

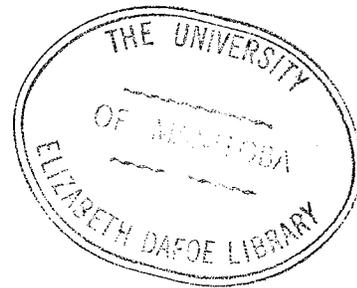
THE RENAISSANCE CODE OF THE GENTLEMAN
IN THE POETRY OF BEN JONSON

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Darrell B. Lynch
September 1969

c Darrell B. Lynch 1969.



ABSTRACT

In his study, Complaint & Satire in Early English Literature,

John Potter writes:

What matters about Jonson's comedy of humours is his firm grasp of the notion of eccentricity which implies the measurement of everyone against a natural norm; and his social instinct in linking this notion with comedy which is society's most effective weapon against the contrary and anarchical tendencies of human nature.¹

This thesis attempts to show that the norm which may be said to have governed Jonson's moral point of view was largely traditional and based on the same understanding of virtue that governed the thought and writings of his Renaissance predecessors. I have made little or no attempt to set forth or delineate the philosophical systems which may have been the basis for his a priori assumptions regarding the nature of goodness as others have already explored this question. Rather, I have tried to show through an examination of his poetry, that Jonson was a practical moralist concerned with reforming society along lines already well established and widely adopted.

¹John Potter, Complaint & Satire in Early English Literature (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 24.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii

Chapter

I. JONSON AND THE RENAISSANCE CONCEPT OF
THE POET 1

II. BEN JONSON'S CLASSICISM 9

III. THE CODE OF THE GENTLEMAN 16

IV. BEN JONSON AND THE RENAISSANCE CODE
OF THE GENTLEMAN 24

BIBLIOGRAPHY iv

CHAPTER I

JONSON AND THE RENAISSANCE CONCEPT OF THE POET

There is little doubt that the didactic view of poetry was paramount in the minds of sixteenth century writers. Although many critics have argued that the aesthetic interest was uppermost, to do so they have had to ignore much of what was written to the contrary at this time or argue that these writers were merely defending themselves against puritanical attacks on their vocation. But the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. Sixteenth century theories regarding the nature of art were derived principally from the classics, especially the writings of Horace who

supplied the Renaissance with so many of its critical precepts, especially the mixture of utile and dulce. And one cannot pass by those deities of the Renaissance, Cicero and Quintillian, who said that the great orator—for posterity that meant the poet as well—must first of all be a good man.¹

In addition, the tradition of Christian Humanism had a long history in England which had entrenched these ideas in the minds of its spokesmen. Perhaps the most influential of these humanists who may be said to have given impetus and direction to the English humanists of the sixteenth century was Erasmus. In the following statement Erasmus sums up succinctly the a priori assumptions which could be said to have provided the justification

¹Douglas Bush, The Renaissance and English Humanism, (London: University of Toronto Press, 1939), p.46.

for most of the writers of this period.

I affirm that, as the instinct of the dog is to hunt, of the bird to fly, of the horse to gallop, so the natural bent of man is to philosophy and right conduct. As every creature most readily learns that for which he is created, therefore will man, with but slight effort, be brought to follow that to which nature has given him so strong an instinct, namely excellence, but on one condition: that nature be reinforced by the wise energy of the educator. . . . What is the proper nature of man? Surely it is to live the life of reason, for reason is the peculiar prerogative of man.²

It is in the role of educator—especially moral educator—that most poets found their raison d'être. Sidney in his The Defence of Poesy, writes "Poesy, therefore, is the art of imitation, . . . a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight."³ And Jonson himself sums up all the dogma and tradition of his precursors both classical and Renaissance in his preface to Volpone:

. . . For if man will impartially and not a'squint, looke toward the offices, and function of a Poet, they will easily conclude to themselues, the impossibility of any mans being the good Poet, without first being a good man. He that is said to be able to informe yong-men to all good disciplines, inflame growne-men to all great virtues, keepe old men in their best and supreme state, or as they decline to childhood recouer them to their first strength; that comes forth the interpreter, and arbiter of nature, a teacher of things diuine, no lesse then humane, a master in manners; and can alone, (or with a few) effect the business of mankinde: this, I take him, is no subject for pride,⁴ and ignorance to excercise their rayling rhetorique vpon.⁴

²Quoted in Douglas Bush, The Renaissance and English Humanism, p.6'

³Sir Phillip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," Tudor Poetry and Prose, ed. by J.W. Hebel, H.H. Hudson, F.R. Johnson, A.W. Green, R. Hoopes. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953), p.806.

