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The habits and Ben Jonson's humours

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Ill habits gather by unseen degrees,—
As brooks make rivers, rivers run to seas.—Ovid

I

In 1961, *ELH* published an article by James D. Redwine, Jr., entitled "Beyond Psychology: The Moral Basis of Jonson's Theory of Humour Characterization," which argued rather convincingly that Jonson's emphasis in characterization by humour was not so much psychological or aesthetical as instead primarily moral.¹ Many things that are known about Jonson and his art support such a view. However, despite the service which this critic performed in opening or widening the field for ethical consideration of Jonson's work, he did not go to the heart of his subject. At the very first of his article Redwine drew attention to the *locus classicus* of the theory of humour characterization, which is the speech by Asper in the Prologue to *Every Man Out of His Humour*, but according to Redwine's own exegesis, Asper's definition of humour has nothing to do with morality and ethics at all. Indeed, the critic believes that Asper's "theory is almost meaningless when it is removed from its induction context and studied as an independent brief essay" (p. 319). But this is not so, and neither is it true that except for the context, one would be left believing that Jonson's humour characters are "somapsychotic automatons" rather than "responsible free agents," which Redwine immediately goes on to say. Indeed, far from being meaningless, if properly understood, Asper's theory of humour characterization can provide the basis for understanding something that Jonson and the Renaissance considered to be the very backbone of moral character. As will be seen, that something is the second nature of habit.

Since it is so important, the crux of Asper's disquisition should be quoted here in full:

Why, Humour (as 'tis *ens*) we thus define it
To be a quality of aire or water,

1. *ELH*, 28 (1961), 316-34.

And in it selfe holds these two properties,
 Moisture, and fluxure: As, for demonstration, 90
 Powre water on this floore, 'twill wet and runne:
 Likewise the aire (forc't through a horne, or trumpet)
 Flowes instantly away, and leaues behind
 A kind of dew; and hence we doe conclude,
 That what soe're hath fluxure, and humiditie, 95
 As wanting power to containe it selfe,
 Is Humour. So in euery humane body
 The choller, melancholy, flegme, and bloud,
 By reason that they flow continually 100
 In some one part, and are not continent,
 Receiue the name of Humours. Now thus farre
 It may, by *Metaphore*, apply it selfe
 Vnto the generall disposition:
 As when some one peculiar quality 105
 Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
 All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
 In their confluxions, all to runne one way,
 This may be truly said to be a Humour.²

Now to begin with, although Redwine contends that one should not start an investigation of Jonson's theory of humours with Galen or Hippocrates (p. 316), nevertheless it appears that in his discussion of this particular passage the critic himself falls victim of an excessive emphasis on physiology. For when he comes to the critical word "quality" in line 105, which is used to designate the specific cause of a character's humour, Redwine considers that it must refer to the physical or corporeal qualities such as cold, hot, moist, and dry, which in varying combinations make up the bodily humours.³ But the term "quality" has a great many denotations in general Renaissance usage and can refer to more than physical or physiological states. As John J. Enck had earlier noted, Jonson's stress is on the current or stream that a humour

2. *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Induction, 88-114. All quotations of Jonson's works are from C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, eds., *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1925-52).

3. Redwine's explanation is as follows: "The four physiological humours (Black Bile, Blood, Yellow Bile, and Phlegm) have their 'peculiar qualities' (Cold & Dry, Hot & Moist, Hot & Dry, and Cold & Moist); when any one of these 'qualities' gets out of equilibrium with the others and gains an unhealthy ascendancy, it possesses a man so that his 'affects' . . . his 'spirits' . . . and his 'powers' generally flow uncontrollably in one direction (Melancholic, Sanguine, Choleric, or Phlegmatic)" (pp. 318-19).

involves,⁴ and this is true throughout the whole passage: both in his initial definition of humour and in his example of the bodily humours, Asper is emphasizing the continuous "fluxure" or flow which is a property of humour, and it is this same property that is paramount when he then applies the term humour metaphorically to a man's general state. Thus, once having used his physical and physiological discussion for this simple metaphorical purpose, it seems highly unlikely that Asper would then return to physiology within the metaphor itself. A simpler explanation is needed, and this could be provided if one could show that when Asper gets to his metaphor he drops physiology and uses a nonphysiological sense of the word "quality." But is there another sense of this term which would fit the case, which would be relatively simple, and yet be specific enough to match Asper's definitive mood? Indeed, there is, or rather one should say that there was; in the Renaissance, the term quality could be used, very generally, to mean a moral habit.

According to the *OED*, the second definition of "quality" is "a mental or moral attribute, trait, or characteristic; a feature of one's character; a habit,"⁵ while another dictionary of note puts the definition this way: "One of those [attributes] of a person or thing which make it good or bad; a moral disposition or habit."⁶ It will be useful to show certain examples. Most often the term was used to denote the more favorable attributes or virtues, as when in Hakluyt certain men were described as being "well qualited in courage, experience, and discretion," or when Valentine, in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, speaks to the Duke of his men:

These banish'd men that I have kept withal
Are men endued with worthy qualities:

...

They are reformed, civil, full of good
And fit for great employment, worthy lord.

