

JONSON'S IRREDEEMABLE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Critics seem generally to agree that Jonson's **Bartholomew Fair** differs in its morality from his other comedies. It is claimed that it concerns itself with "the mere follies" of society, and that it does not rise to the high moral attitudes adopted in Jonson's other comedies. Critics support this view by referring to the "Induction to the play" which says that this play is "made to delight all and offend none".

Critics often consider the ending of **Bartholomew Fair** as a deviation from the strict morality usually adopted by Jonson, because the moral problem is left unsolved.

This paper refutes such views and proposes that **Bartholomew Fair** does not differ from Jonson's other dramas either in its outlook on society or in its hope of reform. It may even be said that it has a more positive attitude towards society in spite of the apparent lack of strict morality and of able executives of such morality.

Critics seem to agree that **Bartholomew Fair** is different in its morality from Jonson's other comedies. "According to most of the critics," A.C. Dessen says, "Jonson here is concerned with 'the mere follies of the fair,' not with 'improved moral studies' or 'extreme moral issues.'" He then goes on to say that "according to this interpretation, Jonson is here relinquishing his characteristic moral position in favour of an indulgent attitude towards 'irredeemable human weakness'..."¹

Obviously, there is in this play an apparent relaxation of the strict morality that characterizes most of Jonson's plays. It is my task in this essay to find out, as far as I can, how much or little this play differs in morality from others of his dramas.

It is my proposition that this play is not very different from Jonson's other plays in its view of society and hopes for reform. It might seem too big a claim to say that **Bartholomew Fair** has, in a way, a healthier outlook towards the future despite its apparent lack of strict morality and able executives of this morality. Notwithstanding the apparent loose ending (in the moral rather than the artistic sense) which most people seem to object to, the play essentially adopts a moral position similar to the one found in his other plays.

Another major charge that has been levelled against the play and that supports the "irredeemable society" argument is that the play is a compromise with public taste, that it is "made to delight all, and offend none"; "yet if puppets will please anybody, they shall be entreated to come in" (Induction to the play, ll. 1. 135-6).² In the process of refuting such arguments, I will look into the nature of this "irredeemable society."

This society consists of several irredeemable characters who, strangely enough, include among them men of authority. The controllers of this society are outright knaves and fools. It is shocking to see, and I quote Dessen again, that "The objects of his [Jonson's] satiric wrath become not the rogues and fools who inhabit that world but rather the reformers or kill-joys who attempt to change it or control it."³

The Fair, which is a microcosm of the real world, is so full of cheating and dirty dealing that it urgently calls for efficient justices to restore peace and order. The shock comes when we first see what kind of authority we have. It is not so much for the behavior of Ursula, Edgeworth, Knockem, Whit that we should express much concern, for they exist in every society, but for the freedom they have been allowed. Our criticism would, therefore, be shifted to those people who are responsible for order. The chief men of authority are a fool (Justice Overdo), a hypocrite (Busy) and a lunatic (Wasp).

Justice Overdo disguises himself as a madman and goes to the Fair in order to discover its "enormity," but in the process he makes a series of foolish errors and misapprehensions. Although he mistrusts his spies - "a foolish constable, or a sleepy watchman, is all our information" (ll.i, 30-1) - he himself is led astray by what he hears.

Believing Mooncalf, he mistakes the cutpurse Edgeworth for "a civil young gentleman" (II. iv. 22). In II. iii. he concludes from the conversation between Ursula and Knockem that the latter is a cutpurse, only to change his mind when Mooncalf denies it. This early exposure of the Justice as a fool gives us little hope that he can be any better when put to work. Another equally appalling weakness that appears is the Justice's vanity, which starts with his disguise and ends with his enumeration of the "enormities": "Look upon me, O London! and see me, O Smithfield! the example of justice and Mirror of Magistrates..." (V. vi. 33-5).

Within his family circle, Overdo does not seem to be just when he hands over his ward, Grace, to his brother-in-law, the fool Cokes. She expresses her hatred of and contempt for Cokes and gets rid of him at the first opportunity, when Winwife and Quarlous express an interest in her.

