

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Epicoene or The Silent Woman (1609)

Ben Jonson

OVERVIEW

Background Jonson's *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman*, was first performed in 1609, but was from its origins a failure. It was not until many years later that the play was brought to enthusiastic attention, by John Dryden, who called it 'the pattern of a perfect play.' It was revived after the Restoration, and began to attract large audiences; Samuel Pepys enjoyed a performance of the play in July of 1660 and notes that it was one of the first plays performed after the restoration of Charles II to the throne. It was at that time performed in the Whitefriars Theater in London, a sound sensitive indoor venue, required by the frequent silences or crescendos of voice in Jonson's play. (Shakespeare's plays, performed at the outdoor Globe Theater fitted the urban soundscape unfolding on all sides of the audience.) The popularity of the play waxed and waned throughout the following centuries, proving in general to be a play for the intelligentsia rather than a shaggier Shakespearian play, with its feet on commonplace soil, or in the heaven of Shakespeare's imagination.

CHARACTERS

Morose A gentleman addicted to silence, and neurotically upset by any loud noise. We have to wonder whether Morose is maintaining his condition as a way of keeping his nephew Dauphine from coming in contact with him.

Sir Dauphine Eugenie. A knight. Nephew of Morose. A wit and a rascal, who has been unkind to his uncle, but who now wishes to secure his own rightful inheritance, which is under the control of Morose.

Ned Clerimont. A gentleman; friend of Dauphine.

Truewit. Dauphine's other good friend; an articulate foe of marriage.

Epicoene. A young gentleman; In actuality a young man dressed in women's clothes

Sir John Daws A knight, Epicoene's servant. Sir Amorous La Foole, A Knight.

Thomas Otter, A land and sea captain

Cutbeard, A barber, who aids in tricking Morose.

Mute. One of Morose's servants

Madame Haughty. Ladies Collegiate

Madame Centaure. Ladies Collegiate

Mistress Mavis, Ladies Collegiate

Mistress Trusty. The Lady Haughty's woman

Mistress Otter. The captain's wife. A loud and sharp spoken lady, the power center of her family.

Parson

Pages

Servants

SYNOPSIS

What the play is about

The play takes place in the home of a wealthy old gent by the name of Morose. This man is so pathologically noise-averse that he must live in a lane so narrow that no cart traffic can pass along it. It is the world of this neurotic that establishes the tone of the entire play. Morose, as the man is named, in the fashion of Johnson, has suffered a good many abuses and scorns from his nephew Dauphine, to whom his inheritance would normally pass, and has decided to marry, in part so as to keep the money from going to Dauphine's hands.

A Marriage prospect

The play takes an unexpected turn. Dauphine has decided to work with Cutbeard, Morose's barber, to counter the decision of Morose to marry and prevent his inheritance from going to Dauphine. Cutbeard finds a suitable marriage prospect for Morose—where suitable is to mean silent—and notes with delight that Epicoene, the lady in question—though actually a young man dressed as a lady—speaks in a low murmur, if at all. (To the delight of the noise averse morose, who believes he has found his dream woman.) Pleased as punch, Morose proceeds to arrange his marriage.

The attack on marriage

Dauphine's friend, Truewit, is delighted with the seeming course of events, which looks like it may lead to Dauphine recovering his inheritance. He foresees that the actual 'silent woman' is going to be nothing but woe for Morose, and that the poor man will rapidly abjure the idea of marriage. To bolster these persuasions Truewit unpacks a list of disadvantages to marriage, including women's inability to shut up. (Morose has already satisfied himself on this score, having discovered that Epicoene speaks, or seems to speak, 'only in whispers.') As it is, the marriage takes place. Morose is hitched, and then all hell breaks loose. Morose's house is inundated with house guests: Dauphine, Clerimont, and Truewit, Captain Otter, two foolish knights, LaFoole and Daw, loud Collegiates, eager to criticize the new bride for her failure to invite them to the wedding. The worst thing of all, for Morose, is yet to come: Epicoene turns out to be a loud nagging partner, whose roaring voice resonates through the house.

Epicoene herself/himself

As it turns out the new bride has a totally dominant personality and so rapidly drives Morose crazy that all he can think about is divorce which will of course free his inheritance up for Dauphine. Morose consults two lawyers—two friends of Dauphine in disguise—but they can not find grounds for divorce. Finally Dauphine tells Morose that he will arrange for the divorce, 'if Morose will agree to give him (Dauphine) his inheritance. Having an agreement from Morose, Dauphine turns to Epicoene and strips off his disguise to reveal that Epicoene is after all a male, and the marriage could in no case have been validated. Among the ludicrous consequences of this resolution, which restores Dauphine's inheritance, is the revelation that the two big fools of the play, LaFoole and Daw, admit to having slept with the new 'bride.'

The point of the play

One might say that the play ends where it ends, with the Inheritance promised to Dauphine, the ladies collegiate hurrying to their next rendez-vous, Dauphine once more Intestate, Morose....well, presumably in his study thrashing out what has happened. Has anything changed? For all we can imagine, Morose is as noise-averse as ever. The fools are still fools. Truewit is still an articulate foe of marriage. Rather like *Bartholomew Fair*, or *Everyman in his Humor*, the present play is not one in which there is something to happen, and the challenge of making that something happen, but there is something like a circular universality to the present play. It ends more or less where it starts.

