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What is a Greek Source on the Early English Stage? Fifteen New Essays

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi and Tania Demetriou

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4

An Idea of Old Comedy: Ben Jonson's Metatextual Appropriation of Aristophanes*

Alessandro Grilli

Abstract

This study argues that the relationship between Ben Jonson and Aristophanes evolves considerably over time and starts displaying an allegiance to Attic Old Comedy mediated in fact by Horace's satiric poetry. Through Horace, Jonson was led to think of Aristophanes as a forerunner of Roman satire – an idea that was widely shared in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture. In Jonson and Horace's view, Aristophanes' dramatic art was essentially equated with his sharp representation of characters. Explicit references to Aristophanes in the metatheatrical sections of *EMO*, in contrast to the almost complete lack of close intertextual passages linking Jonson's 'comical satires' to the Aristophanic *corpus*, suggest that up to at least 1606 Jonson was not familiar with Aristophanes' comedies, but only with their metatextual representation in literary texts and studies, from antiquity to his time. This is why I would propose to understand the Jonson-Aristophanes relationship entailed in the 'comical satires' of 1598-1601 as a form of 'metatextual appropriation'. Jonson's effort to place his 'comical satires' under the banner of Attic Old Comedy results in a peculiar triangular relationship linking him to Aristophanes through Horace, and unveils his need for an eminent precursor in whose shadow he could stand out as both a satirist and a playwright.

Keywords: Ben Jonson; Aristophanes; Horace; Transtextuality; Imitation

An Aristophanic Playwright

The main purpose of this study is to reconsider the relationship of Ben Jonson's comic theatre with its most distant model, Aristophanic comedy. Understanding whether and to what extent Ben Jonson's comedies can be interpreted as a reworking of themes and dramaturgical models of Attic Old Comedy is a relevant question in

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the history of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. Underlying the whole issue is the fact that Jonson's privileged relationship with Aristophanes is already explicitly (though only occasionally) mentioned in Jonson's own texts and those of some of his contemporaries.[1] The link between the work of Jonson and Aristophanes has thus been considered an established fact: it has been the subject of specialized studies or commentaries, which have carried forward from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century the idea of the indisputable relevance of Aristophanes for an understanding of Jonson's dramaturgy. Evidence of this can be found in the studies of F.E. Schelling (1898) and E. Baldwin (1901), throughout the many notes and commentaries of the Oxford edition by Herford and Simpson (1925-1952), as well as in some comparative readings of individual plays (Thayer 1959; Davison 1963; Potter 1968). This critical tradition was finally systematized by a few contributions in the second half of the twentieth century (Gum 1969; Lafkidou Dick 1974; Armes 1974), whose book-length investigations helped shape a shared vision of the issue. Indeed, later contributions (Barton 1984; Ostovich 2001, 18-28; Miola 2014) seem to rely on the results of those studies, accepting their basic tenet: Ben Jonson's dramaturgy starts from a conscious 'Aristophanean' choice in opposition to the Hellenistic-Roman tradition of the earlier comedy. In the authoritative words of Anne Barton (1984, 114),

> [b]oth *The Case Is Altered* and *Every Man In His Humour* had borne witness to Jonson's uneasiness with the kind of linear, boy-gets-girl plot inherited from Greek New Comedy, the plot which for other Elizabethan dramatists was staple. The comical satires to which he turned next at least abandoned any pretence to interest in changeling children, resurrections from the dead, or romantic love leading to marriage. Yet 'words, above action: matter, above words' had turned out to be an unsatisfactory substitute, especially in performance. Jonson had not been really successful in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, *Cynthia's Revels* or *Poetaster* at replacing the well-tried organisational principles of contemporary comedy with any effective dramatic, as opposed to literary, structure. From this impasse he was rescued by Aristophanes.

1 The main passages are quoted and discussed below, 144ff; 150ff.

Although Barton implies that Aristophanes only exerted his dramaturgical influence from *Volpone* onwards, Jonson's close relationship with his predecessor's *corpus* is (for her) never in doubt, not even for the years before 1606:

> As Camden's pupil, and also as a man naturally interested in the comedy of the ancient world, both Roman and Greek, Jonson *must have been acquainted* with what survives of Athenian *vetus comoedia* long before he addressed himself to *Volpone*. But it was not until 1606 that he seems to have discovered Aristophanes creatively, understanding how this great dramatist might provide for him what Greek New Comedy had given most of his dramatic contemporaries, including Shakespeare: a basic comedic structure capable of subtle variation and extension. (1984, 113; first emphasis mine)

It is precisely the familiarity of Jonson with Aristophanes in the early stages of his career that deserves, in my opinion, more in-depth reconsideration. Indeed, recent contributions (Harrison 2023; Grilli and Morosi 2023) have drawn attention to some interesting features of this specific imitative relationship, made up of explicit statements that are not accompanied by equally perceptible echoes. An important premise of my discussion is that it is precisely through the peculiarities of this imitative relationship that certain aspects of intertextual processes in Renaissance poetic practice can be identified and better understood.

Although theoretical approaches to intertextuality point out that imitative phenomena are not an object that can be thought of merely as close textual rewriting or allusion (Pigman 1980; Greene 1982; Burrow 2019, esp. 1-34), some reference studies on the Jonson-Aristophanes relationship (Gum 1969, in particular) tend to overestimate the incidence of precise Aristophanic allusions in Jonson's plays.[2] Indeed, the term 'intertextuality' is often employed as a single concept, when in fact it refers to a constellation of practices with very different objectives and modalities.

2 On the history and multilayered meanings of 'intertextuality' see at least Bernardelli 2000 and 2013; Allen 2002. Relations with Renaissance poetics are discussed by Carter 2021, in particular 107-14. Theoretical connections between intertextual practice and literary genre are explored by Genette 1979 and Most 1987.

Understood in its broadest sense, intertextuality is an intrinsic property of the text (as such, it is the last of the "seven standards of textuality" outlined and investigated by text linguistics: de Beaugrande, Dressler 1981, chapters 1 and 9); in its most narrow sense, on the other hand, intertextuality coincides with citation, that is, the partial superimposition of a text on another text (Compagnon 1979). Between these two extremes, the phenomenon of the relationship between texts presents itself in a great variety of forms, whose relevance goes beyond the mere knowledge of literary history and involves the very dynamics of poetic creation.

In order to better describe different relationships between texts, I adopt in this study the terminology of Genette 1982, which begins by distinguishing 'transtextuality', that is a generic relationship between texts, from its various forms. Genette's taxonomy is also the most suitable to account for two crucial aspects: 1. transtextual practices range from a maximum to a minimum of specificity;[3] 2. the pragmatic dimension, although difficult to investigate, is crucial to the understanding of any transtextual relationship. This is why the term 'intertextuality/intertextual', which in current usage refers to all varieties of relationship between texts (Allen 2000; Bernardelli 2000), is defined by Genette as the "actual presence of a text within another" (Genette 1997, 2): it entails a direct, specific link between a hypotext and a hypertext resulting from its close textual elaboration ("quoting", "plagiarism" and "allusion" being the main cases brought up by Genette).

3 Genette distinguishes between transtextual and intertextual relationships, the former being a hyperonym of the latter: in Genette's words, transtextuality is "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (1997, 1), and as such occurs in different forms (intertextual, paratextual, metatextual, hypertextual, and architextual relationships, according to Genette, who lists those five types "in the order of increasing abstraction, implication, and comprehensiveness": ibid.). The complex semantics of intertextuality, particularly in early modern poetics, is duly accounted for by Carter 2021, 107-12. For my purposes, in this article I will use transtextuality to refer to a more generic form of relationship between texts, whereas hyper- and/or intertextuality will denote a closer, clearly detectable rewriting of a known hypotext.

In my opinion, a more analytical approach to the issue can modify and integrate received notions about Ben Jonson's relationship with Aristophanic comedy. At the basis of my argument is the idea that the relationship between Ben Jonson and Aristophanes is an important one, but one that evolves over time: the occurrences of Aristophanic themes, code traits and dramaturgical situations are to be found in Jonson's middle or late production, while his early comedies express a programmatic intent that is not matched by an objectively demonstrable intertextual presence of Aristophanes.

I will focus precisely on the first phase of Jonson's comic theatre, and argue that it does not bear traces of an actual intertextual reworking so much as of a *metatextual* appropriation. Broadening Genette's definition of 'metatext',[4] we can understand metatextual appropriation as a relationship that the text (or rather its author) entertains a second-degree discourse about the text to be taken as a model, that is with a mere *idea* of it. Hence the title of this study: this 'idea of Old Comedy' is nothing other than the image of that genre reflected, simplified and mediated by other sources: not only literary texts (such as, in this case, the Latin poets central to Jonson's poetics of satire) but also secondary literature, from literary history treatises to commentaries, or other critical metatexts. This line of reading takes into account the peculiarities of Aristophanes' dissemination in England in the sixteenth century: a relative abundance of references indeed confirms that Aristophanes was well known (see Miola 2014 for an analytical review), although in a quite superficial way – a peculiarity that is easy to explain on the one hand by the author's historical-literary importance, and on the other by the linguistic and exegetical difficulty of his works (Lever 1946).