(V.iv.152-53, 156-57)

On the other hand, the same word could be used to denominate evil. As Thomas Browne explained, "Every sin, the oftener it is committed,

4. In a chapter entitled "The Streame of Humour," *Jonson and the Comic Truth* (Madison, Wis., 1957), pp. 44-69.

5. VIII, 18.

6. *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia*, rev. ed. (New York, 1913), VII, 4891.

the more it acquireth in the *quality* of evil." And so, when Feliche in the First Part of Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* says "I hate not man, but man's lewd qualities" (III.ii.286), an investigation of his other remarks reveals that here he is referring to bad habits or vice.⁷ In fact, the word "quality" was often used to denote good or bad habits in prominent Renaissance works, and there is good reason for this. As the editors of the *Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia* point out, not only does this specific use of the term to designate habit come from Aristotle,⁸ but its general usage also has roots in that source: "The precise meaning of the word is governed by its prominence in Aristotelian philosophy, which formed a part of a liberal education till near the end of the seventeenth century, though the modified doctrine of Ramus was taught at Cambridge. Aristotle makes quality one of his categories, or highest genera."⁹ In the *Categories* Aristotle had distinguished four species of "quality," which are, very simply, "*states and conditions*," by which Aristotle is referring to the sciences, the virtues and vices, and other more changeable dispositions; natural powers or natural abilities; "*affective qualities and affections*"; and, finally, "*shape and the external form of each thing*."¹⁰ Of these four species, the first one which includes the virtues and vices is also the first in importance.

To explain this matter of priority, however, and to understand what the moral habits or virtues and vices have to do with natural powers, affections, and external form, it will be useful to recall that Asper's central metaphor concerns what he calls the "generall disposition" (line 104). Of course, then as now, the term "disposition" used in this manner denoted the way in which all of one's faculties were ordered or disposed towards future events. But since it was universally thought at the time that by a man's acts he could dispose himself in a particular way, so too, in Renaissance usage, when one spoke of the "generall disposition" one was usually speaking about a moral or partially moral state. The science of ethics in Ben Jonson's time was principally Aris-

7. The quotation from Hakluyt is found in the *OED*, VIII, 17, while the passage from Thomas Browne is cited in the *Century Dictionary*, VII, 4891. The quotation refer are to be found in III.ii.47-61 of the text of the play.

8. "This use of the word, which comes from Aristotle, was much more common and varied down to the end of the eighteenth century than now" (*Century Dictionary*, VII, 4891).

9. *Ibid.*

10. See the discussion in ch. 8 of the *Categories*, as found in Aristotle's "*Categories*" and "*De Interpretatione*," trans. J. L. Acknill (Oxford, 1963), pp. 24-31. Our quotations are found, respectively, on pp. 24, 25, and 27.

totelian,¹¹ and in Aristotle's major ethical work, great attention was paid to the various moral dispositions: what they were, how they might come about, and how they could be avoided. All of this, of course, is well known. But what is often overlooked is that in this science a man could be thought somewhat responsible for his bodily state. Consider, for example, the following passage on bodily defects from the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Not only vices of the soul are voluntary but also defects of the body in certain men whom we justly reproach. No one reproaches those who are born ugly but only those who are so because of slothfulness and carelessness. The same is true with weakness, disgrace, and blindness. No one justly taunts a man who is blind from birth or disease or wound but he is rather shown sympathy. But everyone does reproach a man blind because of excessive drinking of wine or other incontinence. Men are reproached for those vices and bodily defects that are within our power.¹²

But now if a man might be held to account for the state of the body itself, much more might he be considered responsible for tempering or controlling inclinations arising from it. And so the ability of a man by his acts to conquer the tendencies arising from his physiological state or "temperature" was often commented upon by Renaissance scholars. One particular story was commonly used as an example. In the following passage from the psychologist Du Laurens, one sees that story in its typical context, and, in addition, its connection with the previously mentioned, well-defined use of the term "quality":

It is most true that *Galen* attributeth more to a good temperature, then to a commendable shape, and in one whole booke maintaineth with strong and firme argument, that the manners of the soul doe

11. As Carol L. Marks points out on p. xvi of his introduction to Thomas Traherne's *Christian Ethicks*, ed. Marks and George Robert Guffey (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968), "Until the time of Descartes and Hobbes, systematic ethics consisted of a series of footnotes to Aristotle," culminating in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa*, I-II, "the most thorough and influential annotation of all." This was true even until the mid-seventeenth century, as Marks's investigation of university curricula and manuals of ethics reveals.

12. III.iv. All quotations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and of Aquinas' *Commentary* are from C. I. Litzinger, trans., *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Living Library of Catholic Thought (Chicago, 1964), 2 vols. consecutively paginated. The translation of Aristotle included in this text is a new one made by Litzinger from the very literal Latin translation of William of Moerbeke, which was the basis of the *Commentary* and which was available in printed editions in the Renaissance.

