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Capitalism in the poetry of Ben Jonson

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Capitalism in the Poetry of Ben Jonson

by

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Capitalism in the Poetry of Ben Jonson

Ben Jonson, like his classical forbears, condemns avarice as an abstract, general sin that represents the basest of human failings. But in his poetry he condemns a kind of avarice, peculiar to his own historical age, which is the product of the England's nascent capitalist economy. Collectively, Jonson's poems offer a scathing critique of capitalism by attacking its practitioners, its urban locus, its intensified commodification of people and things, and by praising the nobility of the old order threatened by the emergence of the new and unfamiliar socio-economic system.

O, but to strike blind the people with our wealth and pomp is the thing!
What a wretchedness is this, to thrust all our riches outward, and be beggars
within; to contemplate nothing but the little, vile, and sordid things of the
world; not the great, noble, and precious! ~ Ben Jonson, *Discoveries*

Ben Jonson's passionate condemnation of avarice in his philosophical treatise *Discoveries* is representative of the obsession with exposing human failings that characterizes many of his most famous dramatic and poetic works. Jonson, of course, was not the first moralist to condemn avarice as the basest of these failings, as this was also a principal concern of his classical forbears. Indeed, explains Gilbert Highet, "we expect the Romans to be scolded for cruelty or for debauchery, for the blood in the arena and the rose-lipped girls. But their critics say, and Juvenal agrees with them, that their besetting sin was Money" (Highet, 53). According to Juvenal himself in Satire 1,

In our society nothing is held in such veneration
as the grandeur of riches, although as yet there stands no temple
for accursed Money to dwell in, no altar erected to Cash (Rudd, 6)

While Jonson was not the first to condemn the avaricious, however, his work can be seen as a departure from that of his predecessors in that it not only condemns avarice as an abstract, general sin, but also as a kind of greed peculiar to his own historical era: the greed endemic in England's nascent capitalist culture.

In works such as *The Alchemist* and *Volpone*, greed manifests itself as faith in the alchemy of easy money, a metaphor for the promise of immediate and lucrative returns on the dubious business transactions of the new, vulgar class of capitalists.

But while such attacks on capitalism are commonplace in his best known dramatic works, Jonson's heavy-handed treatment of capitalism in these plays, as well as the abundance of criticism focusing on this subject, tends to overshadow the more discreet but no less resolute criticism of capitalism in his poems. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate a point generally ignored by critics, that the poems in which Jonson condemns vice and folly and exalts virtue also present a staunch, if subtle, critique of England's emerging capitalist culture.

The emergence of capitalism in early-modern Europe was an international phenomenon that resulted from a complex set of conditions; for our purposes, it is enough to show how the practical and ideological consequences of the new economy in England influenced Jonson's worldview. Joyce Appleby writes:

...the gains of the sixteenth century became the departure point for the sustained growth which has characterized the modern world. The moving force behind this change was economic, but the principal effects were social and intellectual...Disruptions in the most basic relations made the past an uncertain guide to the future...By the beginning of the seventeenth century the persistence of change had brought an end to that equilibrium between people and land, labor and repose, peasant and lord, king and kingdom, production and consumption, custom and circumstance, that had made even the turbulent late Middle Ages appear a part of a timeless order. (Appleby, 3)

Jonson was writing against the background of an emerging socio-economic order that threatened the conservative values he most esteemed. As a monarchist, he deplored the instability that was implicit in the emergence of a rapidly evolving yet unfamiliar economy. Commercialism created a moneyed middle class that began to

challenge the existing social and political hierarchy that Jonson revered both personally and in his writings. His poems often criticize the class of people who have benefited financially from the new opportunities for wealth but lack the nobility of character that he believes is necessary to validate such wealth. As a moralist, Jonson railed against a system of acquiring wealth that was inherently exploitative in addition to its encouraging the vice and folly that he found so repugnant. In many of his poems he lashes out at the predation of capitalists whose shameless opportunism is both exploitative and corrupting—and inimical to traditional notions of morality. Thus, the denunciation of capitalism that emerges from Jonson's poems results from his attacking capitalism and its consequences while praising the old order and personal integrity threatened by these consequences.

