



The Influence of Ben Jonson on Restoration Plays: A Comparative Analysis of Selected Plays

Jahnu Deori

Post Graduate in English

Department of English

Central University of Punjab, Ghudda, India

jahnudeori11@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper briefly discusses the influence of Ben Jonson's comedies, particularly *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* on the Restoration Comedies. A comparative study is performed between Ben Jonson's aforementioned plays and Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*. The study ideally focused on the similarities in themes and characters of Jonson's comedies with that of Oliver Goldsmith's and William Wycherley's plays. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the Restoration period was greatly influenced by the comedy of manners. Most of the plays borrowed the style and characterization of Jonson's comedy of humor, with slight deviations like the light-hearted, neat, and more zestful. Jonson had a strong influence on the comedies and it is bounced in numerous works of the Restoration writers as well.

Index Terms – Ben Jonson, Restoration Play, Comedy of Humor, Influence, Imitation, Inspiration, Themes, Characters.

I. INTRODUCTION

Many performances of Jonson's plays between 1660 and 1682, as well as the popular and critical acclaim he received during that time, would appear to imply a major Jonsonian influence. Ben Jonson's influence is easily discernible in the comedies of the Restoration Period. The imitation of his judgment, his humor, his plot construction, use of wit and repartee, etc. are found in the comedies of the following period. Jonson's incident, characters, and even expressions are borrowed from the playwrights. His innovative practices of 'humor characters' in satirical comedies were highly influential and hence, provided an ingenious layout for many Restoration comedies. His output and popularity remain remarkable to this day and he is often termed as "One of the most vigorous minds that ever added to the strength of English Literature (Morley,1892)." In this paper, Jonson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, are compared and analysed to demonstrate the similarities in their themes and characterisations. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that the countless performances of his plays and the widespread popularity of his work had a significant impact on the works of the Restoration period.

II. DISCUSSION

The similarities between selected Jonson plays and restoration plays are rather apparent. A thorough analysis of the plays reveals that Jonson's themes and characterizations have had a significant influence on the restoration plays. Jonsonian concept of character and theme was very much regarded and highly imitated. We can see that most of the themes of the English Renaissance are also seen in the Restoration plays.

2.1 Similarities In Themes

Greed, Deception, and Lust are the most common themes in all of the mentioned comedies. Considering the mentioned plays, these themes and ideas of renaissance work are the common elements in the plays of the two eras. Since the eras were very close, the influence and inspiration are plausible.

2.1.1 Greed

Jonson's *Volpone* satirizes "avarice", which can be thought of as greed that extends not just to money but also to all objects of human desire. While greed fuels the pursuit of money, power, and respect, it ultimately renders everyone in the play dumb, disgusting, and spiritually and monetarily destitute. In the play, Volpone and Mosca plan to dupe Corvino, Corbaccio, and Voltore into parting with their goods but Volpone ends up losing his own property.

The Alchemist is rife with vice and sin. The play focuses on Face and Subtle, two con men who pose as expert alchemists with knowledge of the philosopher's stone to swindle unsuspecting Londoners. The play satirizes human follies and greed. In the play, Subtle and Face along with their company Dol Common loot gulls out of their pockets. They used the greed of the gulls to fulfill their own greed.

In Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, we can find elements of Greed in the character of Mrs. Hardcastle. She is a vain woman, following fashion and trends, indulging in pretentious ways. She was a greedy and manipulative woman who tried to force her niece into marrying her son to keep her niece's fortune in the family. Of her greed for property, she could build up a healthy relationship with neither her niece or her son.

William Wycherley's, *The Country Wife* deals with greed for status. Mr. Sparkish was a shallow and foolish playboy who only wanted to marry Alethea for her money and status. Sir Jasper Fidget was a money-minded businessman, who was very concerned about the family name and status.

