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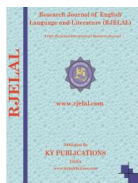
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THE AMBIVALENCE IN JONSON'S ATTITUDE: A BRIEF STUDY OF HIS CRITIQUE OF COMMERCE

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Abstract

As a man of the Renaissance Jonson was conscious about fashioning his identity as a satirist who wanted to follow the classical notion of writing poetry which was *Dulce et utile*, sweet yet useful. Through his plays Jonson strove to mirror the times and hold up the ills of society so that spectators may recognize and reform their ways. It is generally perceived that Jonson was a harsh critic of the acquisitive spirit of individuals in a mercantile economy. In many plays he is ironical but even when he is at his satirical best the impression that prevails in the reader's mind is not one of censure. It is not the moralist's heavy breath on the reader but the artist's fine touch, the play of words and the experience of an aesthetic presentation, poetic and sensuous, even though subject to the uncertainties of the money market. The moral resonances of a material culture often threaten to overshadow much of the effect of Jonson's plays. But there is a mature handling of the reflection of the way in which the changing economic transactions and market forces impact relationships and the very fabric of society of early modern England. Jonson realized that the consumer culture had resulted in trust deficit but it was unavoidable in a nascent capitalistic society.

Keywords: fashioning, money market, nascent capitalism, artificer, exchange, relationships

Ben Jonson's plays are replete with references to money and the greed and acquisitive instinct of individuals in a nascent capitalistic society. Allied to these exchanges are the ideas of trust and deceit, honesty and betrayal. Many of Jonson's plays explicitly dwell on this theme. We are instantly reminded of opening lines of the play, *Volpone*,

Good morning to the day; and next, my gold ! Open thy shine that I may see my saint (I.i.1-2)

This apotheosis of material gold repeatedly resonates with mythological references –to Danae and Jove in a shower or the pursuit of the yellow metal as an elixir in *The Alchemist*. Similarly, we recall the aspirations of Merecraft in *The Devil is an Ass* and the endless commercial exchanges in the land of God's plenty, *Bartholomew Fair*. There are other examples to be found in *Every Man In His Humour*, a play that initiates us into the humours comedy and, in Jonson's own words where he wanted to present "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” (21-24). In his oft quoted prologue Jonson says, “He that is so disrespectful in his courses, / oft sells his reputation at cheap market”. The notion of the connection between money and reputation in a newly changing society was once again stressed in *Eastward Ho!*. Having gauged the importance of the printed word Jonson is generally seen as the pioneer in the book trade market of early modern England and his Folio of 1616 is seen as a landmark achievement. If we consider the upheavals in the life of the playwright and also that his career spanned the reigns of three monarchs it becomes clear to us that Jonson was alert to the rapid changes in the society around him and a burgeoning culture that was beginning to appreciate the printed books as much, if not more, than dramatized performances. We are also conscious that, starting with L.C. Knight, we have been alerted to the change in the money market and exchange economy during the Renaissance. There was a conscious attempt to lean towards the identity construction that men wanted to forge for themselves and also in the ways in which overseas trade and voyages changed the economy forever. This was an economy which began to thrive on new plans, new projects and new ideas that people sought to put into practice. As is true of capitalism there was expansion in scope created for job seekers and the poor but there was also the creation of a class of people who dominated over the disenfranchised or the less powerful. It was a time which was marked by an increased desire for common goods in the domestic sphere and for exports. Some surplus began to be generated which gave a fillip to a consumer culture that thrived on purchase of goods. Mercecraft in *The Devil is an Ass* always imagines that there is a vast land of consumers, “citizens, commoners and older man” waiting to buy his expensive goods, and all willing to participate in this process of exchange, investment and profit. Sarah Pennell writes about consumer behaviour in early modern England. She thinks that consumption is not an economic phenomenon but a socio-cultural event that should concentrate on the subject-object relationship. Anatomies of desire are

closely related to ostentatious consumption patterns and to changes in perception about what constitutes status. The idea of access is closely considered to be the rediscovery of the market. It is only natural that the changing economy impacted the culture of seventeenth century England. Jonson and his readers and spectators stood to gain from these changes. For Jonson it increased his reliance on advertising techniques and adoption of marketing strategies and an anxiety for earning a livelihood which was independent of the patronage culture. We also see a rise in consumer acquisitiveness which is at the mercy of a well manipulated control over consumer knowledge. This is particularly necessitated by a fiercely competitive market and increase in the number of theatrical productions of good, bad and indifferent quality. Jonson was conscious that he had to bow to the pressures of the Elizabethan and Jacobean English stage but he could not resist satirizing it as we find in the opulence of Sir Epicure Mammon’s speeches or the final scene in *Volpone* where the eponymous character is “punished by the laws” and divested of his wealth amassed through his dissembling and cheating. Even if we become willing participants in the various projects hatched by Volpone and enjoy his dramatic skills and the power of improvisation demonstrated by Mosca we are not allowed any kind of doubt as we are called upon to judge the hyperbolic rhetoric of Sir Mammon. We are acutely conscious that in *The Alchemist* Mammon is not speaking of something individual, but rather a generic social change that predicated its enjoyment on excess consumption.