Till They Betrayed Themselves To Riches

Jonson explains in *Discoveries* that “It was ancient poverty that founded commonweals, built cities, invented arts, made wholesome laws, armed men against vices, rewarded them with their own virtues, and preserved the honor and state of all nations, till they betrayed themselves to riches” (Jonson, 44). By the early-modern era, the “ancient poverty” that had inspired such feats had been consumed and corrupted by its own achievements. In particular, the city, initially an exemplar of human progress, became invariably tied to capitalist growth and represented for

Jonson all that was bad about the emerging capitalist culture. This theme predominates in many of Jonson's plays, as David Riggs points out that the "greatest achievement of Jonson's mature comedies had been to create an urban environment where vice is indistinguishable from virtue" (Riggs, 241). But Jonson's poems are no less condemnatory in their treatment of the city. In the mock epic "On the Famous Voyage," his heroes undertake to navigate the Fleet Ditch, a former tributary to the Thames that had become a vile cesspool of human and animal waste. Alluding to the Freudian equation of avarice with anality, Bruce Boehrer explains that in "On the Famous Voyage" the Fleet Ditch "functions almost as a repository of the city's collective unconscious" (Boehrer, 162). Such a claim suggests that the city, as the principal locus of capitalist development, was becoming synonymous with greed, as its filth, along with its population, proliferated and became increasingly unmanageable.

Though Freudian analysis (pardon the pun) provides a useful interpretive framework for "On the Famous Voyage," however, for Jonson the example of the feculent Fleet had a more immediate significance that is readily comprehended without recourse to the intricacies of Freud:

For yet no nare was tainted,
Nor thumb nor finger to stop the acquainted,
But open and unarmed encountered all,
Whether it languishing stuck upon the wall
Or were precipitated down the jakes,
And, after, swum abroad in ample flakes,
Or that it lay, heaped like an usurer's mass,
All was to them the same, they were to pass (133-140)

The heroes' equation of the "usurer's mass" with the "ample flakes" that adorned the Fleet ("All was to them the same") not only validates Freud's association of fecal matter with greed, but, more importantly, is characteristic of Jonson's attacks on one of his favorite targets, the consummate capitalist practice of usury.

As the city grew in accordance with the developing capitalist economy, its swelling population also provided a fertile space for the propagation of usurers, who for Jonson exemplified the most egregious excesses of capitalism. In "On Banck the Usurer," Jonson suggests that as a usurer, Banck is actively working toward his own damnation:

Banck feeles no lamenesse of his knottie gout,
His monyes travaile for him, in and out:
And though the soundest legs go every day,
He toyles to be at hell, as soone as they.

This poem is particularly revealing not only because it reflects Jonson's resolute belief that usurers are working inevitably toward damnation, but perhaps more significantly because it suggests that their dogged pursuit of money facilitates their own doom. Because Banck's "monyes travaile for him," his gout is no hindrance as he "toyles to be at hell." Money functions as a sort of nostrum for Banck, ostensibly providing him with comfort and security while in actuality doing nothing more than disguising a profound moral baseness for which he will inevitably be punished.

Jonson develops this theme in "The Praises of a Countrie Life," which at first seems to be an encomium to a lifestyle removed from and unaffected by the transgressions of the city:

Happie is he, that from all Businesse cleere,
As the old race of Mankind were,
With his owne Oxen tills his Sires left lands,
And is not in the Usurers bands (1-4)

After a lengthy meditation on the virtues of country living, however, it is revealed that the musings in the poem are actually those of Alphius the usurer:

These thoughts when Usurer Alphius, now about
To turn mere farmer, had spoke out,
'Gainst th'Ides, his moneys he gets in with paine,
At th'Calends, puts all out againe. (67-70)

For Alphius, usury is akin to farming, as he sows his "seeds" at the Calends and reaps the yield at the Ides. That Alphius' plying his trade can stimulate in him such eloquent reveries and idyllic associations reveals that usury is genuinely pleasurable to him, providing him with the peace of mind that he facetiously implies might only result from country living. Ultimately, however, his cynicism illuminates the stark contrast between the virtue of living and working close to the land and his own perverse husbandry—between country life and city life.