2.1.2 Deception/ Gulling

Deception was a key element in the plays of Jonson. His comedies mostly dealt with falsehood and trickery which created an ambience of humor. It is not necessary that all his tricksters are punished and go through a process of revitalization. For example, in *The Alchemist*, Face did not get any penalty for his deceits and in fact, gets an epilogue in the end. Face, Subtle, and Dol Common are three con men who rob numerous naive Londoners by lying about their expert knowledge of alchemy and elixir. The play revolves around the acts of deception of various characters known to be the 'Gulls'.

Volpone deals with a rather similar theme. Volpone and Mosca fake Volpone's 'grew disease' to possess goods from other equally greedy characters, who were showering him with gifts in the hope of inheriting his property. At the end of the play, they also fake Volpone's death to reprieve the allegation of forcing Corvino's wife into adultery.

In *She Stoops to Conquer*, Mrs. Hardcastle, together with her husband, were deceiving Tony, by keeping his true age a secret. Also, Tony plays a practical joke on Charles Marlow and George Hasting, upon knowing that they were there to visit Hardcastle. He unloads a complicated and amusing set of directions on the visitors and deceives them into believing that the Hardcastle home is really an inn and Mr. Hardcastle is the owner of the inn.

Harry Horner in *The Country Wife* deceits gullible husbands by faking impotency in order to make them trust him with their wives. He then seduces the wives and manages liaisons with them. He carried on his lie till the end of the play and never seized on bedding unhappy wives and took advantage of his fake impotency.

2.1.3 Lechery/ Lust

Volpone was not only a greedy deceiver but also a morally corrupt man who tried to seduce someone else's wife. He tried to force himself on Celia by taking advantage of her husband's greed for his property.

We can see that there was clear evidence of lust in Jonson's *The Alchemist* as well. Dol Common was a prostitute and many a time, there was a salient hint of sexual favors with both subtle and Face. The character Sir Epicure Mammon is a fan of sexual pleasure and imagined luxury. His name itself refers to excess in material and body pleasure. His sexual desires are evitable in his speech where he wishes to have a list of fifty wives and concubines and bed them all in a night.

In *She stoops to conquer*, the rather gentleman Marlow lust for Kate who disguised herself as a maid. He tried to force himself into her and also wanted to buy her virtue with money. Although he is portrayed as a man with honor who is shy in front of ladies of high status, we can see his true face when he is with maids or women of the lower class.

The Country Wife is a clear-cut play dealing with human desires and adultery. In the play, Horner lusts over married women but what is interesting is that the play showcases the desires of women as well. The unhappy married women who are not satisfied with their sex lives mutually indulge in adultery with Horner.

2.1.4 Marriage

In plays of both the ages, marriage is displayed as something which is not based on love but on status and property. During that age, people were more into celebrating libertinism. Marriages were devalued and were seen only as an institution for maintaining name and reputation.

In *Volpone*, Corvino rules over his wife Celia. He is a very jealous husband and treats his wife as his possession. Their relationship was not like that of a happily married couple. He even tried to force Celia into sleeping with Volpone, in the hope of coming into the good books of Volpone and being the inheritor of his property.

Kestrel in *The Alchemist*, is an aggressive brother who only wants his widowed sister to marry a rich man of high status. He doesn't care about the choice of his sister but only wants to use her for immediate wealth and status. He tried to use the concept of marriage as a contract to get a rank. He didn't shy away to force his sister to marry a Spanish count, despite her reluctance.

The same goes in *She stoops to Conquer*, where the courtship of Kate and Marlow is based on their equal status and class. Marlow is not comfortable around women of high class, but to gratify his expectations to court a woman of class he came all the way to Hardcastle's home to court Kate. During his stay, he is deceived by Tony to think that the Hardcastle's home is an inn and the members of the family are the owners and maids of the inn. He mistakes Kate to be a maid and is very comfortable around her. He even tries to seduce her and buy her virtue. Upon knowing that she is a relative of the Hardcastle's, he falls in love with her but refuses to forward any relationship because of their class differences. Eventually, when he gets to know their true identity of Kate he is happier and more than ready to marry her. Also, Mrs. Hardcastle was very forceful toward her son and niece to get married because she wanted to keep Constance's property in the home despite Tony and Constance not being in love and their reluctance to stand on the same ground. Here, the base of marriage is not their love but in fact the social standard and rank of both the families.