Notwithstanding his blindness, Overdo is not the worst representative of authority, although he can never, perhaps, make a good Justice. In contrast, Busy and Wasp have passed redemption. Wasp's irrationality makes him unfit for the post he holds as the guardian of Cokes. Furthermore, it disqualified him for any natural human communion. In this respect, he may differ little from Troubleall, the madman. When he starts talking about his relationship with Cokes, Littlewit interrupts him with "They do apprehend, sir." Wasp replies "Pardon me, sir, neither they nor you can apprehend me yet" (I. iv. 66-7).

Unlike the natural fools, Busy is "a notable hypocritical vermin" (I. iii. 133-4). He is, in H.W. Baum's words, "a full-length study of the hypocritical Puritan."⁴ Before we meet him we learn of his love for food and we can hardly mistake his vicious character for that of the humorous food lovers that sometimes inhabit drama. Littlewit "found him fast by the teeth i' the cold turkey-pie, i' the cupboard, with a great white loaf on his left hand, and a glass of malmsey on his right" (I. Vi. 32-5). He might very well represent the corrupt lawgiver as Overdo represents the corrupt legal executive. Busy modifies the law to suit the desires of his people, whose reward is his primary aim. He is bereft of moral conviction and dissimulates so well that few people take him for what he really is. His deception is so great that at one moment he himself seems to believe it. While in the stocks, he keeps up his perfect pretense and expresses the feelings of a martyr. He is "one that rejoiceth in his affliction, and sitteth here to prophesy the destruction of Fairs and May-gangs, Wakes and Whitsun-ales, and doeth sigh and

groan for the reformation of the abuses" (IV. vi. 82-5). What makes things worse is the fact that he stands, or is meant to stand, for a whole sect - the Puritans. Jonson thus calls attention through him to widespread evil in the great society outside the Fair. By means of the debasement of Busy, particularly in his argument with the puppet Dionysius, Jonson lets fall a curse upon all whom he represents and taints their ideals as well.

In keeping with this spirit of debasement (the Fair itself being the debased world), the puppet play shows the degeneration of common sense in low popular taste. Jonson himself held this form of entertainment in no better esteem than ballads, jigs and dances. High literature, if one may call it so, is reduced to such a low level to satisfy the degenerate audience whom Cokes represents. The puppet play reduces the romantic story to a fight for a "whore." The language itself reflects this debasement; it is redolent with terms like "whore," "knave," "whore-master," and "goose" and "gander" instead of "angel."

These then are the main elements that would probably make the Fair an irredeemable society. However, one may wonder how different this society is from some of Jonson's other ones. Does it stand exceptional in its incurable corruption? Placing the play in its proper perspective, it may not seem all that different in its morality from the general conception of morality that Jonson expresses in his other plays. If the "irredeemable society" label can be justly attached to any of Jonson's plays, **Bartholomew Fair** is the least qualified to bear it.

Although it is quite true that the authorities are the subject of Jonson's ridicule here, judges are severely satirized in **Volpone** as well. These judges actually court Mosca, who appears to have become Volpone's heir; the Fourth Judge thinks of him as "A proper man and .../ A fit match for my daughter" (V. xii. 50.1).⁵ By contrast, Overdo does not look for personal gain, not even in his agreement to the marriage of Grace and Cokes. He acts with the best of intentions. He wants to detect evil by himself, avoid inaccurate reports, and save some money for the good of the public; in spite of his apparent failure, he learns a great deal from this experience. We should bear in mind the fact that he is not the stark fool we might mistake him for. Of the "enormities," he could detect Trash and Leatherhead (II.ii.11), and he finds Ursula "the very womb and bed of enormity!" (II.ii. 106); Busy, the "super-lunatical hypocrite"; Knockem, "seducer of youth"; and Whit, the "esquire of dames, madams, and twelpenny ladies" (V. vi. 40-7). Of the wrong-doers, he mistakes Edgeworth for an "honest young gentleman" and

omits several others from his list. Like any detective, he depends on his enquiries, and disguises his real personality. When he overhears Ursula, whom he has known as a punk and bawd for "twenty years," talking to Knockem about "cutting halfpenny purses," he takes her word for it as would anybody else.

