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Character Writing and the Stage in the Early Seventeenth Century

Joseph Hall's 1608 collection *Characters of Virtues and Vices* and the Overbury collection *Characters or Witty Descriptions of the Properties of Sundry Persons*, written around 1607 and first published in 1614, sparked a keen interest in the genre of Character writing in *England*, which led to the publication of over twenty Character books and many single Characters before the century was over (Smeed 1985, 25). Hall and Overbury modelled their Characters on those of Theophrastus, which had been edited and published with a Latin translation by Casaubon in 1592 and re-issued in 1599. However, as Boyce and Smeed have pointed out, the forerunners of the English seventeenth-century Characters cannot only be found in the Theophrastan Characters with their vivid descriptions of actions, gestures, and expressions typical of each vice represented but also in classical Roman verse-satire, medieval allegory, epigrams, commonplace books, and the literature of the Estates (Boyce 1967, 55-100; Smeed 1985, 1-19).

It seems no coincidence that a genre that depicts human representatives of virtues and vices, occupations, and stations in life should rise to popularity at a time when drama, and in particular the comedy of humours, features characters dominated by a particular character trait or vice. This raises the question of the influence of drama on the Character genre and vice versa. This article will pursue three aims: first, to address the relationship between drama and the genre of the Character in *England* in the early seventeenth century. In doing so, we take up hints provided by the writers themselves; for example, Joseph Hall presents his collection as "this stage", on which he wishes the "amiable virtue" of Wisdom "to lead" (Hall 1924, 54). Conversely, the first of the vices, Hypocrisy, is regarded as "the worst kind of player, by so much as he acts the better part" (*ibid.*, 71). Secondly and more specifically, we consider the Character as a genre of very short texts, few of them exceeding more than two pages: In which way are its concision and brevity (including its succinct use of metaphors and comparisons) related to and used in the dramatic representation of character? Hall, for instance, points to a principle of economy that serves to bring about a moral effect when he states in his preface: "I desired not to say all, but enough" ($A6^r$, 1608 edition quoted in Hockenjos 2006, 37). This economy of the prose Character helps the dramatist to bring together the reader's and the spectator's perspectives. Our third aim is to address the nature of characters thus conceived by considering the function of prose Characters inserted into dramatic texts. At this point, it may also become clear why such an inquiry has its place in a section called "not Shakespeare": Ben Jonson's early satirical comedies, for example, are much more closely related to the Character books than most plays by Shakespeare.

Drama and Character Writing: "Hybridisation" of Genre

Our focus will be on Jonson's comical satires *Every Man Out of His Humour*, first performed in 1599 and printed in 1600, and *Cynthia's Revels*, first performed sometime between September 1600 and May 1601 and printed in 1601 (see Donaldson 2012, xciv-xcv). Even though *Every Man Out of His Humour* has been regarded as a case of "generic engineering" (Watson 1986, 337)[1] for "reformulating [...] the conventional genres of its day" (Ostovich 2001, 14), the part played by the Character books in this "engineering" has not yet been fully explored. This is surprising, for in both plays satirical comedy is quite obviously fused with the Character genre. Some critics have at least noticed its presence. Baldwin, for example, argues that the short character descriptions in *Every Man Out of His Humour* are in fact the earliest English Characters based on the Theophrastan model as they are, "except for their brevity, exactly like those of Theophrastus" (Baldwin 1901, 386).[2] Smeed, however, declares that "such prefatory sketches have nothing to do with the possible invasion of the play proper by Theophrastan character-writing; their function is to establish the various personalities in advance of the dramatic action. The character-sketches which come in *Cynthia's Revels* ([1600/]1601) have been more confidently labelled Theophrastan" (Smeed 1985, 201-202). We rather think that the prefatory sketches establish personalities by referring to Character writing, and that the plays are very much about the unfolding and interrelation of characters conceived in the vein of that genre. Perhaps even more interesting than the question whether these Characters are specifically 'Theophrastan' is the mere fact that, a few years before the genre of Character writing would gain popularity in *England*, Jonson chooses to enrich his plays by means of prose descriptions of specific traits that together form a particular character. The plays thus become hybrids of drama and narrative or expository prose.