⁴C.N. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson (eds.), Ben Jonson Vol. V, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 17.

In this statement, indeed, Jonson comes close to the position that Sidney had assumed which granted to the poet the power of seeing beyond the illusory fabric presented by the senses and reason to the divine order instituted by God.

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of nature; but rather give right honour to the heavenly maker of that maker, who, having made man to his own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature; which in nothing he showed so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath, he bringeth things forth surpassing her doing with no small arguements to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam; since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it.⁵

As E.M.W. Tillyard points out, we find in this quotation a blending of the two great traditions which informed much of the thinking of Renaissance poets—Platonism and Christianity.⁶

Further evidence for Jonson's adherence to Sidney's view of the poet as inspired is to be found in his "Ode to Himself."

Where do'st thou carelesse lie
 Buried in ease and sloth?
 Knowledge, that sleepes, doth die;
 And this Securitie,
 It is the common Moath,
 That eats on wits, and Arts, and destroyes them both.

Are all the Aonian springs
 Dri'd up? lyes Thespia wast?
 Doth Clarius Harp want strings,
 That not a nymph now sings!
 Or droop they as disgrac't,
 To see their Seats and Bowers by chattring Pies defac't?

⁵Sir Phillip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," p. 806.

⁶E.M.W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture, (London: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 33-34.

If Hence thy silence be,
 As 'tis too just a cause;
 Let this thought quicken thee,
 Minds that are great and free,
 Should not on fortune pause,
 'Tis crowne enough to vertue still, her owne applause.

What though the greedie Frie
 Be taken with false Baytes
 Of worded Balladrie,
 And thinke it Poesie,
 They die with their conceits,
 And only pitious scorne, upon their folly waites.

Then take in hand thy Lyre,
 Strike in the proper straine,
 With Japhets lyne, aspire
Sols Chariot for new fire,
 To give the world againe:
 Who aided him, will thee, the issue of Joves braine.

And since our Daintie age,
 Cannot indure reproofe.
 Make not thyself a Page,
 To that strumpet the Stage,
 But sing high and aloofe,
 Safe from the wolves black jaw, and the dull Asses hoofe.
 (Under-wood No. 25)

The whole theme and subject of the poem, Jonson's repudiation of his own negligence and his determination to continue writing, suggests his sense of the great dignity of the poet, while the line "Aspire, Sols chariot for new fire to give the world againe" reflects Sidney's description of the poet as vates or prophet, inspired by God. In addition the general tone of the poem is aristocratic, or rather, very disdainful of the "common Moath" and may be taken to imply his concern to speak to those more likely to understand his "new fire"—the

⁷All quotations from the poems of Jonson are taken from The Complete Poetry of Ben Jonson, edited by William B. Hunter, Jr. (New York: New York University Press, 1963). Line numbers, where necessary, are indicated in brackets, as above.

aristocracy.

Much of what he had to say to the aristocracy is to be found in his minor poems where, according to Robert Bell:

. . . we must look for him as he lived, felt and thought. Here his express qualities are fully brought out; his close study of the classics, his piety and principles, and profound knowledge of mankind; his accurate observation and his strong common sense.⁸

These poems are for the most part either panegyrics or satires and consequently lend themselves very readily to a didactic purpose. As most of the chapter will concern itself with these poems it would be advisable to show how Jonson related them to his poetic theories. With respect to bestowing honours or praise, he had this to say:

When a virtuous man is rais'd, it brings gladnesse to his friends; grieffe to his enimies, and glory to his posterity. Nay his honours are a greater part of the honour of the times: when by this meanes he is growne to active men, an example, to the sloathful, a spurre, to the envious, a Punishment.⁹

Similar sentiments are to be found in the poems themselves. When he finds himself in the awkward position of having praised a man too much and therefore exposed himself to the charge of sycophancy he argues as follows:

Who e're is rai'd,
For worth he is not, He is tax'd not prais'd.
(Epigramme LXV, ll. 15-16)

⁸Ben Jonson, Poetical Works of Ben Jonson, edited with a memoir by Robert Bell (London: Charles Griffen & Co.), p. 23.

⁹Ben Jonson, Discoveries, p. 51.

At another point, however, he gives an entirely different
 reason for overpraising some men.

I have oft preferred
 Men, past their termes, and prais'd some names too much,
 But 'twas with purpose to have made them such.

