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THE FORMAL CHORUSES IN THE COMEDIES OF BEN JONSON

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Though the cast of characters through which Ben Jonson achieves his massive satirical commentary is large, it divides itself in reality into a few recurring types. Frequently a single figure, larger than life, makes for the author comic assessments and assigns comic fates, whether reformation or cutting-off is proposed. Such figures, looking remarkably like Jonson himself, are Horace of *The Poetaster* and Peniboy Cantor of *The Staple of News.*[1] On other occasions, wits, of the Wellbred or Truewit type, wind up the victims to the revelation of their follies, and give the comic *coup de grace.* A third group, whom Satan of *The Devil is An Ass* designates as members "of our tribe of brokers," provides the bait at which the greedy nibble, whether they be hypocrites or fools. Such are Merecrafte, of *The Devil is An Ass,* and Volpone.

But the therapeutic attentions of all these members of Jonson's comic gallery are focused on his characters of the humorous type—those possessed by greed or hypocrisy, being perhaps utterly foolish at the same time. Their humours are not the object of Jonson's attack, but merely a technique of differentiating them one from another.

These people, wise or foolish, greedy or hypocritical, exemplars of manners or corrupters of manners, are all on Jonson's stage. But they are also in his audience. This he implies frequently in his introductory matter. The point is made much more bitingly, however, in those plays into which he introduces a formal choric group, composed of persons outside the action of the play itself. Such a group may have other functions, also, such as helping the "auditory" through the mazes of the action, or justifying the author's comic procedures. There are three such groups in the comedies, the "Grex" (Mitis and Cordatus) of *Every Man Out of His Humour,* the "Intermeane" (the Gossips, Mirth, Tatle, Expectation, and Censure) of *The Staple of*

[1]See my article, "Ben Jonson in Ben Jonson's Plays," *Studies in English,* University of Mississippi, III, (1962), 1-17.

News, and the "Chorus" (Mr. Probee, Mr. Damplay, and A Boy) of *The Magnetic Lady.*

These groups are not in the strict sense "characters," for they are not concerned in the sequence of events. But, as part of the comic apparatus by which Jonson achieves his effects they should be examined, all the more because in many instances they themselves are impaled among Jonson's more prominent victims.

Our friends of the "Grex" of *Every Man Out of His Humour,* though they take no part in moving the members of the *Dramatis Personae* toward their comic fates, are obviously part of the "play." For the artistic entity which is a "play" is composite: a poem, spoken by actors, on a stage, before an audience. Even costume and gesture are a part of the "play." The ultimate effect of a Jonson play on an audience will be, perhaps, scorn—for one cannot countenance a Bobadil; and complacency—for one is not, of course, a Bartholomew Cokes; and self-recognition—for there may be in all of us a little of Fastidius Briske. To help the audience in arriving at the proper comic assessment of action, of motive, of character, and ultimately of itself, a "Grex" is a valuable tool in the hand of the author.

The "Grex" of *Every Man Out of His Humour* is a replica of the audience viewing the play, not in all the manifold humours of the Fungosos and the Deliros, but in the simple category of wise and learned, in contrast with ignorant and foolish. In the final words of the "Grex," Cordatus makes the identification, even though he perhaps flatters the auditory a bit:

> Here are those (round about you)
> of more abilitie in censure than wee, whose iudgements
> can giue it a more satisfying allowance; wee'le refer you to them. (V, xi, 71-74)[2]

In the introductory matter in the printed texts, not a part of the "play," Jonson gives these formal characters for Cordatus and Mitis:

CORDATVS.

THe Authors friend; A man inly acquainted with the scope and drift of his Plot: Of a discreet, and vnderstanding iudgement; and has the place of a Moderator.

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[2]The source of all quotation is *Ben Jonson,* Herford and Simpson (11 vols., Oxford, 1925-1952).

MITIS.

IS a person of no action, and therefore we haue reason to affoord him no Character.

One questions, of course, whether Jonson would find many of his auditory to have "a discreet and vnderstanding iudgement." The fiction, though, that there is in the audience a Cordatus to correct the misapprehensions and enlighten the ignorance of a Mitis gives the poet an opportunity to achieve many effects, not only intellectual, but also mechanical.

