words and deeds, so as to keep his plays within the bounds of comedy. When the characters remain mere humours, they are relatively harmless like Kno'well, Kitely, and Sir Pol, but when Volpone's religion of gold creeps in, they become vices "about cure" ("Prologve," *The Alchemist* 14).

Now, "the world's turn'd Bet'lem" (*The Alchemist* V. iii. 56). The primum mobile of the universe is gold. With gold hell becomes Elysium and the god sucks the living blood. Wherever the appearance is the reality, everything human is safely and indecorously dragged to the material and animal levels. Virtues are compared to things. Kno'well's paternal "cares" are likened to a cap, so Corbaccio easily puts it off and disinherits his son. In Kitley's jealousy chastity is precious goods of "too good caract," so in Corvino it does not become worse for being touched. Brayne-worme's metamorphosis, which ultimately gulls the ignorant into the denouement, is metamorphosed into "the rogues in multi-disguise" in Mosca, Face and his company. Humourists in greed commit the sin, in the theological sense, of losing their controlling reason and as a consequence their "deare selfe." Now that they have had no identity, they must mimic and disguise themselves into another form: they imitate animals. The vulture, the crow, the raven and even the parrot hover over the dying fox. The fox, in turn, feeds on their gullible avarice and enjoys "a rare meale of laughter" out of it. The metamorphosis of men is paralleled with the metamorphosis of metals in alchemy. The alchemist becomes the creator of the "*nouo orbe*," his pseudo-science a travesty of the Christian doctrine. The Puritans accept the inverted religion of gold "with a good conscience" on the pretense that gold can cure the ills of mankind. Both the humourists and their project have no reality underneath their disguises. It is only natural that both are blown up "*in fumo*" and nothing remains except the "pelfe" or "the refuse of society" in Love-Wit's possession. The characters in their humour surmise all out of the skin-deep surfaces of lies and disguises by means of clothes, epithets, and verbal twists. Even the innocent Bonario and Celia, who never disguise, and Svrly are defeated without any investigation further than the surface of slanders. Disguise, then, is important for characterization and plot-construction, for in Jonson's view of such an alchemized world only appearance counts and such tender emotions as love, pity, and sympathy are quite out of place. The dramatist keeps his interest more in what can be observed than in psychological analysis.<sup>41</sup> Jonson's kind of humour, indeed, deprives us of our "willingness to judge normally of things,"<sup>42</sup> and we watch the discomfiture of the humour characters without any emotional involvement.

Strictly confining the characters and their actions within the realm of humours, the dramatist suffers them to create the logic and law of their own perverted world: that is, "To bee a foole borne, is a disease incurable," and "To deceiue him / Is no deceit, but iustice." Follies and moral monstrosities are inevitably equated;<sup>43</sup> "the rogues in multi-disguise" are rampant, competing with one another along the "hierarchy of malicious intelligence." When things have gone to excess, the comic natural selection begins to work. The biological process of animals' fattening and bleeding restores the justice of Volpone's Venice. The mere return of Love-Wit, the owner of the "trans-changd" world, changes the craze for the philosopher's stone into the sordid reality of the plague-stricken house in London. Nobody reforms. Face, the wittiest, is allowed to survive. Justice at this stage, indeed, is hardly seen working. It has certainly come from the author's view of life as a Ship of Fools where vices and follies among men

seem constantly to expose their inner aridity. Jonson, as a result, makes the evil look ridiculous, rather than praise the good. Jonson seems to affirm the ideal world by ridiculing the imperfect and the monstrous.<sup>44</sup> For that purpose he makes plain the degree of perversion from the natural and decorum by the exaggerated exposure of the incongruity between the ideal and reality. What a falling off from the Apollo of the Golden Age to Androgynio! What a dwindling race of Tamburlaine, Barabas, Faustus, and Mephistophilis we find in Mammon, Volpone, Svbtile, and Face!

The dramatic effect of the author's irony and the final judgment, then, are dependent upon the awareness of the degree of incongruity by the audience. The rhetorical speech used in Jonson's plays is the language of the life as he saw it. It is the language of lies and pretenses. We are constantly required to inquire into the reality beneath the disguised surfaces with our standard ethics, "What beast is this?" until our esthetic distance, our comic detachment, along with our sense of superiority to the characters on the stage, are mercilessly blown away at "a puffe of scorne" at the well-calculated moment. Jonson, the staunch adherent of the Renaissance didactic tradition,<sup>45</sup> insinuates, in fact, that we are of the same nation as the fools and knaves on the stage, deviating from the God-given cosmic order in our lack of not only reason but "deare self" if we are unable to manage our humours within.<sup>46</sup> When we realize that for Jonson all affectation is evil, we can see that the real object of his satiric attack is neither the perversion of human values nor the "Get money . . . / No matter, by what meanes" attitude, of his age, but rather the negation of one's self by pretending to appear what one is not and by adopting disguises. In this sense disguise in Jonson is always symbolical of the loss of self and the violation of decorum, and consequently, hypocrisy and evil. Jonson dramatizes the vicious cycle of humour in five-act plays—the loss of self, disguise, deception, defeat and the public unmasking of inner emptiness. Indeed, the author's treatment of his creations and us, human beings in general, "the beast, the multitude,"<sup>47</sup> is rarely warm.

