

‘A more familiar straine’: puppetry and burlesque,
or, translation as debasement in Ben Jonson’s
Bartholomew Fair

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Amidst the several aspects which have traditionally been part of Ben Jonson’s rather uncertain literary reputation, one of the most persistent and - it is fair to say - most difficult to counter may be the depiction of this Poet Laureate as a paradigm of the pedantic Classicist¹. His much quoted strictures on some of his contemporaries’ less solid Classical scholarship, combined with the tradition of a clichéd and always disadvantageous comparison with Shakespeare, have continued to turn what Jonson and most of his contemporaries and immediate followers would have regarded as an asset and a source of authority - his unquestionable scholarship - into a liability, or, at best, into a target for what Eliot famously called ‘the praise that quenches all desire to read the book’².

It is not, however, the purpose of this paper to secure the continuity of another long-standing, and almost as wearisome, critical tradition - that of the complaint about Jonson’s unfair critical reputation. Its aim is rather to point out how in one of Jonson’s best-known, and today most-valued, comedies the satiric purpose can be guided by Jonson’s assumption of the Classics as reference and yardstick; and, further, to argue that, in the same comedy, Jonson construes the practices he denounces in such a way that they become a case in point for such present-day critical concerns as the interest in the modes of rewriting and the study of the strategies involved in translation.

The comedy in question could seem, however, the unlikeliest place in Jonson’s *oeuvre* to look for a consequence of his unremitting admiration for classical standards: after all, *Bartholomew Fair* has in recent years become the centre of a reassessment of Jonson’s dramatic vitality, and it has become so precisely on the basis of values antithetical to those - riot rather than order, profusion and dispersion rather than economy and discipline, a reconciliation with popular culture rather than a forbidding assumption of high culture. Alternatively to, or rather complementing, this predominantly Bakhtinian reappraisal of Jonson centered around *Bartholomew Fair*³, this comedy has convincingly been presented as a decisive step in a development of his work which may have

¹ On this aspect of Jonson’s reputation, see Haynes, Jonathan 1992: *The Social Relations of Jonson’s Theater*. Cambridge, CUP: 1.

² Eliot, T. S. 1932: Ben Jonson (1919). *Selected Essays*. London, Faber: (147-160) 147.

³ See Bakhtin, Mikhail 1968: *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press. As part of a growing interest in the study of festive traditions, and for readings of Jonson in that light, see: Bristol, Michael D. 1985: *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England*. New York and London, Methuen; Hayes, Tom 1985: *The Birth of Popular Culture: Ben Jonson, Maid Marian and Robin Hood*. Pittsburgh, PA, Duquesne U.P.; Hutton, Ronald 1994: *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700*. Oxford, OUP; Laroque, François 1991: *Shakespeare’s Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*, trans. Janet Lloyd. Cambridge, CUP; Marcus, Leah S. 1986: *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the defense of old holiday pastimes*. Chicago, Ill, Univ. of Chicago Press; and the final chapter in Haynes 1992: 119-138.

brought him nearer to, rather than confirmed a distance from, Shakespeare and romantic comedy - a critical trend decisively buttressed by Anne Barton's 1984 study *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*¹.

It has to be acknowledged, however, that, from the outset, Jonson places *Bartholomew Fair* under the aegis of a balanced consideration of the learned and the popular, trying to draw the line by drawing up a formal compromise between both. The 'Indvction on the Stage' acknowledges the inevitability of the play being staged in a place which shares the status of a theatre and a bear-pit - but it also suppresses the impertinence of a 'Stage-Keeper' who would like the comedy to pander to the less demanding aspects of popular taste and the easiest strategies to elicit the audience's laughter. It will be up to the 'Booke-holder' to represent the author in the formal proposal of a 'Covenant' which will commit each member of the audience to respect the theatrical event, and to have the humility not to get 'about his wit'; but such a contract will in exchange promise an amusement whose acknowledged forms, in characters and situations, represent a willingness to compromise which might be difficult to find in the majority of Jonson's previous plays and critical statements. The terms of the 'Covenant' show a Jonson concerned with establishing clear limits to his giving in - or, in the words of Jonathan Haynes (1992: 135), feeling that '[his] art envelops the fair, but the Fair must not envelop his art.'

