HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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# ***Every Man in his Humour*** (1598)

Ben Jonson

## OVERVIEW

*Ancient Comedy*

The theatrical comedy of the ancient Greeks reached its deepest achievement in the work of Aristophanes (441-386 B.C.E.). His eleven remaining dramas, created in the last decades of the fifth century, set world standards for their blend of irreverent hilarity, full throttle social and political criticism, and ability to criticize globally as well as locally. *Lysistrata* offers us an immortal recipe for preventing war, the *Wasps* anatomizes the vitriol and toxins of the law court business, the *Clouds* pillories the indulgence of high theory which shows inadequate respect for the way things play out on the ground. All three plays tackle present and pinching reality—regional war and its assault on daily life, preoccupation with the law courts and the personal issues exposed there, trends of philosophical theory for which the cooler of the youth felt, as today, an irresistible and naïve attraction.

*Comedy and the local*

Each of these critical sallies made its target out of local settings—as we might find the war in Ukraine, the self-interested junkets of member of the American Supreme Court, or the pursuit of the latest tech device—but infused its targeted dialogue with universal understanding, a pervasive sense of the application of the present drama, to mankind in general, wherever and whenever. I reference that 'universal' quality of classical Greek literature which continues, twenty five centuries after its creation, to touch our hearts, minds, and values.

*The comic universal*

The brilliant blend of universal with sharply local did not vanish from the scope of subsequent ancient playwrights, though it would suffer a sea change with the passage of a century or two after the death of Aristophanes.  Menander (342-290 B.C.E.) speaks from a cultural environment which is greatly domesticated after the daring of fifth century Athens. The world of Menander's mimes, a world of slaves, eunuchs, confused masters, ladies of the night, and just plain gossipy middle class housewives, is no longer the 'elevated' world of Aristophanes, who wrestles with the foundational issues of his society—war, women's rights, parental powers, intellectual theory—but is the world of bourgeois conflict, middle class solution, and drubbings of insolent servants. Comedy—still the critique of error from the standpoint of 'values,' is still a conservative medium, delighting an audience delighted to enjoy its own sense of superiority—has begun a long history which in the west is gradually to add mockery-humor to critical superiority, as it assembles its primary characteristics.

*Plautus and Terence*

In the Roman Republic two comedians—Plautus (259-184 B.C.E.) and Terence (195-158 B.C.E. ) made brilliant moves to consolidate the creative gains carved out by Menander, and other of his contemporaries, whose works are now for the most part dust and loss. The contribution of Plautus most applies here. For he particularly excelled at the temperate kind of creation of universal characters, which was to prove formative when it came to the early drama of Renaissance England, and which is the point at which we find ourselves in beginning with *Royster Doyster.* It will not do, of course, to undertake great leaps of time and synthesis, and to suggest that it is but a breath from the society of Plautus to that of the Renaissance. It may be enough simply to suggest the extraordinary power of Aristophanes, say, who was

able to soar with comedy, after a fashion barely emulated since his time, then to descend to culture worlds which have laid less claim to pure comedy than Aristophanes himself could make.

*The uniqueness of the individual comic character*

With *Royster Doyster* and Ben Jonson's *Every Man in his Humor*—here I *do* leap, to where we are, to two Renaissance playwrights whose lives bracket that of Shakespeare, and who do thrive both on their classical educations and on the ancient theater—and thus we come on what would have been considered, in ancient Rome, creations touching the uniqueness of the individual character, who at the same time bear universally recognizable traits. This formulation—complex and perhaps muddied by time—is what came down to the Renaissance classicist as a lasting paean to the universal, to what Samuel Johnson, in the eighteenth century, was to describe as *quod semper quod ubique*, w*hat is valid always and everywhere*. This motto would unfurl generously throughout the eighteenth century period of classicism.

*From Udall to Jonson*

We have seen what these literary concepts could mean in the case of Udall's play. This witty dramatist, who trailed high culture scandal around with him, presents one dimensional figures—Royster Doyster, the narrator, Dame Constance—who function as little more than placeholders for the incremental development of the plot. (Think momentarily of Rosalind in *As You Like It*, or of Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well*; these characters seethe with multi-level traits, rather than occupying plot space, like Udall's figures. In the case of Ben Jonson's first success, E*very Man in his Humour*, we also come upon placeholder figures, though in this case they are a multitude, a simulacrum of the world itself, and are in that sense universals, functions in the large geometrical plot of human nature; *quod semper quod ubique* in that sense.