EVENTS

The depictions of Morose, closed off in his noise proof chamber, talking to others only in a whisper, is a brilliant take on Jonson's theory of humours. What an extraordinary addictive humour, a character trait that eats up the whole person.

Impetuosity regulates Morose's behavior. Rather than inquire into Epicoene's identity, or to wonder why she appears in disguise, Morose hurries ahead to plan his wedding. Does he understand how deeply he has been hurt by Dauphine's tricks, and how much he longs for vengeance? Or is he just wallowing in emotional self-dislike?

Who are the collegiates, these women who appear as antagonists to Morose, and as proto feminists who control their husbands by controlling their husbands' sex lives? Does their viewpoint intersect with the

perspective of the entire play? What is that perspective? Is it that exaggerated humour is itself a disease, and comes onto other people harmfully from all directions? Are the women too addicts, if happy ones, of revenge?

Truewit, eager to support Dauphine, his friend, launches into an extensive anti-marriage peroration, aimed at Morose, and with the intention of dissuading Morose from his plan to marry Epicoene. The peroration concentrates especially on the chief annoyance of Morose, the noise that accompanies a spouse, her friends, and the commotion of a full household.

The new bride for Morose, the silent woman, turns out to be loud and nagging, and part of the endless commotion which dominates Morose's house. He has paid his nephew's inheritance and lost his tranquility. What was his actual trouble? Was it a language difficulty? Or a psycho neurotic defect driven by the desire for revenge?

Has Morose come out of this drama with any honor? Or has not His neurotic retreat disqualified him for any effective social concourse? Is his problem not measured by ordinary language, which he has voluntarily withdrawn from? Is language not the measure of social health? But if so, what is Jonson telling us about the horrors of totally unregulated language, like that of the collegiates, who babble Morose to death, or of Dauphine and his friends, for that matter, who conspire like schoolchildren, without regard to the character of their language.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Power Patriarchy combines power and parenthood, and even the extremely retiring Morose embodies both power and male parenthood. Hence the power Morose has over his nephew, Dauphine. It may be said that Dauphine brought this state of affairs on himself—his exclusion from inheritance—by his bad treatment of his uncle. The fact is, though, that the uncle had absolute discretion over the handling of Dauphine's inheritance—and would have had equal possession of any female inheritance in the family. The tradition behind Morose, of course, reverts as far back as Roman antiquity, where the *pater familias* rules the family's financial destiny.

Middle class world view By contrast with certain 'high class' comedies of Etherege or Wycherley—*The Man of Mode* or *The Country Wife*, for example—Jonson's *Epicoene* deals with what we can call the lower gentry of London. Figures like Morose or Dauphine or the fools like LaFoole are drawn from the upper middle trades classes, and operate within traditional limits of financial power transmission. We are within shooting distance of the bourgeois comedy of the mid seventeenth century, like Dryden's *Marriage a la Mode* or *The Kind Keeper*. In other words the age of chivalry in literature—already fading away in, say, *Ralph Roister Doister*—is slowly giving way to the appearances of the bourgeois onstage, the very bourgeois whom Moliere is pillorying in *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670).

Gender Equality The Ladies Collegiate remind us of the ladies of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, who express their power just like Jonson's ladies' crew. In Aristophanes the women were searching for a way to bring the endless Peloponnesian War to a close. Their method was to shut down on sex until the men decided for peace. The collegiate ladies of Jonson have left their husbands, whom they control by periodic consents to sexuality, and live apart, socially active and at the top of their social game. They make it plain, in the present play, that they will not be excluded from social events like marriages.

Oppressiveness The present work belongs to that category of drama in which a culture world is depicted—a certain milieu of London at a certain time— but in which there is little change from beginning to end of the piece. In the present play the situation at the end is similar to that at the beginning. No one is married, but the oppressiveness of Morose's character has remained intact. He may have found his way back to granting Dauphine his rightful inheritance, but the personality he brings to the final state of affairs is exactly the same as the personality—domineering, tight, and inflexible—he brings to the play in the beginning. This would be an example of a man fixed in his humour, unchangeably what he is.

PSYCHOLOGY

Obsession Jonson's portrayal, of Morose' obsessive antipathy to noise, is both comic and interestingly 'modern,' as, in fact, is Jonson's use of the traditional medical concept of humours, for literary analysis. On stage, a humour can easily play out as an obsession, not only an inbuilt state of mind, but also as a neurosis which controls the person. The medical theory underlying this essentially aesthetic concept of the humour seems to dictate that health is envisaged as the end of indulgence in one's humours. Does Morose find a way to cure his neurosis? Or does he in fact remain incarcerated in the same mindset at the end of the play? Has he come out onto any new level of understanding? Have any of the characters?

APPEARANCE vs. REALITY

Hypocrisy and Fake learnedness Amorous LaFoole and John Daw cite Latin poorly—by contrast to the 'lawyer' who later arranges for Morose's divorce, and who uses Latin in the stiffly formal style of the Academies—correctly. Jonson is always ready to mock pretenses of learning, for where better to exercise the comic perspective than on individuals whose trademark is to seem what they are not. Moliere might be said to be the master mocker of such pretence.