It will prove particularly relevant to the concerns of this paper that, in the terms of that covenant, the author's most extreme concession will refer to *puppets* - at the end of a passage more often quoted with regard to the dismissive allusions in it to Shakespeare's romances:

[the *Author*] is loth to make Nature afraid in his *Playes*, like those that beget *Tales*, *Tempest*, and such like *Drolleries*, to mixe his head with other mens heeles, let the concupisence of *Iigges* and *Dances*, raigne as strong as it will amongst you: yet if the *Puppets* will please any body, they shall be entreated to come in. ('The Indvction on the Stage' 129-34)²

And the puppets will indeed come in, by the hand of a character who, to the extent that he is an author of sorts (and very much proud of that quality), and that he is by profession a *proctor* (i.e., someone who acts on behalf of others), could be an on-stage surrogate for the dramatist. But the character in question will be allowed to be so only in the diminutive and demeaning sense conferred by his name, Littlewit, the name being a first and immediately obvious feature of a characterization which will expand from the character's intellect to the kind of entertainment - puppet plays - which propels him to the Fair, and will expand further to the judgment the play will unfold on the role to be played by writing, learning and morality in an environment of popular amusement and transgression.

In fact, the first words on Littlewit (which are virtually the first words in the play), when the stagekeeper comes forward to apologise for a delay, since 'He that should beginne the Play, Master *Littlewit*, the *Proctor*, has a stitch new falne in his black silk stocking' ('Indvction' 2-4), ascribe to him a fastidiousness with clothing (later to be confirmed as an obsession with fashion) which is often the sign of a fool in Jonsonian comedy. And when Littlewit finally does come on stage his first words will take up again the image of the silk thread to give voice to a delighted self-assessment in the use of language which may be as decisive as his vanity for his exposure as would-be author:

A Pretty conceit, and worth the finding! I ha' such luck to spinne out these fine things still, and like a Silkeworme, out of my selfe. (I-1: 1-3)

Littlewit's delight in a mode of creation which rests, as is the case here, on the 'witty' discovery of verbal coincidences, is, from Jonson's cultural perspective, a clear sign of a diseased use of language and a diseased imagination, guided by 'Opinion' - the consequence being that words are generated by words rather than by 'sense' or 'substance', as he would put it in several

¹ Published by Cambridge University Press.

² The edition used is: Herford, C. H. and Percy Simpson eds. 1938: *Ben Jonson*, vol. VI. Oxford, Clarendon Press. Henceforth cited by act, scene and line numbers.

passages of *Timber, or Discoveries*, his collection of maxims and reflections¹. The same passage can be read also as a satiric indictment of an attitude to creation which prizes originality above dutiful *imitatio*². And it characterizes this author of puppet-plays, and all those who have as little wit as he, as easily seduced by the surface of things - as of language - and as unable to see beyond it. This limitation, and his penchant for fashion, will lead him to parade his wife and her new clothes before the gallants who come to his house, and prevent him from seeing any harm in their familiar treatment of her (I-2: 1ff); and, combined with his obsession with the success of his puppet play, the same limitation will make him later abandon her to the pimps in the Fair, mistaken for 'good company', 'honest Gentlemen' (IV-5: 3, 8).