Overdo's vanity is not inconsistent with the atmosphere of the Fair. Since his vanity has been so inflated, we the audience may overreact when it is punctured. Justices are not sinless men, and Overdo is "but Adam, flesh and blood!" (V.vi. 99). Furthermore, his reputation may give us the impression that he has been an effective, strict Justice. The people of the Fair seem to fear him, and Grace speaks of him as "too serious for this place" (III. v. 28).

Later I will talk about the "enormities," but now to Wasp. Despite his rashness, he is a sympathetic character. He does his best to convince Cokes not to go to the Fair. When Cokes mentions the Fair, he cries "Bless me! deliver me, help, hold me! the Fair!" (I. v. 57). Although Cokes is hopeless, Wasp believes in his future - "These are errors, diseases of youth: which he will mend, when he comes to judgment and knowledge of matters" (I. v. 42-4). He feels obliged to follow Cokes, even if it takes him to the Fair. All this does not make him an ideal citizen, but he is sober enough to know what is wrong with the world, with his charge, and, most important, with himself: "He that will correct another, must want fault in himself" (V. iv. 96-7). This is not generally true, but it fits him best.

Busy can be singled out as the most vicious character. Although he may be able to deceive many, some people can see through him. Quarlous, for example, knows that he is a hypocrite who "stands upon his face more than his faith, at all times" (I. iii. 134-5). Although Busy is a "study of hypocrisy," the study itself began probably in **The Alchemist**. The scope of the study is large here, but originally Busy is not much worse than Tribulation and Ananias, who trust Subtle with the orphans' goods although they know that

The visible mark of the beast [is] in his forehead.

And for his stone, it is a work of darkness ... (III.i.)⁶

And just as Busy makes pigs legal, so do Ananias and Tribulation, helped by Subtle. With verbal dexterity, they mask their deceit in legal garb:

Tribulation Wholesome: Ay; but stay,
This act of coining, is it lawful?

Subtle: It is no coining, sir.

It is but casting.

Tribulation Wholesome: Ha! you distinguish well:

Casting of money may be lawful. (III.i.)

If Busy shocks us with his contrived deception, we must not forget that there are some comparatively good characters in the Fair. The Fair is not the proper place for upright people to visit, so we should not expect many of them. Grace, Winwife, Quarlous and even Wasp (as we have seen above) do not think much of the Fair. Grace, for instance, tells Cokes that "Truly, I have no such fancy to the Fair; nor ambition to see it; there's none goes thither of any quality or fashion" (I.v. 125-6). Such characters have a positive influence on the course of the happenings. Winwife and Quarlous acquire Grace and Purecraft as their wives and eventually save them from their suitors, Cokes and Busy. The new suitors are interested in money, but Winwife would certainly make Grace a far better husband, and she deserves him. Rejecting her past, Purecraft becomes more suitable for a better spouse than Busy.

Prostitution and theft are the cardinal crimes of the Fair. Both are not, however, alien to other societies of Jonson's plays. In **Volpone**, **The Alchemist** and **Everyman In His Humour** we have adequate examples. In fact, those crimes are on a smaller scale in this play, for theft does not include large amounts of money and does not require much plotting - money is practically offered for theft, as in Cokes' case. As for whoring, even though the play has the smell of adultery, at most we only see the threat of its happening to Win-the-Fight and Mrs. Overdo. The threat is not, even then, as urgent as it is in the seduction scene in **Volpone**. Nothing comes out of these threats, whereas in **Everyman In his Humour** we are pretty sure that the relationship between Bobadill and Cob's wife, Tib, is impure. She keeps him in her house and provides him with money: "He [Bobadill] owes me forty shillings (my wife lent him out of her purse, by sixpence a time) besides his lodging" (I.vi. 79-80).⁷ In fact, Ursula, who is "the sow of enormity" hates her job: "Fie upon 't: who would wear out their youth and prime thus, in roasting of pigs, that had any cooler vocation?" (II.ii. 42-3). These words may also imply that she hates prostitution, which is also "a hot vocation."