In *Every Man Out of His Humour* the Character descriptions are part of the paratext, which was added for the printed edition. They can be regarded as explanations of the hints given by the characters' names.[3] The list begins with "Asper, his character": "He is of an ingenious and free spirit [...]" (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Characters 1-2). Of course, one could argue that this is the characterisation of a figure in the play, whereas the Character by, or in the manner of, Theophrastus is the personification of a quality or habit. Theophrastus's "Chatterer", for example, begins with a definition of the quality to be personified: "Chattering is the mania of talking hugely without thinking" (Theophrastus 1924, 30). There is clearly a difference to the description in Jonson. Instead of the description of a person we get the definition of a human weakness. But then Theophrastus goes on: "The Chatterer is the sort of man who sits down beside someone he never saw before and begins by praising his wife" (*ibid.*, 30). This is not an abstract quality defined, this is the imitation of life, "*imitatio vitae*", and accordingly evokes the nature of comedy (of which Jonson reminds us in *Every Man Out of His Humour* 3.1.415). Another link between the two genres is established by

1 Watson's phrase refers to all of Jonson's comedies, especially *The Alchemist*.

2 Martin notes that the brief insertions were influenced by Theophrastus in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour* 250n9).

3 Meier lists several of the characters from *Every Man Out of His Humour*, e.g. Carlo Buffone, Asper, and Fastidious Brisk, as representatives of a group of Jonsonian characters who are named after habits (Meier 1964, 91-92).

the fact that, in the English Character books, we find beginnings that are exactly like those of Jonson's paratextual descriptions, for example in Hall's "The Envious": "He feeds on others' evils; and hath no disease, but his neighbours' welfare" (Hall 1924, 92).

Accordingly, we see that the Character genre is itself a mixed one. Even though it is essentially discursive – frequently close to the essay, as suggested by the title of Nicholas Breton's *Characters upon Essays* (1615; see the chapter in Boyce 1967, 190-219) – and strives to define qualities, virtues, and vices with a moral purpose, it also participates in drama by making the characters act and speak in a "characteristic" manner. The moral purpose is part of Jonson's comedy anyway, "accommodated to the correction of manners" (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour* 3.1.416-417). Moreover, Jonson creates 'humour' characters, which are based on the observation of nature but are nevertheless (or for that very reason) representatives of certain qualities, vices, etc., as well.[4] As Asper explains to Mitis and Cordatus in the Induction of *Every Man Out of His Humour*: "As when some one peculiar quality / Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw / All his affects, his spirits, and his powers, / In their confluctions, all to run one way, / This may be truly said to be a humour" (*ibid.*, Induction 103-107).

In *Cynthia's Revels* the fusion of the 'essayistic' Character and dramatic representation is even more obvious, as the descriptions of dramatic characters given by Mercury and Cupid in Act Two are part of the play proper. The diegetic process of characterisation is thus consciously integrated into the play and becomes part of the mimesis. One might even say that, in this play, Jonson more fully amalgamated the Character genre and made quite economic use of it.

Economy: Compression and Redundancy

Jonson's addition of the Character descriptions preceding *Every Man Out of His Humour* for the printed edition of 1600 was a novelty at the time (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour* 250n9).[5] One function of these descriptions can be seen in

4 Doran sees a difference between the Theophrastan technique, which "reveals a class of moral behavior (like flattery, boasting [...]) through the behavior of an imaginary individual" (Doran 1954, 230), and the humour technique, which "starts with the person and makes an individual excess [...] the essence of the character" (*ibid.*, 230). For her, the humour characters in *Every Man Out of His Humour* are not types but individualized to the extreme (see *ibid.*, 230) because they are not representatives of a general disposition but represent a "particular departure from the norm" (*ibid.*, 231). It is this distortion of the term 'humour' that Asper criticises at the beginning of *Every Man Out of His Humour* (*ibid.*, 230): The term has come to denote eccentricity rather than a general disposition (see Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Induction 100-113).