*Dramatis personae of Every Man in his Humour*

The dramatis personae of Jonson's play does at times seem built starchily around the notion of the 'universal character.' Dad and son are at loggerheads, after a fashion dear to comedy back to Aristophanes' *phrontisterion (idea factory)*, in which the older and the younger generations vie for bragging rights in a local think tank. Jonson's play opens with a dad who receives a letter intended for his teen age son—same name as dad—and who opens the letter to discover that a trendy young pal of his son is urging the lad to come join the crowd. Dad slips the letter back in its envelope, and asks his servant Brainworm—a stock character to go with the stock of dad and son—to deliver the letter to son. Son, of course, sees that dad has penetrated the message in advance, and makes the necessary moves to travel, secretly, to his buddies.

*Plot launch*

And so is launched a drama of flight, pursuit, mutual misunderstanding, and subterfuge which by stages moves the play's action over to the community of one Kitely, who has just married, and who is an urban underworldish figure, Wellbred, a guy geared for fun and parties, and a cast of minor figures drawn, as was the comic tradition going back to Menander, from the pullulating city streets of a new bustling London, a cast including a fatherly judge, a slave or two, an old man and his sons, a country gull, an irritable water bearer, that is stock characters, a version of the literary universal, going back to Menander and the Greek New Comedy prominent in the fourth century B.C.E.

*Historical backdrop*

The title of Jonson's play suggests an amalgam of literary historical factors which conjoin to mark the sensibility of the end of Elizabethan, and the start of Jacobean literary culture. One is here creating in an atmosphere in which distinctive local types set the tone of humor wryness, and wit, targeting the folly of life, but doing so with good humor. Not far in the background of this aesthetic lies a mediaeval culture world in which agriculture, regionalism, and old saws were unselfconscious drivers of daily life.

Intertwined with this cultural evolution, Jonson's first drama purports to work the territory of widespread medical perspectives, onto the kinds of persons that make up a society. The pronounced 'individualism'—quirkiness, uniqueness, independence—of literary characters had its roots in the mediaeval medical theory of humors.

*Literature and medicine*

The belief that each individual was composed of a distinctive blend of the four humors—bile,--yellow and black-- phlegm, and blood—played into the view that character grew from a distinctive balance. The disposition of humors in one's body was what one is—medicine consisted in adjusting that balance to the point where the individual was fully realized—and when one was 'in his humour,' as in the title of the Jonson play—one was in his true nature. By depicting every man 'in his humor,' in the present play, Jonson seems to stress the multiplicity of kinds of men and women in the world more than their medical humors, but even so he takes his medical route toward maximizing diversity, as it were stressing varieties of character DNA.

*Contemporary comedy*

It may finally be noted, since we have in this entry touched on the evolution of the concept of dramatic comedy, that the comedic traditions we are now tracking await—from the standpoint of the Renaissance, the many turns and twists of humor that lead to our own day, when factors both cultural and technical have reset the practices of comic acting. The pillorying of foibles, as each character plays out its 'humors,' is still arguably the core gesture of the comedian, whether on screen or television or on the page: whether it be Jack Tripper, The Nutty Professor or P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster. The pleasure we take in the gaffes and travails of others is still the trigger to our pleasure in comedy.

*The concept of Humours*

Ancient Greek medicine—and after it Roman and mediaeval medicine—relied heavily on theories of the blood—its movements and effects on different people, effects which went so far as to determine one's personal traits. The dominant imagery, in this medical thought, involves dividing the human body into four separate blood- types: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, black bile. Medical practice, then, involved balancing blood types, seeking for and finding a harmony among the types found in the body.

