

Misogyny or Misanthropy?
The doubtful case of Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*

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Resumo

Como o seu título sugere, a comédia de Ben Jonson *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman* põe uma ênfase crucial na identidade e comportamento das mulheres: As personagens femininas são satirizadas como corporizações verbosas da falsidade e da depravação, e como agentes de uma ânsia de poder tão “monstruosa” quanto incompetentemente manifestada. Mas o fracasso na obtenção de um valor normativo é também conspícuo nas personagens masculinas - expostas como maridos subjugados e (portanto) *contra natura*, como tolos impotentes e cobardes, ou como tratantes cruéis e amorais (mesmo se bem-sucedidos nos propósitos que os movem na acção). Os desígnios da sátira misógina diluem-se assim numa acusação mais universal, quando não na contrapartida benevolente da misantropia - ou seja, na atitude exculpatória e de relativização moral que se deixa reconhecer como característica de uma fase mais tardia da comédia jonsoniana.

Abstract

As its title suggests, Ben Jonson's comedy *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman* lays a crucial emphasis on women's identity and behaviour. Women in this play are satirized both as voluble embodiments of falsehood or depravity and as the agents of a 'monstrous' and incompetently pursued will to power. But male characters also conspicuously fail to take on a normative status - as they are found to be either 'unnatural' hen-pecked husbands, impotent and cowardly fools, or sadistic and amoral (though triumphant) rogues. The design of misogynous satire is thus diluted with a more universal indictment, or else with misanthropy's benevolent counterpart - a shoulder-shrugging moral relativism which can be recognised as a hallmark of later Jonsonian comedy.

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Last week I saw a Woman flay'd, and you
will hardly believe, how much it altered
her person for the worse. (Swift 1965: 109)

This is a famous passage from *A Tale of a Tub* - not from Ben Jonson's play with that title, but rather from Jonathan Swift's homonymous and much better-known prose satire. It is one of many instances of the use of litotes in the self-characterization of a pedantically insensitive, ironic persona. It reminds us of how often Swift's satires take on a not always ironical misogynous bent. But it is also an instance of the grotesque when endowed with a direction and a purpose: that of providing shocking reminders of the lowly and death-bound nature of the body, thus effecting a deflation of pretensions and vanities. And that is a purpose and a strategy which greatly contributed to the reputation of both Swift and Ben Jonson as satirists, and to often bringing them together in critical consideration.

As far as the grotesque in Jonson's comedies is concerned, however, it is true that in recent years a somewhat different emphasis has come to dominate critical attention: a predominantly Bakhtinian focus on how grotesque imagery can promote an ambivalent celebration both of life and death, of desire and disgust, in the service of a basically permissive *ethos* - the *ethos* proper to the patterns of festivity of late medieval and early modern Europe, some of whose forms would be retrieved and recreated in Renaissance drama. The consequences for Jonsonian criticism of this now well-known argument have been at their most visible in the reappraisal and revaluation of *Bartholomew Fair* as, possibly, the play in which Jonson the satirist experiences and acknowledges a reconciliation with the benevolent implications of comedy - and also as the most significant recreation in comedy of the forms of a disappearing festive culture (Teague 1985: passim; Creaser 1994: 112; Haynes 1992: 119ff). This is a viewpoint which has rescued *Bartholomew Fair* from a certain amount of critical neglect and from some charges of structural slackness, and allowed it to be hailed instead as Jonson's masterpiece; a viewpoint which has made it tempting to read Jonson's entire work retrospectively as a progression from satiric bitterness to comic benevolence - the resting point being precisely the physically, socially and morally open space of the Fair.

Although I have no wish to quarrel with this view of Jonson's comedy - which, indeed, I have advocated elsewhere (Carvalho Homem 1995) - it seems to me there is the risk both of turning it into a simplistic critical teleology, and also, in the name of the greater attraction we may culturally feel for the permissive stance, of undervaluing the dramatic and rhetorical vitality of plays in which satiric acerbity predominates. After all, even in *Bartholomew Fair* the satiric perspective coexists with the comic drive, finding some of its more obvious targets - as always in city comedy, Jonsonian or otherwise - in the upstart citizens of London who bring their ridiculously inflated ambitions and pretensions to the Fair.

Four years before *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), Jonson had dealt with such characters in their own milieu - the most obvious contrast to the openness of

the Fair - as the context for the plot of *Epicoene*. In a move which would allow *Epicoene* to be read as a forerunner of certain aspects of Restoration comedy, and possibly, in the words of Jonathan Haynes, 'the beginning of the comedy of manners' (Haynes 1992: 91), Jonson had set his plot within the narrow physical confines of a house in London, matched by the social and intellectual narrowness of a somewhat obscure, and in some cases less than legitimate gentry.