In the following pages, I will attempt to show how Jonson's works reflect a considerable familiarity with critical texts relating to Aristophanes, in contrast to the scarcity of actual parallel passages between the two authors. This discrepancy is consistent with the assumption that Jonson had an abstract idea of Aristophanes

4 Genette 1997, 4: "The third type of textual transcendence, which I call metatextuality, is the relationship most often labeled 'commentary'. It unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it), in fact sometimes even without naming it".

in mind, rather than a precise textual memory of his comedies. As a consequence, the *purpose* of Jonson's claim to similarity to Aristophanes can be understood as an attempt to place his experiments in comic dramaturgy under the banner of an illustrious but not overly popular author. In so doing, Jonson privileges some aspects of Attic Old Comedy over many others: his Aristophanes is basically the forerunner of Roman satire. In this, Jonson adheres to the image of Aristophanes prevalent among his contemporaries, an image founded on Horace's mentions of Attic Old Comedy in his *Satires* and *Ars poetica*.

Reading Texts or Metatexts?

That Jonson had direct knowledge of Aristophanes' text is a matter of unquestionable agreement. However, this should not prevent us from asking more specific questions, namely when, in what form, and to what extent it is reasonable to think that Jonson gained this knowledge. To answer these questions, the data in our possession includes contextual information about the playwright's library and documented readings on the one hand, and traces of intertextual contact on the other – which must, however, be limited to the (admittedly very rare) cases in which it is entirely beyond doubt.

Now, as to the time, it is certainly reasonable for us to assume an early knowledge of Aristophanes in some form on Jonson's part, since the Greek playwright is already explicitly mentioned in *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599) and in *Poetaster* (1601). This knowledge is not surprising, given that Aristophanes was included, at least in part, in a school curriculum to which Jonson himself may have been exposed during his years at Westminster School;[5] and given, above all, that Aristophanes is a pillar of that Greek literary tradition that Renaissance classicism was so invested in.[6]

5 On which see Kay 1995, 8-11.

6 Lord 1963, 102ff. On the dissemination of Aristophanes' study in the English Renaissance see in particular Miola 2014; for an understanding of his influence on Ben Jonson it may be relevant to recall that *Clouds* was included in the curriculum of both universities, and was performed at St John's College Cambridge in 1598.

In practice, however, we can only formulate conjectural hypotheses on the actual channels of this knowledge, of which no specific evidence remains: Jonson's library, as it can be reconstructed today, includes only two editions of Aristophanes, dated 1607 and 1616 respectively,[7] which would lead us to date our author's reading of Aristophanes rather late.

In fact, the documentary evidence of 'Jonson's library' is not compelling in this case, and for several reasons: firstly, it is not certain that Jonson only ever read the ancients in his own editions – indeed, McPherson 1974 emphasises the relevance of Jonson's intellectual (and bibliographical) exchanges with other scholars, among which those with John Selden are particularly important. Secondly, it is well known that in 1623 a fire destroyed part of Jonson's personal library.[8] As I have argued elsewhere (Grilli and Morosi, 2023, 27), what we know of Jonson's habits makes it plausible that precisely the books that Jonson read and used most, those with the richest and most in-depth annotations, perished in the fire, of which we can form an idea on the basis of Petrus Scriverius's Martial (Leiden, 1619), preserved at the Folger Library (McPherson 1974, no. 121, 68-70). But it is possible that Jonson decided to purchase a complete translated and annotated edition of Aristophanes precisely because of his desire to deepen his knowledge of an author he had previously only known in a more superficial way.

External evidence, in short, is of little help when we seek to establish the extent and manner of Jonson's assimilation of Aristophanes. We must turn to indubitable intertextual references, which are, however, surprisingly few in comparison to the many that are evoked in the studies (see e.g. Gum 1969, 132-186). In *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), the Aristophanesque character of the setting and characters, already recognised by Rechner (1914, 54), and analytically explored by Potter 1968, appears more evident than elsewhere, even if it is not substantiated by precise intertextual references. Instead, we find some of the latter in a play whose overall independence from the Aristophanean model is recognised

7 McPherson 1974, nos. 8 (25-6) and 95 (57-8).

8 On that occasion Jonson composed *Execration Upon Vulcan* (H&S, 8.202-12).

by Coburn Gum himself, *The Devil is an Ass* (1616):[9] in that play the measurement of flea jumps is mentioned, which undoubtedly alludes to Aristophanes' *Clouds* (*DA* 5.2.10-4 ~ Ar. *Nub.* 149-52). [10]

From the same play comes the only explicit quotation from the Greek text, that of *Wealth* 850-2, included (with a significant omission) in *DA* 5.8.112-4. As I have shown elsewhere (Grilli and Morosi 2023, 27-31), the quotation does not signal a deep semantic resonance with the intertext, because it is motivated solely by the connotation of the signifier: in a scene simulating glossolalia of a demonic nature, the quotation of a passage in which the word δαίμων occurs several times is expressively appropriate, even though the Greek κακοδαίμων has nothing particularly demonic about it, as it simply denotes the unhappiness of those struck by misfortune.[11]

Undoubtedly Aristophanic, as has already been observed (H&S 2.177), is also the Canting College in *The Staple of News* 4.4 (1626), where other unquestionable allusions to Aristophanes emerge, such as Pennyboy Senior's trial of his dogs, which evidently recalls *Wasps* 836ff.[12] To these long-known elements one could add a deeper dramaturgical feature, highlighted by Francesco Morosi in this volume: in *The Staple of News* the dynamic of intergenerational conflict takes an opposite form to that of Hellenistic-Roman comedy, and conforms instead to the atypical father/son clash of Aristophanes' *Clouds* and *Wasps*.

Finally, these passages should be supplemented with the observations on Aristophanes that Jonson notes in his commonplace book *Discoveries* (published posthumously in 1641 and the subject

9 "In *The Devil is an Ass* Aristophanic allegory seems out of place, for the play is developed along Plautine and Terentian lines, which exclude allegorical features" (Gum 1969, 175).

10 The passage is reported and discussed among others by Lafkidou-Dick 1974, 8.

11 Jonson's expressive goal is made clear by his omission of a hemistich (ὡς ἀπόλωλα δείλαιος), which would have the disadvantage of making the divergence of contexts obvious. As Coburn Gum also observes, since these words "are essential to the meaning of the passage, their absence reduces it to gibberish" (1969, 176).

12 Besides H&S 2.184, the reference is already in Schelling 2.265.

of much controversial interpretation by the poet's biographers and editors).[13] Here again, the explicit mention of Aristophanes is considered a sure indication of Jonson's familiarity with this author (Miola 2014, 497), and a retrospective testament to the importance of Attic Old Comedy in the development of his career as a playwright. A closer look at these references, however, allows to clarify further important aspects of the matter at hand (*Disc.* 1876-96):

> So that what either in the words or sense of an author, or in the language or actions of men, is awry, or depraved doth strangely stir mean affections, and provoke for the most part to laughter. And therefore it was clear that all insolent and obscene speeches, jests upon the best men, injuries to particular persons, perverse and sinister sayings – and the rather unexpected – in the Old Comedy [1880] did move laughter, especially where it did imitate any dishonesty; and scurrility came forth in the place of wit; which who understands the nature and genius of laughter cannot but perfectly know. Of which Aristophanes affords an ample harvest, having not only outgone Plautus or any other in that kind, but expressed all the moods and figures of what [1885] is ridiculous, oddly. In short, as vinegar is not accounted good until the wine be corrupted, so jests that are true and natural seldom raise laughter with the beast, the multitude. They love nothing that is right and proper. The farther it runs from reason or possibility with them, the better it is. What could have made them laugh like to see Socrates presented – that example of all good life, honesty, and virtue – to have him hoisted up with a pulley, and there play the philosopher in a basket; measure how many feet a flea could skip geometrically by a just scale, and edify the people from the engine? This was theatrical wit, right stage-jesting, and relishing a playhouse invented for scorn and laughter; whereas if it had savoured of equity, truth, perspicuity, and candour, to have tasted a wise or a learned palate, [1895] spit it out presently.

13 Hutson 2014. One should also bear in mind C. Burrow's remarks urging caution about what Jonson wrote in *Discoveries* and the extent to which we should be guided by it when we consider his literary practice (Burrow 2019, 240).

What appears to be a coherent Jonsonian reflection on the essential features of the ridicule is actually a rather accurate translation of a page by Daniel Heinsius, and not just any page: in the edition of Horace that Heinsius prepared for Elzevier in 1612,[14] the Dutch scholar includes his annotations on the author (*De satyra Horatiana libri duo*), in which he addresses problems of textual criticism and provides the interpretation of numerous problematic passages. This *excerptum* by Jonson, therefore, also confirms the reading hypothesis of *Poetaster* that Francesco Morosi and I have recently proposed in a contribution where, among other things, we emphasised the role of Horace's mediation in the relationship of Jonson's 'comical satires' with Aristophanes' comedy (Grilli and Morosi 2023, 113 and n121).

The lines translated in *Disc.* 1876ff. belong to the remarks *In epistolam ad Pisones de arte poetica* (1612, 67ff.), and are extracted from a long digression on 270-84: this passage from Horace provides an extremely succinct (and not particularly perspicuous) account of the development of theatrical history in Greece, from Thespis and Aeschylus to the authors of ancient comedy ("vetus . . . comoedia", 281). Heinsius' note takes advantage of Horatian references to the earliest phases of Greek theatre to expound a broader and more systematic reflection on the nature of tragic and comic theatre (1612, 78-99).