The puppet play, which is certainly a symbol of decadent public taste, has its precedent in Mosca's entertainment, which is far worse in its picture of corrupted human beings. It gives, as one critic put it, "a short and irreverent history of the progressive degeneration of

mankind.”⁸ Apollo’s soul passes down to a fool and a hermaphrodite. The puppet play does not attract all the characters: most of them stay out. Only Cokes is very much taken by it, but it is hardly an entertainment to others. It serves its dramatic purpose for Jonson when one of the puppets enters in a dispute with Busy and reveals the latter’s hypocrisy.

Thus, the characters, the crimes, and the atmosphere of Jonson’s *Fair* are not radically different from what they are in his other dramas. Their similarity appears most clearly at the ending of **Bartholomew Fair**. Unlike that of **Volpone**, where Mosca and Volpone seem to suffer from a harsher judgment than they deserve, the characters, all of them, are let loose here. Indeed, in **Everyman In His Humour**, which one critic believes is closely related to **Bartholomew Fair**, the ending is similar. Justice Clement says to Edward: “Master Bridegroom, I ha’ made your peace, give me your hand; so will I for all the rest, ere you forsake my roof” (V. iv. 12-3). The only castigation Bobadill and Matthew receive is that they will not share the supper at the Justice’s house. Nothing serious befalls any of the characters, as in **Bartholomew Fair**.

The play calls for a light ending because of the “shift of responsibility from gullers to gulled.”⁹ It is unlikely that Overdo, who has learned from his experience, can be severe in his punishment. That the puppet play may continue at home signals some danger, but it is Cokes who has shown greatest interest in it, and his bad taste may not be shared by the others. The ending is healthier than the ending of **Volpone** or even **The Alchemist**, since Overdo comes to know about the fallibility of people and how to best contribute to making the world more safely liveable. In **Volpone**, the corrupt Judges continue to be the last resort of justice, while in **The Alchemist**, Subtle and Dol Common have so mastered their ways of deception that it is hard to believe they will be able to adapt themselves to virtuous behavior.

Bartholomew Fair, then, is part of the morality Jonson has adopted, and the variation that exists here “does not break the logic of the design.”¹⁰ The ending cannot be taken to be pessimistic, unless we either adopt the impossibly rigid morality espoused by certain of Jonson’s other plays, or dislike being reminded of our imperfect nature. The play, then, has a healthy ending and leaves us with the impression that whatever may happen, Overdo will take his experiences to heart and use them to cut down crime. Human nature is liable to corruption, deceit, and self-deception, and the sooner one realizes this, as Overdo does, the more distance one cuts toward perfect justice - although it may not really be perfect, and this is an important realization.

NOTES

1. Alan C. Dessen, **Jonson's Moral Comedy** (Evanston, Ill., 1971), p. 148.
2. The quotes from this play are taken from Ben Jonson, **Bartholomew Fair**, Edward B. Partridge, ed. (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1964).
3. Dessen, p. 148.
4. Helena W. Baum, **The Satiric and the Didactic In Ben Jonson's Comedy** (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1947), p. 126.
5. The quotes from this play are taken from Ben Jonson, **Volpone, or The Fox**, John W. Creaser, ed. (London, 1978).
6. The quotes from this play are taken from Ben Jonson, **The Alchemist**, ed. John R. McCollum, Jr. (New York, 1965).
7. The quotes from this play are taken from Ben Jonson, **Everyman In His Humour**, Gabrielle Bernhard Jackson, ed. (New Haven, 1969).
8. Partridge, **Bartholomew Fair**, note to I. ii. 1.
9. M. Doran, **Endeavours of Art** (Madison, Wisconsin, 1954), p. 330.
10. **Ibid.**, p. 330.