follow the temperature of the bodie, as thou shalt see in the chapter following. And yet I for my part will not yeeld so much either to temperature or shape, as that they can altogether commaund and over-rule the soul. For such qualities as are naturall, and as it were borne with vs, may bee amended by those qualities which the Philosophers call acquise, or purchased and gotten by other meanes. The historie of *Socrates* maketh this plaine enough. *Zopyrus* a great Philosopher, taking vpon him to judge and know at the first sight, the disposition of every man, as vpon a day he had beheld *Socrates* reading, and being vrgently pressed of all them that sate by to speake his opinion of him: answered at last, that he well knew that hee was the most corrupt and vicious man in the world. The speech was hastily carried to *Socrates* by one of his disciples, who mocked *Zopyrus* for it. Then *Socrates* by the way of admiration cried aloud; Oh the profound Philosopher, he hath thoroughly looked into my humour and disposition; I was by nature inclined to all these vices, but moral Philosophie hath drawne me away from them. And in very deede *Socrates* had a very long head and ill shaped, his countenance vgly, and his nose turning vp. These naturall inclinations then which proceede of the Temperature and shape of the bodie (foreseene that these two vices bee not exceeding great, as in melancholike persons) may bee reclaimed and amended, by the qualities which we get vnto our selves by morall Philosophie, by the reading of good bookes, and by frequenting the companies of honest and vertuous men.¹³

As shall be seen, the most important of the "acquisite qualities" outside of learning and knowledge are the virtues and vices. Two brief remarks from the later but strictly traditional work of Thomas Traherne also illumine this subject: "The Predicament [or Category] of *Quality* contains within it either *Natural Dispositions* or *Habits*: *Habits* may be either *Vertuous* or *Vicious*; *Vertuous Habits* are either *Theological*, *Intellectual*, *Moral*, or *Divine*"; and "A *Habit* is something added to that which wears it, and every power of the Soul is naked, without the *Quality* wherewith long Custom cloaths it."¹⁴

13. Andre Du Laurens [M. Andreas Laurentius], *A Discourse of the Preservation of the Sight: of Melancholike diseases; of Rheumes, and of Old Age*, trans. Richard Surphlet (London, 1599), pp. 83-84.

14. Traherne, pp. 23 and 26, respectively (see n. 11 above). *Christian Ethicks* was originally published in 1675.

The word "quality," then, is both the name for a whole genus of characteristics and a name for the most important of those characteristics, that is, those habits and other dispositions chiefly found in Aristotle's first species of quality¹⁵ which have been brought about or acquired by the use of the reason and will. By and large these "acquisite" qualities are the only ones that we can do anything about, and hence their distinction from the other, "natural" ones; but in addition and more important, as is seen in the passage from Du Laurens quoted above, these qualities are superior to the others because they can "reclaim and amend" inclinations arising from those others. Another way of stating much the same thing is to say that in Aristotelian ethics, the habits are conceived to rule and govern the various powers of the soul. The traditional teaching on the habits and powers was clearly pronounced by Traherne:

As the Members are capable of Various Motions, either comely, or Deformed, and are one thing when naked, another when attired, and capable of being modified with several Habits: so are the Powers and Faculties of the Soul. As they are in the Nature of Man without Exercise, they are void and Naked: But by many acts of Vice or Vertue, they put on a Habit, which seems chiefly to consist in an Inclination and Tendency to such Actions, a Facility of working, an Acquaintance with them, a Love to them and a Delight in them; For by long Custome it turns to a second Nature, and becomes at last as Necessary as Life it self; a confirmed Habit being taken in and incorporated with the Powers of the Soul by frequent exercise [p. 26].

Here as before it seems necessary to stress that while Traherne writes later than Jonson, his view is the traditional one. The passage above, like much of his work, simply explains the same tradition that was originally elaborated in the *Categories* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* and was later qualified by Aquinas' masterly *Treatise on Habit*, which is found in the *Summa* (I-II, qq. 49-89). In that tradition, all of the specifically human powers of the soul, which are in particular the reason, the will, and the passions, can be governed or superintended by the virtues and vices.

15. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, not all the acquire qualities are found in the first species. For example, certain shapes and affective qualities are capable of being acquired. But there was dispute on this subject. See Aquinas' argument in the *Summa Theologica*, trans. The English Dominican Fathers (London, 1916-35), I-II, q. 49, a. 2.

This is truly important. Traditionally, of course, these three powers have been seen by criticism as the three possible sources or "principles" of human action, and the pertinent psychological question about the propriety of each human act has been this: from which source did that action proceed? Did the reason maintain her sovereignty, or did the will or the passions mutiny, and one of them take over the principal seat? But now if upon this portrait habit can be superimposed, and this so strongly as to constitute a "new nature" in man, the familiar features are substantially changed. Aristotle had quoted the poet Evenus to this effect in the *Ethics*, Aquinas had expanded upon it, and a multitude of other classical and medieval authors restated this tradition.¹⁶ But it is most pertinent here to note the Renaissance playwrights who knew of the new nature brought about by a habit. In Shakespeare, for example, Hamlet uses the same image of clothing the body as in the passage from Traherne which was quoted above, in attempting to persuade his mother Gertrude to cast her vices aside:

Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat
Of habits evil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery,
That aptly is put on. Refrain to-night,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence: the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature
And either master the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency.¹⁷

Here the doctrine is more or less fully developed, but playwrights and others knew quite a bit about this subject before. "How use doth breed a habit in a man!" says Shakespeare's Valentine (*Two Gentlemen from*

16. VII.x in the *Ethics*; as for Aquinas, several passages in the *Summa* refer, among them I-II, q. 49 (preface), q. 53, a. 1, and q. 58, a. 1. Cicero, Ovid, Quintilian, and Plutarch among the Romans knew of this second nature (several sources), while eleven medieval English authors (including Gower) are cited in Bartlett Whiting with Helen Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly Before 1500* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 115.

17. III.iv.160-170 in *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. George Lyman Kittredge and Irving Ribner, rev. ed. (Lexington, Mass., 1967), p. 108.

