

WORKS of Ben Jonson

Jonson's work is in strong contrast with that of Shakespeare and of the later Elizabethan dramatists. Alone he fought against the romantic tendency of the age and to restore the classic standards. Thus the whole action of his drama usually covers only a few hours, or a single day. He never takes liberties with historical facts as Shakespeare does but is accurate to the smallest detail. His dramas abound in classical learning are carefully and logically constructed and comedy and tragedy are kept apart, instead of crowding each other as they do in Shakespeare and in life. In one respect his comedies are worthy of careful reading - they are intensely realistic, presenting men and women of the time exactly as they were. From a few of Jonson's scenes we can

understand - better than from all the plays of Shakespeare - how men talked and acted during the Age of Elizabeth.

Tonson's first comedy, 'Every man in his Humour', is a key to all his dramas. The word "humour" in his age stood for some characteristic whim or quality of society. Tonson gives to his leading character some prominent humor, exaggerates it, as the cartoonist enlarges the most characteristic feature of a face and so holds it before our attention that all other qualities are lost sight of, which is the method that Dickens used later in many of his novels. 'Every man in his Humour' was the first of three satires. Its special aim was to ridicule the humors of the city. The second, 'Cynthia's Revels' satirized the humors of the court while

the third, 'The Poetaster' the result of a quarrel with his contemporaries, was levelled at the false standards of the poets of the age.

The three best known of Jonson's comedies are 'Volpone', or 'The Fox', 'The Alchemist', and 'Epicoene', or 'The Silent Woman'. 'Volpone' is a keen and merciless analysis of a man governed by an overwhelming love of money for its own sake. The first words in the first scene are a key to the whole comedy:

(Volpone)

Good morning to the day, and next, my gold open the shrine that I may see my saint. Hail the world's soul and mine!

Volpone's method of increasing his wealth is to play upon the avarice of men. He pretends to be at the point

of death and his "suitors", who know his love of gain and that he has no heirs, endeavour hypocritically to sweeten his last moments by giving him rich presents, so that he will leave them all his wealth.

The intrigues of these suitors furnish the story of the play and show to what infamous depths avarice will lead a man.

'The Alchemist' is a study of quackery on one side and of gullibility on the other, founded on the mediaeval idea of the philosopher's stone and applied as well to the patent medicines and get-rich-quick schemes of our day as to the peculiar forms of quackery with which Jonson was more familiar. In plot and artistic construction 'The Alchemist' is an almost perfect specimen of the best English drama. It has some remarkably good passages,

and is the most readable of Jonson's plays.

'Epicoene, or the Silent woman', is a prose comedy exceedingly well constructed full of life, abounding in fun and unexpected situations.

Besides these, and many other less known comedies, Jonson wrote two great tragedies, 'Sejanus' (1603) and 'Catiline' (1611) upon severe classical lines.

The end.

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