

Realism and Satire - Ben Jonson's Volpone.

Shakespeare paints the universal in man, his world is timeless eternal. Ben Jonson like Dekker is the romancer of the Elizabethan streets. His plays are stuffed with local colour and flavour, writing about his own age and people. A classicist and a realist Jonson's plays spring directly from the age he belonged to. 'Othello' or 'The Tempest' depict lives tossed by great passions but say very little about the Elizabethan age. For a true picture of the Elizabethan age one goes to Ben Jonson and not Shakespeare. In the Alchemist and Volpone, Ben Jonson dramatizes the dark side of the Renaissance, while the Renaissance liberated the imagination and opened the door to the unknown, it also gave an impetus to lust for gold, for all earthly pleasures. Jonson satirizes man's inordinate lust for gold and prosperity. He unmasks his characters and shows literally the dog beneath the skin - the animal in man. The very names of the characters suggest the extent of their fall, their brutality and their beastly nature. Volpone is a fox, Voltore is a vulture, Mosca is a fly and so on. Lust, greed, dissimulation are the dominant humours governing these characters. Ben Jonson reveals the inner life of the average citizen of the Elizabethan age by highlighting their character traits according to the theory of humours in this sense. Jonson weaves his comedy from the staple of tragedy. After all, the decline and fall of man is tragic and Jonson very successfully shows the comic possibilities of a tragic theme.

Volpone begins with gold worship. In his opening speech Volpone underlines the dominant passion of his life - that is - love of gold. "Good morning to the day; and, next, my gold. Open the shrine, that I may see my saint."

The passage at once seems rather awkward and punny, ludicrous and tragic. The highly rhetorical language of Volpone is a measure of shame, hollowiness and degrading values associated with his personality. Volpone's delusion is Faustian, gold leads to all things human beings generally aspire to:

"Thou art virtue gone

Honour and all things else who can get"

Ben Jonson sets forth the theme in the opening scene. He expases Valpone as well as the general mass of the Elizabethan men and women. Above all, he shows that Valpone derives a kind of perverse delight by exploring the greedy people who flock to him. Valpone delights in his sport, of hunting the treasure-hunters. More in the cunning purchase of his wealth, than the glad possibilities, Valpone is a comedy which often shows the sharp edge of satire. Depravity of Valpone is despicable and he in turn despises the legacy-hunters awaiting his death like birds of prey:

"Now, now my clients . . ."

Begin their visitation"

Valpone is a complex book and maybe approached from many angles. As a satire, it measures the angle of deviation from the norms and moral principles, 'What a rare punishment?' It is avarice to its core. At times Valpone talks like an enlightened man fully aware of moral implications of the game he is playing.

Valpone is rooted in the reality of the age; it also offers a criticism of the age. So to quote S.C. Knight:

"~~Jonson's~~ ^{Jonson's} peculiar triumph was whilst apparently engaged in nothing more than building up a vigorous comic action, to enforce a variety of recognition that blends a deadly serious criticism of life."

At times of vicious characters themselves, without apparent incongruity are made to indicate the reality that condemns them. A lawyer ready to disinherit his son, a husband, and a very jealous one, staking the honour of his wife for the sake of gold, provides examples of perversions at once comic and grotesque. ^{He has no compunction} Ben Jonson ^{calls} personates the same theme with slight variations in both ^a ^{pi} ^c The Alchemist and Valpone. Central to both the plays are the theme of man's greedy vulnerabilities and consequent fall.

To sum up, Jonson is neither the classicist whose learning puts a barrier between himself and the experience of his age; nor the purely native product in whom a certain provinciality is the price of forthright vigour, he is a man who having seen and learnt from other civilizations, puts it thoroughly at home in his own time and place. The result of this blend is an uncommon poise and strength which give its unique character to Volpone.