These functions, in perhaps the ascending order of their importance, require brief examinations. At perhaps the lowest level Cordatus and Mitis provide stage directions: "Behold, the translated gallant"—Fungoso has entered wearing a new suit. Or, they announce the entry of Sir Puntarvolo, "stay, here comes the knight adventurer. I, and his scrivener with him." In a slightly different function, they are of immense help, at least to the reader of *Every Man Out of His Humour,* for they announce changes of scene: "the *Scene* is the country still, remember"; "we must desire you to do presuppose the stage, the middle isle in *Paules";* "O, this is to be imagined the *Counter,* belike?"

Cordatus and Mitis have the responsibility, on a somewhat higher level, of adumbrating character. Though Jonson had, in the introductory material, given a thumb-nail "character" of each of his actors, those descriptions were only for the reader, not for the auditory. It is therefore a help to the play-goer to have Cordatus describe Buffone:

> He is one, the Author calls him CARLO BVFFONE, an impudent common iester, a violent rayler, and an incomprehensible *Epicure;* one, whose company is desir'd of all men, but belou'd of none; hee will sooner lose his soule then a iest, and prophane euen the most holy things, to excite laughter: no honorable or reuerend personage whatsoeuer, can come within the reach of his eye, but is turn'd into all manner of varietie, by his adult'rate *simile's.*
>
> (Prologue, 356-364)

On the appearance of Clove and Orange—"mere strangers to the whole scope of our play"—Cordatus pinpoints both for the audience in what is almost a formal "character":

> I, and they are well met, for 'tis as drie an ORANGE as euer grew: nothing, but *Salutation;* and, *O god, sir;* and, *It pleases you to say so, Sir;* one that can laugh at a iest for company with a most plausible, and extemporall grace; and some houre after, in priuate, aske you what it was: the other, monsieur CLOVE, is a more spic't youth: he will sit you a whole afternoone sometimes, in a booke-sellers shop, reading the *Greeke, Italian,* and *Spanish;* when he vnderstands not a word of either: if he had the tongues, to his sutes, he were an excellent linguist.
>
> (III, i, 23-33)

Much more important, however, to both reader and auditory is Cordatus' explication of Macilente's humour of envy:

> COR. . . . Why, you mistake his Humour vtterly then.
>
> MIT. How? doe I mistake it? is't not enuie?
>
> COR. Yes, but you must vnderstand, Signior, he enuies him not as he is a villaine, a wolfe i' the common-wealth, but as he is rich, and fortunate; for the true condition of enuie is, *Dolor alienae Faelicitatis,* to haue our eyes continually fixt vpon another mans prosperitie, that is, his chiefe happinesse, and to grieue at that. Whereas, if we make his monstrous, and abhord actions our object, the griefe (we take then) comes neerer the nature of hate, then enuie, as being bred out of a kinde of contempt and lothing, in our selues.
>
> (I, iii, 159-171)

Mitis, as the uninformed half of the Grex, and of the audience, has an occasional cavil which must be corrected. Scene three of Act II has been of unusual length, but the objection of Mitis is neatly spiked in this passage:

> MIT. Me thinkes, CORDATVS, he dwelt somewhat too long on this Scene; it hung i' the hand.
>
> COR. I see not where he could haue insisted lesse, and t'haue made the humours perspicuous enough.
>
> MIT. True, as his subiect lies; but hee might haue

altered the shape of his argument, and explicated 'hem better in single *Scenes*.

COR. That had been single indeed: why? be they not the same persons in this, as they would haue beene in those? and is it not an obiect of more state, to behold the *Scene* full, and relieu'd with varietie of speakers to the end, then to see a vast emptie stage, and the actors come in (one by one) as if they were dropt downe with a feather, into the eye of the spectators?