As we can see, Heinsius' relationship with Aristophanes is doubly metatextual, as the philologist comments on a page of Horace that, despite its poetic form, is itself a treatise on literary history. Indeed, Horace's remarks stand as an overall interpretation of the evolution of ancient Greek theatre. The nature of a treatise also emerges in Heinsius' notes, which follow the conceptual and argumentative schemes of Aristotle's *Poetics* at several points. For example, on page 79[15] Heinsius states that comedy and tragedy can be understood in parallel ("Cum eaedem propemodum comoediae ac tragoediae sint partes, finis quoque idem ex parte, ex parte diversus, multa communia esse utrique, est necesse. Comoedia enim delectat et docet. Neque minus comici διδάσκαλοι et κωμῳδοδιδάσκαλοι,

14 Reprinted in Leiden in 1629; on the critical-literary theories of Daniel Heinsius see Meter 1984.

15 Mistakenly, Lorna Hutson's commentary *ad locum* indicates p. 52.

quam tragici a Graecis dicuntur")[16] and the definition of the comedian that is given in this very passage is that of Aristotle, *Poetics* 5.1-2.

On this double metatextual framework is grafted Jonson's page, which in this section of *Discoveries* sets out to reflect on the nature of poetry and the prerogatives of the poet, and selects passages from various works by Heinsius (in particular the *Animadversiones in Horatium*, and the *De tragoediae constitutione liber*) focusing on the definition of various literary genres, tragedy and comedy *in primis*. It is, in short, a third-degree metatextual discourse, within which Aristophanes' work is reduced to a few hints. It is precisely their selective and stereotypical character that is the point of greatest interest in our eyes. From the entire bulk of the Aristophanic *corpus*, so vast and varied, only a couple of commonplace details are recalled: the caricature of Socrates in the *Clouds*, suspended in a basket ("to have him hoisted up with a pulley, and there play the philosopher in a basket"), and the measurement of the flea's leap ("measure how many feet a flea could skip geometrically by a just scale"). This patently superficial selection provides us with a valuable indication of what the gist of Aristophanes' poetics was for the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reader (we will return to this later).

Imitating an Idea

The combination of these premises (scarcity of intertextual reworking and relative abundance of metatextual references) is consistent with the assumption that Jonson had no thorough knowledge of Aristophanes' texts at the beginning of his career as a playwright. As we shall see in greater detail in a moment, in the first phase of his production Jonson refers to Aristophanes as an authority, but no textual or dramaturgical allusions to the Attic Old playwright are

16 It may be interesting to note that the didactic (i.e. moralistic) nature of Jonson's 'comical satire' is completely in tune with Heinsius' vision of ancient comedy. Interestingly, Jonson follows Heinsius in a misinterpretation of the term διδάσκαλος, which in the Athenian theatrical context had the technical meaning of 'chorus master', i.e. 'director', whereas the great philologist (and Jonson with him) interprets it in an educational sense.

easily recognizable in his 'comical satires'. It is possible, and very reasonable, that Jonson was initially familiar with *Clouds*, if we are to believe the possible parallels highlighted by Helen Ostovich in her rich commentary on *Every Man Out of His Humour*.[17] In general, then, a change of perspective on the Jonson-Aristophanes relationship can help bring into focus misunderstandings of various shapes and sizes. This is why it is worthwhile to briefly review the documentary and textual evidence, also highlighting the history and some conceptual limits of these interpretations.

As we have seen, indubitable references to Aristophanes are increasingly common in Jonson's mature production, from *Volpone* onwards, and peak between 1614 and 1616. In my opinion, it is reasonable to assume that at the beginning of his career Jonson could not rely on a deep, complete, first-hand knowledge of Aristophanes: his illustrious predecessor was a figure of prestige providing an excellent reference point as a poetic authority. In particular, a close analysis of the 'comical satires' reveals that all explicit allusions to Aristophanes between 1598 and 1601 do not entail a direct knowledge of his comedies. Their vagueness shows that they can easily have been mediated by other texts – literary, primarily, such as Horace and Lucian, but also reference books and critical works of ancient and modern scholars. Jonson's Aristophanes, in other words, is the Aristophanes that Horace, Lucian, as well as Quintilian and Donatus – but also Castelvetro, Julius Caesar Scaliger, Robortello and Minturno, not to mention William Camden, Roger Ascham or Gabriel Harvey – present to Ben Jonson.

This change of perspective has several advantages, the main one being to explain the *forms* of the revival, which go far beyond imitative rewriting (such as Jonson's meticulous reworking of Horace's *Satire* 1.9 in *Poetaster* 3.1-3) and often entail structural and ideological transformations. Even when the contact between Jonson and Aristophanes seems most likely, due to the close parallelism of the dramaturgical situation, the 'imitation' can imply a considerable updating of the ideological posture. Interestingly, this updating is not an indication of 'eristic imitation' (Pigman 1980): Jonson's metadiscursive hints to Aristophanes make clear

17 See esp. Ostovich 2001, 26-8.

that he is convinced of faithfully following his predecessor; yet his partial, inevitably subjective understanding of the model inspires him passages where the form of his hypotext is preserved, but the content reversed. What Jonson seems to retain is Aristophanes' censorious attitude, even his targets, but not his worldview. Such is the case with the meta-performance of the poet, or the situations in which a poet attempts to gain acceptance as a member of a prestigious group. This situation, in itself rather peculiar and thematically marked, recurs several times in Jonson's theatre, from *Every Man In His Humour* to *Poetaster*, from *The Alchemist* to *Bartholomew Fair*, and takes forms that closely resemble those attested in Aristophanic comedy. The problem is that in spite of the dramaturgical similarity, the ideological tendency of these scenes in Aristophanes and Jonson is *radically opposite* – anti-elitist in Aristophanes, elitist in Jonson. This is the main clue that leads one to read this apparent transposition as a *mediated* transposition: and in fact it is easy to see that behind the poet-postulator is not the poet or the dithyrambographer of Aristophanes' *Birds*, but the bawler of Horace's satire 1.9. As Francesco Morosi and I have recently shown (Grilli and Morosi 2023, 116-20), Aristophanes' postulant is negative because he is pretentious and profiteering, whereas Jonson's postulant is mocked and despised as incompetent – both too rough and too bombastic to be a true poet. The positive pole in Aristophanes, consequently, is an everyman's anti-intellectual stance, while in Jonson the positive pole is represented by the intellectuals who know the poetic art but are exempt from both uneducated clumsiness and pedantry.

Even in Jonson's mature comedies, however, formal revival is sometimes accompanied by ideological reversal, as in the conversion of Busy in *Bartholomew Fair*, where the theatre-averse Puritan is finally transformed into a 'beholder' no different from any other show lover.[18] Although in principle it formally re-proposes the conversion of Kreitton Logos at the end of the *Clouds* agon,[19] in

18 *BF* 5.5.93: "Let it go on. For I am changed, and will become a beholder with you!". The comparison is reported and discussed in Gum 1969, 174.

19 Ar. *Nub.* 1102-4: ἡττήμεθ'· ὦ κινούμενοι, / πρὸς τῶν θεῶν δέξασθέ μου θοἰμάτιον, ὡς / ἐξαυτομολῶ πρὸς ὑμᾶς.

terms of content it polarises the trend: Kreitton Logos personifies naive adherence to ethical ideals practised in good faith, and his conversion is the subject of marked irony (the good guy switches sides). Busy's conversion, on the other hand, is a restoration of common sense, opposed to the stubborn and fanatical rejection of theatre typical of Puritans and hypocrites: here it is the wicked Busy who finally passes over to the side of the good. Needless to say, even when studies point out the comparison (such as Gum 1969, 174) they omit to note the – far from secondary! – element of ideological updating. We are not to think, of course, that influence is only a matter of agreement (as Pigman 1980 makes abundantly clear); yet, any deviation, correction, or reversal of the hypotext should be highlighted by interpreters as meaningful, since it indicates the aims and purpose of the imitation. All the more so in this case, where Jonson's imitative stance seems to be unwillingly "adaptive" (Burrow 2019, 9, 169ff.): from *EMO* onwards, Jonson claims his conformity to Aristophanes the satirist, even if the ideological implications of imitated passages are opposite.

The profound transformation of 'Aristophanic' elements in Jonson, in short, makes the search for parallels a complex and fraught path: sometimes, even when the parallel is well-founded, studies provide readings of it that, while acknowledging Jonson's imitative freedom,[20] fail to value the extent and tendency of the transformation; in most cases, however, alleged parallels are based on vague similarities which do not resist a closer look at the context. For example, Gum forces the argument when he claims that in *SN* 3.2.123-5 the "ridiculous traffic in abstractions may have been suggested by Aristophanes" (177). In fact, references to the cost of education in *Clouds* are much more marginal than in *The Staple of News*. They are presented as a secondary element (only Strepsiades mentions a tuition fee), and moreover filtered through the focus on a character as obsessed with material goods as the old protagonist (Grilli 2001, 24-9). In cases like this, therefore, the hypothesis of a specific intertextual derivation of a single element

20 In relation to the dogs' trial in *SN*, Gum (1969, 181) correctly observes: "These differences between the two trials indicate Jonson's customary free adaptation of his borrowings, from Aristophanes and other classical authors".

is only a reflection of the general assumption that there is an indisputable contact between the two authors and their texts. In *The Staple of News* this contact is guaranteed in relation to very marked elements, such as the dog trial derived from *Wasps* (above, para. 2), or the very structure of the Canting College exemplified in Socrates' *Phrontisterion*, but it is not at all guaranteed in the case of particular elements or sections of the text for which no actual analogy with sections of the hypotext can be demonstrated (the petty sale of news evokes much more immediately incongruous practices of selling abstract goods – from indulgences to offices – than the sale of knowledge in a school; let us not forget that in England, education, then as now, was anything but free).