The Country Wife, satirizes the very notion of "marriage". Marriage is rather made fun of in the play. All the husbands in the play are more conscious of their family status and their reputation than satisfaction in their marriage life. They do not care about their wife's desires but are afraid of getting cuckolds. Most of their marriages are not because of love but only for business ties. Mr. Pinchwife married a country wife in the hope of not getting cheated upon but nonetheless loses her because of his possessiveness and ignorance towards her desires. The same goes for the Fridges. Horner took advantage of his fake impotency and had numerous affairs with unhappy married wives behind their obnoxious husbands' backs.

2.1.5 Disguise

Disguise was a common factor in Elizabethan plays. Jonson was famous for his use of disguise of his characters in order to bring out different comic elements as well as help in the progression of the story.

In *Volpone*, Volpone disguises himself as Scoto the Mountebank in order to see Celia. Also, at the end of the play, he disguises himself and has the word put out that he is dead.

There are many elements of disguise in *The Alchemist*. Almost all the major characters disguise themselves. Face, undercovers himself as a Captain, and his real name is Jeremy the butler or housekeeper of Lovewit but he is known as the Face over the entire play. Subtle acts as a Doctor and Astrologer, Dol Common disguised herself as the Fairy Queen for Dapper and a mad lady scholar for Mammon. Surly, disguised as a nobleman to reveal the falsification of the tricksters.

The employment of disguise was also evident in the Restoration comedies. In *She stoops to conquer*, Kate disguises herself as a maid and a relative of the Hardcastle's in order to bring out the real nature of Marlow.

Margery Pinchwife in *The Country Wife*, disguised herself as her brother to go out with her husband without notice. She also dressed up as Alethea so she can meet up with Horner.

Disguise produced a comedic effect as well as a sense of suspense while also contributing to the ironic rendering of the plays.

2.2 Characters

Ben Jonson's character portrayals were very much imitated during the Restoration period. We can see similarities in the idiosyncrasies of the characters in the plays of both generations. Comparing the characters of the selected plays, we can say that there is unignorable correspondence between the characters of the plays.

2.2.1 Volpone (*Volpone*) and Mr. Horner (*The Country Wife*)

There are significant similarities between Jonson's *Volpone* and Wycherly's Mr. Horner from *The Country Wife*. Both the characters are the protagonists of their plays, but due to their acts of impostoring others for their own amusement, they are often regarded as antagonists as well. Both the characters have a reputation for lewdness and spreading false rumors in order to gain money and goods from their hopeful heirs in Volpone's case and the trust of the husbands with their wives in the case of Mr. Horner. Volpone was impotent and feigned his illness as fatal so as to get gifts and goods out of the greedy characters, who were hoping to inherit his fortune since there was no one in line after Volpone in his family. Therefore, in a way he used his impotence as a tool to give false hopes to the gulls and trick them out of their money. Similarly, Mr. Horner fakes his impotency so that the local ladies will let their guards down in his presence and their husbands would also trust him with their wives. Both the characters used impotence as a device for their amusement and advantage.

2.2.2 Corvino (*Volpone*) and Jack Pinchwife(*The Country Wife*)

Both Corvino and Jack Pinchwife are jealous husbands who are often cruel to their wives. They treat their wives as their possessions and are controlling to an extreme. Mr. Pinchwife married Margery because he believed she was innocent, naive, and hadn't been touched by the debauchery of the city and therefore it would be easier for him to control her. Celia is a naive and meek character whom Corvino bullies and dominates with her every move. Both the husbands are extremely jealous and suspect their wives and abuse them when their jealousy would get out of control. They even prevent their wives from getting out of their rooms. Corvino doesn't even let Celia come too close to the windows and Mr. Pinchwife used to lock Margery in her room. They depicted the contemporary husbands of both generations who treated their wives as goods and oppressed them in every way possible.