(II, iii, 288-301)

Two other cavils of Mitis are put to even more effective use in the educating of the auditory. After the end of Act II, says Mitis, "Well, I doubt, this last *Scene* will endure some grieuous torture." Cordatus must again put him right. In the process he enunciates the essential theory of satire and offers the standard disclaimer of any personal portraiture:

COR. No, in good faith: vnlesse mine eyes could light mee beyond sense. I see no reason, why this should be more liable to the racke, then the rest: you'le say, perhaps, the city will not take it well, that the merchant is made here to dote so perfectly vpon his wife; and shee againe, to bee so *Fastidiously* affected, as shee is?

MIT. You haue vtter'd my thought, sir, indeed.

COR. Why (by that proportion) the court might as wel take offense at him we call the courtier, and with much more pretext, by how much the place transcends, and goes before in dignitie and vertue: but can you imagine that any noble, or true spirit in court (whose sinowie, and altogether vn-affected graces, very worthily expresse him a courtier) will make any exception at the opening of such an emptie trunke, as this BRISKE is! or thinke his owne worth empeacht, by beholding his motley inside?

MIT. No sir, I doe not.

COR. No more, assure you, will any graue, wise citizen, or modest matron, take the obiect of this folly in DELIRO, and his wife: but rather apply it as the foile to their owne vertues. For that were to affirme, that a man, writing of NERO, should meane all Emperors: or speaking of MACHIAVEL, comprehend all States-men; or in our

SORDIDO, all Farmars; and so of the rest: then which, nothing can be vtter'd more malicious, or absurd. Indeed, there are a sort of these narrow-ey'd decypherers, I confesse, that will extort strange, and abstruse meanings out of any subiect, be it neuer so conspicuous and innocently deliuer'd. But to such (where e're they sit conceal'd) let them know, the author defies them, and their writing-tables; and hopes, no sound or safe judgement will infect it selfe with their contagious comments, who (indeed) come here only to peruert, and poison the sense of what they heare, and for nought else.

(II, vi, 146-179)

The unhappy Mitis again at the end of the sixth scene of Act III falls into a trap of Jonson's making, thereby allowing Cordatus to state for Jonson a sort of capsule *Poetics* on the nature of comedy:

MIT. I trauell with another obiection, signior, which I feare will bee enforc'd against the author, ere I can be deliuer'd of it.

COR. What's that, sir?

MIT. That the argument of his *Comoedie* might haue beene of some other nature, as of a duke to be in loue with a countesse, and that countesse to bee in loue with the dukes sonne, and the sonne to loue the ladies waiting maid: some such crosse wooing, with a clowne to their seruingman, better then to be thus neere, and familiarly allied to the time.

COR. You say well, but I would faine heare one of these *autumne*-judgements define once, *Quid sit Comoedia?* if he cannot, let him content himselfe with CICEROS definition, (till hee haue strength to propose to himselfe a better) who would haue a *Comoedie* to be *Imitatio vitae, Speculum consuetudinis, Imago veritatis;* a thing throughout pleasant, and ridiculous, and accommodated to the correction of manners: if the maker haue fail'd in any particle of this, they may worthily taxe him.

(III, vi, 191-210)

Finally, Cordatus and Mitis serve as a sounding board for the formal statement of the humours concept by Asper-Macilente-Jonson:

As when some one peculiar quality
Doth so possesse a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confluctions, all to runne one way,
This may be truly said to be a Humour.

(Prologue, 105-109)

They applaud his statements of his satiric purpose: "And therefore I would giue them pills to purge, And make 'hem fit for faire societies" (Prologue, 175-176). They also concur with his comic method:

To please, but whom? attentiue auditors,
Such as will ioyne their profit with their pleasure,
And come to feed their vnderstanding parts:
For these, Ile prodigally spend my selfe,
And speake away my spirit into ayre;
For these, Ile melt my braine into inuention,
Coine new conceits, and hang my richest words
As polisht jewels in their bounteous eares. (Prologue, 201-208)

When Asper has gone to become the envious Macilente, Cordatus and Mitis remain "as censors to sit here," and explain why Jonson has not in this play, observed the "lawes of *Comoedie.*" Says Mitis:

> MIT. Why, the equall diuision of it into *Acts,* and *Scenes,* according to the *Terentian* manner, his true number of Actors; the furnishing of the Scene with GREX, or CHORVS, and that the whole Argument fall within compasse of a dayes businesse.
>
> (Prologue, 237-241)