Verona, V.iv.1), while in Marlowe, the Old Man admonishes Faustus in the following terms:

Though thou hast now offended like a man,
Do not persevere in it like a devil.
Yet, yet, thou hast an amiable soul,
If sin by custom grow not into nature.

(B-text, V.i.41-44)

Finally, as for Jonson, two passages chiefly refer. First, there is the passage in the *Discoveries* in which he says,

I have considered, our whole life is like a Play: wherein every man, forgetfull of himselfe, is in travaile with expression of another. Nay, wee so insist in imitating others, as wee cannot (when it is necessary) returne to our selves: like Children, that imitate the vices of Stammerers so long, till at last they become such; and make the habit to another nature, as it is never forgotten [1093-99].

The second passage, from "A Panegyre, on the Happie Entrance of James, Ovr Sovereigne, to His First High Session of Parliament," deals more directly with the effects of evil itself:

[James] knew that princes, who had sold their fame
To their voluptuous lustes, had lost their name;
And that no wretch was more vnblest then he,
Whose necessary good 'twas now to be
An euill king: And so must such be still,
Who once haue got the habit to doe ill.

(113-18)

Thus, like medieval and classical authors before them, the great Renaissance dramatists conceived that in addition to the reason, the will, and the passions, habit could also be a principle of human behavior, or a fount from which actions proceed. Certainly just as one can resist being influenced by the inclination of passion, so it is not strictly necessary to use the habits one has. However, whenever a person does choose to follow his habit, he then acts in a fundamentally different way than a man who is not by habit disposed. Briefly stated, in the general conception of the whole tradition, instead of fully deliberating, whoever

has a well-developed habit tends more and more to follow the inclination of habit, and he comes in the end both to think and to act in the way that the habit decrees.¹⁸

But now having established the position of habit as a superintendent or, in relation to the various powers, as a field marshal disposing his troops, the time has come to answer the question, Where does this lead us in Jonson? First of all, we have seen in Traherne that "qualities" in the sense of the "Predicament of Quality" are either "Natural *Dispositions* or *Habits*," and from Du Laurens we have learned that "acquisite qualities" can rule the natural ones. Further, we know that the chief of the "acquisite" qualities besides the branches of knowledge and intellectual habits are the moral habits, and that as a matter of fact each of the cardinal virtues, under the four of which traditionally all the other virtues are grouped, derives its specific character from the particular natural power which it chiefly perfects. Prudence, for example, has the rule of the reason, while justice governs the will. But now the two other cardinal virtues which have as their subject the sensitive appetite must not be forgotten, for the habits can govern the body as well as the soul, and in the habituated man, the inclination from passion becomes subordinate to the inclination which habit provides. As Thomas Wright informs us, there is a "common division of our sensuall appetite, found out by experience, allowed of by Philosophers, and approved of by Divines; that is, in *concupiscibile* . . . and, *irascibile*."¹⁹ In the tradition, temperance perfects the concupiscible and fortitude the irascible passions.²⁰ In taking up the passage from Jonson, then, especially if one remembers that the "passions" and the "affections" are basically one, the conclusions are easily drawn. After emphasizing the "fluxure" of humour, Asper had gone on to conclude:

when some one peculiar quality
Doth so possesse a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,

18. For the general argument of this paragraph, the whole second book of the *Ethics* and St. Thomas's *Treatise on Habit* refer; but for habit being a principle of act (or operation), see especially VII.viii of the *Ethics*, and I-II, q. 49, of the *Summa*.

19. *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (London, 1604), p. 19. Jonson wrote a commendatory sonnet for this book. Concerning this, and concerning Jonson's general connections with Wright, see Theodore A. Stroud, "Ben Jonson and Father Thomas Wright," *ELH*, 14 (1947), 274-82.

20. *Summa*, I-II, q. 61. Aquinas' summary concerning fortitude and temperance is based on Aristotle's discussion as found in Book III of the *Ethics*.

That straines my strict obseruance to this point?
 O would it were, therein I could afford
 My spirit should draw a little neere to theirs,
 To gaze on nouelties: so vice were one.
 Tut, she is stale, ranke, foule, and were it not
 That those (that woo her) greet her with lockt eyes,
 (In spite of all the impostures, paintings, drugs,
 Which her bawd custome dawbes her cheekes withall)
 Shee would betray, her loth'd and leprous face,
 And fright th' enamor'd dotards from themselues.

(I.v. 33-39, 43-54)

The fact that "custome" here is the "bawd" or procurer for vice shows that Jonson knew very well how easily "sin by custom" tends to bring about "nature"; one should also note that for Crites as for the tradition a man's understanding or thinking is a part of the flow of which vice is the cause. For Crites, vice is the central, causal element in the development of a character's humour. One immediate consequence of this should be pointed out. It has often been remarked that the most purely developed humour characters in Jonson who seem possessed by their passions resemble vice figures from the morality tradition. But there is an explanation for this: the passions and humours of such characters have all been brought about by their vice. For example, the greed which possesses Sordido in *Every Man Out* is responsible for his extremely disordered and passionate state. Similarly with the envy of Macilente, and Kitley's jealousy in *Every Man In*: their disordered affections, imaginations and wills can all be laid to the door of their respective bad habit or vice. These characters, in fact, most perfectly exemplify Asper's formal definition.²² And while affectation, of course, is often Jonson's particular concern, he allowed for this at the start. After his formal definition, Asper went on to say,

But that a rooke, in wearing a pyed feather,
 The cable hat-band, or the three-pild ruffe,
 A yard of shoetye, or the *Switzers* knot

22. Of Macilente, Sordido, and Saviolina of *Every Man Out*, John Enck remarks, "These three venerate their peculiarities most devotedly; their humours have cut so deeply that no escape from the confines of eccentricity exists. They have fed humours assiduously; the domination is total" (p. 52). He cites a diagram in the *quarto* in which these names are set apart from those of the other characters.

