

1981

Defining Society: The Function of Character Names in Ben Jonson's Early Comedies

Mark Anderson
The College at Brockport

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los>

Repository Citation

Anderson, Mark (1981) "Defining Society: The Function of Character Names in Ben Jonson's Early Comedies," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 8 , Article 19.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol8/iss1/19>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literary Onomastics Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.

DEFINING SOCIETY: THE FUNCTION
OF CHARACTER NAMES IN BEN JONSON'S EARLY COMEDIES

Mark Anderson

State University of New York
College at Brockport

Ben Jonson was probably the most self-conscious dramatist of the English Renaissance. His dramatic handling of various subjects shows signs of thorough research, and his dramatic techniques seem to have been carefully planned, precisely applied, and when necessary, meticulously revised. Jonson's scrupulous craftsmanship is particularly evident in his choice of character names for his comedies.¹ In his prime Jonson was capable of incredible sophistication in his use of names. For example, in Volpone the character names are carefully chosen and related to the action, thereby providing a multi-leveled perspective on the story of a Venetian magnifico who attempts to gull his legacy hunters. In the first place, the character names evoke the beast fable of the fox who feigned death: Volpone is the fox, and Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino are the carrion-eating vulture, raven, and crow trapped by his deception. Secondly, the actions of these obviously abnormal individuals are shown to be within the scope of "natural" behavior

because the legacy hunters' visits to Volpone are in the same sequence as the feeding of the scavengers they denote. Finally and most importantly, Jonson uses his characters' names to help expose the moral perversion, the bestiality that subverts the image of man, in their avaricious actions and attitudes.²

The masterful use of character names evident in Volpone, however, was not a skill that Jonson suddenly acquired at the beginning of his dramatic career. An examination of his early plays reveals that he continually explored the ways in which character names could be significantly applied and integrally related to the action of serious dramatic comedy. Although some of these early comedies were unpopular with his contemporaries Jonson's experimentation in the use of character names provides a valuable insight into his developing conception of the form and technique of dramatic comedy.

As an actor and fledgling dramatist during the late 1590's, Jonson would have been familiar with the common Elizabethan practices in naming dramatic characters. Although not all character names in Elizabethan drama can be neatly categorized, there do seem to be two rather diverse approaches to them. These two attitudes can be roughly described as the pleasurable or decorative and the didactic. It is not surprising that this division has much in common with the Renaissance artists' dual grounds for justifying the value of dramatic art--its ability to delight and to teach. The

first tendency leads to character names adopted with little regard to meaning; many of these names are romantically foreign and adopted from earlier literary works or from anything exotic. Sometimes these names were chosen to discourage the audience from directly relating the dramatic characters and action to Elizabethan individuals and conditions: political or social comment, even in art, was demonstrably not without its dangers. More frequently, however, the names were intended to evoke in the audience little more than connotations of love and adventure and partially flesh out an imaginative world in which the strange and marvelous were possible.

The second attitude was inherited from the multi-leveled approach of much medieval literature. This allegorical tendency was firmly established in the morality play that, scholars too often forget, continued as a viable dramatic tradition well into the high Renaissance. And if most Renaissance dramatic characters are no longer called Everyman or Youth, names such as King Lear or Prince Hal are clearly a secularized and nationalistic substitution for them.

Ben Jonson's early comedies show his developing awareness of the dramatic potential in didactic character names. Ben Jonson's first play, his unacknowledged The Case is Altered, gives little indication of the dramatist's later development. The play is an amalgamation of two Roman comedies that in a very un-Jonsonian and rather superficial way explores the comedy and pathos of love. The

names of the major characters--Count Ferneze, Paulo, Camillo, Chamont, Angelo; Rachel de Prie, Jaques--are purely decorative. Only in the servants Juniper and Onion is there a small recognition of the denotative value of names, but Jonson seems content to use their names for only a few quick jokes.