5 Jonson later added descriptions of the characters to his less successful comedy *The New Inn* (first performed in 1629 and first published in 1631). "The Persons of the Play. With some short characterism of the chief actors" are placed between "The Argument" and the Prologue and give a short account of the respective character's biography, his role in the play, and his relation to other characters in the play. Although the descriptions reveal character traits and dispositions for some of the characters, e.g. for Lovel, who is identified as a "melancholy guest in the inn" (Jonson 2012, *The New Inn*, The Persons of the Play 6-7), or Ferret, who is deemed "a fellow of a quick, nimble wit, [who] knows the manners and affections of people, and can make profitable

providing orientation for the readership of a play that is primarily aimed at presenting characters. The paratextual descriptions have a similar function to the names that Jonson gives his characters. In the printed edition there are four steps of characterisation: the characters' names, which already appear in the paratext; the description of each Character in the paratext; the description of the characters by other characters in the play's Induction, which lies on the boundary between the world of the reader and the world of the play[6]; and the actions and interaction of the characters in the play proper. It may seem utterly redundant to repeat characterisations on the layers of paratext, Induction, and play proper, but we suggest that there are reasons for this that have to do with the literary genre of the Character.

Macilente's name, for example, derives from the Latin word *macilentus* meaning 'lean' or 'thin', thus giving the reader an idea of the character's appearance. The leanness signalled by the name "is the traditional physical attribute of envy, and both qualities are associated with the contemporary stereotype of the malcontent" (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour* 252n10). The paratextual description, then, spells out Macilente's envious trait for the reader and gives possible explanations for it: he feels he does not hold the station in life he merits (see Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Characters 6-9). The aspect of envy is then again pointed out by Mitis in the Induction (*ibid.*, Induction 330) and later expressed by Macilente in his soliloquies, which comment on other characters' behaviour throughout the play. Thus envy is established as the trait by which Macilente is to be defined and recognised.[7] This dominance of one streak is of course linked to the notion of the humours, but it is also a feature of the Character genre.

At the beginning of a play, an audience would usually see the actor playing the part before they hear the name of the character; similarly, the prominent placement of the name in the paratext followed by the description also serves the function of putting the Character before the reader's eyes. Macilente's case is a special one, however. When he appears at the end of the Induction, his name is mentioned before he speaks in such a way that the audience is supposed to know all about him: "Oh, this is your envious man, Macilente, I think" (*ibid.*, Induction 330). Jonson here quite economically handles the two media of the stage and the page at once: The experienced theatre audience immediately identifies the lean actor as an envious character, which is confirmed by Mitis's words; for the readers (who do not see the figure coming), the stage direction

and timely discoveries of them" (*ibid.*, 12-14), they differ from the descriptions preceding *Every Man Out of His Humour* in that their primary function is to locate each character's role in the play, explain their situation, and summarize what happens to them in the course of the dramatic action rather than to enable and challenge the reader to get an idea of their character.

6 The Induction of *Every Man Out of His Humour* fuses different levels of communication. A fictional author enters and addresses the audience directly (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Induction 49-70), several characters quarrel over the question of whose task it is to deliver the Prologue (*ibid.*, Induction 269-316), and Carlo Buffone enters to talk about the author and the play he is a part of (*ibid.*, Induction 302-12). Thus, the Induction is undoubtedly part of the theatrical performance (or, for the reader, part of the imaginary theatrical performance), yet represents an intermediary stage that is one level removed from the conventional Prologue, whose function it highlights.

7 Doran describes Macilente as belonging to the general class of melancholics but as being individualized by the humour of envy (Doran 1954, 231).

"*Enter* MACILENTE, *solus*" (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour* Induction 329) and Mitis's words serve as a reminder of the Character description that they have perused in the paratext. The redundancy on the page is thus the equivalent of the multiple (verbal and non-verbal) codes realised in the live performance. Moreover, Jonson's technique helps readers in that it enables them to refer back to the descriptions and to keep track of who is who. A theatre audience would have the visual help of costumes, props and particular gestures. Accordingly, the insertion of the narrative genre of Character descriptions into drama might be motivated by a shift from performance towards print, or it may conversely underline the literary[8] origin of stage performance. It also suggests that Jonson's decision to add the brief descriptions is based on the belief that a Character can be unfolded from a name or conversely be observed and then described in a nutshell. (It is important to keep in mind that the description of the paratext was added after the play had been performed, and that Jonson and his audiences had indeed been able to observe these characters.) The Characters by Theophrastus and the Character books that were published a few years after Jonson's play was acted and published rely on the same assumption.