(Under-wood 16. 11. 20-22)

Whatever the motive for his overpraising, these quotations reveal a man seriously concerned to justify himself on moral grounds. His biographers without exception have all argued, on the basis of his writings and his frequent courageous disregard for his own safety and interests, that he cannot with any justice be accused of sycophancy, so we should be able to accept the above quotations as sincere expressions of his own attitudes.

With respect to his satiric verse Jonson had this to say:

If men by no means write freely, or speake truth, but when it offends not; why doe Physicians cure with sharpe medicines, or corrosives? Is not the same equally lawful in the cure of the minde, that is in the cure of the body? Some vices (you will say) are soe foule, that it is better they should bee done, then spoken. But they that take offence where no Name, Character, or Signature doth blazon them, seeme to mee like affected women; who, if they heare any thing ill spoken of their Sexe, are presently mov'd as if the contumely respected their particular: and on the contrary, when they heare good of good women, conclude, that it belongs to them all.¹⁰

The metaphor of the satirists as physician which he uses here occurs in many critical statements of the Renaissance regarding satire. The portrayal of the satirists as one who cures

¹⁰Ben Jonson, Discoveries, p. 88.

the mind of vice reveals the moral basis which is fundamental to his poetic theory. A second instance of this point of view is to be found in the prologue to The Silent Woman:

The ends of all, who for the Scene doe write,
 Are, or should be, to profit, and delight.
 And still't hath beene the praise of all best times,
 So persons were not touch'd, to taxe the crimes.¹¹

He was so insistent on the dignity of the poet and his moral function that he prefaced his collection of epigrams with the poem "To My Booke" wherein he makes very clear that these poems are not written to enhance his reputation nor to gain praise, but for a serious moral purpose.

It will be look'd for, booke, when some but see
 Thy title, Epigrammes, and nam'd of mee,
 Thou should'st be bold, licentious, full of gall,
 Wormewood, and sulphure, sharpe and tooth'd withall;
 Become a petulant thing, hurle inke, and wit,
 As mad-men stones; not caring whom they hit.
 Deceive their malice, who could wish it so.
 And by thy wiser temper, let men know
 Thou are not covetous of least self fame,
 Made from the hazard of another's shame:
 Much lesse with lewd, prophane, and beastly phrase,
 To catch the worlds loose laughter, or vaine gaze.
 He that departs with his owne honesty
 For vulgar praise, doth it too dearely buy.
 (Epigrammes II)

From the foregoing it should be apparent that Jonson's basic assumptions regarding the function of the poet were not antithetical to the didactic tradition that had been adopted by many poets of the Renaissance. Douglas Bush in his study

¹¹Herford and Simpson, Ben Jonson Vol. 5, p.164.

The Renaissance and English Humanism aptly sums up the position of the poets of this period;

In a word, most Greek and Roman literature rests on the belief that a serious author is a moral teacher. In the Middle Ages that belief was, of course greatly fortified by Christianity, and if it was sometimes held with painful literalness, as it often has been since, it was also held by Dante. The Renaissance inherited the Christianized Didactic tradition of the Middle Ages and gave it an added strength derived from fuller knowledge, admiration, and understanding of the ancients.¹²

¹²Douglas Bush, The Renaissance and English Humanism, p. 46.

CHAPTER II

BEN JONSON'S CLASSICISM

The moralist is not only a teacher, he is also an observer. He is not required to formulate an ethical system based upon philosophic assumptions as to the nature of the good, nor is he required to interpret revelation. Rather, his task is to observe what is good or evil in man and "render the one lov'd, the other hated, by his proper embattling them."¹ The moral writings of Jonson are based not only on his wide reading but also on his observation of actual men; thus his moral ideal is not an abstract ideal but a description of what can be. That is not to say that the men Jonson praises were perfect, nor that Jonson thought they were. Jonson was a classicist in the finest sense of the term. Governing all his observations and writings is a sense of proportion and an awareness of human limitations.

Jonson's classicism does not consist simply in his wide reading of the classics nor in the fact that much of his work is based on classical models. Rather, it is to be seen in the point of view he reveals in his poetry. Hiram Haydn defines the

¹Ben Jonson, Timber or Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter, ed. by F. Schilling (Boston, Ginn & Co., 1892), p. 42.

true classicist as:

a man and artist who finds it possible to accept without misgivings the authority and discipline of a fixed order and rules because he believes in the essential congruence and relatedness of the ideal and the empirically actual—that which should be and that which is.