Mitis has been more knowledgeable in this passage than he will be later, but even this degree of knowledge is of little avail against the redoutable Cordatus. After a brief history of comedy, he liberates Jonson from the strict "lawes" established by Mitis:

> I see not then, but we should enjoy the same licence, or free power, to illustrate and heighten our inuention as they did; and not bee tyed to those strict and regular formes, which the nicenesse of a few (who are nothing but forme) would thrust vpon vs. (Prologue, 266-270)

Apparently that "licence" was for this play only; for in prologues to his later plays, Jonson insists on those "lawes," and in general, in his comedies, he conforms strictly to the "unities."

Jonson did not introduce another formal chorus into a comedy for twenty-six years. In *The Staple of News,* 1625, he has the "Intermeane" of the Gossips: Mirth, Tatle, Censure, and Expectation. But their presence is not to instruct reader or auditory in Jonson's poetic dogma; they in no way assist the poet in presenting the action, or the audience in understanding it. Though they are seated on the stage, they speak only as prologue, and between acts.

But they are, I suspect, the audience. If so, however, the audience has degenerated since the days of Cordatus and Mitis. Even Mitis had some knowledge, and Cordatus possessed all the wisdom of Jonson himself. These four Gossips understand nothing. They praise the foolish (Peniboy-Jr. as prodigal) and condemn the wise (Peniboy-Canter as the true chorus).

They constitute, at best, another object of the poet's satire. In part of that satire they have a sort of mirror function, for they are the avid consumers of the ridiculous news collected and disseminated by the Staple. A measure of their discernment, as representatives of the audience, and perhaps of all *London,* is provided in the Third Intermeane:

> MIRTH.... *But how like you the newes? you are gone from that.*
>
> CEN. *O, they are monstrous! scuruy! and stale! and too exotick! ill cook'd! and ill dish'd!*
>
> EXP. *They were as good, yet, as butter*[3] *could make them!*
>
> TAT. *In a word, they were beastly buttered! he shall neuer come o' my bread more, nor in my mouth, if I can helpe it. I haue had better newes from the bake-house, by ten thousand parts, in a morning: or the conduicts in* Westminster! *all the newes of* Tutle-*street, and both the* Alm'ries! *the two* Sanctuaries! *long, and round* Wool-staple! *with* Kings-*street, and* Chanon-*row to boot!*
>
> MIRTH. *I, my Gossip* Tatle *knew what fine slips grew in* Gardiners-lane; *who kist the Butchers wife with*

[3] A reference to Nathaniel Butter, printer and newsmonger, whose first newspaper, *Newes from most parts of Christendom,* appeared in 1622.

CEN. *Or the fine* Madrigall-*man, in rime, to haue runne him out o' the Countrey, like an* Irish *rat.*

TAT. *No, I would haue Master* Pyed-mantle, *her* Graces Herald, *to pluck downe his hatchments, reuerse his* coat-armour, *and nullifie him for no* Gentleman.

EXP. *Nay, then let Master* Doctor *dissect him, haue him open'd, and his tripes translated to* Lickfinger, *to make a* probation dish *of.*

CEN. TAT. *Agreed! Agreed!*

MIRTH. *Faith, I would haue him flat disinherited, by a decree of* Court, *bound to make restitution of the* Lady Pecunia, *and the vse of her body to his sonne.*

EXP. *And her traine, to the* Gentlemen.

CEN. *And both the* Poet, *and himselfe, to aske them all forgiuenesse!*

(IV, iv, 40-68)

The third of Jonson's semi-formal comic choruses is in *The Magnetic Lady,* 1632. It consists of Mr. Probee, in an attitude very similar to that of Cordatus in *Every Man Out of His Humour;* of Mr. Damplay, who is both more uninformed and more censorious than Mitis; and a Boy of the House, who "had the dominion of the shop, for this time under him [the poet]," and who speaks for Jonson.