On his *French* garters, should affect a Humour!
O, 'tis more than most ridiculous.

(*E.M.O.*, Induction, 110-14)

Although usually considered to be of a somewhat lesser order, affectation or pretense is also a species of vice.²³ Clearly in Ben Jonson's eyes it can possess a person in a most fearful degree.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that Asper himself is a humour-some man. Characterized in Jonson's brief sketch as being "of an ingenious and free spirit," and "one whom no servile hope of gaine, or frosty apprehension of danger, can make to be a Parasite, either to time, place, or opinion" (*Characters*, 1, 3-5), it is only the warning of Mitis that his "Humour will come ill to some" (Induction, 73) which provokes Asper to speak on the subject of humour at all. Thus, Asper is both passionate and virtuous, for of course it was commonly conceived that a person could order his passions toward good as well as evil.²⁴ Although fortitude was also involved, in common parlance it was chiefly the virtue of temperance that was said to govern the passions, and thus when Traherne contends that "There is not one Humor, nor Inclination, nor Passion, nor Power in the Soul, that may not be admitted to act its part, when directed by Temperance" (p. 174), he intends to cover the field. Traditionally, both virtue and vice, temperance and intemperance can produce a highly passionate or humour-some man. And since immediately after the passage just quoted Traherne goes on to stress the critical position of the second nature of habit in governing the tendencies of the natural complexion, our argument as to the meaning of Asper's metaphor of humour can be summed up by quoting Traherne, and this summary will be particularly appropriate since that passage contains a metaphorical use of the term humor which is similar to the one that is used by Ben Jonson:

Nor is it unlawful to alter the Natural Complexion by Care and Study. I know very well, that the Complexion of the Body can

23. "Dissimulation" or pretense (of which affectation would be a species) is discussed in I-II, q. 111, of the *Summa*, while Aristotle speaks of sincerity and its opposites in IV.vii of the *Ethics*.

24. As Thomas Wright puts it, "most men inordinately followe the unbridled appetite of their sensual passions; yet no doubt but they may, by vertue be guided, and many good men so moderate and mortifie them, that they rather serve them for instruments of vertue, than foments of vice, and as an occasion of victory, than a cause of foyle" (p. 15).

hardly be changed by the strongest Physick: and that Choler, and Phlegm, and abundance of Blood, will, where they are, have their Natural Course without any remedy. But the Humours of the Soul are more tractable things; they are all subject to the Will in their operations: and though they incline, yet they cannot act, but by consent and permission. I know furthermore that Custom and Habit is a Second Nature: what was difficult at first, becomes at last as easie in its Exercise as if it were *innate*; and that the Soul of a Vertuous man does in process of time act by a new *Disposition*. I know further that all vertuous Operations are free and voluntary; and that the office of Vertue is to correct and amend an Evil Nature. Let no man therefore be disgusted, because a *Made-up man* is Artificial, and not Natural: . . . For Vertues are not effects of Nature, but Choice. Which how free soever it may appear, is as stable as the Sun, when founded on Eternal principles: it secures any Friend in the good and amiable Qualities he desires in his Beloved, as much as Nature it self could do, though they depend upon the Will, which is capable of changing every moment. This of Temperance in the Government of our *Humors* [pp. 174-175].

Despite the fact that Traherne's stress here as throughout *Christian Ethicks* is on virtue whereas Jonson is usually picturing vice, the basic matter is clear. Both men agreed with the tradition that the tendencies of the bodily complexion could be ruled and managed, suppressed and aroused, and generally disposed by the habits. And thus except in extreme states involving insanity, while the bodily humours can and usually do constitute a part of the psychological flow, they are not its principal cause. The humours of the soul with which Ben Jonson is mainly concerned certainly affect physiology, but generally their cause can be located in human act, specifically, in human act as retained and embodied in the various moral habits.

II

One interesting concomitant of what has been said is that, originally, when one spoke of the "qualities" of a person or talked in general about "men of quality," one was not just speaking of clothes, speech, or a general way of life, nor merely of the abilities and sensibility that tend to go with good breeding, although any or all of these may have