In general, it should be borne in mind that in the case of the relationship between Jonson and Aristophanes it is rather risky to try to identify textual analogies, where the context reveals their ultimate inconsistency. One example among many: the relationship between *DA 5*.5.28-30 ("Fitzdottrel Out, you rogue! / You most infernal counterfeit wretch! Avaunt! / Do you think to gull me with your Aesop's fables?") and Ar. *Av.* 471 ('Αμαθὴς γὰρ ἔφυς κοὐ πολυπράγμων, οὐδ' Αἴσωπον πεπάτηκας, "That's because you've an unintelligent, uninquisitive nature, and haven't studied your Aesop." transl. Sommerstein) is reported by Graves (1954, 13) and taken up by Gum (1969, 176):[21] in the two passages reference is made to Aesop's fables. But the radical difference in context makes the polygenetic nature of the reference clear. Whereas, in Aristophanes, Peisetaerus reproaches the birds for ignoring Aesop's fables, in Jonson, on the contrary, Fitzdottrel reproaches Pug for knowing them and using them inappropriately. To postulate a contact between the two passages, in short, one would have to assume that Jonson needed Aristophanes to mention Aesop's fables – which in my opinion is highly unlikely.

21 Gum justifies the legitimacy of the comparison by the fact that the word πολυπράγμων is emphasised in the 1607 edition of Aristophanes that belonged to Jonson (so already Graves 1954, 64; but McPherson [1974, 26] observes that the annotations on this volume, preserved today at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, are not "of the kind usually made by Jonson").

Looking for a Forefather

Indeed, the quest for parallel passages is not the most productive way to pursue the analysis of the Jonson-Aristophanes relationship. It is not just a question of focusing on *what* goes into a transtextual contact, but how, and above all *for what purpose* – in other words, it is a matter of getting an idea of the *pragmatics* of the transtextual relationship entailed in a text. The purposes can be of various kinds, and this variety of intentions also helps to better understand the variety of forms in which contact between texts takes place. Intertextual rewriting does not always imply total alignment: many texts are written in a 'corrective' mode, and the transtexual relationship presents itself as an occasion for self-definition and more or less polemical opposition to a model.[22] In the case of Jonson's relationship with Aristophanes, rather the opposite is true: from an examination of explicit statements, and of many aspects of Jonson's dramaturgy, the effort to assimilate, to identify, to legitimise oneself by exhibiting familiarity with the model is evident.[23]

Jonson's relationship with Aristophanes seems to begin under the banner of projection: a relationship more exhibited than substantiated by real familiarity with the text. This hypothesis is consistent with our main documentary evidence, a metaliterary

22 As early as 1980, in his study of imitation metaphors in Renaissance theoretical texts, George W. Pigman III introduces the notion of 'eristic' imitation, one substantiated by a dialectical – polemical or corrective – attitude (it is surprising not to find Bloom 1973 among Pigman's references; on this issue see also Greene 1982). In a comprehensive study on Renaissance imitation, Colin Burrow deals extensively with the pragmatics of the imitative relation. Burrow draws attention in particular to 'adaptive imitation', which is able to account for both the veneration of the ancients and the moderns' need for self-assertion (Burrow 2019, 169ff.). Burrow does not specifically address the issue of Jonson's imitation of Aristophanes, but one of his remarks seems to me to capture the substance of this literary relationship: "*Imitatio* is such a complex process and such a multiplex concept that no one who imitates can be expected ever to be quite sure what they are doing, or how exactly they stand in relation to their textual origins" (Burrow 2019, 32).

23 This aspect is particularly emphasised by Hui 2013; see also Burrow 2019, 235ff.

statement of the 'philosopher-critic'[24] Cordatus in the *Induction* to *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599: CEWBJ Online, 224-43):

> Mitis You have seen his play, Cordatus. Pray you, how is't?
> Cordatus Faith, sir, I must refrain to judge. Only this I can say of it, 'tis strange, and of a particular kind by itself, somewhat like *Vetus Comoedia*. A work that hath bounteously pleased me; how it will answer the general expectation, I know not.
> Mitis Does he observe all the laws of comedy in it?
> Cordatus What laws mean you?
> Mitis Why, the equal division of it into acts and scenes, according to the Terentian manner; his true number of actors; the furnishing of the scene with Grex or chorus; and that the whole argument fall within compass of a day's efficiency.
> Cordatus Oh, no, these are too nice observations.
> Mitis They are such as must be received, by your favour, or it cannot be authentic.
> Cordatus Troth, I can discern no such necessity.
> Mitis No?
> Cordatus No, I assure you, signor. If those laws you speak of had been delivered us *ab initio*, and in their present virtue and perfection, there had been some reason of obeying their powers. But 'tis extant that what we call comoedia was at first nothing but a simple and continued satire, sung by one only person . . .

This is a crucial passage in the play's *Induction*, since it provides a kind of metaliterary reading key: to Mitis's questions, who asks about the play to be performed, Cordatus responds with a critical judgement that is also, and above all, an attempt to orient the recipient towards a formal understanding. One should not expect a traditional comedy that conforms to Hellenistic-Roman grammar ("the Terentian manner"), but rather an attempt to recover the spirit of primitive comedy ("*Vetus Comoedia*"), which originates from a *non-dramatic monody* with satirical content ("that which we call comoedia was at first nothing but a simple and continued satire, *sung by one only person*"; emphasis mine). Jonson's intention, through the character of Cordatus, is to place his new proposal under the banner of a return to its more remote origins, which are outlined in

24 Martin 2014 (*Introduction* to *EMO* in CEWBJ Online).

a very interesting way – on the one hand with the technical term *Vetus Comoedia*,[25] on the other with a genealogical reconstruction of the technical innovations that lead from poetic satire to comic drama (details are provided by Cordatus in the lines following the quoted text: 243-55).

This passage is crucial to the understanding of Jonson's relationship with Aristophanes. Two details are particularly meaningful: firstly, its phrasing is predominantly *negative*. The point is *opposition* to the comedy of the Terentian tradition, not so much assimilation to Aristophanes. It is no coincidence that Aristophanes is evoked in 246 along with Cratinus and Eupolis (a quite significant association, as we shall see), and not as a prominent author, but as part of a broader genealogical succession. Not only that: conformity to this model, identified through the use of a technical term and an overview of literary history, is presented as vague ("somewhat"), not as total conformity to an *alternative* code. Secondly, it is worth noting that the passage speaks not of an author but of a genre ("*Vetus Comoedia*") – one that Jonson, like us, knew only from the Aristophanic *corpus* and fragments of indirect tradition, accessible to him presumably through Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists* (it is worth noting, however, that Jonson's extant copy was published only in 1612: McPherson 1974, 27-8, no. 14). Also in *Discoveries*, as we have seen above, Jonson translates Daniel Heinsius's remarks on Aristophanes and the 'Old comedy' as part of a general commentary on Horace's *Ars poetica.* It is significant that in both cases Jonson makes use of terminology that is drawn not so much from the ancient comic texts as from the paratexts and metatexts that have accompanied them throughout the tradition (Evantius, Donatus and their modern epigones). Which means that in this passage Jonson has in mind, rather than specific literary texts, a series of general connotations, which do not cite texts but *describe the genre* in metadiscursive terms. Jonson, in short, does not take up Aristophanes' *corpus* directly, but *a discourse on the comic form mediated by pages of literary criticism.*

25 It may be useful to recall that in the technical lexicon in Jonson's time the term Old Comedy is also used to refer to older phases of English comedy: see e.g. Nashe 1958, 1.100.

This is why I would propose to understand the Jonson-Aristophanes relationship entailed in the 'comical satires' of 1598-1601 as a form of *metatextual* appropriation. This would be a particular case of that second-degree appropriation in which one author recalls another through the mediation of a third, even when the older author is not known to the more modern – a bit like Dante's Homer, whose presence in the *Commedia* is guaranteed by the mediation of Virgilian poetry.[26] In that case, moreover, the mediating text has a hypertextual relationship with its hypotext (the *Aeneid*, as is well known, is a hypertextual reworking of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*), while in the Jonson/Aristophanes relationship the appropriation relies on texts which are already in a metatextual relationship with the source text (such as the various treatises that Jonson evidently knew well from having studied them in the course of his training. In a later stage of his life Jonson may even have profited from this knowledge for the lectures he possibly gave at Gresham College – the impressive amount of these readings is attested in *Discoveries*).[27] The figure of Horace offers a double possibility of mediation, insofar as works such as the *Ars poetica* (which Jonson translated in 1604, although a revised version of it was posthumously printed by John Benson in 1640 and in F2: Burrow in CEWBJ Online, *Introduction*), but also various passages from the *Satires*, stand both as metatexts relating to literary history and as hypertexts of specific models.