How does this condensation of a dramatic Character into a brief description work, and what effect does it create for the reader? A closer look at the Character descriptions in the paratext of *Every Man Out of His Humour* shows that they differ in what they tell us about each character. The shorter descriptions, such as that of Macilente, provide explanations for motives or a particular view of the world, which might cause certain actions or reactions to particular situations. The descriptions also raise expectations in the reader as to how a Character will respond when confronted with other characters during the play. Of course, they also enable the reader to recognise the actions performed by the characters in the play as caused by their attitudes and particular dispositions.

The longer descriptions in the paratext present typical actions, utterances, and situations the characters might find themselves in. The paratextual description of Carlo Buffone is an example of this. He is described as "a public, scurrilous, and profane jester" (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Characters 19), and this links him to a Character familiar from classical comedy, especially as eating and drinking are set up as his main concerns.

In the Induction, the second layer of characterisation, Carlo immediately calls for drink (*ibid.*, Induction 292). Cordatus then delivers a description of Carlo to Mitis:

> He is one, the author calls him Carlo Buffone, an impudent common jester, a violent railer, and an incomprehensible epicure. One whose company is desired of all men, but beloved of none. He will sooner lose his soul than a jest, and profane even the most holy things to excite laughter. No honourable or reverend personage whatsoever can come within the reach of his eye but is turned into all manner of variety by his adulterate similes. (*ibid.*, Induction 318-324)

8 The term "literary" here serves to characterise plays that were not solely conceived to be performed but also written with publication in mind. The title page of the 1600 quarto of *Every Man Out of His Humour* mentions Jonson as the author of the play, and the publication of Jonson's *Workes* in 1616 indicates that he was eager to be perceived as an author of dramatic literature (Martin 2012, 241).

Again we find interplay between the paratext made for readers and the stage performance, which, in spite of certain duplications and amplifications, is not merely redundant. As regards the nature of the jester, the paratext adds "public, scurrilous, and profane" to Cordatus's "impudent" and "common". But the main difference is that the paratext, by means of comparison and metaphor, puts the jester before the reader's eye. Whereas Cordatus in the Induction just says that "honourable or reverend personage[s]" are "turned into all manner of variety" by Carlo, the profound, almost violent effect of the jester's similes is more visibly evoked by the literary comparison to Circe in the paratext (who turned Ulysses's companions into swine): "more swift that [sic] Circe, with absurd similes [he] will transform any person into deformity" (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Characters 19-20). Similarly, Cordatus's brief statement that Carlo is "an incomprehensible epicure" (*ibid.*, Induction 320) is made more concrete in the paratext by means of metaphor when Carlo is presented as a dog, a "feast-hound or banquet-beagle, that will scent you out a supper some three mile off" (*ibid.*, Characters 20-21). Again comparison serves to flesh him out before the reader's mental eye: he "will swill up more sack at a sitting than would make all the guard a posset" (i.e., a drink of milk spiced up with alcohol) (*ibid.*, Characters 23-24). The difference between the two descriptions has to do with the fact that the paratext, added in print, helps the reader visualise a character, whereas Cordatus's description in the Induction comes when Carlo has already presented himself and given an example both of his drinking habits and his simile-making ("A well-timbered fellow, he would ha'made a good column an he had been thought on when the house was a-building", *ibid.*, Induction 297-298). Cordatus interprets, sums up, and identifies the Character that we have seen, whereas the paratext presents the Character to our mental eyes before we read what he says. All these features can be regarded as a productive exploitation of the genre of the Character, comprising both the unfolding of a concept and the analysis of social observation.

The insertion of Characters in Act Two of *Cynthia's Revels* achieves a similar effect in terms of putting characters before the reader's eyes and highlighting the process of characterisation. For example, Mercury expressly introduces his description of Amorphus as a presentation of his "character" (Jonson 2012, *Cynthia's Revels* 2.3.65); this means that he both depicts him as a Character, i.e., that of "a traveler" (*ibid.*, 2.3.66), and characterises him as a 'humorous' individual. In accordance with his name, Amorphus is defined and described as "one so made out of the mixture and shreds of forms that himself is truly deformed. He walks most commonly with a clove or pick-tooth in his mouth" (*ibid.*, 2.3.66-68). As this is part of the play, Mercury may take up aspects the audience is already familiar with, such as costume or props (the pick-tooth) carried by the actor playing the part. This insertion would, however, not be redundant for a reader who must rely on words alone in order to have an idea of Amorphus's appearance. The notion of putting characters before a reader's eyes by picking out striking external features again links the genre of comedy with the Character. Overbury's "Affectate Traveller", who bears a close resemblance to and is believed to be based on Jonson's Character Amorphus (Boyce 1967, 104, 139-140), for example, carries a "pick-tooth" which "is a main part of his behavior" (Overbury 1924, 102). This item identifies the Character described and serves a similar function to a theatrical prop carried by an actor on stage.