Ben Jonson (and George Chapman, in his *An Humorous Day's Mirth*, published a year before Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour,)* appear almost at the same time to have worked with the idea of creating literature around the notion of humours. In retrospect that idea seems less different than it appears, from the classical theatrical conception of distinctive characters playing off against one another in a simulation of the richness of life, 'holding the mirror up to life,' as Shakespeare put it. In fact Shakespeare himself was a natural genius at equipping country and low class characters with quirky and distinctive life ways—Mrs. Overdone, Andrew Aguecheek, Sir Toby Belch, Doctor Pinch—including speech practices that make them unique. The new importation, in Jonson, is to make this individual distinctiveness into a theme of its own, the humuor of each person aspiring to be the whole person. In the prologue to *Every Man in His Humor*

Jonson wrote that he will offer

*deeds and language, such as men do use:*
*And persons, such as comedy would choose;*
*When she would show an image of the times,*
*And sport with human follies, not with crimes.*

The early modern philosophy of man, when not simply exalting humanity, as Ficino's *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* is likely to choose that view of man for which folly is the most accurate spokesperson, and the guilt of the fall the tone setter for the human enterprise. Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* is emblematic for this stance in thought.

SYNOPSIS

The play opens in Mr. Knowell Sr's house. He has just received a letter which could be for him or his son—same name. He opens it, sees it is from his son's buddies, seals it and sends it to his son via Brainworm, the family servant. Brainworm passes the letter on to Edward Jr., who leaves the house to join his friends. In the next act we see Mr. Knowell in pursuit of his son—who has actually gone to the house of his buddies, Matthew and Cob. From this point we move to another part of the city, to the home of Kitely, a local merchant. Wellbred, who wrote the letter to young Edward Knowell lives in Kitely's house, which brings the two elements of the plot together. Kitely has his own worries, and around him swirl shady dealings, jealousies, and antagonisms. Wellbred, the brother of Squire Downright, who lives with Kitely, has been disrespectful—he is the lad who wrote the letter to Edward. For another thing, Kitely is newly married, jealous of his wife who is surrounded by the young bachelor friends of his brother in law. As the two scenes of action gradually coalesce, jealousy and shady dealings prevailing on all sides, the scene shifts to the home of Justice Clement, who appears as an island of sanity, and whose judgment is needed. He serves as a spokesperson for the view of mankind with which Jonson opened the play, in his prologue. Justice Clement advises the assembled participants, who include figures from both parts of the play, that they should free themselves of the emotions that have put them into conflict, and be their true selves, their humours shaping them. It is at this point that the true unity of the diverse characters, whom the play has brought together, is realized.

SCENES

Mr. Knowell, the authoritarian dad, is eager to keep tabs on his trend enjoying young son, who is equally eager to hide his activities from his dad. The two men have the same name, so that when a letter arrives for the son it is delivered to Dad.

Taking advantage of the identity of his with his son 's name, Dad 'takes the liberty' of opening the letter, in which he finds out that his son's buddies are seeking his company, urging him to get out of the house.

The dad gives the resealed letter to his servant, Brainworm, with the request to deliver the missive to Knowell junior, pretending that the letter has not yet been opened. The servant agrees to this condition, but at once delivers the letter to Knowell junior, with an explanation of what the dad has found out.

Thus opens a full throated generational conflict, in which Dad pursues son with the misguided hope of 'reforming him.'

This ingenious plot opening springs loose into the parallel development, which surrounds a certain Kitely, whose brother in law Wellbred—the chief contact for Knowell Junior—has imported into the Kitely household a band of dubious characters, of whom Kitely fears that they will cuckold him with his lovely new wife.

The man is deeply jealous—an archetype of one of the many humours exemplified in the play—traits like jealousy or cowardice or aggression or fear, which manifest as central characteristics of the individual.

By the time the two component parts of the play have been brought together, grievances and mirth fully expressed, the Magistrate is called in to judge the individual cases, in each instance weighing the individual's fate in relation to his humours: a j8ridical system aligned with basic natures is in the making.

CHARACTERS

**Knowell**, the elderly gent whose efforts to reign in his trendy son go the way of all such intentions. This father is benevolent, wants to make youngsters into men, but is only partially able to read his son—like many dads at all times.

**Edward Knowell**, son to the former, a sulky but erudite youngster, whom we meet, at the beginning of the play, A standard model teen ager, except for the wrinkle of his erudition, for we find him, right at the

start if the play, bent over reading a text of Epictetus. He may stand, at the end of the play, as an uplifting opposite to the poetaster Matthew, the town gull.

**Brainworm**, the senior Knowell's manservant, spy for the younger Knowell. Continuingly subversive throughout the play, though at best a bit player.