The distinction between country life and city life is crucial to Jonson's critique of capitalism, as he often defines what is bad about society by contrasting it with what is good. Whereas for Jonson the city is a place, as we have seen, "where vice

is indistinguishable from virtue,” the country represents the antithesis of an urban environment increasingly defined by the greed and filth concomitant with the out-of-control development capitalism. An exemplary paean country life, “To Penshurst” begins with a meditation on the physical characteristics of the main edifice of the Sidney estate:

Thou are not, Penshurst, built to envious show
Of touch, or marble; nor canst boast a row
Of polished pillars, or a roof of gold;
Thou hast no lantern, whereof tales are told,
Or stair, or courts; but stand’st an ancient pile,
And, these grudged at, are revered the while. (1-6)

Penshurst’s understated nobility stands in contrast to the ostentatious excesses of a nouveau riche eager to display its newly acquired wealth. As Jonson explains in *Discoveries*, “Change into extremity is very frequent and easy. As when a beggar suddenly grows rich, he commonly becomes a prodigal; for, to obscure his former obscurity, he puts on riot excess” (Jonson, 3). While Penshurst has no “polished pillars, or a roof of gold” it is significant as a representation of stability and permanence against what Appleby calls the “disruptions in the most basic [social and economic] relations” of the early-modern era. Furthermore, as Sara van den Berg points out, “Court and city, still foremost in [Jonson’s] mind, provide the context in which he experiences life at Penshurst. He is surprised, for example, that the fish here forgo their predatory, competitive ways: pikes weary of eating lesser fry, ‘Bright eels’ emulate their elders” (van den Berg, 117). In light of Jonson’s

condemnation of the city and its inhabitants, we can readily see in Jonson's depiction of the animals at Penshurst a metaphor for the nobility of spirit challenged by the predacious disposition of capitalism.

Money Never Made Any Man Rich

While Jonson's praise of stability and loftiness of spirit in "To Penshurst" is a theme that resonates in many of his poems, it is in his personal epistles that he seems most immediately concerned with asserting the importance of resisting the growing opportunities to succumb to debauchery. In "To Sir Robert Wroth," he praises Wroth for retaining his virtue when he might just as easily be seduced by worldly pleasures:

How blest are thou, canst love the country, Wroth,
Whether by choice, or fate, or both;
And, though so near the city and the court,
Art ta'en with neither's vice nor sport (1-4)

Similarly, he praises his friend Salisbury for remaining true to himself and asserts the importance of integrity over material wealth in "To Robert Earle of Salisbury":

Who can consider thy right course run,
With what thy vertue on the times hath won,
And not thy fortune... (1-3)

Such praise of the virtue of self-worth reflects Jonson's assertion in *Discoveries* that "Money never made any man rich, but his mind" (Jonson, 44), a notion expressed most succinctly in "To Alchymists":

If all you boast of your great art be true
Sure, willing povertie lives most in you.

While this poem is representative of Jonson's devilish wit, its playfulness belies a conviction that is at the heart of Jonson's critique of capitalism, which is that the lure of capitalism's potential to finally realize alchemy's promise of easy money threatens to undermine the integrity of the individual and, conceivably, the security of the commonwealth.

"To the World" is arguably Jonson's most earnest condemnation of the material world and its potentially deleterious effects on the individual, as it is told from the point of view of a woman who resolves to abandon a world which she perceives as artificial and corrupt. She lashes out at her society's emphasis on materialism and, in particular, on the intensified commodification of both goods and people that increasingly defined Jonson's own era:

I know, too, though thou strut and paint,
Yet art thou both shrunk up and old,
That only fools make thee a saint,
And all thy good is to be sold.
I know thou whole art but a shop
Of toys and trifles, traps and snares,
To take the weak, or make them stop (13-19)

In this passage, the speaker characterizes the world as a bazaar in which everything is for sale, despite the fact that by virtue of its commodified nature, it no longer has any genuine value, for “only fools make thee a saint.” Nevertheless, people continue to embrace the world indiscriminately, as they too have been cozened into becoming another of its wares, “Enamored of their golden gyves [fettters]” (24).