There is yet another interplay of stage and page to be seen in the Character of Amorphus, one that has to do with the paradoxical fact that he is a man of no form and yet many forms. By the time Mercury presents his Character, we have been repeatedly introduced to him. In the Induction (or "Praeludium"), the Third Child calls him "Amorphus, or the deformed, a traveller that hath drunk of the fountain [of Self-Love]" (Jonson 2012, *Cynthia's Revels*, Induction 48-49); upon first entering the stage in 1.3, he characterises himself negatively: "I am neither your minotaur, nor your centaur, nor your satyr, nor your hyena, nor your baboon, but your mere traveller, believe me" (*ibid.*, 1.3.4-5). This absence of a specific form may make it difficult for a reader to imagine him, but then he is also made for readers since he is a bookish Character in more senses than one. This becomes clear when Mercury's description in 2.3 continues: "He's the very mint of compliment; all his behaviours are printed, his face is another volume of essays, and his beard an Aristarchus" (*ibid.*, 2.3.68-70). The "essays" may even be a reference to Character books, just as his beard "is imagined as a classical commentary attached to the text of his face", as Rasmussen and Steggle point out in their annotation to *Cynthia's Revels* 3.2.70. This is quite fitting, for Amorphus is many Characters in one and, as it were, in need of annotations. Amorphus is also a creature of the stage, however, the quintessential actor who can assume all sorts of forms. Immediately before Mercury's characterisation, Amorphus has presented a whole set of characters, imitating as well as describing their faces: "First, for your merchant's, or city-face, 'tis thus [*He makes a face*]: a dull, plodding face, still looking in a direct line forward, there is no great matter in this face. Then you have your student's, or academic face, which is here [*He makes a face*], an honest, simple, and methodical face, but somewhat more spread than the former" (*ibid.*, 2.3.216-220). Readers, even though they have to make do without the actor's art, are able to imagine the various professions imitated, as they get hints through Amorphus's Character-like descriptions.

Apart from catering economically for page *and* stage, Jonson's interplay of description and presentation (i.e., the interplay of genres) serves a further purpose. In *Cynthia's Revels* the insertion of the Character descriptions in Act Two also has the function of providing the reader with an alternative view of a character.[9] In Act One, Amorphus, who has drunk from the Fountain of Self-Love, has given a rather favourable description of himself as the "essence so sublimated and refined by travel, of so studied and well-exercised a gesture, so alone in fashion, able to make the face of any statesman living, and to speak the mere extraction of language" (*ibid.*, 1.3.24-27). Mercury depicts him in a different light: "He speaks all cream, skimmed, and more affected than a dozen of waiting women. He's his own promoter in every place; the wife of the ordinary gives him his diet to maintain her table in discourse, which indeed is a mere tyranny over her other guests, for he will usurp all the talk – ten constables are not so tedious" (*ibid.*, 2.3.70-74). Apart from the fact that Amorphus is a Character without specific form, then, his moral evaluation is a matter of perspective.

9 One might argue that plays frequently offer alternative views on a character provided by different authorities/characters. What is special in the cases discussed here is that, due to the insertion of the long character descriptions influenced by Character writing, conflicting views on the character are highlighted and lead the audience or reader to reflect on the process of piecing together a character.

In *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Mitis's remark on Cordatus's description of Carlo Buffone, "You paint forth a monster" (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour* Induction 325), underlines the impression that the Character description given in the Induction might not be impartial. For example, the description in the paratext picks up on similar aspects of Carlo's Character as Cordatus does in the Induction. But it leaves out some aspects mentioned by Cordatus, namely that Carlo "will prefer all countries before his native, and thinks he can never sufficiently, or with admiration enough, deliver his affectionate conceit of foreign atheistical policies" (*ibid.*, Induction 326-328). It is left to the reader to piece together the information provided by different authorities. The different layers of characterisation work as a challenge for the reader to reconcile the different versions of a Character with the action displayed by the Character in the play. Carlo, for example, is indeed shown to jest at the expense of other characters; however, compared to Macilente, who poisons another character's dog and helps to seal Carlo's lips with hot wax, he seems rather less of a monster. The addition of the descriptions in the paratext of *Every Man Out of His Humour* and their insertion in *Cynthia's Revels* both advance the notion that a Character can be presented in a nutshell and simultaneously challenge that notion by offering the audience different layers of characterisation and conflicting views on the same character, or by replacing a conceited self-definition with a 'true' view of the character.