2.2.3 Sir Politic Would-Be (*Volpone*) and Sir Jasper Fidget (*The Country Wife*)

Sir Would Be is a knight and Sir Fidget is a wealthy Businessman. Both the characters did not inherit their status but Sir Would-Be bought the knighthood at a time when the English throne sold knighthoods out to make money and Sir Fidget has made his money through business. Both the characters try so hard to give the appearance of being knowledgeable but are in fact stoke laughter for the audience. They are gullible and are made to be "fools" on the stage as comic characters.

2.2.4 Lady Politic Would-be (*Volpone*) and Mrs. Hardcastle (*She Stoops to Conquer*)

Both the women portray the character of the typical upper-class woman of the Elizabethan and Restoration periods. They are obsessed with fashion and trends. Lady Would-be moved to Venice because of her desire to learn the sophisticated lifestyle of the Venetians. Mrs. Hardcastle has lived all her life in the countryside but is engrossed with the stylish lifestyle in the cities and tries really hard to be updated with whatever is fashionable in the city by following the magazines. Both the characters are extremely vain and are more into showoff than taking care of their family ties.

2.2.5 Women Characters

We can notice the similarities in the presentations of the women characters. In both periods women were expected to be obedient, innocent, naive, meek, and family-oriented. In the selected plays, women characters were depicted to be naive and stupid. They were portrayed as weak, sensitive, and easily manipulative. Celia from *Volpone*, is an ideal woman who is innocent and religious. She is faithful to her husband despite his violent suspiciousness and does whatever her husband asks her for. Her husband tries to force her to sleeping with Volpone in the hope of gaining Volpone's admiration and fortune despite her reluctance to do so. She couldn't fight against her husband and Volpone tries to molest her but is saved by Bonario. Celia is sketched as a rather weak woman who cannot fight for herself against her own husband. Dame Pliant from *The Alchemist*, is a widow who is controlled by her brother. He wants her to remarry, only to a high-class nobleman. He forces her to meet up with a Spanish Count (Surly) even though she was very hesitant to marry a Spanish. She was dominated by her own brother and many times was called names by the same. Mrs. Pinchwife from *The Country Wife*, is a naive and innocent character. She is controlled by her husband and is often abused by him due to his insecurities. Mr. Pinchwife married her because she is unfamiliar with city life and therefore, he thought she wouldn't attempt to cheat on him. But eventually, she gets manipulated by Horner and starts lying to her husband. However, she remains an honest character because she does all that without realizing the inappropriateness

of the acts, and also, she is gullible enough to get manipulated by Horner. Her character is innocent but stupid because she couldn't realize her own misdeed and Horner's intentions with her. Kate from *She Stoops to Conquer*, is a rather conflicting character. Some might say that she is in fact a very brave and intelligent woman who loves and respects her father and dresses the way he likes. She satisfies him by dressing in the old-fashioned manner that he prefers. She tries to win Marlow's love and his real affection by personating as a barmaid. Marlow, thinking of her to be a real maid, falls for her beauty and tries to buy her virtue. Later, when her true identity is revealed, Marlow expresses his love for her. Although Kate isn't a woman who is shy and gullible, she is rather stupid because she believes Marlow to be a modest man even after knowing how he is otherwise with women of the lower class. She falsified the notion of true love and couldn't realize the ambiguous character of Marlow.

III. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis it can be concluded that The Restoration period was greatly influenced by the comedy of manners. Most of the plays borrowed the style and characterization of Jonson's comedy of humor. Jonson had a strong influence on the comedies and it is bounced in numerous works of the Restoration writers as well. The selected plays from the periods have numerous similarities. In the paper, we can see that it is very much evident that the themes of the Restoration comedies were similar to that of Jonson's Renaissance Comedies. His use of deception, greed and sexual desires was withheld along. Also, the characters of the plays were somewhat alike indicating the ascendancy of Jonson. His writings had a stronger influence on subsequent writers, making him a much-regarded Elizabethan playwright who was highly followed by his disciples.

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