This unwitting assumption of the role of a pimp will converge with Littlewit's irresponsibility when, already in the puppet booth, he declares: 'I would not haue any notice taken, that I am the *Author*, till we see how it passes' (V-3: 23-4). And the faults of this puppet playwright will be fully confirmed in his play and in the diminutive theatre where it will be performed. It is a booth where pretensions to learning expose themselves in a promiscuous mingling of historical and cultural references, and in the puppet master's utter inability to discriminate between different sources and times. The biblical and the contemporary, the remote and the familiar, moral *exempla* and instances of misrule - all are muddled up in Leatherhead's personal and theatrical memory, and all prostituted for an easy, though petty, profit:

O the *Motions*, that I *Lanthorne Leatherhead* haue giuen light to, i' my time (...)! *Ierusalem* was a stately thing; and so was *Niniue*, and the city of *Norwich*, and *Sodom and Gomorrah*; with the rising o' the prentises; and pulling downe the bawdy houses there, vpon *Shroue-Tuesday*; but the *Gunpowder-plot*, there was a get-penny! (V-1: 6-12)

It is true that Jonson's dramatic practice will seldom match point by point his critical pronouncements, and that *Bartholomew Fair*, the development of its plot coinciding with the discrediting of all those who claim authority, has convincingly been argued to be the culminating point in the mollification of Jonson, the satirist; moreover, Jonson was trained, as Creaser puts it, in 'the pervasive rhetorical culture of the sixteenth century in which minds were trained to argue *in utramque partem*, on both sides of any question'³. However, in that clearest possible denial of all literary decorum which is Leatherhead's description of his theatrical experience, a possible sympathy for the zest with which it is presented does not invalidate the judgment which derives from the puppet booth's neighbourhood of thieves, pimps and prostitutes. The diminutive nature of this theatre is another implicit judgment passed on the quality and on the moral and cultural dimensions of everything it will be concerned with - ultimately, through all the characters which converge to it, the world as the Fair allegorically (re)presents it; but Jonson will have as a specific satiric target a cultural self-confidence of which he makes Leatherhead the spokesman, associating it, from the outset, with overweening ignorance.

The revealing passage comes immediately after the one last quoted, when Leatherhead claims:

Your home-borne proiects proue euer the best, they are so easie, and familiar, they put too much learning i' their things now o'dayes: and that I feare will be the spoile o'this. (V-1: 14-17)

It is as if, by putting this defence of native cultural production in the voice of Leatherhead, Jonson were questioning the whole ambition to promote the dignity of vernacular literary culture which pervades a great deal of English Renaissance writing - an ambition and a purpose, it should be added, to which Jonson, concerned in particular with redeeming dramatic literature from a

¹ Herford and Simpson eds. 1947: *Ben Jonson*, vol.VIII. Oxford, Clarendon Press: 555-649. Henceforth cited as *Discoveries*, followed by line numbers.

² For Jonson's praise of *imitatio*, see *Discoveries* 2466ff.

³ Creaser, John 1994: *Enigmatic Ben Jonson*. > Corder, Michael et al. eds. 1994: *English Comedy*. Cambridge, CUP: (100-118) 115

menial position, was to commit himself personally with his 1616 Folio publication of his *Works*, at the time seen by many as weirdly pretentious¹. Leatherhead's rejection of 'too much learning' is equally damning, but Littlewit's play will be ultimately denounced not so much for an aversion to learning, but rather for its incompetent handling - an incompetent *imitatio*.

Having read the puppet play's title, whose incongruities and weird connotations promptly denounce Jonson's burlesque strategy -

'The ancient moderne history of *Hero*, and *Leander*, otherwise called *The Touchstone of true Loue*, with as true a tryall of friendship, betweene *Damon*, and *Pythias*, two faithfull friends o' the Bankside' (V-3: 6-10)

Bartholmew Cokes, a character whose limitations will make him the ideal spectator in the puppet booth, will ask the crucial question: 'But doe you play it according to the printed booke? I haue read that' (V-3: 106-7). The 'printed book' would in this case be Christopher Marlowe's narrative poem *Hero and Leander* (1598), which, together with George Chapman's additions to it (1598-1613), had proved a considerably popular instance of the Elizabethan taste for Ovidian-style brief epics of erotic and mythological content - here probably conflated with Richard Edwards's *The Excellent Comedie of two of the most faithfulest Freendes, Damon and Pithias*². But even if it is probable that Jonson would hardly find such works congenial, his satiric target is rather, in this case, a disrespect for them which he might fear to amount to a more generic disrespect for the integrity of the written word, of the inviolable source. Leatherhead's answer to Cokes's query is unequivocal - also in its direct quotation of passages from the first lines of Marlowe's poem:

By no meanes, Sir. (...) A better way, Sir, that is too learned, and poetically for our audience; what doe they know what *Hellespont* is? Guilty of true loues blood? or what *Abidos* is? or the other *Sestos* hight? (...) No, I haue entreated Master *Littlewit*, to take a little paines to reduce it to a more familiar straine for our people. (V-3: 108, 110-13)

The point will be made even clearer by Littlewit himself:

I haue onely made it a little easie, and *moderne* for the times, Sir, that's all; As, for the *Hellespont* I imagine our *Thames* here; and then *Leander*, I make a Diers sonne, about *Puddle-wharfe*: and *Hero* a wench o' the *Banke-side*, who going ouer one morning, to old fish-street; *Leander* spies her land at *Trigsstayers*, and falls in loue with her: Now do I introduce *Cupid*, hauing *Metamorphos'd* himselfe into a Drawer, and hee strikes *Hero* in loue with a pint of *Sherry*, and other pretty passages there are, o' the friendship, that will delight you, Sir, and please you of iudgement. (V-3: 120-30)

And the satiric point is surely a mistrust of rewriting. As André Lefevre puts it, 'rewriting manipulates, and it is effective', and works have often been 'rewritten to bring [them] in line with the "new" dominant poetics'³ - in this case, the doubtful poetics of the Fair, or rather a pattern of taste for which Jonson's scorn, in the context of all the characteristic pronouncements which reveal his cultural perspective, is only to be expected.

As Lefevre also adds (1992: 9), 'translation is the most obviously recognizable type of rewriting', and so it should come as no surprise that the issues raised by the passages just quoted should easily lend themselves to consideration in the light of some of the most persistent *topoi* in Translation Studies. One such *topos* which has recently gained a renewed relevance, after having been available since at least the early nineteenth century, concerns the opposition between

¹ See Dutton, Richard 1983: *Ben Jonson: to the First Folio*. Cambridge, CUP.

² See Dutton, Richard 1983: *Ben Jonson: to the First Folio*. Cambridge, CUP.

³ Lefevre, André 1992: *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. London, Routledge: 9, 19.

'foreignizing' and 'nativising' strategies of translation. The German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher is credited with having provided one of the first and most memorable formulations of this opposition in his 1813 essay 'Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens' ('On the Different Methods of Translating')¹. For Schleiermacher, only two possibilities are available for the 'genuine translator' to further his concern with bringing author and reader together:

Entweder der Übersetzer läßt den Schriftsteller möglichst in Ruhe, und bewegt den Leser ihm entgegen; oder er läßt den Leser möglichst in Ruhe und bewegt den Schriftsteller ihm entgegen. (Schleiermacher 1813: 47)

Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him. Or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author toward him. (Lefevre ed. 1992: 149)

Schleiermacher further argues that the two methods are mutually exclusive, requiring the translator to make a fundamental option for one or the other, and that they are an all-embracing alternative, to the extent that other supposedly diverse methods can be proved to be encompassed by those two basic strategies. On the first, or 'foreignizing' method, and insofar as it will involve keeping the tone of the text 'strange' or 'foreign' (*fremd, ausländisch*), Schleiermacher (1813: 54-55) points out how difficult and even 'humiliating' it can be for a writer to have to give up the best forms of his mother tongue for a discourse patterned after the foreign language - the very literalness of the rendering inviting charges of clumsiness. He further argues that:

diese Methode des Uebersetzens nicht in allen Sprachen gleich gut gedeihen kann, sondern nur in solchen die nicht in zu engen Banden eines klassischen Ausdrucks gefangen liegen, außerhalb dessen alles verwerflich ist. (Schleiermacher 1813: 56)

this method of translating cannot thrive equally well in all languages, but only in those which are not the captives of too strict a bond of classical expression outside of which all is reprehensible. (Lefevre ed. 1992: 157)

And, as another *sine qua non* condition for this method, Schleiermacher postulates the need for a nation to acknowledge as positive the access to, and the understanding of foreign works (Schleiermacher 1813: 58).