Probee and Damplay, as heretofore, are the audience—but *only* the "Plush and Velvet—outsides." The Boy fears, however, that this description fits only "clothes, not understandings." These three members of the choric group serve, not only for the functions previously suggested in this paper, but in one or two not observed earlier. They provide a sort of "argument" for the play, explaining that the Magnetic Lady herself and her marriageable niece are the poet's "Center attractive," with "persons of different humours to make up his *Peremiter."* The Boy explains to the auditory the proper procedure for hearing a play:

> A good *Play,* is like a skeene of silke: which, if you take by the right end, you may wind off, at pleasure, on the bottome, or card of your discourse, in a tale, or so; how you will: But if you light on the wrong end, you will pull all into a knot, or elfe-locke; which nothing but the sheers, or a candle will undoe, or separate.

(Induction, 136-141)

> *the Cowes-breath; what matches were made in the* bowling-Alley, *and what bettes wonne and lost; how much griest went to the* Mill, *and what besides: who coniur'd in* Tutle-fields, *and how many? when they neuer came there. And which Boy rode vpon* Doctor Lambe, *in the likenesse of a roaring* Lyon, *that runne away with him in his teeth, and ha's not deuour'd him yet.*
> (III, iv. 12-32)

In a second function they are Jonson's old enemy, the audience which cannot understand a play, but would censure it. Jonson makes that point abuntantly clear in a "To the Readers" appended to the Second Intermeane (this "To the Readers" is, of course, *not* part of the "play"):

> IN this following *Act,* the Office is open'd, and shew'n to the *Prodigall,* and his *Princesse Pecunia,* wherein the *allegory,* and purpose of the *Author* hath hitherto beene wholly mistaken, and so sinister an interpretation beene made, as if the soules of most of the *Spectators* had liu'd in the eyes and eares of these ridiculous Gossips that tattle between the *Acts.*
>
> (To the Readers, 1-7)

A sample of their censure, taken from the Fourth Intermeane will show the bitterness of Jonson's attack:

> MIR. *I wonder they would suffer it, a foolish old fornicating* Father, *to rauish away his sonnes* Mistresse.
>
> CEN. *And all her women, at once as hee did!*
>
> TAT. *I would ha' flyen in his* gypsies *face i' faith.*
>
> MIRTH. *It was a plaine piece of* politicall *incest, and worthy to be brought afore the* high Commission *of wit. Suppose we were to censure him, you are the youngest voyce,* Gossip Tatle, *beginne.*
>
> TATLE. *Mary, I would ha' the old* conicatcher *coozen'd of all he has, i' the young heyres defence, by his learn'd Counsell,* Mr. Picklocke!
>
> CENSVRE. *I would rather the* Courtier *had found out some tricke to begge him, from his estate!*
>
> EXP. *Or the* Captaine *had courage enough to beat him.*

Probee offers the standard disclaimer of any personal intent in the satire, and mounts a severe attack on all those who undertake the "civil murder" of a play through "the solemne vice of interpretation."

Probee and the Boy enlarge the auditory to include Charles I himself, for on behalf of "an overgrowne, or superannuated Poet," they very neatly beg for Jonson a gratuity:

> PRO. Why doe you maintaine your Poets quarrell so with velvet, and good clothes, *Boy?* Wee have seene him in indifferent good clothes, ere now.
>
> BOY. And may doe in better, if it please the King (his Master) to say Amen to it, and allow it, to whom hee acknowledgeth all. But his clothes shall never be the best thing about him, though; hee will have somewhat beside, either of humane letters, or severe honesty, shall speak him a man though he went naked.

(I, vii, 49-57)

Cordatus and Mitis, then, and Tatle and Expectation, and Probee and Damplay, should, along with the wits, and the individuals with primarily choric functions, and the brokers, and the unfortunate ones possessed of the humours, be admitted to the list of Jonson's comic *Dramatis Personae.* Such is the thrust of the formalized choric groups toward the follies and ignorance of the audience, that one is disposed to feel that, not only in *Every Man Out of His Humour, The Staple of News,* and *The Magnetic Lady,* but perhaps in all the plays, an additional name should be admitted to the cast of characters—"Auditory."