

01. Ben Jonson's Bartholomew Fair as a Satirical City Comedy¹**Merve AFACAN²****APA:** Afacan, M. (2025). Ben Jonson's Bartholomew Fair as a Satirical City Comedy. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (48), 1-8. **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17036622>**Abstract**

A few works in Jacobean drama present the multifaceted mosaic of a burgeoning urban society with critical depth among which Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* stands out. This seminal city comedy belongs and represents a period of profound social and political instability. It also transcends mere topical satire to offer a comprehensive anatomy of folly within the chaotic microcosm of a London fair. This article investigates *Bartholomew Fair* within the framework of city comedy and satire. The play offers a vivid portrayal of early 17th-century London society while delivering a critique of human behaviour as well as the political, religious and cultural institutions of its time. Set against the bustling backdrop of a chaotic fair, the narrative presents characters who embody various segments of contemporary urban life. It critically examines how *Bartholomew Fair* encapsulates the Jacobean ethos of realism and urban critique and reveals the playwright's profound albeit often pessimistic insight into human follies. Through innovative metatheatrical devices, Jonson blurs the line between stage and audience and not only critiques contemporary theatrical conventions and Puritanical dogmas but also subtly asserts his own artistic superiority. The play thus stands as an enduring reflection of its era's complex relationship with morality, authority and the self. All in all, through detailed analysis of the play's structure, character Dynamics and performative techniques, this article explores how Jonson constructs a critical perspective on urban existence and the complexities of human nature. The study ultimately positions the play as a significant contribution to both the comic tradition and the social discourse of its period.

Keywords: Benjamin Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, Satire, Jacobean Drama, City Comedy

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Ben Jonson'ın *Bartholomew Fair* Adlı Eserinde Hicivli Şehir Komedyası Unsurları³

Öz

Jakoben dönemi tiyatroları arasında, gelişen kent toplumunun çok katmanlı yapısını eleştirel bir derinlikle yansıtan az sayıda eser bulunmaktadır. Ben Jonson'ın *Bartholomew Fair* adlı oyunu ise bu eserler arasında özellikle dikkat çeker. Bu önemli şehir komedisi, derin toplumsal ve siyasal istikrarsızlıkların yaşandığı bir döneme ait olmanın yanı sıra yalnızca güncel bir hiciv sunmakla sınırlı kalmaz; aynı zamanda Londra'daki bir panayırın kaotik mikrokozmosu içerisinde sergilenen insan budalalığının kapsamlı bir çözümlemesini sunar. Bu makale, *Bartholomew Fair*'i şehir komedisi ve hiciv bağlamında incelemektedir. Oyun, 17. yüzyıl başı Londra toplumunu etkili bir şekilde yansıtırken, aynı zamanda insan davranışlarını ve dönemin politik, dini ve kültürel kurumlarını eleştirel bir bakışla değerlendiren. Kalabalık ve karmaşık bir panayır atmosferinde geçen anlatı, kent yaşamının çeşitli sosyal kesimlerini temsil eden karakterler aracılığıyla ilerler. Makale, oyunun Jakoben dönemi gerçekçilik anlayışıyla nasıl örtüştüğünü ve Jonson'ın insan zaafalarına dair çoğu zaman karamsar olan derin içgörüsünü nasıl ortaya koyduğunu tartışır. Jonson, yenilikçi metateatral teknikler kullanarak sahne ile seyirci arasındaki sınırları bulanıklaştırır. Böylece dönemin tiyatro anlayışını ve Püriten dogmalarını eleştirirken, aynı zamanda sanatsal üstünlüğünü de ima eder. *Bartholomew Fair*, böylelikle ahlak, otorite ve birey kavramlarıyla dönemin karmaşık ilişkisini yansıtan kalıcı bir edebi yapıta dönüşür. Bu makale, oyunun dramatik yapısını, karakter ilişkilerini ve sahneleme tekniklerini ayrıntılı biçimde analiz ederek, Jonson'ın kent yaşamına ve insan doğasının karmaşıklıklarına dair geliştirdiği eleştirel bakışı ortaya koyar. Sonuç olarak, eser hem komedi geleneğine hem de dönemin toplumsal söylemine kayda değer bir katkı olarak değerlendirilir.