It is significant that the speaker of this poem is a woman, as Jonson seems to suggest that there was much at stake, particularly for women, in an increasingly commodified society. The danger of commodification for women is addressed more explicitly—and more disturbingly—in “Riches,” a poem that depicts gold as a suitor that women are powerless to resist. Though Jonson was certainly not a feminist, the cavalier tone of the poem does little to disguise its alarming implications. It begins by introducing “Gold as a sutor, never took repulse” (1). It then goes on to describe gold’s invincibility in vanquishing all that stands in its way, and finally concludes:

Then why should we dispaire? Dispaire away:
Where Gold’s the Motive, women have no Nay. (13-14)

This final couplet reduces all women to whoredom, which in itself is disconcerting. More disturbing, however, is that because “women have no Nay” when it comes to gold, their free will vanishes and they are reduced to mere objects, not even enjoying the agency, however limited, of prostitutes. In the context of the intensification of commodification and increased access to wealth under the

capitalism, "Riches" offers an ominous critique of the condition of women in early-modern England.

Jonson ultimately suggests that commodification was becoming pervasive in society, writing in his "Epistle to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland" that even virtue and vice were for sale:

Whilst that for which all virtue is now sold,
And almost every vice, almighty gold... (1-2)

The last line of defense against the encroachment of the culture of capitalism, argues Jonson, is a reaffirmation of the power and stability inherent in those too noble in nature to succumb to the lure of capitalism. He writes of one such man and the importance of his example in "To William Earle of Pembroke":

I Doe but name thee *Pembroke*, and I find
It is an *Epigramme*, on all mankind;
Against the bad, but of, and to the good:
Both which are ask'd, to have thee understood. (1-4)

In these first four lines, Jonson insists that the noble Pembroke set an example for all mankind, suggesting in the following lines that society is already in dire trouble for having allowed vice to get a solid foothold in its struggle against virtue:

Nor could the age have mist thee, in this strife
Of vice and vertue; wherein all great life
Almost, is exercis'd: and scarce one knoes,
To which, yet, of the sides himselfe he owes.
They follow vertue, for reward, to day;
To morrow vice, if she give better pay:

And are so good, and bad, just at a price,
As nothing else discernes the vertue' or vice. (5-12)

As in the "Epistle to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland," Jonson is writing specifically about his own historical era ("the age") in which virtue and vice have both, in accordance with the practices of capitalism, become commodified and thus distinguishable from one another only by the price that they can command on any given day. In the lines that follow (13-18) Jonson reasserts the importance of Pembroke's example for mankind and then, in the final couplet, arrives at an astonishing conclusion:

Thou must draw more: and they, that hope to see
The common-wealth still safe, must study thee. (19-20)

For Jonson, what is at stake in the struggle between the old order and the new is nothing less than the future of the commonwealth. He feared that the delicate equilibrium described by Appleby was beginning to tip in favor of the emerging capitalist economy and the personal and social dissolution that invariably accompanied it. "To William Earl of Pembroke" is perhaps Jonson's most powerful appeal for a reaffirmation of traditional values, without which the commonwealth, like the degenerate Banck the Usurer, was toiling toward its own doom.

Writing in the tradition of the great classical satirists, Jonson relentlessly railed against avarice, often condemning it as an abstract, general sin that continually threatened personal integrity and the fabric of social life. But his critique departs

from that of his forbears in that he was also addressing a kind of avarice, peculiar to his own age, that distinctively reflected the emerging capitalist economy. Whereas Juvenal could write of his age that “as yet there stands no temple for accursed Money to dwell in, no altar erected to Cash,” Jonson suggests that in his own age this no longer was true. Indeed, Subtle’s laboratory and Volpone’s chamber serve as temples where the greedy come to worship the almighty riches that seemed increasingly accessible in the early-modern age. But while Jonson’s abhorrence of capitalism is most explicit in his plays, it is also apparent in his poetry. Collectively, his poems offer a scathing critique of capitalism by attacking its practitioners, its urban locus, its intensified commodification, and by praising the nobility of the old order. In fact, for Jonson, poetry itself may be the most important tool for resisting capitalist excess, as he informs the Countess of Rutland:

... whilst gold bears all this sway,
I, that have none to send you, send you verse,
A present which (if elders writs rehearse
The truth of the times) was once of more esteem
Than this our gilt nor golden age can deem...

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