also been meant. It only makes sense, of course, that a man be most respected for what he is and not what he has, and in the classical conception one can in a way become the thing he desires through the attaining of habit. Thus, chief among a man's qualities, those for which a man most could be loved, and those which were supposed to be at the center of the gentleman's life, were the habits of knowledge and virtue. At Penshurst, for example, the lord is generous and hospitable, the lady industrious and chaste, and therefore not only can the children "Reade, in their vertuous parents' noble parts,/ The mysteries of manners, armes, and arts" (97-98), but they can see many specific virtues as well. This emphasis on virtue lies at the heart of several of Jonson's poems, but in his drama too, the author suggested that the most important result of good breeding is virtue. For example, when in *Bartholomew Fair* Grace Welborne remarks, "Truely, I have no such fancy to the *Fayre*; nor ambition to see it; there's none goes thither of any quality or fashion (I.v.130-132), by the use of the word "quality" she is referring to people of generally virtuous life, a meaning which is emphasized by Cokes' subsequent misapprehension (I.v.133-137). Perceiving this, Alan Dessen devotes a section of his chapter on *Bartholomew Fair* to "The 'Quality'" in his *Jonson's Moral Comedy* (Evanston, Ill. 1971), pp. 181-186, and points out with respect to the behavior of two "gentlemen" who watch another's purse being robbed with relish and applause, that here "As in [certain of Jonson's poems] cited earlier, the lack of good example and true 'manners' among the 'quality' is an important factor in the corruption of society."²⁵ As Dessen and Redwine both suggest, the word "manners," like "quality," was often used by the author in a moral sense.²⁶ Thus, whether one speaks of the plays or the poems, there can be no doubt that the good habits or virtues were at the center of the social as well as of the psychological order as it was conceived by Ben Jonson.

But of course our main interest here has been a more psychological one, and if what has been said is true of Ben Jonson and of his theory of humours, certain specific consequences concerning Jonson's psychology ought to be briefly drawn out. Our first conclusion, which is that "humoursome" characters are not necessarily affected or bad, has already been mentioned; Downright and Justice Clement, for example, generally direct their passions towards good, and Asper has already

25. Dessen's discussion of the poems is on pp. 144-47.

26. Dessen, p. 145; Redwine, pp. 332-33.

been commented on. On the other hand, it is true that most of the characters in *Every Man Out* and *Cynthia's Revels* are affected or vicious, and that Jonson's attention is usually focused upon some form of bad habit or vice and the passionate state which goes along with it. And since such characters as Jonson portrays in these plays have almost always been responsible for bringing about their inordinate passions and their "servants" the humours,²⁷ it would seem that unlike Ford, say, or Shakespeare in some of his plays, Jonson is not especially concerned with "perturbations," that is, strongly inordinate passions or emotions arising against one's will or without one's control. Sogliardo and Kitley, for example, not only are responsible for the way their powers and passions react, but still stand behind the desires which through habit so have perverted their states. In traditional ethics, emotion can arise from as well as precede the choice of the will, and in such a way eventually through the medium of habit a strong inordinate emotion can become a creature of choice and of act. In fact, so strong is the attachment of many of Jonson's humourous characters to their passions that they can only be cured or drawn "out of their humour" with the aid of some kind of jolt, such as, for example, Macilente and Crites often provide.

But there are other plays by Ben Jonson in which more or less humourous characters are found, and in which the characterization is said to have a similar thematic importance. Specifically, in an article entitled, "*Bartholomew Fair: Comedy of Vapours*," James E. Robinson has suggested that the "theme of vapours" which is found in that play provides the very "principle of its structure and unity of action."²⁸ At first glance, this seems highly unlikely, for in contrast to *Every Man Out*, the key word is not found in the title, no "theory of vapours" is pronounced, and outside of the game of vapours in Act IV, only one character uses the word to any degree at all. Indeed, the very derivation of the term is uncertain. John J. Enck believes it comes from the game of vapours and that "no consistent denotations can be assigned it" (p. 190), while Robinson and others link it to a physiological explanation like that of the bodily humours.²⁹ But as has been seen,

27. The terminology is that of Wright. See above, n. 21.

28. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 1 (1961), 65-80; our quotation is from p. 67.

29. Specifically, according to Robinson, "vapors arise from bilious humors in unnatural heat because of physiological disorder or immoderate passions. The vapors rise, cloud the brain, and produce madness" (p. 66). He draws this explanation from Lawrence Babb, *The Elizabethan Malady* (East Lansing, Mich., 1951), pp. 21, 27-29.

Jonson's humours themselves do not have a strictly physiological basis, and there is no good reason to believe that the vapours do either. Instead, since most of the time the term is connected with people who are "fuming" or "heated," in good or ill "humour" (using the modern sense of those terms), or inflamed with liquor or quarrel, "vapours" as used in this play can be understood as the mental and verbal effects of emotion or passion. This is true in the very first use of the term, when Knockum responds to Ursula's sullen maledictions by saying, "Let's drinke it out, good *Urs*, and no vapours!" (II.iii.23-24), and "How? how? *Urs*, vapours! motion breede vapours?" (II.iii.45-46). And it is also true of the impassioned and inebriate speech of the game, which ultimately causes such a commotion that it ends in rousing the watch. As Quarlous says, "Call you this vapours? this is such belatching of quarrell, as I neuer heard" (IV.iv.78-79). Even Knockum's admittedly "all-inclusive"³⁰ use of the term such as is found in the following passage is usually connected with the effusive effect of a passion:

- KNO. Gentlemen, these are very strange vapours! and very idle vapours! I assure you.
- QVAR. You are a very serious asse, wee assure you.
- KNO. Humh! Asse? and serious? nay, then pardon mee my vapour. I haue a foolish vapour, Gentlemen: any man that doe's vapour me, the Asse, Master *Quarlous*—
- QVAR. What then, Master *Jordan*?
- KNO. I doe vapour him the lye.
- QVAR. Faith, and to any man that vapours mee the lie, I doe vapour that.
- KNO. Nay, then, vapour vpon vapours.

