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In the Person of Mankind Attempting to Depict Womanhood

Jessica L. Sedor

Ben Jonson was by no means a minor character of the early seventeenth century. His writings ranged from plays like *Sejanus* and *Every Man in His Humor* to poems like “Song: To Celia” and “To the Memory of My Beloved”, “The Author”, “Mr. William Shakespeare”, and “What He Hath Left Us.” He was not a modest writer, and he truly had no need to be because of the vast amount of work he constantly produced throughout his life. According to the editors of the Norton Anthology of English Literature, “Jonson took his calling as a poet with the greatest seriousness, asserting the dignity of the profession with (sometimes) a kind of pedantry and emphasis that contrasts with Shakespeare’s inconspicuous anonymity” (619). He was bold in his attempts. As a result, while many of his works are extremely popular, there are several that proved to be not so successful. Jonson’s attempt at speaking as a woman in his “In the Person of Womankind (In Defense of their Inconstancy)” is one example. Jonson fails in his use of words to embody a woman’s feelings. His writing stereotypes women, and his understanding of how a woman feels and perceives herself is far from accurate.

There are at least six known poems that Jonson attempted to write from the perspective of a woman. All six lack scholarly recognition and proved to be somewhat unsuccessful. What was he lacking that made these works fail in light of his other successes? Perhaps one answer is found in the opinion that “the most common criticism of Jonson (usually following an extensive comparison with Shakespeare) is that he lacked poetic imagination” (Partridge 213). This imagination could be merely in his idea; however, perhaps this lack of imagination is in his application of language in a gendered circumstance. This possibility certainly seems true in the poem “In the Person of Womankind.”

Jonson’s choice to speak in the voice of a woman appears to be an interesting project. It was not a prevalent practice; thus the novelty of the endeavor adds to its uniqueness. George Johnston echoes this sentiment when he explains that “[o]f equal or greater significance than the choice of the image is the choice of a woman

to speak Ben's ideas in this poem, the ideas often expressed in his most personal utterances" (95). Jonson did make an honest attempt to write this poem from the feminine perspective. Unfortunately, he had an improper view from the start when he added into the title the parenthetical phrase "In Defense of their Inconstancy." When he uses the pronoun "their" he separates himself from the female perspective almost immediately. He begins with clarifying that while he is speaking "in the person of womankind" he still wants not to be entirely associated with this perspective, that it is another's view and not his own. Another improper word choice he makes is to have the woman call herself "inconstant." Just as a woman wouldn't speak of her gender with the pronoun "their," so also it is not probable that a woman would define herself in such a negative and "flighty" manner with the choice of the adjective "inconstant." It is clear in this perspective that Jonson is not "governed by a conscious or unconscious rejection of the feminine, as is sometimes the case" with other writers who are trying to avoid stereotypes and present a more realistic picture of the woman (Lauter 60). Neglecting their uniqueness, Jonson portrays women as beings from a common mold. There can be no one type of woman just as there is no one type of man. As a result of those flaws, he speaks unconsciously in the person of mankind in his word use and attitude towards women.

This terminology continues throughout the text. In lines three and four, Jonson states that "We were not bred to sit on stools, / Our proper virtue is to range" (125). Here he speaks of "range" in terms of surveying the surrounding area as if on a man-hunt.

Jonson states that women are most comfortable when searching for men or engaged in other such mischievous activities. This idea likens women to beasts, which accords with what Edward B. Partridge claims about Jonson and his works, that "women are almost always compared to animals" (221). Jonson continues along this line of thinking when he progresses into lines eleven and twelve to proclaim that "The frequent varying of the deed/ Is that which doth perfection breed" (125). In these lines he insinuates that it is in practicing different sexual acts with various partners that women find fulfillment and perfection. This picture of sexuality, that practice in sexual activity would make perfect, or that this activity even

needs to be perfected, is more typical of a male point of view than of a woman's. A woman is often more concerned with the unity that builds from the sexual experience rather than with the act itself. In lines seventeen and eighteen, Jonson makes the claim that "The good from bad is not descried/ But as 'tis often vexed and tried" (125). Here he is claiming that a woman feels that she needs to experience bad before she can value the true essence of good. This may be true of some women, but the general idea of most females, as well as males, is not that bad must be experienced before good. One doesn't have to know bad in order to know good anymore than they would have to experience pain to know what joy is like. The final perspective assumed by Jonson is found in lines nineteen through twenty-four:

And this profession of a store
In love doth not alone help forth
Our pleasure, but preserves us more
From being forsaken than doth worth:
For were the worthiest woman cursed
To love one man, he'd leave her first
(125).