As to the opposite method, it is described as that which expects no effort on the part of the reader, since the foreign work is brought over to him:

wie es sein würde, wenn der Verfasser selbst es ursprünglich in des Lesers Sprache geschrieben hätte (Schleiermacher 1813: 58-9).

as it would have been if the author himself had originally written it in the reader's language (Lefevre ed. 1992: 159).

This nativising method is acknowledged to allow an adequate cultivation of the beauties of the translator's mother tongue, and it is found to work ideally when the level of sophistication of the source and target languages is similar. But Schleiermacher's misgivings about this user-friendly strategy become clear when he considers the reply an imaginary reader might give on being offered a text translated in such a way that it could have been originally produced in the target language:

Ich bin dir eben so verbunden, als ob du mir des Mannes Bild gebracht hättest, wie er aussehen würde, wenn seine Mutter ihn mit einem andern Vater erzeugt hätte. (Schleiermacher 1813: 67)

¹ Schleiermacher, Friedrich 1813: Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens. > Störig, Hans Joachim herausg. 1973: *Das Problem des Übersetzens*. Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: 38-70. Passages in English will be quoted from the translation provided by Lefevre, André ed. 1992: *Translation / History / Culture: A Sourcebook*. London, Routledge: 141-166.

I am so much obliged to you, just as I would have been if you had brought me a picture of the author just as he would have looked if his mother had conceived him by another father. (Lefevere ed. 1992: 167)

The implication is that when one nativises a text, one is somehow bastardizing it, and Schleiermacher's limited sympathy for this method reveals itself further in considerations on how one can thus 'disfigure' the original work.

Misgivings of a different nature, but likewise directed at the nativising strategy, would recently be voiced in Lawrence Venuti's 1995 *The Translator's Invisibility*, a book which explicitly derives its point of departure and its argumentative design from Schleiermacher's essay.¹ Underlining how 'the ethnocentric violence of translation' will become most obvious in 'a domesticating method, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values', and also explicitly concerned with countering the hegemonic, centripetal drive of 'Anglo-American culture (...) [which] has long been dominated by domesticating theories', Venuti sponsors the notion that, out of a respect for 'the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text', for its otherness, 'foreignizing translation (...) is highly desirable today'.

A similar concern with the respect for otherness, and with the role to be played in furthering that respect by the culturally predicated 'notion of translatability', as also by 'translation' in a sense broader than the inter-linguistic one, informs Wolfgang Iser's 1994 lecture 'On Translatability: Variables of Interpretation'. For Iser, the plurality of inter-cultural contacts characteristic of 'a rapidly shrinking world' requires constant alterations in one's frame of reference, 'the various modes in which otherness manifests itself [being] already modes of translation', and the many changes of viewpoint entailed by cultural encounters 'run[ning] counter to the idea of one culture being superior to another (...) hence translatability emerges as a counter-concept to cultural hegemony', 'to the otherwise prevailing idea of cultural hierarchy'.

At this stage, the question may legitimately arise: what have these characteristic late twentieth-century concerns to do with an instance of the burlesque in an early seventeenth-century play? We have already suggested that Jonson's satiric representation of what happens when a text is transposed from a learned cultural register with Classical antecedents into the language of popular culture could be seen as an instance of translation. To the extent that such a 'translation' is coincidental with the production of a burlesque - i.e., a degraded and risible version of the original text - translation will mean, in this case, debasement, disfigurement, bastardization (to use a few of the words employed above). And it will already have become obvious too from the juxtaposition of a few passages from *Bartholomew Fair* descriptive of the puppet-play-within-the-play with some remarks on an opposition famous in Translation Studies that what Jonson satirizes is something analogous to a domesticating, nativising strategy. There will be no doubt either that Jonson bases his satiric attack on the wish to see the source literature and culture respected. But these analogies should not obscure the equally enlightening fact that there is a world of difference - of historic and cultural difference - between the assumptions on which Jonson bases his attack and the present-day critique of a 'domesticating' translation method. Whereas the latter is carried out in the name of a denial of the superiority of any one culture to another, Jonson would hardly entertain doubts as to the superiority or inferiority of some cultures, and some cultural levels - and also as to which would be superior and which inferior. Even if we cannot take for granted that his stance would be at all times coherent throughout the different genres he cultivated, the satiric or lamenting treatment given in several of Jonson's plays, poems and epigrams to the possible consequences of a 'democratisation' of taste and of the authority to pass judgment on poetry is sufficiently similar to his pronouncements in several passages of *Discoveries*² on the vulgarity of the crowds, and on the ignorance of many pretenders to learning, to allow us to infer that such pronouncements would represent a consistently-held view. Furthermore, the present-day critique of the nativising method in translation (in particular as we find it in Lawrence Venuti) sets out its