These clarifications, which seem to me to be of particular importance, are generally neglected by studies that aim to account for the imitative relationship in terms of concrete intertextual references. This is as true of what I would consider the weaker studies (such as Gum's monograph, which spends an entire chapter analysing mostly implausible parallels: 1969, 132-86) as it is of the more convincing ones, such as the pages devoted to the problem by Helen Ostovich (2001, 18-28). Even in the latter case, however,

26 It is well known that in *Discoveries* Jonson also recommends an imitation that can also include literary models of its own models: CEWBJ, 7.582. The issue is discussed in Burrow 2019, 245-7.

27 I am following here C.J. Sisson's suggestive hypothesis (1952) that *Discoveries* originates from notes made by Jonson for his lectures as deputy Professor of Rhetoric at Gresham College. More on this topic in Hutson 2014.

the terms of comparison, which are described and analysed with great acuity, are not considered within a more complex system of influence. This leads to an inadequate appreciation of the fact that Jonson's Aristophanism at this stage is not so much dependent on Aristophanes as on an *image of* Aristophanes that Jonson derives from other authors, primarily Horace. The association of Aristophanes with Eupolis and Cratinus, in fact, is a clue that reveals the passage's dependence on the famous lines of Horace's satire 1.4 (1-5), from which the idea that the *comoedia prisca* is the proper antecedent of the Roman satire also comes:[28]

> Eupolis atque Cratinus Aristophanesque poetae
> atque alii, quorum comoedia prisca virorum est,
> siquis erat dignus describi, quod malus ac fur,
> quod moechus foret aut sicarius aut alioqui
> famosus, multa cum libertate notabant.

The most immediate confirmation of this derivation can be found in a passage from the *Apologetical Dialogue* in the appendix to *Poetaster* (1601), in which Jonson clearly reveals his inclination to equate ancient comedy with satire:

> Polyposus Oh, but they lay particular imputations –
> Author As what?
> Polyposus That all your writing is mere railing.
> Author Ha! If all the salt in the old comedy
> Should be so censured, or the sharper wit
> Of the bold satire termed scolding rage,

28 Also of great interest is what Heinsius, in his *Liber de satyra Horatiana* (1612, 39-40), quotes from Isidore, who considers comedy and satire two different historical stages of the same literary genre: "Duo sunt genera comicorum, id est, veteres et novi. Veteres, qui et ioco ridiculares extiterunt: ut Plautus, Actius, Terentius. Novi qui et Satyrici, a quibus generaliter vitia carpuntur, ut Flaccus, Persius, Iuvenalis". Of course, Heinsius criticises Isidore's errors ("homo imperitus", 40), but explains them with the structural similarity of comedy and satire ("Hoc autem [scil. Isidore's error] nos docet Veterem, quae sic revera fuit dicta, in plerisque convenisse cum Satyrica, Comoediam. Immo prope eandem fuisse. Nam et numeros, et compositionem, et ex parte formam eius expresserat Lucilius": ibid.), a similarity confirmed by the Horatian passage quoted above.

> What age could then compare with those for buffons?
> What should be said of Aristophanes?
> Persius? Or Juvenal? Whose names we now
> So glorify in schools, at least pretend it.
> (*Poet.* in CEWBJ Online, 171-9)

In responding to the criticism levelled at his dramatic experiments, the author invokes the principle of authority and places his own creations under the aegis of two ancient art forms, which are treated as disjunct ("*or* the sharper wit of the bold satire"; emphasis mine) but parallel and, as far as "railing" is concerned, equivalent: ancient Attic comedy and Roman satire. Undoubtedly, Jonson assumes Horace's historical reconstruction in *Serm.* 1.4, which makes Lucilius' work derive directly from Aristophanes, accompanied by Eupolis and Cratinus. It is interesting, therefore, that in citing the most significant exponents of both literary genres, Jonson mentions Aristophanes in an atypical triad of poets that associates him with Persius and Juvenal, thus confirming the idea that the ultimate forefather of his 'comical satires' could only be an author of 'dramatic satires'. Even more interesting is the fact that the glory of these ancient authors is explicitly attributed to school readings – a hint to the role of education in establishing the classical canon. The postulate "at least pretend it" ironically scorns the perfunctory deference of teachers and students to classical authors, more celebrated than read or understood. If perused carefully, however, their works would show how faithful Jonson's plays are to their ancient models – yet another indirect indication of the playwright's conviction that he is their true heir.

Aristophanes as a Satirical Poet

In assimilating Aristophanes to satire, i.e. in considering Horace's partial and tendentious genealogical reconstruction to be reliable, Jonson is by no means alone, let alone against the tide: a quick review of critical texts from the English Renaissance shows that Aristophanes is understood in very general terms in a narrow canon of preserved

Greek poets spanning different literary forms;[29] or as a significant junction in chronologies relating to the history of comedy;[30] or finally as a forerunner of satirical poetry, in contexts that are clearly dependent on the genealogy presented in Horace's satires.

A chronologically relevant testimony is in William Webbe's *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (London 1586; reprinted in Smith 1904, 1.226ff.), from which we infer Horace's relevance to similar overviews:

> After the time of Homer there began the firste Comedy wryters, who compyled theyr workes in a better stile, which continued not long before it was expelled by penalty, for scoffing too broade at mens manners, and the priuie reuengements which the Poets vsed against their ill wyllers. Among these was Eupolis, Cratinus, and Aristophanes; but afterward the order of thys wryting Comedies was reformed and made more plausible: then wrytte Plato (Comicus), Menander, and I knowe not who more. (Webbe [1586] in Smith 1904, 1.236)

The triad Aristophanes, Eupolis, and Cratinus is in fact taken from *Serm.* 1.4.1, while the reference to the censorship suffered by ancient comedy for its excessive freedom of expression recalls *Ars* 283-4. Both aspects, in short, concur in attributing to *vetus comoedia* the role of precursor of Roman satire. The connection is even more explicit in the canons that Georgius Fabricius of Chemnitz draws from the *Ars poetica*, and which Webbe finds so useful that he proposes a translation at the end of his treatise (Smith 1904, 1.290-8). Chapter 23 reads:

> Some Artes doo increase; some doo decay by a certayne naturall course. The olde manner of Commedies decayde by reason of slaundering which therein they vsed against many, for which there was a penaltie appointed, least their bitternes should proceede to farre: *In place of which, among the Latines, came the Satyres.*

29 E.g. in R. Ascham, *The Scholemaster*, London, 1570, Book 2 ("Of Imitation"), quoted from Smith 1904, 1.23 (Aristophanes is associated, among Greek authors, with Sophocles, Homer and Pindar); see also 29.

30 See e.g. G. Harvey, *Letter to Edmund Spenser* IV, in Smith 1904, 1.116.

> The auncient Authors of Comedies were Eupolis, Cratinus, and Aristophanes; of the middle sorte Plato Comicus; of the last kinde Menander, which continued and was accounted the most famous. (295; emphasis mine)

As can be seen, the discourse on Aristophanes is in total conformity with the genealogy of Roman satire that Horace proposes, which ultimately makes Aristophanes the forerunner of Latin satirical poetry and its modern successors. It is no coincidence that, even when Jonson associates Aristophanes with other comic poets, as in the Shakespeare memorial poem prefixed to the *First Folio of* 1623,[31] Aristophanes is qualified as "tart", i.e. capable of the biting and aggressive mockery proper to satire, while Terence and Plautus deserve the epithets of "neat" and "witty" respectively, emphasising qualities of style and humour.

In general, it is quite clear that the English Renaissance, and Ben Jonson in particular, have a rather selective image of ancient comedy, which marginalises many thematic and dramaturgical peculiarities of Aristophanes' texts in order to focus on the aspect of personal satire, and especially on satire of manners. But the latter, as any reader of Aristophanes knows, is far removed from the practice of ὀνομαστὶ κωμῳδεῖν characteristic of ancient Attic comedy. The tendentiousness of these historical reconstructions clearly reveals the fact that Aristophanes' profile in sixteenth-century England (and in Jonson's view, as a special case in point) is primarily a metatextual aftermath, i.e. an image constructed from partial and already simplified visions, which are disseminated through the mediation of historical syntheses and critical metatexts.

This is particularly evident in another place in Webbe's treatise, where the reference to Aristophanes does not seem to rely on any direct knowledge of the texts:

> But not long after (as one delight draweth another) they began to inuent new persons and newe matters for their Comedies, such

31 "The merry Greek, tart Aristophanes, / Neat Terence, witty Plautus, now not please, / But antiquated and deserted lie, / As they were not of nature's family" (*To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Master William Shakespeare, And What He Hath Left Us*, 51-4).