The multiplication of perspectives on a Character created by the insertion of a Character book-like description can also be found in John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), one of the few non-Jonsonian plays of the early seventeenth century in which the genre is used in a dramatic text.[10] The Jonsonian examples have shown that the two genres may be aligned with the transition from the world in which the play is performed (or read) to the world shown in the play (*Every Man Out of His Humour*) and that a Character book-like description may become part of a character's speech (*Cynthia's Revels*). Webster's technique is somewhat different: He has a Character expressly create a Character as a distinct genre on the internal level of communication. This shows that the Character genre, by 1612, had become so popular that it could be evoked without further explanations in a play.

In *The White Devil* 3.2, Cardinal Monticelso is both plaintiff and judge of Vittoria, who is to be put on trial for adultery (and the possible murder of her husband). When he refers to her in court as "this whore" (Webster 1996, 3.2.77) and she replies incredulously "Ha? Whore – what's that?" (*ibid.*, 3.2.77), he starts expounding what a whore is: "I'll give their perfect character. They are, first / Sweet-meats which rot the eater" (*ibid.*, 3.2.79-80). What follows is "a series of bitter metaphors [...] of ruin, disease, hellfire, and falsehood" that "is intended to produce a feeling of horror at Vittoria's corruption" (Smeed 1985, 220) at a moment when there is no hard evidence of her guilt. Through openly referring to the Character genre, Vittoria is strategically to be identified with a class of women "worse / Worse than dead bodies, which are begged at gallows" (Webster 1996, 3.2.95-96). She rejects this by responding "This

10 According to Smeed (1985, 24), 32 sketches in the 1615 edition of Overbury's *Characters* are attributed to Webster. The Characters of "A Whore" and "A very Whore" (Overbury 1924, 115-17), which are quite different from what we find in *The White Devil*, are apparently not by Webster.

Character 'scapes me" (*ibid.*, 3.2.101), meaning both that she finds this form of characterisation unintelligible and that it does not concern her.[11] Obviously the fashion and mode of Characters have not yet fully reached her.

The effect is an ambiguous one.[12] On the one hand, apart from the Cardinal's ostensible purpose of disparaging Vittoria, the Character serves to entertain the audience by evoking a fashionable genre; it shows the Cardinal's wit (for example in calling a whore "worse than the tributes i'th'Low Countries paid", *ibid.*, 3.2.86) and reminds the audience of the moral evaluation of characters, familiar from Hall's Character book. On the other hand, the insertion of the Character will make the audience see the difference between the wholesale vituperation of this class of women and the Character of Vittoria, who immediately before the Cardinal's speech could garner some sympathy by pointing out his "poor charity" (*ibid.*, 3.2.70); moral evaluation is made more difficult rather than easier by the Character. While the insertion of the Character may provide some sort of comic relief and serves to raise the question of whether it is perhaps just 'character' that makes people act in such a universally evil way in this tragedy, it also points up the limitations of the genre in coming to terms with human life, at least as long as it stays confined to virtues and vices.

Concept of Human Character: Not Shakespeare?

The extensive mingling of Character genre and drama is peculiar to Jonson's early comedies, and the proximity of the plays to the 1592 and 1599 editions of Theophrastus's Characters suggests a direct influence of the Theophrastan Character on Jonson. Obviously it helped him to establish his plays as literary, i.e., written with a publication and readership in mind, as well as theatrical works. Once he had done so, he resorted to the technique much more sparingly. As Smeed points out, it is to be found, for example, in Quarlous's account of Zeal-of-the-land Busy in *Bartholomew Fair* (Jonson 2012, *Bartholomew Fair*, 1.3.106-115; first performed in 1614 and first printed in 1631) or in Compass's description of Parson Palate in *The Magnetic Lady* (Jonson 2012, *Magnetic Lady*, 1.2.15-33; 1632; see Smeed 1985, 206-207).[13]

11 See John Russell Brown's note on 3.2.101 (Webster 1996, 80).

12 Ellis (2006, e.g. 64) points out that Vittoria eludes the various (gendered) characterisations of her in the course of the play.

