

Antitheatricalism – ben jonson

Experience, Human Nature



Antitheatricalism in Light of Ben Jonson's Volpone Commentary by Joel Culpepper
Crossdressing in England was mostly opposed by the Fundamentalist branch of the Protestant Church known as the Puritans. The Puritan dogma, much like the concept of transvestism, was constantly challenged. Puritans found resistance in the religious authorities of the Church of England and the English government. Before 1536, the Roman Catholic Church was unimpeded and always won over Puritan proposals regarding legislation.

Without a cooperative political ear, the Puritans resorted to experimental spiritual expression by changing their social behavior and structuring. Due to these changes, a formidable way of attacking the theater's use of crossdressing was developed- public preaching and pamphlets. Other individuals and groups (like the Juvenalians) supported the moral and social reform movement by speaking and writing essays and books on the subject. Due to the nature the actor's role in Ben Jonson's Volpone, the play was also implicated in this moral battle.

The ideology behind the Puritan protest was based on biblical sentiment and the patristic literary tradition of Roman writers like Tertullian and St. Augustine. The Puritan's religious banner for combatting gender transgression was Deuteronomy 22: 5- 'The woman shall not wear that which pertains to a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment' (Tiffany 58). In general, pagan myths were also associated with crossdressing. Puritans like William Pryne labeled these actors as " beastly male monsters" that " degenerate into women" (Tiffany 59).

Further, the Puritans feared that men dressing as women caused the men in the audience to lust for real females and to form homoerotic desires for the male actors (the reverse was also true for women). The Puritan fear also opposed androgynous Renaissance clothing and women's "male" hairstyles, as documented in Phillip Stubbes' 1583 *Anatomy of Abuses*. Jonson was more than aware of these Puritan sentiments. In *Volpone*, Volpone hopes Celia will submit sexually and "have [her] in more modern forms... such as a "Brave Tuscan lady, or proud Spanish beauty" (Campbell 3. 7. 226, 228). Volpone seems to be conveyor of Jonson's acknowledgment of the actor's transformative ability - a part of the playwright's (and the actor's) self concern of the real drama within a play, or metadrama. In Volpone's subsequent proposal to Celia, crossdressing is coupled with androgyny. Male and female spirits are joined in harmony because their lips "transfuse [their] wandering souls" (Campbell 3. 7. 234).

One's point of view might relate this as a matter of homosexual or heterosexual sex. The passage could also (ironically) refer to the Puritan sponsored sacrament of marriage- a holy sacrament. It must also be mentioned that Volpone's ending also provides an element of punishment for sins- lust, avarice and deception being among them. Jonson's blatant use of classical satire as farce links the feminine male with naivety or aggressiveness that demeans love and advocates the scholarly, independent male identity.

The female image in his plays is often masculine- true to the actor's real physicality and the surrounding male chauvinist population. Interestingly,

Jonson allows the head male character, Volpone, to be exceedingly great at his craft of deception while the virtuous Celia adopts an irrational, painful way to keep herself a virgin. Celia vows she will swallow hot coals rather than submit to Volpone's desires. The Puritans' homophobia is also apparent in Volpone.

Volpone makes sure (through explanation) that even though he acted the part of Antonias (a supposed lover of a gay king) for the non-heterosexual King Henry III, he is a ladies' man. Volpone claims that he "attracted/ The eyes and ears of all the ladies present" (Campbell 3. 7. 164). In another reversal of gender, Lady Would-be notices her husband with someone she believes to be a female prostitute dressed as a young man. After belittling her husband for this by calling him a client of a "female devil," she realizes her mistake and apologizes.

This situation supports the possibility that Jonson believed the Puritans were making a mistake (like Lady Would-Be) in ignoring permanent, masculine reality and challenging the temporary, imaginative, and effeminate role of actors for immorality. Morality, the main goal of the Antitheatrical movement in the Renaissance, was both supported and denounced by Jonson in various ways. However, the general perception is that Jonson (unlike Shakespeare) fueled the fires of degradation- implicating women with the weakness, lack of intelligence, and reason they were believed to exude.

In the annals of theatrical history, Jonson's metadrama could be said to perpetuate this social stereotype. Nevertheless, Jonson's crossing of the gender line and sexual scenes like Volpone's "flashing" of Celia were enough

to have religious, moral, and social commentators screaming blood murder. Two issues demand prominence in the play. While outwardly a play driven by blatant genderless controversy, the inward thematic, character-driven nature of Volpone suggests a conformity and adherence to the intellectual and theological moralism of the time. <http://www.english.uga.edu/cdesmet/joel/PURITAN.html>