**Master Stephen**, a country gull, easily led by the nose; first seen visiting with Mr. Knowell.

**George Downright**, a squire. A straight shooter, with a temper. Abstract naming is a regular part of the humour-identification of individuals; Dogood, Downright, Brainworm, Knowell—the list is as long as the naming practices of cultures, which wish to both create and predict the outcomes of their offsprings' lives. Nigerian cultural naming follows the same pattern, confidently prophesying the favors of God which will shower themselves on the growing youth.

**Wellbred**, half-brother to Downright. Magnet for dubious characters, despite his reassuring name.

**Justice Clement**, an aging magistrate, ultimately the judge of all the complaints that have accumulated during the play. It is he who summarizes and sums up the faults of the individual figures of the play.

**Roger Formal**, clerk to Justice Clement.

**Thomas Kitely**, a merchant. The main figure within the complicated intrigues that constitute the second part of the play. (The part of which Kitely and Downright are central figures.)

**Dame Kitely**, wife to Kitely. She, the attractive new bride of Kitely, comes under suspicion. Kitely fears that Wellbred's hangers-on may try to cuckold him with Dame Kitely.

**Mistress Bridget**, Kitely's sister. Attractive but unmarried, thus of additional attraction to the denizens of the Kitely household.

**Master Matthew**, the town gull, easily fooled, and addicted to poetry, at which his buddies give him very low marks.

**Thomas Cash**, Kitely's man. His name tells it all, and wherever he appears suspect cash is trading hands.

**Oliver Cob**, a water-carrier. He accuses his wife of cuckolding him, a garden variety accusation, as we see from this play, and unsubstantiated. The Shakespearean tradition, of scattering 'laboring folk' through his plays, peers vigorously through Restoration comedy.

**Tib**, Cob's wife. Falsely suspected, by Cob, of making him a cuckold.

**Captain Bobadill**, a braggadocio soldier, like Ralph Roister Doister in the play by Udall, a half century before. The protoyopes of this stock character go back to Plautus and Terence, and even to Menander, in Greek Hellenistic times. To note, here, that even the sleepy old Judge Clement, who presides over the resolution of the play, spots the Captain as a classic coward.

THEMES

***Jealousy***. Master Kitely can serve as the poster child for humourousness, *for he is* preternaturally Jealous. He is convinced that Wellbred and his mates, who are encroaching on his house, are a threat to the honor of his new bride. If any figure in Jonson's play has been swallowed up by a single attribute, it is Kitely.

***Paternalism**.* Mr. Knowell is a paternal figure for his son, and pushes the permissible limits, of paternal intervention, when he opens the letter to his son, then demands—though in vain of course—that

Brainworm should deliver the letter to Knowell Junior, without revealing that it had already been opened. It is a trait of the comedy of humours that personality is reiatively fixed: such figures as Mr. Knowell and relatively cut in the stone of genetics. But a ‘humour’ is a far richer notion than an ‘obsession,’ say. Mr. Knowell, for example, is genuinely preoccupied with guiding his son’s ways, and in fact violates his son’s letter with good intentions, to understand and guide the young man. In the same spirit Mr. Knowell does his best to give ‘life advice’ to Master Stephen, who comes to the Knowell home to visit relatives.

***Dishonesty***. The entire cast of characters, who gather around Kitely and at the tavern they find congenial, breathes an air of dishonesty, which is their collective humor. Shady deals, money under the table, disguises, imputations of infidelity; none of these dubious behaviors reaches the high crime level, but the collective atmosphere is itself a humour generated by each of the participants. (One might think of the malign atmosphere in which Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* is bathed.)

***Deception***. Brainworm has no compunction about passing on Mr. Knowell’s sealed letter, to young Knowell junior, without mentioning that the letter had been opened. It is quite natural to Brainworm, as it is to the traditional comedic ‘servant,’ to serve his master’s interests quite unscrupulously, and not to put a fine point on other relationships. The crowd that follow Mr. Wellbred, and gather at Kitely’s house, is a seedbed of deceptive types, and invites company like that of Brainworm, who continues throughout the play, to support young Master Edward Knowell.

***Judiciousness***. Judge Clement wraps up the loose ends of the drama, by gathering the complaint - filled participants at his house, for a summary judgment. He concerns himself with ‘human follies,’ not with ‘crimes,’ as Jonson said of his own dramatic practice, and in the end, after the whole set of actors has been judged in terms of their humours, a lighthearted sense pervades the whole human comedy. Jonson himself stands outside the play rejoicing that no harms deeper than social misdeeds have been perpetrated.