All my beds blown up, not stuffed mine oval
room Filled with such pictures as Tiberius took

From Elephant is, and dull Archive
But coldly imitated, my glasses
Cut in more subtle angles, to disperse
And multiply the figures as I walk
Naked between my succubae (II.2., 41-8)

There is a satiric undertone that takes down the images of opulence in these lines. In *Discoveries* Jonson exclaims, “Oh, but to strike blind the people with our wealth and pomp is the thing! What a wretchedness is this, to thrust all our riches

outward, and be beggars within". (*Discoveries*, II. 981-83). He then goes on to criticizing people for their habit of excavating the inessential to feed their avarice and set aside the necessary things placed before us by God. Here we notice the opposition between inner wealth and superfluous money, a criticism that marks much of Jonson's plays. While it is true that the money market economy was becoming very important in England Jonson did not shy away from pointing to its crudities, dependence on appearances, anxiety about disintegrating relationships born of trust, or the uncertainties of exchange and the breakdown of earlier forms of relationships. Much to the chagrin of many conventional readers in the past two decades we have been constantly using the term 'market' to speak about the culture that impacted Jonson's writings. We are aware that Jonson was very much a part of the extravagant masques at court and despite his objections to outward pomp participated in the glorious production of the spectacles. Again, the fact that he personally oversaw the publication of the 1616 Folio makes one wonder if it was only to do with fashioning the image of the Author or was it not monetary consideration as well that motivated him to stop the loss of revenue owing to the piracy of texts.

There is a feeling of ambivalence about the ending of *Volpone* which mirrors the fractured response of Jonson's mind. On the one hand Volpone was the supreme artificer who was able to succeed with all his plans and projects and he, as the arch confidence trickster, cheated the gulls in an admirable way. On the other, Jonson was operating within a moral and social framework that made him satirize such activities and he finally wanted to give the message that such a free run of an acquisitive spirit would ultimately ruin itself since vice is ultimately self-defeating and also self-limiting. Volpone pretends to be dying simply because he wants to maximize his profit by cheating the legacy hunters. Volpone is conscious that his method of making money is unusual and Mosca distinguishes him from the common usurer who fleeces prodigals. It is also interesting to note that Volpone engages in a trade which is not the usual one relating to death of others but relates to death of the self. When

circulation of money forces societies to realign in different networks then relationships which unite individuals disintegrate. As he pretends to be dying, Volpone actually isolates himself from those who flock to visit him at his bedside. Though Volpone is annihilated and no prospect of the enjoyment of his wealth remains, he is, nonetheless instrumental in creating an economy surrounding his death bed. However, at the end the spoils of this venture are given away to the hospital for the *Incurabili*. The penalty faced by a master artist does make us wonder if the ultimate end of satire is to concentrate on utility rather than pleasure. We observe that while Jonson does appear to be presenting an overpowering moral tone there is a sense that traditional practices endure despite the new network of relationships. Volpone and Mosca try to evoke Christian values when the gulls come in with gifts for the dying man, each expecting to be named the heir but ultimately they are bound together in a relationship of profit. However, each gull tries to outdo the previous one in the value of their gifts and this is a pointer to the larger economic and social context of the play. Volpone teases his visitors, "Letting the cherry knock against their lips,/And draw it by their mouths, and back again." (II 89-90). He had earlier played the part of the enticer and the collector, "All which I suffer, playing with their hopes, /and am content to coin 'em into profit" (I.I.85-86) yet, after a series of exposures Volpone goes down fighting, "This is called mortifying of the Fox".

The ending of *The Alchemist* situates Jonson at any uneasy distance from the independence and extreme individualism which he tried to satirize in the play. There is good humoured satire which is not observed by ethical preaching. There is toleration but no celebration of the disguises and dissembling adopted by the trio, Subtle, Face and Doll. Jonson's satiric intention is set out clearly in the Prologue:

this pen
did never aim to grieve, but better men,
Howe'er the age he lives in doth endure
The vices that she breeds, above their cure. \n
But when the wholesome remedies are
sweet. And in their working, gain and profit

meet, He hopes to find no spirit so much
diseas'd

But will, with such fair correctives be pleased.
(11- 18)

Jonson was definitely very successful with the plot of his satiric compositions for Coleridge thought that the Oedipus Tyranus, The Alchemist and Tom Jones had perfect plots. Three very unlikely creations have been brought within the same context of discussion. The quarrel at the beginning of the play in The Alchemist ultimately ends in the final explosion. We observe that gulls and cheats alike are in pursuit of money and the venture tripartite is built on the expectation of quick money. There is a heightening of the comic tension as each new gull enters the Lovewit household but the project finally goes up in fumes. It may be appropriate to reiterate once again that money is displaced and our attention is directed towards a more enduring wealth, the enduring art of the Author. Mammon dreams of the Golden Age, a mirror of an artistic dream harboured by the poet. Holland and Sherman in their introduction to the *The Alchemist* in Volume III of the Complete Works (p. 547) says that these dreams "are played out in the alternative state, the 'republic' that the trio of con artists have established.....to replace the English monarchical state, as the outcome of their profit sharing capitalist endeavour, their venture tripartite'. Such a movement seems to appear tolerant but ultimately decimates the profit making ventures associated with capitalism. What prevails is the true alchemy of words says Anne Barton (1984, 150). These are words that have a transformative power and convert the ugly into the beautiful and the fake into the precious. Words prevail over money power.

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Mallika Ghosh Sarbadhikary has presented and pursued research in areas relating to Renaissance Literature, Gender studies and English language teaching. She has been teaching engineering students for more than two decades at Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology, Shibpur.