¹ Venuti, Lawrence 1995: *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London, Routledge.

² E.g. *Discoveries* 228-35, 273-96, 587-668, 730-1, 756.

'ethnocentric violence', meaning to denounce, from the inside of an imperialistic language (English), the hegemonic designs it supposedly has on the texts from peripheral languages it 'domesticates'; in Jonson's case, on the other hand, the 'violence' of a misappropriation is represented as inflicted, by the (by Jonson much despised) low-culture English aspirers to a petty power and a petty learning, on a cultural level and legacy (the Classics or their learned reception) whose effective cultural power Jonson would like to go unquestioned and to see expanded.

The debasement involved in 'translating' *Hero and Leander* to the Fair, already anticipated in Leatherhead's and Littlewit's description of the puppet-play, will be confirmed in performance by the effectiveness of a burlesque in which the subtle rhetoric of sensual titillation proper to Marlowe's poem is 'translated' into low-life situations and language. Cokes, a mockery of the ideal spectator, promptly salutes the adequacy of the translation strategy by declaring, in the midst of an exchange of insults between some of the puppet characters: 'He sayes he is no *Pandar*. 'Tis a fine language; I vnderstand it, now' (V-4: 163-4). That no character or reference will escape debasement is made clear when Hero is 'translated' from priestess to prostitute - '*Mistresse Hero's a whore*' (V-4: 330) - and a Cupid turned publican takes on a momentary oracular function and declares, amidst generalised insults and aggressions: '*Whore-masters all!*' (V-4: 352).

This general indictment could, of course, be the ultimate utterance of the satirist who, despairing of the possibility of reforming mankind, abandons the curative purpose and turns misanthrope - a change which satirists have often been suspected of undergoing, Jonson being no exception. In the context of the final scenes of *Bartholomew Fair*, however, Cupid-the-publican's judgment is indeed a global denial of authority, but, rather than signalling despair and misanthropy, it heralds a shoulder-shrugging acknowledgment of an inescapable and flawed humanity on the part of the austere Classicist submerged by the Fair. As suggested earlier in this paper, this play is now broadly accepted to be the site where Jonson surrenders his satiric acerbity - in a *finale* where Judge Overdo, who in his inflexibility, his willingness to pass judgment on others, and his proneness to invoke grand Classical precedents, could be the clearest *alter ego* for his creator; a *finale* where Overdo has to let go of his previous stance and accept an injunction to forgiveness, drunken forgetfulness and conviviality:

remember you are but *Adam*, Flesh, and Blood! you haue your frailty, forget your other name of *Ouerdoo*, and inuite vs all to supper. There you and I will compare our *discoveries*; and drowne the memory of all enormity in your bigg'st bowle at home. (V-5: 96-100)

Having dealt with the punitive side of an author who laid his most explicit claim to authority in a volume he called *Discoveries*, but may in this passage have signalled his own dis-authorization, allow me to salute that shift, at the end of my paper, by paraphrasing a famous passage from a totally different comedy by another playwright - or should I perhaps say *the* other playwright? - and declare: 'Bless thee, Jonson, thou art translated!'

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