Amid the upstart characters is Mrs Otter, maybe the most notorious for her unsubstantiated social pretensions, and for the way in which she seems to epitomise the qualities Jonson persistently satirises; she will be the object of a memorable description, in several passages of Act IV, scene 2, following some general invective against wives:

Wives are nasty sluttish *animalls*. (...) A wife is a scurvy *clogdogdo*; an unlucky thing, a very foresaid beare-whelp, without any good fashion or breeding: *mala bestia*. (...)

Shee has a breath worse than my grand-mothers, *profecto*. (...) And she has a perruke, that's like a pound of hempe, made vp in shoo-thrids. (...) a most vile face! and yet shee spends me fortie pound a yeere in *mercury* and hogs-bones. All her teeth were made i'the *Blacke-Friers*: both her eye-browes i'the *Strand*, and her haire in *Siluer-street*. Euery part o'the towne ownes a peece of her. (...) She takes her selfe asunder still when she goes to bed, into some twentie boxes; and about next day noone is put together againe, like a great *Germane* clocke: and so comes forth and rings a tedious larum to the whole house, and then is quiet againe for an houre, but for her quarters. (Herford and Simpson 1937: IV-2: 56, 74-6, 83-4, 88-9, 91-5, 97-101)⁽¹⁾

Thus Captain Otter, hen-pecked husband to such a wife. Stimulated by drink, Otter, whose former occupation in the Bear Garden is repeatedly evoked in the bear-baiting images he employs, is made to decry his formidable wife in these terms - a wife who will promptly beat him before the same on-stage audience that had made Otter drunk and had secretly brought Mrs Otter to overhear this exposure.

It may, of course, be said that this scene contains many elements that could make it part of Mikhail Bakhtin's 'grotesque realism' (Bakhtin 1970: passim). The animal imagery which Otter employs both in the quoted passages and elsewhere consistently represents the 'fatness of the body', deriving, moreover, from bear-baiting, a characteristically festive activity; the very name of the

⁽¹⁾ Hereafter cited by act, scene and line references.

Otters evokes such references, and adds to them a sense of ambivalence which the description of Captain Otter as '*animal amphibium*' (I-4:26) had already made clear. The beating of a husband - a familiar instance of the *topos* of *mundus inversus* (Lafond et Redondo 1979: passim) - greeted, as it is, by laughter and derision, could also be read as part of the inversions of power proper to festive licence⁽²⁾. And the outrageous similes and metaphors in Otter's description of his wife's body could easily be taken to evoke the risible insults of the market-place on feast days, the element of invective, of attack, being qualified by its insertion in the whole celebrative design.

A closer look at this passage and its implications reveals, however, that festivity can in Otter's description be upstaged by the forms of what Bakhtin calls 'the modern grotesque', that which historically happens when communal and celebrative gluttony is superseded by individual, egocentric acquisitiveness, and when in the verbal forms of the grotesque revulsion is no longer balanced by desire, or debasement by fruition - in short, when life is overcome by the energies of death (Bakhtine 1970: 30ff, 240-1). That Mrs Otter, despite her efforts at flirtation, cannot become an object of desire, is to some extent confirmed by the young gallant Truewit's rejection of her favours when, listening in the wings to her husband's 'slander' of her bad breath, she encourages Truewit to disprove it with a kiss (IV-2:85-7). But the crucial element is the description of the body as a fake, as a compound of loose parts: if in the ambivalent, regenerative grotesque the body as living matter - and particularly the female body - overflows its boundaries to mix with the world, in a great **organic** fusion, in Otter's words his wife's body indeed belongs to the whole town - but rather as a great **mechanical** monster, contributed to by many different craftsmen to produce a poor mimicry of life, youth and beauty.

The daily bringing together of the 'great *Germane* clock', as an instance of the itemisation of the parts of a body, is one of the strategies of representation described as most characteristic of the grotesque in Neil Rhodes's classical study of such forms (Rhodes 1980: 20) - as well as an example of what Henri Bergson would call '*une certaine raideur de mécanique*', '[une] mécanisation de la vie', the body rendered awkwardly and repetitively mechanical as a characteristic source of laughter (Bergson 1963: 392, 435). But, also, Otter's description is only one of the most immediately laughable occurrences in *Epicoe* of a persistent misogynous *topos*, elsewhere brought up in a more earnest tone: female cosmetics. Its importance for this play, as the realization in the female body of the broader theme of fraud and deceitful appearances, is signalled by the fact that the play virtually opens with a long dialogue in which Clerimont (one of the young gallants) gives voice to his disgust at women's oils and face