In his next comedy, however, Jonson makes two rather significant advances. Every Man In His Humour is still dominated by romantic Italian names--Lorenzo, Stephano, Bianca, Thorello--but Doctor Clement, the Justice of the Peace, and Bobadilla, the braggart soldier, are given names that identify their characters. Secondly, because of the Justice's position in his society and in Jonson's plot, the clemency Jonson depicts in his person expands to be the dominant attitude toward offenses in this merry world, and hence the name is as much a revelation of this world as it is of one individual in it.³ Several years later Jonson revised Every Man In, giving it a London setting and Anglicizing the characters' names. Bobadill and Clement remain, but Jonson's other changes in the names of his characters indicate an increased sensitivity to the revealing power of names: the self-confident father becomes Knowell (although the old man does not know enough to leave well alone), the blunt country squire becomes Downright, his sophisticated brother is called Wellbred, the jealous merchant becomes the metaphoric Kitley, and the merchant's clerk is rather prosaically but justly called Thomas Cash.

Jonson's next play, Every Man Out of His Humour, is the first of his three experimental comical satires. All three of these plays show bold experimentation with comic form. The dramatic function of names in these plays comprises no small part of this experimentation. Every Man Out, like the earlier plays, is dominated by characters with Italian names. But here, for the first time, Jonson has made a conspicuous and extensive attempt to use the names of the characters in popular drama to expose their individual characters.

This allegorical approach is not unexpected from the master of the densely symbolic English masque, a genre which Jonson himself described as "court hieroglyphicks." Jonson's use of names, in fact, bears a strong relationship to the hieroglyph, which for the Renaissance meant a picture with a hidden meaning.⁴ Jonson is firmly Platonic in his goals for both popular and court drama: he describes his intent in his masques as to "lay hold on more remou'd mysteriēs,"⁵ and the Italian names in Every Man Out are, like hieroglyphics, signs with hidden truths accessible through reason and learning.

For the Renaissance the whole of nature was "a hieroglyph of revealed truth,"⁶ and Jonson constructs his dramatic artifice so that concrete personages embody abstract verities not only in their action, but immediately in their names. For example, Deliro (doting, foolish) is "sincerely besotted on his own wife" Falace (false, deceitful), who deceives her husband with the fopish courtier Fastidious (over-nice,

difficult to please) Brisk (brisk--to dress finely). Admittedly, the meanings of these names could be completely understood by only a select few of those in the audience. This obscurantism, however, was traditional in Platonic symbolism,⁷ and Jonson mitigates it somewhat by his unconventional inclusion of the descriptions of the dramatic characters in the authorized quarto printing of the play. In this play character names provide a revelation of the truths that are accessible to reason, the second level of Platonic knowledge, and lead to the highest level, the intellectual intuition of ideas of essences.

In Every Man Out Jonson's emphasis on names extends even into the conceptual basis for the action. Asper (sharpness of temper, harshness) is indignant over the follies in his society, and he transforms himself by impersonation into Macilente (lean--the best known characteristic of envy) in order that he may, "with an armed and resolved hand. . .strip the ragged follies of the time." Exposure, much more than correction, is Asper/Macilente and Jonson's thrust in the play, and with a few exceptions the characters of the play are as incurably condemned to their faults as they are to their names.

The next of Jonson's comical satires was Cynthia's Revels, a play that makes even fewer concessions to its popular audience. Here Jonson incorporates characters from the Greek mythology into his plot, thereby laying claim to mythic truth in the actions of

Cupid, Mercury, Echo, and Cynthia. It is worth recalling that Renaissance humanists considered myths, like nature, as a storehouse of divine revelation; in fact they believed that "the men of the golden age had been so close to the act of creation that they had still known the secrets of the universe."⁸ Jonson, as evidenced in Cynthia's Revels as well as in his masques, certainly seems to have shared the identification between mythology and eternal verities. His treatment of his mythological figures is consistent with their traditional emblematic significances as depicted in Alciato, Ripa, Whitney, and others.⁹

Jonson's handling of his other characters, however, is strikingly unique. If he draws on emblem literature for the traditional characterizations of his mythological figures, he uses the form of the emblem for the conceptual basis of his invented characters. To clarify this point further, we must remember that the basic form of the emblem is tripartite--a picture, the motto or word, and finally an epigrammatical stanza--so that no part of the emblem is complete in itself, and the whole is a composite of these parts. Translating the emblem form into a dramatic medium we would naturally equate the visual appearance and action of a character with the picture in the emblem, his or her name with the motto, and a verbal character description with the epigrammatical stanza. In Cynthia's Revels the characters do not gradually emerge or develop in the course of

the action; rather, they exhibit themselves on stage, their names are furnished, and Mercury or Cupid adds a moralized character description to complete the emblem. One example is sufficient. The character of Anaides is first shown, then clarified by the Greek meaning of his name, Impudence. Mercury's non-dramatic character sketch supplies the moral comment:

Tis impudence it selfe, Anaides; one, that speakes
 all that comes in his cheekes, and will blush no
 more then a sackbut. Hee lightly occupies the iesters
 roome at the table, and keepes laughter, Gelaia
 (a wench in pages attire) following him in place of
 a squire, whom he now and then tickles with some
 strange ridiculous stuffe, vtter'd (as his land came
 to him) by chance. He will censure or discourse of
 any thing, but as absurdly as you would wish. His
 fashion is not to take knowledge of him that is
 beneath him in clothes. (II.ii.79-97)

As exemplified here, the total character of each of Jonson's creations is an aggregate of all three emblematic elements working together. Jonson manipulates his characters as moral symbols who repeatedly present their truths in changing contexts. Name and moral comment, motto and subscript, remain constant, but one action-picture succeeds another in presenting didactic tableaux. The true

courtiers, such as Time (honor), Euthus (honesty), and Arete (virtue) are presided over by the chaste and divine Cynthia. Phantaste (fancy) and Philautia (self-love) are firm friends and have Moria (folly) for their guardian. Even the women's choice of their male consorts provides a moral message: Phantaste chooses Amorphus to indicate "fanciful deformity," and Moria picks Anaidēs to show "foolish impudence." Although this onomastic coupling is not as exciting as the physical couplings frequently presented in modern theater, it is certainly more meaningful. In Cynthia's Revels it is the "appropriateness" rather than the depth or "dramatic" nature of the relationships between the characters that is important.

The resolution of Cynthia's Revels is predicated on the recognition of the characters' names as revelations of their moral natures. The flawed courtiers perform a masque in which they impersonate the virtues that are closely related to their own faults: Aphelia (simplicity) is played by Moria (folly); Eucloios (generosity) is impersonated by Asotus (prodigality), and so on.¹⁰ Although Cynthia applauds the masque, she condemns the masquers for their presumption. Their entertainment is laudable art but a reprehensible activity for the characters because they sought to disguise the moral truths implicit in their names and pretended to virtues they did not possess. Proper action for Jonson derives from character, and character, as we have seen, is dependent on name.

In the world which Jonson creates in Cynthia's Revels only a miracle can free an individual from the action that derives from his nominal character, and the play ends with just such a miracle.. The goddess Cynthia--who is at the same time mythic truth, an abstract conception of a just monarch, and personalized reality through analogy to Queen Elizabeth--instructs the faulty courtiers in the quasi-religious steps necessary for purgation of their faults, the transformation of their characters into the virtues they had only impersonated in the masque.

Jonson's final comical satire, Poetaster, has received a great deal of scholarly attention because of its conspicuous place in the poetomachia, the war of the theatres.¹¹ I do not wish to belabor this highly complex and speculative issue much more. Rather I would like to focus on Jonson's conceptual approach to dramatic names in the play. Above all else, I think we must take as honest Jonson's rejection of comic drama that is little more than personal lampoon.. The title page motto, "Et mihi de nullo fama rubore placet," rejects fame gained by the embarrassment of others, and in the apologetical Dialogue that follows the play, Jonson's representative author denies any specifically personal satire in the play:

I neuer write that peece
More innocent, or empty of offence.
Some salt it had, but neyther tooth nor gall. . .
I vs'd no name. My Bookes haue still beene taught

To spare the persons, and to speake the vices. (II.74-85)

I think that we can allow Jonson his noble intent and at the same time concede that his characterizations of Crispinus and Demetrius so much resemble certain aspects of John Marston and Thomas Dekker respectively that the identification of the characters with the real persons was unavoidable for both the contemporary audience and later scholars. But I think to attempt further identification of the dramatic characters with Jonson's contemporaries is to assume a simplistic attitude toward artistic creation and to indulge our critical imaginations. Only the amazing critical methods evolved by the anti-Stratfordians could ignore the conflicts inherent in identifying the other dramatic characters of this play with real individuals.