13 Clausen claims that the "first tangible allusions" to Theophrastus's *Characters* can be found in *Volpone* (Clausen 1946, 32-33). He detects an echo of Theophrastus's "Superstitious Man", who, after a weasel has crossed his path, will not go on unless someone else will cross before him or before he has thrown three stones over the way (*ibid.*, 39), in Jonson's Sir Politic Would-Be's diary entry: "A rat had gnawn my spur-leathers; notwithstanding, I put on new, and did go forth; but first I threw three beans over the threshold" (Jonson 2012, *Volpone* 4.1.136-38; Clausen 1946, 38n30). Dutton draws attention to this similarity in the Cambridge edition and comments: "The real point is surely to draw attention to his doubtless prominent spurs, the lame symbol of his knighthood" (Jonson 2012, *Volpone* 135n136-38). The traces of Hall's "Good Magistrate", which Aggeler (1995) points out in Justice Overdo in *Bartholomew Fair*, show that, apart from adopting the technique of presenting a character in a short prose account, Jonson also took up some of the features he found in the English Character books in constructing his characters. Another example of a dramatic character based on a description from a Character book is Shakerley Marmion's Veterano in *The Antiquary* (c. 1635, published 1641), who is clearly based on Earle's "Antiquary" (Boyce 1967, 312-14; Smeed 1985, 202-03).

Jonson's fusion of the genres, however, had implications for the concept of Character as the representation of human life. Although the genre of the Character is often thought to present categories of people rather than individuals (Smeed 1985, 2; Hockenjos 2006, 26), the Characters found in Character books are not merely types. Nor are the figures in the Jonson plays we have considered. Both the plays and many of the texts in Character books rather combine definition and observation. They show, for instance, what is quintessentially "A Child" (as in Earle, who thus gives us the ideal nature of childhood; Bauer 2011, 67-76), "An Excellent Actor" (Overbury), or "The Flatterer" (Hall). But this is frequently done by exemplary features and actions and utterances observed in life, and, as Coleridge says about Bunyan's allegorical characters, "we go on with the characters as real persons, who had been nicknamed by their neighbours" (1830, quoted from Sharrock 1976, 53).

The underlying principle of observation of everyday life is also reflected in a development in Character writing away from the depiction of abstract concepts such as vices as we find them in Theophrastus, or virtues and vices, as in Hall, towards a depiction of professions and social groups, as for example in Overbury and Earle. This observation and depiction of everyday life links the Character genre with the genre of comedy, which is, after all, meant to imitate everyday life. The tendency to depict these professions and social groups is certainly also influenced by drama and its inventory of characters, which is in turn influenced by Characters found in the Character books.

With regard to the Aristotelian dramatic categories of action (*mythos*) and Character (*ethos*), we might claim that drama affiliated with Character books is void of action. Jonson, as a reader of Theophrastus and a forerunner of English Character books, seems to have thought otherwise, for in the paratext descriptions in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, he says about Mitis: "It is a person of no action, and therefore we have reason to afford him no character" (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Characters 90). This statement confirms our view that this is action generated by the Character descriptions. It is neither plot-driven nor the kind of action propelled by the functional types of New Comedy.[14] The plays rather unfold the activity inherent in the Character descriptions, as in the case of Amorphus in *Cynthia's Revels*, who "is his own promoter in every place" (Jonson 2012, *Cynthia's Revels* 2.3.71-72). The fact that action may consist in characters falling "out" of their humours does not contradict this concept.

This will also take us to our last point: Most of the Character book characters and those in the Jonson plays discussed are 'not Shakespeare'. What we mean by this is that, as stated in the Induction to *Every Man Out of His Humour*, "the property of the persons" (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour* Induction 250) must be clearly defined and provides the fixed starting point of the action. Even when there are conflicting views on the same character, the notion of definable Characters prevails. Interplay primarily consists in the meeting and collision of these characters (who are for example railed against by others whose Character is raillery).

14 This goes along with Jonson's desire to produce "a particular kind by itself, somewhat like *Vetus Comoedia*" (Cordatus in Induction; Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Induction 226).