⁽²⁾ Besides Bakhtin's fundamental study, see also Laroque 1979: passim.

paintings, their wigs and perfumes, advocating 'simplicitie' against 'th'adulteries of art' (I-1: 98, 101). His friend Truewit takes the opposite perspective - not that the attribution of such practices to women be slanderous, but rather that, nature **and women** being as they are, 'the helpe of art' (I-1:121) should never be dispensed with, 'to mend breath, clense teeth, repaire eye-browes, [and] paint' (I-1:110). The point of agreement between the two gallants is indeed that with women, as in the lines Clerimont sings on the occasion, 'All is not sweet, all is not sound' (I-1:96).

This note will be rung in several passages throughout the play, some of which glossing misogynous invective in classical sources such as Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and Juvenal's *VI Satire* - which, in the manifold legacies converging in Jacobean literary culture, could be combined with popular ballads and pamphlets denouncing female cosmetics as an outward projection of moral impropriety and, indeed, as an art of the devil⁽³⁾. Jonson's treatment of women in the other genres he cultivated would often bring cosmetics together with moral failings, as in 'A Satyricall Shrub', poem no.XX in his collection *The Underwood*, which began with an ironical apology -

A Womans friendship! God whom I trust in,
Forgive me this one foolish deadly sin

- and ended in invective:

I could forgive her being proud! a whore!
Perjur'd! and painted! if she were no more -,
But she is such, as she might, yet, forestall
The Divell; and be the damning of us all.
(Herford and Simpson 1947: 171-2)

And in *Discoveries*, his collection of commonplaces, Jonson would comment:

now nothing is good that is naturall: (...) Cloath of
Bodkin, or Tissue, must be imbrodered; as if no face
were faire, that were not pouldred, or painted? (...)
Nothing is fashionable, till it bee deform'd
(Herford and Simpson 1947: ll. 575-6, 579-80, 582)⁽⁴⁾

In *Epicoeone*, the women directly in question in Truewit's and Clerimont's remarks are introduced as

⁽³⁾ For Elizabethan/Jacobean views on cosmetics, see Marshburn and Velie 1973: 176-93.

⁽⁴⁾ Hereafter cited as *Discoveries*, followed by line numbers.

TRV. (...) A new foundation, sir, here i' the towne, of ladies, that call themselues the Collegiates, an order betweene courtiers, and country-madames, that liue from their husbands; and giue entertainment to all the *Wits*, and *Braueries* o' the time, as they call 'hem: crie downe, or vp, what they like, or dislike in a braine, or a fashion, with most masculine, or rather *hermaphroditicall* authoritie: and, euery day, gaine to their colledge some new probationer.

CLE. Who is the President?

TRV. The graue, and youthfull matron, the lady HAUGHTY.

CLE. A poxe of her autumnall face, her peec'd beautie: there's no man can bee admitted till shee be ready, now adaies, till shee has painted, and perfum'd, and wash'd, and scour'd, but the boy here; and him shee wipes her oil'd lips vpon, like a sponge.
I-1: 73-89

From the outset, fraud in external appearance comes together with a more general practice of deceit in the characterisation of these would-be, avant-la-lettre bluestockings. Their '*hermaphroditicall* authoritie' helps spread the sexually ambivalent implications of the play's title, *Epicoene*, in a direction which is that of power: the name applies to them (besides being the supposed name of another character) because they claim traditionally male prerogatives - the power to move and speak freely, to live away from home and husband, to pronounce on matters of taste, and so assume the (in the historical context of this play ever-increasing) authority of **fashion** (Haynes 1992: 51ff).

This libertarian *ethos* could once more suggest festive inversion, the sway of misrule, stressing the element of celebration in the play - but, again, a second reading will severely question that possibility. Instead of being placed on the side of a counter-culture, of an anti-official and anti-institutional drive which for Bakhtin is the cultural and political core of pre-modern festive traditions, the Collegiates institutionalise their position, which they want to keep exclusive and privileged - there is no levelling and no communal sharing here - in the same way that Mrs Otter will remind her husband of how a marriage contract had from the outset established, by a formal legal 'instrument', that she 'would bee Princesse' and he an obedient subject in their household (III-1:33-5). As to the power to rule over fashion, the Collegiates' coalition 'betweene courtiers, and country-madames' carries the suggestion of rural manners aspiring to sophistication, of a less than successful fashionableness - to be fully confirmed

later in the play by their blunt assertion of their social and sexual greed, and by the fact that the *'Wits, and Braueries'* they surround themselves with have such revealing names as Jack Daw and Amorous La-Foole, with qualities of mind to match. Characters who, together with the Collegiates, impudently claim the authority and the wit to pass judgment on any authors or themes, and revealingly so when decrying those in Jonson's classical pantheon (II-3:45ff). In word and deed, the Collegiates and their followers could be said, as the character satirised in one of Jonson's epigrams, to 'in an Epicoene fury/ (...) / Make State, Religion, Bawdrie, all a theame' (Herford and Simpson 1947: 222).