In this light Jonson's dislocated world soaked in humours gives a new and appalling insight into the actual world occupied by affectation and the acquisitiveness for gold. Evil is everywhere in the form of fools and knaves, affecting to appear what they are not. At the *imitatio veri* of such endless incongruities we may well say with Marlowe that "where we are is hell / And where hell is there must we ever be"<sup>48</sup> and that Jonson's plays should no longer be regarded as "of the polished veneer" nor his *dramatis personae* two-dimensional "flat-footed dramatic incompetence."

#### NOTES

1. Ben Jonson, *Volpone, or The Foxe*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1937), V, 120. All quotations from Jonson's works are from this edition.
2. John Florio, *Queen Anna's New World of Words 1611* (Menston, England: The Scholar Press, 1968), p. 311.
3. Brayne-worme is a character in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*, in *Ben Jonson*, III.

4. *Volpone, or The Foxe*, in *Ben Jonson*, V, 24–25.
5. *The Alchemist*, in *Ben Jonson*, V, 300.
6. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1937), p. 17.
7. M. C. Bradbrook discusses the use and popularity of disguise on the Elizabethan stage in her *The Growth and Structure of Elizabethan Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 86–93.
8. Bradbrook, p. 86: Allardyce Nicoll, *British Drama* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), p. 54.
9. Thomas Wright, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1968), p. 61. Cf. Faustus orders Mephistophilis to change his shape, in Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*: “I charge thee to return and change thy shape: Thou art too ugly to attend on me” (iii. 26–27).
10. Bradbrook, p. 88.
11. Victor O. Freeburg, *Disguise Plots in Elizabethan Drama: A Study in Stage Tradition* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1965), p. 4.
12. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, *The Man and his Work*, prefixed to *Ben Jonson*, I, 337.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 339–342.
14. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), p. 148.
15. Edmund Wilson, *The Triple Thinkers: Twelve Essays on Literary Subjects* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 216.
16. Oscar James Campbell, *Comical Satyre and Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida* (San Marino, California, 1965), pp. 1–2.
17. Herford and Simpson, *Ben Jonson*, I, 340.
18. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, *Ben Jonson*, IX, 395.
19. L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), pp. 200–227.
20. Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* iii. 63.
21. Eliot, p. 156.
22. Herford and Simpson, *Ben Jonson*, IX, 678.
23. Edward B. Partridge, “The Symbolism of Clothes in Jonson's Last Plays,” *JEGP*, LVI (1957), 396.
24. William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry IV*, ed. A. R. Humphreys (London: Methuen, 1960), pp. 145–146.
25. Paul Goodman, “Comic Plots: *The Alchemist*,” in *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jonas A. Barish (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 110.
26. Plato, *Philebus*, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 333–337.
27. *Ben Jonson*, VIII, 588.
28. Knights, p. 209.
29. *Acts* 5: 1–6. Ananias is a hypocrite who sold property, but kept back some of the proceeds and gave a part of its value to the apostles for the church. At Peter's rebuke he fell down and died.
30. Edward B. Partridge, *The Broken Compass: A Study of the Major Comedies of Ben Jonson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), p. 118.
31. Elizabeth Woodbridge Morris, *Studies in Jonson's Comedy* (New York: Lamson Wolfe, 1898), 29: John J. Enck, *Jonson and the Comic Truth* (Madison, Milwaukee: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 168.
32. Partridge, *The Broken Compass*, pp. 155–156.
33. Herford and Simpson, *Ben Jonson*, X, 116. Partridge's analysis uses the double meaning of “countrey.”

34. Partridge, *The Broken Compass*, pp. 155–156.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 154–155.
36. Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1976), p. 190.
37. Jonathan Swift, "The Preface of the Author," to *A Full and True Account of the Battel Fought Last Friday, Between the Antient and the Modern Books in St. James's Library*, in *The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Basil Balckwell, 1965), I, 140.
38. Thomas Aquinas, "How things imitate the Divine Goodness," in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, in *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, ed. The Reverend Father M. C. D'Arcy. Everyman's Library (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1950), p. 94.
39. Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1966), p. 239.
40. Jonas A. Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 107.
41. John Dryden, "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," in *The Best of Dryden*, ed. Louis I. Bredvold (New York: The Ronald Press, 1933), p. 434. Dryden says of Jonson: "You seldom find him making love in any of his scenes, or endeavouring to move the passions: his genius was too sullen and saturnine to do it gracefully, especially when he knew he came after those who had performed both to such an height."
42. Louis Cazamian, *The Development of English Humor* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1952), p. 156.
43. The Old Testament makes little or no distinction between fools and knaves: both are sinners. *Proverbs* 9:13, 12:15 & *Leviticus* 5:17.
44. James Feibleman, *In Praise of Comedy: A Study in Its Theory and Practice* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), pp. 178–179.
45. Charles Read Baskerville, *English Elements in Jonson's Early Comedy* (New York: Gordian Press, 1967), p. 31.
46. James D. Redwine Jr., "Beyond Psychology: The Moral Basis of Jonson's Theory of Humour Characterization," *ELH*, XXVIII (1961), pp. 320–321. Redwine, here, contends: "Jonson's humour characters are conceived as responsible free agents, not somapsychotic automatons.... To call Jonson's theory of humours a "psychology" is to risk serious misunderstanding.... And to liken 'humour' to 'neurosis'...is to compound the danger, since it is precisely because he misuses his reason and free will that a man gets himself into this or that darkling humour and that he is considered by Jonson to be morally responsible for his sad predicament."
47. *Ben Jonson*, VIII, 644.
48. *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* v. 122–123.

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