We mentioned before in our discussion of Crites that for Jonson, the understanding can be a part of the flow of which vice is the cause, but the vapours provide a perfect example. As Robinson suggests, most of the characters in *Bartholomew Fair* are "anxious to feed the fires of their vanities and so becloud their brains even more" (p. 70). Whether drunkenness or quarreling, anger or vanity produce the emotional seething which in turn produces its impassioned expressions, in each case behind the words and emotions lies some species of intemperate vice.³¹ And it is when the vapours are viewed in this way, that is, as

30. Robinson, p. 71.

31. Our understanding of vapour would seem to subsume both the definition of

the effects of general intemperance, that they seem most plausible as a central theme for *Bartholomew Fair* and the "animalism" which draws people there.

Finally, in connection with intemperance, a few words can be said about Jonson's "beast fable," *Volpone*. In an article published in 1968 entitled "Folly, Incurable Desire, and *Volpone*,"³² Harriett Hawkins deals with the themes of folly and disease in that play, suggesting that they are closely connected. But after a good deal of evidence, including *Volpone's* line, "to bee a foole borne, is a disease incurable" (II.ii. 159), in a footnote at the end of her article she quotes the following passage from the *Discoveries*:

They were ambitious of living backward; and at last arrived at that, as they would love nothing but the vices. . . . It was impossible to reforme these natures; they were dry'd, and hardned in their ill. They may say, they desir'd to leave it; but doe not trust them . . . they are a little angry with their follies, now and then; marry they come into grace with them again quickly [555-64].

Throughout her discussion, Hawkins is intent upon demonstrating the relation of folly to disease, but as the critic realizes, this passage deals not with incurable disease but instead with "incurable vice" (p. 347). This is significant. In a very well-known passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* which distinguishes incontinence from intemperance, not only did Aristotle compare intemperance to long sicknesses like dropsy and tuberculosis (as Aquinas explained in his *Commentary*, "This is so because intemperance—and every real vice—is without interruption, being a lasting habit which chooses evils")³³ but he also said that intemperance (like every real vice) was "incurable": "the intemperate man, as was pointed out before, is not inclined to be penitent, for he is tenacious of his choice. On the other hand, every incontinent man is given to repentance. . . . Consequently, one (the intemperate) is incurable and

Jackson I. Cope, for whom the vapours are "the clouds of discord which rise from the passions of the pig booth hell"—p. 146 in "*Bartholomew Fair* as Blasphemy," *Renaissance Drama*, 8 (1965), 127-52—and that of Dessen, who links the vapours to the effects which ale and tobacco have on the mind (p. 139). It is pertinent that both these critics regard the vapours as products of evil or vice. Dessen, for example, reminds us that Overdo's early oration (II.vi.1-92) had called "attention to 'the diseases of the body' (l. 65) and the consequent 'mallady' of 'the minde' (l. 69) brought about by immersion in vice, a connection basic to the play, particularly to the 'vapours' scene (IV.iv)" (p. 163).

³² *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 8 (1968), 335-48.

³³ Para. 1424, p. 660. See above, n. 12.

the other (the incontinent) is curable" (VII.viii, p. 659). Although Aquinas qualified Aristotle by saying that this incurability of vice is not to be understood as an absolute thing, being reversible by a "contrary practice of long standing" (para. 1430, p. 662), the applicability of these passages to the vice-ridden characters in *Volpone* is immediately clear. Corbaccio, Corvino, and Voltore, for example, are completely "possessed" with their greed, while Charles Hallett has spoken to "The Satanic Nature of Volpone."³⁴ In other plays, lesser bad habits such as folly, vanity, and affectation have a good deal of importance, but *Volpone* is about extremely serious, incurable, nay, even unnatural³⁵ vice. And of course the reason such characters as these can be termed "incurable" in the first place is that they intentionally seek riches above measure; they are not merely the victims of an excess of humour or passion, but their reason is deeply involved. For example, when Corvino considers whether he should offer his wife to Volpone, as, according to Mosca, a physician has offered his daughter, he uses his reason in arriving at a decision:

The thing, in't selfe,
I know, is nothing—Wherefore should not I
As well command my bloud, and my affections,
As this dull Doctor? In the point of honour,
The cases are all one, of wife, and daughter.

(II.vi.69-73)

When, therefore, such characters meet their comeuppance and finally realize what it is that they have become, that recognition comes as something almost contrary to nature itself. They are utterly confounded, not so much because of their shame, but fundamentally, because their reason, their will, and their passions have so long been directed to the unreasonable and vicious. As Aquinas says in a paraphrase of a passage quoted from Aristotle earlier, "because a person becomes unjust voluntarily, it does not follow that he ceases to be unjust and becomes just whenever he may will. . . . A man who is in good health willingly falls into sickness by living incontinently, i.e., by eating and drinking to excess and not following the doctor's advice, had it in his power in the

³⁴ *Philological Quarterly*, 49 (1970), 41-55.