The satiric denunciation of these women in the text and plot of *Epicoene* will thus comprise their full exposure as husband-beaters, lustful hags, and abortionists (IV-3 *passim*). Their names are as revealing as any in Jonson - Haughty, Centaure, Mavis (the latter probably derived from Italian 'Malviso' - Holdsworth 1979: 5). As to the 'female' character from whom the play gets its title, the sense of sexual ambiguity in 'her' name is meant to be explained by the play's second title, *The Silent Woman* - to be understood as a risible paradox, a less than talkative woman being agreed, in the terms of this play, to be a freak of nature. The character Epicoene will prove, nonetheless, to be well-mannered and pleasantly fluent - only to be exposed, at the very end, as a boy in disguise...

With such a gallery of female characters, and pronouncements that universalize their qualities - as in Truewit's loud invective against wives and marriage in Act II, scene 2 - all the elements seem to be in place for judgment to be passed on Jonson as the great misogynist - a status which could rival in disrepute the long-established critical commonplace of Jonson as the paradigm of the pedantic Classicist⁽⁵⁾. And yet - allow me at this point to revert (or, in chronological terms, to fast-forward) to the Swiftian epigraph I departed from, a passage I deliberately quoted only in its potentially misogynous part, which is followed by this:

Yesterday I ordered the Carcass of a *Beau* to be stript in my Presence; when we were all amazed to find so many unsuspected Faults under one Suit of Cloaths: Then I laid open his *Brain*, his *Heart*, and his *Spleen*; But, I plainly perceived at every Operation, that the farther we proceeded, we found the Defects encrease upon us in Number and Bulk (Swift 1965: 109-10)

When taken in its full length, the point of this passage, which can be read as an allegory of the satirist's procedures in his anatomising of vice and weakness, becomes obvious in its basically misanthropic direction, thus putting in per-

⁽⁵⁾ On the presence in Epicoene of all the *topoi* of misogynous satire, see Bamborough 1970: 94; on Jonson's reputation as pedant, see Haynes 1992: 1.

spective what, removed from its context, would be a strictly misogynous outburst. Something similar happens with a passage from Jonson's *Discoveries* - and with the use I have put it to; after lamenting the powdering and painting of women's faces, Jonson proceeds:

All must bee as affected, and preposterous as our Gallants
cloathes, sweet bags, and night-dressings: in which you would
thinke our men lay in, like *Ladies*: it is so curious. (*Discoveries*
583-6)

As to *Epicoene*, the negative characterisation of women might lead us to expect some normative value to be allocated to the male characters. In fact, the men in the play are little better characterised. If we exclude the foolish, ignorant and cowardly Jack Daw and Amorous La-Foole, who are socially discredited by the end of the play; the servants and other menial characters; and Morosé, the most obvious target of verbal satire and physical victimisation, an unbalanced, pathological character who could have escaped from one of Jonson's earlier 'humour' plays - if we exclude these, we are left with the gallants. It is true they do triumph at the end, in terms of the formal arrangement of the plot, and their names are a conventional indication of both social and intellectual distinction - names meant to identify the 'winners', both in Jacobean and, later in the century, in Restoration comedy: Truewit, Clerimont (probably 'an echo of French *clairement*'), and Dauphine Eugenie (the 'well-born heir' - Holdsworth 1979: 4). The French resonance of these two names, however, with the implications Frenchified behaviour usually has in English Renaissance drama (as also in Jonson's Epigram LXXXVIII, 'On English Monsieur' - Herford and Simpson 1947: 56), can already point to aspects of characterisation which will to an important extent ironize the position of these young gallants as the would-be arbiters, and spokesmen for the audience, in the dramatic, social, moral and intellectual rhetoric of *Epicoene*.