> as the deuisers thought meetest to please the peoples vaine: And from these they beganne to present in shapes of men the natures of vertues and vices, and affections and quallities incident to men, as Justice, Temperance, Pouerty, Wrathe, Vengeaunce, Sloth, Valiantnes, and such like, as may appeare by the auncient workes of Aristophanes. (Webbe [1586] in Smith 1904, 1.248-9)

Indeed, much can be said about Aristophanes' comedy, but surely not that its main trait was the moralistic, stereotypical portrayal of characters that is extolled in this passage. The personification of Poverty may well allude to the character of Penia in *Ploutos* (which is Aristophanes' latest extant comedy, in many respects bearing the mark of a new dramaturgical model), but the other figures are clearly derived from Christian morality and a post-Aristophanic worldview. Here, once again, Aristophanes is only mentioned to put a name on a literary form: he is nothing more than a leading figure in literary history to whom the glory of comedy as a dramatic genre is attributed.

This latter aspect explains, among other things, Jonson's tendency to assimilate himself to his predecessor, not unlike his repeated efforts to establish himself as the new Horace. This is clear, for instance, when metatheatrical utterances of Aristophanes' *parabaseis* are hinted at in Jonson's 'inductions' or 'intermeans': even if in thematic aspects and enunciative posture they primarily recall Terence's prologues, the presence of Aristophanes in some of the paratexts of Jonson's comedies is undeniable, particularly those in which intertextuality is enhanced by a suggestion of personal identification. This is the case, for instance, in *The New Inn*, where the author's recriminations in the first *Epilogue* (4-7) closely recall the *haploun* of the first *parabasis* of *Clouds* (521-6).[32] But it is no coincidence that this is one of Jonson's last plays, decades after that passage in *Every Man Out* which for centuries has been taken as evidence of his early, systematic and extensive familiarity with Aristophanes.

The core of the Jonson-Aristophanes relationship can thus be seen as the result of a complex dynamic, involving scholarly misunderstanding and wishful thinking. Both of these misleading

32 On this analogy, see Gum 1969, 181, who is certainly right in drawing attention to this parallel. Jonson's debt to the parabasis of Aristophanes' *Clouds* is explored in depth by Hubbard 1991, 231-40.

factors can be traced back to Jonson himself, and his desire to stand out as a new Aristophanes in the eyes of his contemporaries. It is not surprising, therefore, that this is precisely what happened: the epideictic quirk of celebrating a contemporary talent as the embodiment of an ancient model is one of the most common *topoi* of poetic praise. Jonson himself is praised for having renewed the glories of ancient poetry and been worthy of his predecessors.[33] Indeed, it seems remarkable to me that in 1603, having only the set of 'comical satires' behind him, Jonson was celebrated as "our English Horace",[34] while in the following years the praise expanded to make the playwright the rightful heir to the theatrical glories of the ancients: in 1607, Edmund Bolton speaks of Jonson as an explorer who opened the doors of Greek and Latin drama to the English theatre,[35] while in the epigraph accompanying the portrait prefixed to the first folio edition of Jonson's works (1616), the poet is described as "scenae veteris novator audax".[36] Consider, moreover, what Jonson himself writes in the above-mentioned Shakespeare memorial poem: the genius of the celebrated poet eclipses that of his ancient predecessors, who in this case are evoked as a textbook triad (Aristophanes, Terence and Plautus). This is exactly what

33 Richard James, about 1625. Ad Doct. Franciscum James: "Credo si reviviscerent jam patres illi [Tertullianus, Cyprianus, Chrysostomus] libenter spectarent ingenium foecundissimi Beniamini Jonsoni, quem ut Thuanus de Petro Ronsardo censeo cum omni antiquitate comparandum si compta et plena sensibus poemata ejus et scenica spectemus" (Bradley 1922, 138).

34 Henry Chettle, *England's Mourning Garment; worn here by plain Shepherds, in Memory of their sacred Mistress, Elizabeth; Queen of Virtue, while she lived; and Theme of Sorrow, being dead*, London 1603 (Bradley, Adams 1922, 34-5).

35 Edmund Bolton, 1607. *Ad Utramque Academiam, De Benjamin Ionsonio.* "Hic ille est primus, qui doctum drama Britannis, / Graiorum antiqua, et Latii monimenta theatri, / Tanquam explorator versans, foelicibus ausis / Praebebit: magnis coeptis, gemina astra, favete." Prefixed to Volpone, 1607, with the initials E. B. In the folio of 1616, the poem is signed E. Bolton]. In Bradley 1922, 56.

36 Ab[raham] Holl[and], 1616: "Lines beneath the engraved portrait prefixed to the 1616 (and 1640) folio of Jonson's *Workes*. The portrait seems also to have been printed and sold separately, since it has below it the statement 'Are to be Sould by William Peake.'" (Bradley 1922, 94).

happens in Jonson's case, who in the celebrative poems introducing his printed works is equated not only with Horace or Plautus – but even with Plato![37]

In scene 4.2 of *Lingua*, an academic play attributed to Thomas Tomkis and dated about 1602,[38] chronologically very close, therefore, to the texts most relevant to our argument, the antonomastic figure of the comic poet, Comedus, is associated with his "great grandfather Aristophanes", who, as being too "satirical", is considered deviant from the most typical form of the genre:

> PHANTASTES Your ears will teach you presently, for now he is coming. That fellow in the bays, methinks I should have known him; O, 'tis Comedus, 'tis so; but he has become nowadays something humorous, and too-too satirical up and down, like his great grandfather Aristophanes. (*OEP*, IX, 416)

The Comedus who appears in the passage is usually identified with Jonson on the basis of the hypothesis of J.F. Bradley and J.Q. Adams, who include him (albeit with some caution: "The passage quoted *seems to be* directed at Jonson": Bradley and Adams 1922, 33; emphasis mine) in their list of allusions to the poet. A few things should also be noted: in the entire collection of Dodsley and Hazlitt's *Old English Plays* (4th ed. 1874-1875), Aristophanes is mentioned only two times, both in this play. The first is in the verses above, the other in a passage in 2.4, where Memoria evokes the first performance of *Clouds* and recalls that Socrates was among the spectators and had reacted with meekness in the face of the derision he suffered:

37 John Selden, 1616. Ad V. Cl. Ben Jonsonium, Carmen Protrepticon. [Prefixed to *The Workes of Benjamin Jonson*, 1616.] "In mentem subiit Stolonis illud, / Lingua Pieridas fuisse Plauti / Usuras, Ciceronis atque dictum, / Saturno genitum phrasi Platonis, / Musae si Latio, Jovisque Athenis / Dixissent. Fore jam sed hunc et illas / Jonsoni numeros puto loquutos, / Anglis si fuerint utrique fati." (Bradley 1922, 95).

38 The first, anonymous edition is from 1607 (*Lingua, or The Combat of the Tongue and the Five Senses for Superiority*, London: Eld), but a reference in 4.7 suggests that the first performance predates the death of Elizabeth I. More about Tomkis in Ellerbeck 2009. I quote from Dodsley and Hazlitt's collection (*OEP*, IX, 331ff.).

> Communis Sensus O times! O manners! when boys give to traduce men in authority; was ever such an attempt heard?
>
> Memoria I remember there was: for, to say the truth, at my last being at Athens – it is now, let me see, about one thousand eight hundred years ago – I was at a comedy of Aristophanes' making. I shall never forget it; the arch-governor of Athens took me by the hand, and placed me; and there, I say, I saw Socrates abused most grossly, himself being then a present spectator: I remember he sat full against me, and did not so much as show the least countenance of discontent.
>
> Communis Sensus In those days it was lawful; but now the abuse of such liberty is insufferable.
>
> (*Lingua* 2.4, in *OEP*, 9.376-7)

From this detail two elements of considerable weight can be inferred: at the end of Elizabeth's reign Aristophanes is still known more to the academic reader than to the general public, and even then the information about him seems to be mediated by other texts, rather than derived from direct reading. In the allusion to *Clouds*, Plato's mediation is obvious: the *Apology of Socrates* informs us that Socrates reacted with benevolent tolerance to the theatrical mockery he suffered in 423. In the *Lingua* passage, moreover, Aristophanes' profile conforms to the image of the Old Comedy as the forerunner of satire, an image that goes back at least to Horace, as we have seen above, and that is received as exhaustive and unproblematic in the most important theoretical and historical-literary texts of those years. Finally, it should be noted that, even in the passage from Heinsius translated by Jonson in *Discoveries* and commented on above, the mention of Aristophanes seems to be antonomastically associated with his treatment of Socrates. This linkage, moreover, seems to be a long-lasting phenomenon: the *Clouds* were the first and most popular of Aristophanes' comedies included in the Byzantine triad, and even the didactic interest they aroused was primarily due to the presence of Socrates among its characters. Similarly, Plato's judgement on that play, attributed to Socrates in the *Apology*, seems to have survived to our own time, fuelling the scorn of which Aristophanes has been the object in every age, an accomplice in the downfall of the "most virtuous of the Greeks" (Voltaire 1767, 40).

Imitating an Imitation

These observations allow us to formulate a hypothesis: the idea that Jonson seems to have of Aristophanes reflects a widespread, generic and somewhat superficial view of the comic poet as the *princeps* (chronologically, Horace being the actual summit) of satirical poetry. Given the effort that Jonson makes to realise the project of an English poetry in direct continuation of the ancient tradition (as well as, beyond the classics, of Italian and French predecessors),[39] flaunted imitation unveils the effort to accredit himself in the eyes of his cultured contemporaries with a precise poetic investiture. Aristophanes comes into play because of the prestige enjoyed by the *corpus* of his comedies, which, however, beyond specialist studies, appears to have been assimilated rather superficially throughout Europe at the end of the sixteenth century. The image that Jonson wants to project of himself as a new Aristophanes, i.e. as an author of 'comical satires', is thus based on a *preconception* of ancient Attic comedy that was widely shared in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture, and in my opinion it is this preconception that forms the core of Jonson's later reception as an 'Aristophanesque' author up to the present day.