Jonson's dramatic characters, however, are specifically related to reality, but it is primarily a historical reality rather than a contemporary one. In fact, I think it would not be amiss to say that the play is an attack on the kind of malicious or ignorant misinterpretation that would identify contemporary individuals with dramatic characters. Jonson's story is based on historical fact: Horace and Virgil, Ovid and Julia, had a literal existence. And in this play Jonson uses history for didactic purposes. In a typically Renaissance fashion he uses historical characters and relationships to reveal general moral and social truths, valid for both Romans and Elizabethans. It was a Renaissance commonplace that history taught moral, ethical,

and political lessons: whosoever failed to learn the lessons of history was destined to repeat the errors of the past.¹² The great French humanist Isaac Casaubon called history "nothing else but a kind of philosophy using examples."¹³ And Jean Bodin held that man could learn universal laws from the study of history.¹⁴

It is clear that the historical characters in Poetaster are used by Jonson to communicate general ideas through specifics of character and action. Moreover, the play speaks directly to this issue: the downfall of Ovid in the play results from his injudicious devotion to the personal and his neglect of the higher functions of art, especially the responsibility of the poet to reveal truths to his society. Jonson would like nothing more than for his own audience to learn from the failure of Ovid and the other slanderous fools in the play that an excessively literal-minded interpretation of art, Jonson's or any other artist's, is very dangerous. Even the identifiable characteristics of real individuals living during the reign of Elizabeth verify, rather than undercut, the general moral and ethical truths "for all times" which Jonson intends his play to convey. Poetaster is, therefore, designed to transcend the circumstances that in part contributed to its creation.

Jonson's historical characters in Poetaster, like the allegorical characters of Every Man Out, and like the mythological and emblematic characters of Cynthia's Revels, are the foundation for the

artistic truths of the play. Jonson's experimentation with the dramatic function of character names in his comical satires did not ensure the artistic or popular success of these plays (although I feel that they have been frequently misunderstood and underrated), but this experimentation did lay the groundwork for his masterful achievement in Volpone, Epicoene, The Alchemist, and Bartholomew Fair.

Mark Anderson
State University of New York
College at Brockport

NOTES

¹ The examination of Jonson's use of names has produced significant insights into his works, but most of these onomastic analyses have been small parts of broad approaches rather than systematic investigations of the topic. The comprehensive edition by C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, Ben Jonson, 11 vols. (Oxford 1925-52), is the logical starting point for the study of Jonson; this edition has been used for all quotations from Jonson's works. Two essays that concentrate exclusively on Jonson's names, Allan H. Gilbert's "The Italian Names in Every Man Out of His Humour," Studies in Philology, 44 (1947), 195-208, and T. Meier's "The Naming of Characters in Jonson's Comedies," English Studies in Africa, 7 (1964), 88-95, have focused on explicating the etymological meanings of names, although Meier does categorize Jonson's use of names into four groups: those identifying a character 1) by physical characteristics; 2) by profession or social position; 3) by habitual action or manner; and 4) by metaphoric description.

² For an extensive discussion of the beast fable in Volpone see Robert E. Knoll, Ben Jonson's Plays: An Introduction (Lincoln, Neb., 1964), pp. 79-104.

³ Lawrence L. Levin, "Clement Justice in Every Man in his Humor," Studies in English Literature, 12 (1972), 291-307.

4 Don Cameron Allen, "Ben Jonson and the Hieroglyphics," Philological Quarterly, (1939), 294.

5 D. J. Gordon, "Poet and Architect: The Intellectual Setting of the Quarrel Between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 12 (1949), 155.

6 E. H. Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 11 (1948), 168.

7 Gombrich, p. 166.

8 Gombrich, p. 169.

9 For a thorough examination of the mythological characters see Ernest W. Talbert, "The Classical Mythology and the Structure of Cynthia's Revels," Philological Quarterly, 22 (1943), 193-210.

10 See Allan H. Gilbert, "The Function of the Masques in Cynthia's Revels," Philological Quarterly, 22 (1943), 211-30.

11 Roscoe A. Small's The Stage-Quarrel Between Ben Jonson and the So-Called Poetasters (Breslau, 1899). is a sound discussion of the poetomachia and its interpreters.

12 Irving Ribner, The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare (New York, 1965), p. 13 and passim.

13 Cited in Ribner, p. 16.

14 Ribner, p. 19.