After all, the play opens with Clerimont immersed in the details of his *toilette*, the futility, hedonism and debauchery of his way of life being promptly remarked on by his friend Truewit:

Why, here's the man can melt away his time, and neuer feeles
it! what, betweene his mistris abroad, and his engle at home, high
fare, soft lodging, fine clothes, and his fiddle; hee thinkes the
houres ha' no wings, or the day no post-horse. I-1:23-7

On Clerimont's question - 'Why, what should a man doe?' (I-1:32) - Truewit will provide an answer which, ironically, expands this model of behaviour to include the habits of spendthrifts and rakes - while acknowledging himself to be part of such a social scene:

These be the things, wherein your fashionable men exercise
themselves, and I for companie. I-1:39-41

This preliminary self-characterisation will inevitably qualify the gallants' authority to denounce patterns of female behaviour which directly correspond to (and make possible) Truewit and Clerimont's way of life; and the opening scene, with Clerimont neatly preparing himself for the day in the company of his ambiguous page, will also inevitably be recalled when the Collegiates will declare their disgust with men who

CEN. (...) haue their faces set in a brake!

HAV. I, and haue euery haire in forme!

MAV. That weare purer linnen then our selues, and professe more
neatnesse, then the *french hermaphrodite*! IV:6:28-31

Furthermore, these gallants' way of life is shown to be plagued by that sense of the unacknowledgment of one's merit which is the recognizable mark of the malcontent type - 'great men will not looke vpon vs, nor be at leisure to giue our affaires such dispatch, as wee expect' (I-1:58-60). This perception entails a quest for material rewards which in *Epicoene* finds its obvious realization in Dauphine Eugenie's stratagems to secure access to his uncle Morose's wealth. Morally more disturbing, however, than Dauphine's cool undertaking or acceptance of any actions necessary to further his ambitions is the dimension of enjoyment which, secondary only to material success, Dauphine acknowledges in the tormenting of his uncle: as he answers Truewit's sadistic suggestions, once it does not collide with his material purposes, 'I am for you: for any deuise of vexation' (II-6:22-3). He will not only consent but also take an active part in the baiting of the phonophobic Morose with all kinds of noise - which Clerimont will describe in the same scene as 'an excellent *comædy* of affliction' (II-6:36-7). Dauphine's final remarks to his uncle, after he agrees to give him a pension and make him his heir, are also a paradigm of selfishness:

I'll not trouble you, till you trouble me with your funerall,
which I care not how soone it come. V-4:215-17

Judgment on Dauphine's selfish cruelty will not remain implicit in *Epicoene*: when Truewit scares the fools out of their wits with the (faked) prospect of a duel, and so much so that one of them accepts giving up an arm as satisfaction (anything but having to fight), Dauphine's advice to Truewit is revealing: 'Take it, by all meanes' (IV-5:134) - eliciting no less than Truewit's own shocked remark:

How! Maime a man for euer, for a iest? what a conscience
hast thou? IV-5:135-6

It will be no accident that Dauphine's answer -

'Tis no losse to him: he has no employment for his armes, but
to eat spoone-meat. Beside, as good maime his body as his reputa-
tion. IV-5:137-9

- based on a cool and cavalier assessment of ability and functionality, and ending on a rather shallowly delivered commonplace, will not effectively counter the note of shock and spontaneity which had been obvious in Truewit's exclamation - a remark which, moreover, had questioned Dauphine's moral stature, though produced by the major agent of harassment in the play...

Passages such as this, while bringing out the 'spirit of sadistic glee' which, in the words of R.V.Holdsworth, characterize the gallants' 'punitive manoeuvres' (Holdsworth 1989: 775), bring to evidence 'the element of moral equivocation' (Haynes 1992: 90) in the play, the already suggested lack in *Epicoene* of 'an embodied positive' (Creaser 1994: 112), and support Zvi Jagendorf's statement that '*Epicoene* is an unpleasant play', largely dominated by *Schadenfreude* (Jagendorf 1985: 59) - a view which directly opposes C.H.Herford and Percy Simpson's contention that *Epicoene* would be an instance of Jonson's 'capacity and disposition for pure fun', sounding a '*gaudeamus igitur note*' (Herford and Simpson 1925: 73-4). The difference between the promoters and the butts of derision is gradually found to be of the nature of dramatic functionality and practical cleverness - a difference signified in degree rather than quality. A judgment passed by Truewit on the Collegiates could become ironically applicable to the gallants, in the passages now considered:

they haue a naturall inclination swayes 'hem generally to the
worst, when they are left to themselues. IV-6:69-70

And the general misanthropic drive of such a statement, when universalized in context as it is in *Epicoene*, will make it possible for this paper to end as it began - with a famous passage from Swift, in which the great satirist-as-misanthrope, in a statement emblematic of his attitude to mankind, finds it in himself to love individuals - 'John, Peter, Thomas and so forth' - but, mistrustful of any efforts at reform, cannot avoid to 'hate and detest that animal called man' (Sherburn 1956: 325).

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