One example suffices to prove the existence of such an 'Aristophanic bias': a passage from an eighteenth-century study considered to be the pioneer in the investigation of the relationship between Jonson and Aristophanes, John Upton's *Remarks on Three Plays of Benjamin Jonson* (1749). In the short treatise, which collects his reading notes to the second *Folio* of Jonson's plays (in the 1640 reprint), Upton clarifies obscure passages, in a linguistic and intertextual sense. In one example (1749, 97), Aristophanes is cited as a parallel to a vernacular expression of *The Alchemist* (1.1.1), "I fart at thee", which according to Upton reflects an expression common to both Greek and Latin:

> The reader too, perhaps, is to be informed, that our learned comedian does not deal in vulgar English expressions, but in vulgar Attic or Roman expressions. "– I fart at thee," πέρδω [*sic*] σου, *oppedo tibi.* Aristophanes in *Plut.* v. 618, τῆς πενίας καταπαρδεῖν, *paupertati*

39 See the passage from James quoted above, n3.

> *oppedere*. Horace, the polite Horace, did not think himself too delicate for this phrase: *'Vin' tu curtis Iudaeis oppedere'* L.I.S. IX v. 70.

Upton's note is not entirely accurate: the word πέρδω does not exist (its present form is πέρδομαι, in the middle diathesis); in particular, the genitive regency is only possible in the compound καταπέρδομαι (in composition with προσ- the verb holds the dative; the simple form has only absolute use). It is therefore clear that Upton, who also reads and quotes Aristophanes in the original text, knows Greek less well than Latin.[40] An inaccurate but honest note: Upton intends here to argue that Jonson echoes expressions from the classical languages, without implying a direct quotation from Aristophanes. This partly conflicts with the statement of principle on which his essay is built – that annotating Jonson is necessary because of his constant intertextual references to ancient texts ("Jonson has few passages that want correction, but many that want explanation: which is, in a great measure, owing to his allusions, and to his translations of ancient authors": Upton 1749, Pref. 5). Upton might at most imply that such an expression was already present in English usage, even if for obvious reasons not attested in literary texts;[41] but we understand that for him the point is to show that even in his most vulgar verses, when he only aims apparently at reproducing the language of contemporary rascals, Jonson does not in fact dispense with the usual, conscious, ultimately commendable imitation of the ancients.[42]

40 Perhaps the fact that even the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften's *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* refers to a non-existent verb καταπέρδειν under the heading *oppēdo* is sufficient to excuse Upton's minor blunder.

41 The *OED* records the phraseological use of the verb as 'fart against' while there are no attestations of 'fart at' before *Alch.* 1.1.1. It cannot be entirely ruled out, however, that such an expression in the vernacular register was already in use before Jonson, and that only with *The Alchemist* does it make its way into the written language (Barish 1960 provides still today the most reliable account of the shaping of Jonson's comic style). Also according to *EEBO*, there are no attestations of 'fart at' before Jonson; however, in James Howell's *Lexikon* (1659) "fart at you" is given as a translation of a proverbial expression, which might imply a wider diffusion as a popular idiom.

42 It is worth mentioning that one of the sharpest and most intelligent

Now, two centuries later, Upton's honest commentary becomes, in the leading study of Aristophanes' influence on Jonson (Gum 1969, 165), a "verbal parallel" linking *Alch.* 1.1.1 and Ar. *Pl.* 618. Why is it, one wonders, that the parallel does not affect the other passages where the verb is attested, *Pax* 547 (κατέπαρδεν ἄρτι τοῦ ξιφουργοῦ 'κεινουί) or *Ve.* 618 (βρωμησάμενος τοῦ σοῦ δίνου μέγα καὶ στράτιον κατέπαρδεν)? The answer is simple: Upton only quotes the *Wealth* passage, and Gum is directly dependent on Upton, what's more in forcing its implications – a common problem of Gum's study, which often sees in random, polygenetic or mediated echoes indications of a direct quote from Aristophanes. On the other hand, it is true that this very passage, even without assuming that the expression 'fart at' was usual in English speech in the vernacular register, disproves Gum's assumption, and confirms Horace's priority in the system of Jonsonian intertextual references: the only place where the verb is attested in Latin, Horace's *Serm.* 1.9.70, is precisely, as we have seen, one of the texts most familiar to Jonson, at the basis of the extensive reworking of *Poetaster* 3.1.[43] The expression 'fart at thee' is thus a lexical clue that helps to clarify both the dynamics of intertextual reworking and the tendentiousness of Jonsonian studies: on the one hand, Aristophanes is undoubtedly present as a literary patron, but peeps out from behind another model, which is much closer and more influential: Horace's satiric poetry (Grilli and Morosi 2023, 113ff.); on the other, we realise to what extent the desire to emphasise Jonson's direct dependence on Aristophanes

'sons of Ben', Thomas Randolph, was acutely aware that Jonson's literary excellence depended not so much on his close commerce with the heights of the literary sublime, as on his ability to explore reality in all its manifestations, even the basest and most vulgar (*An Answer to Master Ben. Jonson's Ode, to persuade him not to leave the Stage*, in Bradley, Adams 1922, 143-5, in part. 145: "And though thou well canst sing / The glories of thy king, / And on the wings of verse his chariot bear / To heaven, and fix it there; / Yet let thy muse as well some raptures raise / To please him as to praise, / I would not have thee choose / Only a treble muse; / But have this envious, ignorant age to know: / Thou, that canst sing so high, canst reach as low.").

43 The centrality of Horace, particularly of his *Satires*, in Jonson's poetics was recognised early on in Jonsonian studies (Reinsch 1899); its relevance in the 'comical satires' is explored in depth by Armes 1974. For a recent reconsideration of the problem see Moul 2010, in particular 142-7.

prevents us from grasping the complex and triangular character of the imitative paths Jonson treads.

The Jonson-Horace-Aristophanes line is in fact configured, at least in the first phase of Jonson's comic production, as an imitative plexus in which the relationship between the English and Greek poles depends on the mediation of the Latin poet.[44] This hypothesis – here perhaps its most interesting aspect – entails two meaningful corollaries: on the one hand, when speaking of Aristophanes, Jonson does not necessarily refer to the Attic poet he had read first-hand. What he actually has in mind is *Horace's* Aristophanes, both from *Satire* 1.4 and the *Ars poetica* – that is, a partial Aristophanes, adapted to a view of literary history that tends to emphasise only some aspects (the *vis satirica*) to the detriment of many other, no less distinctive, features. On the other hand, less obviously but no less importantly, Horace was not an utterly unreliable mediator of Aristophanes: as a satiric poet, he consistently tries to place himself in the groove of Attic Old Comedy. Horace takes up Aristophanes in a thousand little ways (Ferris-Hill 2015), which Jonson in turn makes his own perhaps without even realising how Aristophanesque the Horace he is imitating is.[45] The congruity between Jonson and Aristophanes thus derives from the assimilative effort that the Horace of the *Satires* makes towards the champion of Attic Old Comedy. This is precisely what can be inferred from the relationship between Horace's *oppedere* and Jonson's 'fart at': the Latin verb is an Horatian *hapax* attested only in *Serm.* 1.9.70, and thus stands as an immediate intertextual source of the passage in *The Alchemist*. But its Greek equivalent appears linked as a kind of *senhal* to the language of Aristophanic comedy: καταπέρδομαι is in fact attested only in Aristophanes (three times) and (once) in a poet of Middle Comedy, Epicrates (PCG fr. 10: Kassel, Austin 1986, 5.162). However,

44 Grilli and Morosi 2023, 33. Horace's theory that Roman satire is largely derived from ancient Attic comedy is taken up and intelligently explored by Jennifer L. Ferriss-Hill (2015, 3-23), whose discussion obviously begins with the analysis of Hor. *Serm.* 1.4.1-5 and the other mention of *prisca comoedia* in *Serm.* 1.10.14-7.

45 For a comparison between *Poet.* 3.1 and Hor. *Serm.* 1.9 see Grilli and Morosi 2023, 108-12, especially n118.

Epicrates' fragment is such a blatant parody of *Clouds*[46] that it indirectly confirms a kind of commonplace association between (κατα)πέρδομαι and the Aristophanic *corpus*.[47]

Assuming a mediated, triangular[48] relationship between Jonson and Aristophanes is a good starting point to finally reconsider some tenets of Jonsonian scholarship. Some views asserting Aristophanes' decisive character for Jonson's elaboration of a new form of comedy, for instance, could be toned down, or at least articulated more precisely. Let us consider once again Anne Barton's view of the question:

> Jonson had not been really successful in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, *Cynthia's Revels* or *Poetaster* at replacing the well-tried organisational principles of contemporary comedy with any

46 In particular, the expression κύψαντες . . . διεφρόντιζον (21-2) recalls οἱ σφόδρ' ἐγκεκυφότες (Ar. *Nub.* 191); but it is the analogy of the situations that certifies the intertextual connection: Epicrates, just as – long before him – Aristophanes in *Clouds*, mocks the futility of philosophical discussions about nature. In Epicrates' fragment, the young disciples argue at length, and with inconsistent results, about the classification of the gourd; in *Clouds*, as we know, Socrates' knowledge teaches how to distinguish between the genders of nouns and many other things, in a way which is represented as uselessly analytical and full of contradictions.