Here Jonson claims that as a woman she has a "backup plan" so that if her man is to leave her, she is not left jilted and alone. The idea of a "plan B" could not be farther from the truth and farther from a typical female perspective. While a woman does want a companion, she is not under the assumption that anyone will do. A woman does not want only the love and comfort that a relationship brings; she also wants to be devoted to the one she loves. Most women tend to be more worried about spending their time and focus on fixing a relationship that is going bad than seeking new love as an insurance policy.

There are several reasons that male writers, including Jonson, have a tendency to fail when writing from the female perspective. According to Estella Lauter, male writers lean more towards "the confinement of the mother to the realm of intimate relationships; the emphasis on the seductress in every woman" (204). It is more consistent with a male's perspective to insinuate that a woman can only be a "mother-like" figure or a "seductress".

From a female perspective, the writer would tend to be less likely to restrict women to merely one or two stereotypes. While women are fond of intimate relationships and some women may have a seductress tendency, this fact doesn't mean that they are locked entirely into that role, or that all women are limited to this behavior.

Jonson's interaction with women seemed to leave him cynical towards the gender as a whole, and whether it is a conscious or unconscious effort, it is nevertheless apparent in writings such as this one, where he is able to voice this opinion as a woman in a type of first-hand account. George Johnston's reaction is typical: "For the niceties of feminine etiquette he [Jonson] had little regard...and the marked and painted court beauty attracted with peculiar readiness the cynical regard which for him—a few chosen women friends set apart habitually disrobed womankind of even ordinary grace and virtue" (72). Ben Jonson did not hide these perceptions of womankind, and other scholars feel like Johnston. Hugh MacLean offers a common perspective:

Ben Jonson's views regarding womanhood in general were radically cynical though externally chivalrous: a charge which can be brought against no other poet or dramatist of his age. He could pay more splendid compliments than any of them to this or that particular woman...but no man has said coarser (I had well-nigh written viler) things against the sex to which these exceptionally honored patronesses belonged (446).

It wasn't any particular woman, but rather womankind that he stereotyped, and it wasn't merely Jonson himself that stereotyped women as such, for "throughout history women and everything associated with the feminine have been relegated to second-class status" (Lauter 6). The important thing to note about this stereotypical attitude, however, is that no matter what the prevalent idea or attitude towards women at the time, this poem was still supposed to have been written in the voice of a woman, and thus it needs to portray the woman's viewpoint rather than the man's viewpoint spoken from the mouth/persona of a female.

Jonson did not write this work with the assumption of failure. He really tried to make it work by using pronouns like "we" and relating it to what he thought women would be thinking and feeling. It is important to understand Wendy Slatkin's insight here:

That a woman's work will always be a little different than a man's. There's always a difference in the thinking between male and female when women are women artists and don't try to ape men, I see a great difference (250-1).

Jonson wasn't merely trying to tell the poem from a woman's perspective on universal images and ideas. Jonson was trying to write from a woman's perspective about herself and things that are seen through a woman's eye. For a man to successfully capture this perspective is not only difficult but perhaps impossible. A man cannot write from the eyes of a woman simply from his observations about women or from stereotypical portrayals of them. It is difficult for a woman to effectively write of her feelings, of her fears, and of her dreams in a way that other women can truly relate to, thus for a man to write about such things would prove most challenging. It is hard for one to imagine and even more difficult for one to write about something they have not experienced first-hand. There are times when writers get close, very close, and sometimes with the help of someone who is in the situation being written about they might even hit the feeling exactly. But these true portrayals are rare, and rightfully so, because real feelings come from experience and not from observation.

Jonson's noble attempt to speak "in the person of womankind" is a failure not as a poem in itself but in its attempt to accurately speak in the voice of a woman. He used words that women most likely would not use to define themselves, words that men would be more inclined to attach to a woman's thinking and feeling. Jonson was therefore, stereotypical in this poem, whether consciously to make a point about womanhood or unconsciously simply because it was a prevalent idea of the time. His "In the Person of Womankind (In Defense of their Inconstancy)" is an interesting piece of writing, but it is simply not "in the person of womankind." Jonson would have proved far more effective had he written the same poem with the aid of women who could have helped guide his thinking. As the poem stands currently, it seems to have been written with more of a satirical purpose in mind. While Ben Jonson is in fact an extremely respected and talented writer, the results of this attempt are most likely not quite what he would have hoped.

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