³⁵ Bonario calls his father "unnaturall" (III.ii.53-54), and the judges comment both on this and on the unnaturalness of Corvino's treatment of his wife (IV.v.3-7). See Robert Knoll, *Ben Jonson's Plays: An Introduction* (Lincoln, Neb., 1964), pp. 103-4.

beginning not to become sick. But after he has performed the act, having eaten unnecessary or harmful food, it is no longer in his power not to be sick" (para. 513, p. 225). Similarly with the unjust. In other words, after a certain number of irrational acts, a condition of more or less permanent psychological sickness is reached. But this is exactly the point of a number of comments in the very last scene of the play. For example, at Volpone's final unveiling, the advocates break out in astonishment at the discovery both of the true nature of Volpone himself and of that of his victims:

- AVOC. 2. If this be held the high way to get riches,
 May I be poore.
 AVOC. 3. This's not the gaine, but torment.
 AVOC. 1. These possesse wealth, as sicke men possesse feuers,
 Which, trulyer, may be said to possesse them.
 (V.xii.99-102)

The disappointed Corbaccio, Corvino, Voltore, and Volpone do not really need to be punished; the new natures they now have acquired have brought along with them torment and sickness enough.

Critics attest that such an interest in the relation between vice and mental or emotional disease or disturbance is found throughout Jonson's psychology. Alan Dessen has discussed the themes of obsession and fixation in this play (98-101), among other things citing the passage wherein Mosca speaks of his avaricious victims:

- Too much light blinds 'hem, I thinke. Each of 'hem
 Is so possest, and stuf with his owne hopes,
 That any thing, vnto the contrary,
 Neuer so true, or neuer so apparent,
 Neuer so palpable, they will resist it—
 VOLP. Like a temptation of the diuell.
 (V.ii.23-28)

But one should remember that Asper had used similar language in his description of humour: "As when some one peculiar quality / Doth so *possesse* a man," etc. So it is quite appropriate that John Enck would compare "the range of meanings in *humours* with the usages of *neurosis* at the present time" (p. 46). As he explains, the "feeding of a humour" at first "resembles the indulgence of a minor vice which dominates the deluded in one aspect of his behavior. With practice, however, the

stream of humour running through anyone cannot find sufficient outlet in an occasional exercise so that, like a raging river, it breaks forth and sweeps away all inhibitions. The partial eccentricity becomes a whole mania; it twists the powerless into freaks and the strong into tyrants" (pp. 47-48). This portrait would seem as applicable to *Volpone* as to the humour plays, especially in the "minor" vice becoming a "major" one (p. 48). But in both cases, as Enck suggests when he says, "Jonson wrote two endings for *Every Man Out of His Humour*; in the one, humour is compared with a flame, in the other, with a current, but the results of visitation by holocaust or deluge are equally destructive" (p. 48), ultimately, Jonson's vision of the effects of vice is apocalyptic. Vice destroys the mind as well as the soul, disturbs the emotions, adversely affects physiology, and severs external connections as well: as we see in the conclusion of *Volpone*, each vicious character ends up seeking only his own. It is no accident that the very last scene in that play, with its precise judgments and unconditional nature (V.xii.145-46), and the criminals' unrepentant or incurable states, looks very much like a Last Judgment. Indeed, *Volpone's* own judgment may call to mind the physical-psychical correspondence of Dante's *Inferno*:

And, since [thy substance] was gotten by imposture,
 By faining lame, gout, palsey, and such diseases,
 Thou art to lie in prison, cramp't with irons,
 Till thou bee'st sicke, and lame indeed. Remoue him.
 (V.xii.121-24)

Here, as in the transformation of Satan into a serpent in the tenth book of *Paradise Lost*, the punishment merely reveals in appropriate physical terms the frightening debasement of soul which vice has already engendered. Jonson no doubt exaggerates, and his sketches of the ultimate effects to which sinful and vicious behavior naturally lead are somewhat condensed or foreshortened, but as a result, they have the effect of emphasizing the ability of a man by his own acts to make of himself what he will; that is, by his own choice to prepare for himself a psychological heaven or hell.

Recently a good deal of attention has been directed toward morality and ethics in Jonson, both in his plays and his poems, which is a welcome direction in criticism, but heretofore this kind of pursuit has not had a broad enough base. The time is long overdue for criticism to give detailed and serious consideration to the nature of habit in traditional

ethics and how it applies to Renaissance drama. It is widely acknowledged that a medieval and classical tradition provided the intellectual medium in which the great Renaissance dramatists worked, but Aristotelian ethics and its notion of habit were a part of that tradition, and whether it was known in its philosophical depths or merely in metaphorical aphorisms such as the frock that "bawd custome" puts on, that conception of habit still held a pivotal place. In important arguments which attempt to define exactly what "moral virtue" is, both Aristotle and Aquinas point to the fact that the word "moral" itself is taken from a term meaning "custom."³⁶ Thus, in the tradition, if he is to be true to his subject, the moralist will know a good deal about custom and a great deal about the habits which it can work. Like many critics today, we believe that at least in his plays about humour, Ben Jonson was primarily a moralist. However, we also believe what is, after all, only the most sensible thing, that the same author who required the good poet not only to have "*Elocution*; on an excellent faculty in verse; but the exact knowledge of all vertues, and their Contraries," who asked that he study "the *Ethicks*," and who termed Aristotle "the first accurate *Criticke*, and truest Judge; nay, the greatest *Philosopher*, the world ever had,"³⁷ that this same author knew very well what it was he was writing about.

36. See I-II, q. 58, a. 1, in the *Summa*, II.i of the *Ethics*, and, especially, Aquinas' comment on this passage in his *Commentary*.

37. From lines 1038-40, 2407, and 2511-13 of the *Discoveries*, respectively.