47 Apart from this passage from Epicrates, καταπέρδομαι is attested only in Ar. *Pax*. 547; *Ve*. 618; Pl. 618. The basic form of the verb, on the other hand, is also attested mostly in comedy (Eup. PCG frr. 7.10; 92.10; 5.99; Pherecr. PCG 88.1; 12.1); Aristophanes thus remains the main witness to its use in the colloquial registers of fifth-century Attic (*Eq.* 639; *Nu.* 9 and 392; *Ve.* 1177 and 1305; *Pax* 335; *Ra.* 10; *Ec.* 78 and 464; *Pl.* 699). It should also be considered that Jonson's obsession with 'visceral' imagery creates the preconditions for selective assimilation – even on a quick or partial reading of the texts, it is likely that Jonson was as impressed by Aristophanes' scatological vividness as he was by the scatological or sexual vulgarities of the Latin epigram. On the problem see Boehrer 1997, in part. 176ff.

48 This is not the place to systematically explore the contribution that René Girard's theory of mimetic desire (1961) can make to the study of imitative practices in Renaissance literature, and in Jonson's theatre in particular. I addressed this issue in the paper "The Flaunting of Influence: Glamorous Models and the Liberty of Creation" I presented at the second PRIN conference at the University of Verona (*Classical Receptions in Early Modern English Drama*, Jan 10-11, 2023).

> effective dramatic, as opposed to literary, structure. From this impasse he was rescued by Aristophanes. (Barton 1984, 114)

Barton's interpretation is reasonable, straightforward and very suggestive. In my opinion, however, it is somewhat misleading, and depends more on the way the question is set (and possibly the scholar's literary views) than on a careful analysis of the evidence. Barton argues that Jonson's effort to go beyond the "Terentian manner" of *The Case Is Altered* leads him to pen some plays which were not "really successful" in their "dramatic . . . structure". This "impasse" is overcome, in her opinion, through an imitation of Aristophanic dramaturgy. This view is not entirely accurate: the *Induction* to *EMO* shows clearly that Jonson thought of his 'comical satires' as an Aristophanic experiment; *that* is the moment of his career when he is most conscious of his link to his Attic forefather. On the other hand, the relevance of Aristophanes in the genesis of later plays such as *Volpone,* which Barton strongly affirms, seems in fact much less cogent once one discovers, for instance, that the main theme of that play (the social plight of the *heredipetae*) is in no way attested in Aristophanes; on the contrary, that same theme has an almost obsessive relevance in one of Jonson's most prised Greek writers, Lucian, who targets it ironically in many of his works.[49] Patently, in conceiving and elaborating a dramatic text Jonson took great account of *all* the authors most familiar to him, indifferent

49 On Lucian's crucial role in Jonson's poetics see Duncan 1979 and Miola 2019. In relation to the theme of the quest for inheritance, it is significant to observe how in Aristophanes it is invariably traced back to a direct, interpersonal dialectic of power. In *Wasps*, for instance, the old Philocleon deludes himself that he can inherit the patrimony that his son controls, and that he can thus free the young *aulos*-player and make her his concubine (Ar. *Ve.* 1351-8); in *Birds*, on the other hand, a fleeting reference to inheritance is put into the mouth of the Parricide, who states that he wants to kill his father in order to πάντ' ἔχειν (Ar. *Av.* 1352). In both cases, it is clear that the desire for money is not so much a matter of material greed, as of a desire for self-assertion in a power relationship. The perspective changes completely in the *nea*, where the *heredipeta* finally appears in the form of a miserly man eager to take possession of goods to which he is not entitled (a good example is provided by the miser Smicrines in Menander's *Aspis*).

to their theatrical dimension.[50] This goes to say that we should not think of an 'Aristophanic dramaturgy' as a definite feature directly taken over by Jonson. His relationship with his comic predecessor is much more elusive and complex: it is shaped first by Horace's view of Old Attic Comedy as satire, and then resurfaces as occasional loans and allusions throughout his playwrighting career. Scholarly emphasis on the 'Aristophanic model' reflects rather a kind of *Vorurteil* (Gadamer 1960) aiming to stress Jonson's debt to the Greek theatrical canon, but in so doing underestimates the eclecticism of the poet's references, and the real hierarchy of his personal repertoire.

On a point of logic, the weakest point of Barton's 1984 reasoning is perhaps its binary structure: since – she seems to assume – antiquity has handed down two different models of comic drama, departing from one (Hellenistic-Roman comedy) *necessarily* implies falling back on the other (Attic Old Comedy). In fact, Jonson's choice must not be reduced to just two options: going beyond Plautus and Terence does not mean replacing consistently a traditional dramatic structure with a different one. This is shown by the different transtextual presence of both models, respectively in Jonson's first comedic endeavor and in his later plays. In *The Case Is Altered* (1597) Jonson still conforms to the practice of imitation common in European sixteenth-century comedy, hypertextually contaminating the plot of Plautus' *Captivi* and *Aulularia* and closely reworking passages of both plays. The dependence on a precise dramaturgical model could not be more evident. This is not the case with Aristophanes, whose influence, both in Jonson's 'comical satires' of 1598-1601 and in his later plays, is never a matter of systematic hypertextual reworking and quite rarely of direct intertextual allusion.

Taking Aristophanes as a model, then, implies a quite different practice of imitation. In his first dramatic endeavours, which are the main focus of this study, Jonson's inspiration seems indeed to go back to Attic Old Comedy, but only through a second-degree

50 It is not to be overlooked, however, that inheritance hunters are insistently scorned in Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, a text blending satire and dialogic form.

imitation of Aristophanes; his comical satires do not presuppose Aristophanic texts, but only an *idea* of Aristophanes he inferred from both various metatexts and the 'Aristophanic' works of his favourite model, Horace. Apparently, this 'metatextual appropriation' is a specific feature of the Jonson-Aristophanes relationship: as a matter of fact, the 'comical satires' brim with imitative passages, that is with translations, citations, intertextual reworking of ancient authors – except that none of these models is ever Aristophanes: Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Martial, Juvenal, Lucian, Libanius and others are clearly recognisable in the dramatic structures, and in the frequent intertextual allusions,[51] while Aristophanes is only explicitly mentioned in the metadiscursive sections. This has much to do, as I have tried to show, with Jonson's small familiarity with and peculiar view of Aristophanes: whereas for Lucian or Latin poetry, especially satirical poetry, we can be sure that Jonson had a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of the *texts*,[52] Aristophanes seems to be reduced to the abstract model of a literary form. My main point, then, and main adjustment of Barton's hypothesis, is that in his early career Jonson did not go beyond Horace's conception of Attic Old Comedy as a direct ancestor or Roman satire, a view taken up more or less consciously in all sixteenth-century literary historiography. It is true, then, that after 1597 Jonson did try to replace Terence with Aristophanes, except that his Aristophanes, at least in his early career as a playwright, was nothing more than a metatextual appropriation, a testament to his knowledge of and love for Roman satiric poetry more than Greek comic drama.

Abbreviations

CEWBJ = Bevington, David (gen. ed.). 2012. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*. 7 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

51 A general reconsideration of the problem in Harrison 2023, which also emphasises the relationship with ancient comedy.

52 Duncan (1979) highlights the many places where Jonson is closely dependent on Lucian, especially in terms of dramatic invention and satirical cues.

CEWBJ Online = Butler, Martin (gen. ed.). 2014. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/ (Accessed May 14, 2023)

H&S = Herford & Simpson eds. 1925-1952. *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press.

LSJ = Liddell, Henry George and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., revised by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940).

OED = *Oxford English Dictionary*

OEP = Robert Dodsley, William Carew Hazlitt eds. 1874-1875[4]. *A Select Collection of Old English Plays*. 11 vols. London: Reeves and Turner.

PCG = Poetae Comici Graeci. Edited by R. Kassel and C. Austin. Berlin: De Gruyter.

TLG = *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*

TLL = *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*

Aristophanes' Works

Aristophanes' extant plays are quoted from Wilson's edition (Wilson, Nigel G. 2007. *Aristophanis Fabulae*. Oxonii: e Typographeo Clarendoniano. Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis).

Ach. = *Acharnians*
Av. = *Birds*
Ec. = *Ecclesiazousae*
Eq. = *Knights*
Lys. = *Lysistrata*
Nu. = *Clouds*
Pax = *Peace*
Pl. = *Wealth*
Ra. = *Frogs*
Th. = *Thesmophoriazousae*
Ve. = *Wasps*

Jonson's Works

All quotations from Jonson's works are from CEWBJ/ CEWBJ Online.
Alch. = *The Alchemist*

BF = Bartholomew Fair
Case = The Case is Altered
CR = Cyntia's Revels
DA = The Devil is an Ass
Disc. = Discoveries
EMI = Every Man in His Humour
EMO = Every Man Out of His Humour
Ep. = Epicoene
NI = The New Inn
Poet. = Poetaster
SN = The Staple of News
Volp. = Volpone

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