.
 . . . it is a question of rooting the ideal in the actual and motivating the actual by the ideal—in any case, the classicist recognizes the relation as a direct and certain one, and fixes upon that recognition his aesthetic as well as his moral, philosophical or religious creed.²

The ideal for Jonson, the code of the gentleman evolved by the sixteenth century moralists, places him in the tradition of Christian Humanists (those Christian moralists and philosophers who incorporated pagan philosophies into their thought), which extends from Thomas Aquinas to John Milton.³ Although he may be said to be more of a classicist than a Christian in his writings, his classicism does not in any way negate or contradict his Christianity.⁴

²Hiram Haydn, The Counter-Renaissance (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1960), p. 15.

³Ibid., p. 17.

⁴None of the panegyrics or satires quoted deal with the Christian Theological virtues because they are not concerned with religious themes. In those poems which are concerned with religious themes, it is apparent that, to Jonson, religion was an intensely personal question. They reveal a man very much concerned with his salvation in the role of a penitent. George Burke Johnston, in his study of Ben Jonson's poetry (Ben Jonson: Poet, New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), has pointed out that where Jonson is not speaking personally as a penitent, "all, or nearly all, the religious pieces are addressed to women or are in elegies praising dead women or girls" (p. 67). Because of this, and because this thesis is concerned with the code of the gentleman in the Renaissance, these poems will not be discussed. However, it should be pointed out that Jonson's secular morality,

A distinctive feature of Jonson's classical point of view involves what L.C. Knights calls a double or dual attitude towards life. To illustrate this dualism Knights refers to Volpone's wooing of Caela, in which he promises her great magnificence. The audience could both revel in this luxurious description and, at the same time, recognize it as evil when judged by fundamental human or divine standards.⁵ Knights attributes this double attitude to the fundamental awareness of the cultural and moral inheritance of the English people:

The strength of this attitude is realized if we compare it with the puritanic disapproval of 'the world' on the one hand, or a sensuous abandonment on the other. It is the possession of this attitude that makes Jonson 'classical' not his Greek and Latin erudition. His classicism is an equanimity and assurance that springs—'here at home'—from the strength of a native tradition.⁶

Somewhere between these two extremes of "disapproval of the world" and "a sensuous abandonment" lies the reasonable approach to life. Thus the fundamental criterion in judging acts is a sense of proportion, a consciousness of a mean between two extremes. But Jonson did not have to spell out this mean or proportion for his readers; he portrayed his characters vividly, secure in the knowledge that his audience would recognize the virtuous.

as revealed in the poetry discussed, is not in any way incompatible with Christianity, and, as the religious poetry reveals, Jonson was deeply concerned with his faith.

⁵L.C. Knights, "Tradition and Ben Jonson," Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by James A. Barish (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 30.

⁶Ibid.

Perhaps the best illustration of this moderate and reasonable point of view is to be seen in those poems which concern themselves with physical or sensual pleasures. In his epigram "Inviting a Friend to Supper" he deals at great length with the pleasures of the table.

It is the faire acceptance, Sir, creates
 The entertaynement perfect; not the cates.
 Yet shall you have, to rectifie your palate,
 An olive, capers, or some better sallade
 Ushring the mutton; with a short-leg'hen,
 If we can get her, full of eggs, and then,
 Limons, and wine for sauce: to these, a coney
 Is not to be despair'd of, for our money;
 And, though fowle, now, be scarce, yet there are clarkes,
 The skie not falling, thinke we may have larkes.
 Ile tell you of more, and lye, so you will come:
 Of partrich, pheasant, wood-cock, of which some
 May yet be there; and godwit, if we can:
 Knat, raile, and ruffe too. How so ere, my man
 Shall reade a piece of Virgil, Tacitus,
Livie, or of some better booke to us,
 Of which wee'll speake our minds, amidst our meate;
 And Ile professe no verses to repeate:
 To this, if ought appeare, which I know not of,
 That will the pastrie, not my paper, show of.
 Digestive cheese, and fruit there sure will bee;
 But that, which most doth take my Muse, and mee,
 Is^a pure cup of rich Canary-wine,
 Which is the Mermaids, now, but shall be mine:
 Of which had Horace, or Anacreon tasted,
 Their lives, as doe their lines, till now had lasted.
 (ll. 7-32)

While he obviously delights in the sensual enjoyment of the pleasures he is depicting, he is careful to insert a significant qualification at the end of this rich description in the line: "Of this we will sup free, but moderately" (l. 35).

Although he does not present this in the form of a moral injunction, he does give it some added emphasis with the internal rhyme which is rare in Jonson. On the other hand, he has many