Characters and their interaction are, as a rule, quite different in Shakespeare's plays. This has to do with what Jeremy Tambling has described quite fittingly as "a hidden organic unity existing between characters" in Shakespeare, whereas "nothing organic" connects the characters in Jonson (Tambling 2012, 12). They are conceived individually, derived from, and held together, by predominant and defining features and occupations. *In toto* they present a social, psychological, and moral cosmos, but they are just like a collection of Theophrastan Characters set to talk to each other and to interact, without being transformed by their relationships. The only way for a Character to change is to fall out of his humour as Asper does in *Every Man Out of His Humour* when he encounters Queen Elizabeth: "Envy is fled my soul at sight of her, / And she hath chased all black thoughts from my bosom, / Like as the sun doth darkness from the world. / My stream of humour is run out of me" (Jonson 2012, *Every Man Out of His Humour* 5.6.85-88).[15] And when this happens, the play is over.

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15 Jonson added a different version of this ending to the printed edition of 1600 alongside the original ending quoted here and a defence of the original ending in which he objects to criticism the 1599 ending had received (Martin 2012, 239-40). While Macilente's running out of humour is clearly caused by his encounter with the Queen in the original ending, the revised version shows his transformation "after he simply runs out of gulls to humiliate" (Martin 2012, 241): "Why, here's a change! Now is my soul at peace. / I am as empty of all envy now / As they of merit to be envied at" (Appendix B 82-84). Jonson added another two different versions of the ending to the 1616 folio text of *Every Man Out of His Humour*. One of them is a shortened version of the revised ending printed in the quarto of 1600 and does not feature an appearance by the Queen while the other once more attributes Macilente's running out of humour (see Appendix C 1 88) to the Queen's presence.

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"From the Top of Paul's Steeple to the Standard in Cheap": Popular Culture, Urban Space, and Narrativity in Jacobean City Comedy

The majority of Jacobean city comedies were first performed at private London theatres such as Blackfriars, which catered to moneyed audiences[1], rather than at more public venues such as the Fortune or the Red Bull.[2] However, this does not mean that only an 'elite' audience attended these plays or that the dramas themselves had no part in 'popular' culture. As Theodore B. Leinwand makes clear, the spectators at the private theatres consisted not only of the nobility, but also of "merchants and successful retailers, military officers and clerics, lawyers and gentry [...] as well as [...] teachers" (Leinwand 1986, 45). In the first part of this paper, I will look at the way this mixture of social groups among Early Modern audiences is reflected in city comedy.[3] Using Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610), John Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* (1604), and Thomas Middleton's *A Mad World, My Masters* (1605), I will demonstrate that no easy definition of the 'popular' can be applied to the plays and that twenty-first century readings of these dramas need to take into account the complex meanings of the 'popular' inherent in them.

In the second section, I will focus on the London settings of city comedies, which serve to bring a variety of characters together: from rascal to gentleman, from courtesan to lady, from Anabaptist to alchemist. These settings mirror the actual spaces outside the theatres where encounters between different classes and cultures occurred, such as taverns and marketplaces.[4] The images of London in these plays are varied, thus shedding a new light on the complexity of the cultural meetings portrayed in the plays. All the plays depict the opening up of urban spaces, as in each case the city is becoming inclusive rather than exclusive. This change reflects London's development into a vibrant capital city and growing economic centre in the Early Modern age. The plays show, on the one hand, that old notions of an orderly structure of society have become difficult to uphold in the light of this development. On the other hand, they satirise and thereby strongly criticise the downsides of growing capitalism. The depic-

1 The price of admission was "at least 6d" (Leinwand 1986, 45).
2 As Wendy Griswold makes clear, "city comedy took shape in the so-called private theatres, in which most of the genre's early productions were concentrated" (Griswold 1986, 26).
3 The term 'popular culture' is a difficult one to use with regard to city comedies since it could imply something completely distinct from a so-called 'elite culture.' Most of the early comedies were presented at private theatres. However, the differences between the private and the public theatres should not be seen as clear-cut, as there was an intersection of various classes and cultures among the audiences in both types of theatres. Furthermore, some city comedies, such as Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), were first shown at public theatres. Theodore B. Leinwand points out that "city comedies were not unique to the private theatres" (Leinwand 1986, 44).
4 Regarding these meeting places outside the theatres, see also Burke 2001, 28.