Keywords: Benjamin Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, Hiciv, Jakoben Tiyatrosu, Şehir Komedyası

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Hakem Değerlendirmesi: İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme

Ben Jonson and his contribution to the Renaissance comedy

Ben Jonson (1572-1637) stands out as a prominent figure in early 17th-century English stage. He exerted a profound and undeniable influence on the dramatic landscape of his era despite his autodidactic intellectual development. Born into the petty bourgeoisie, Jonson's access to formal academic institutions was curtailed by prevailing financial problems. Nevertheless, he cultivated an ardent devotion to learning by undertaking an extensive self-study of prominent European humanist thinkers from whom he derived his principal ideals as "honest work, self-sufficiency, moderate enjoyment of life, honesty and frankness in personal relationships" (Jovanović, 2012, p. 348). His precise devotion to intellectual discipline that is coupled with classical in-depth knowledge was accompanied with unyielding self-confidence manifesting itself as an assertive and mostly combative personality in the competitive literary sphere of Jacobean London. Regarding this, contemporary accounts frequently depict Jonson as "a big, bulky person, of fierce temperament, quarrelsome and coarse (killed a man in a duel!), boasting and self-important, stubborn" man who presided over a group of his followers called themselves the Tribe of Ben (Jovanović, 2012, p. 348).

Central to Jonson's evolving theories on drama that were particularly observed through his approach to comedy stood the pervasive influence of humanism. In other terms, his theoretical foundations for drama were deeply rooted in classical sources and the discourse of Renaissance theoreticians. This intellectual framework informed Jonson's conviction that comedy should not only transcend mere entertainment but also serve as a morally didactic instrument. As defined by McEvoy (2008), humanism encapsulates "a belief in the power of education to enable the naturally undetermined individual to fulfil the potential which God had made possible" (p. 11). Indeed, he further observes that Jonson consciously situated himself within the continuum of classical literary and cultural tradition who interprets and constructs meaning from the world through the established principles of that valuable heritage (McEvoy, 2008, p. 8). In alignment with these influential predecessors, Jonson shared the elevated status of poets and the profound societal function of poetry. This conviction is articulately expressed in his seminal work, *Volpone* (1606), where he states that "the office of a comic poet [playwright] [is] to imitate justice, and instruct to life, as well as purity of language and stir up gentle affections" (Jonson, 1606, ll. 112-14). Consistent with this theoretical orientation, Jonson frequently employed the "prologues and inductions (short introductory scenes) of his plays" (Jovanović, 2012, p. 348) also exemplified in *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) as vital conduits for articulating his metatheatrical and aesthetic philosophies to his audience.

While primarily renowned for his fourteen comedic works throughout his career, Jonson was also extensively engaged in composing masques for court entertainments under the patronage of James I. In his comedies, he granted significant importance to the genre's reformative function by paying utmost attention to play's suitability to the Aristotelian principle of unities, verisimilitude and decorum with the aim of "correct[ing] manners and morals, by showing human follies and vices and exposing them to ridicule" (Jovanović, 2012, p. 349). Consequently, Jonson's drama is metaphorically described as "a moving stream which reflects the world back to itself, a dynamic and constantly moving, fluctuating surface" (McEvoy, 2008, p. 11). Published in 1616, *Works*, the collection of Ben Jonson's comedies written that far, serves as a precedent which has established drama as a literary genre as well as granting the dramatic works their respectability. Along with this publication, Jonson is "the first Englishman who earned his living as a writer, exploiting every form of the literary medium to address private, public, and courtly audiences" (Van Den Berg, 2000, p. 1) and accepted "as the first bourgeois individualist author, asserting his identity as a competitive producer of a brand of writing that bears his name. Yet, [...] to be

the last Horace, not the first Dickens" (McEvoy, 2008, p. 16).

As a playwright who produces his works within a realistic framework, Jonson reveals his concern with intellectual aristocratism by taking "pride in being able to create comedies according to the best scientific rules, and felt superior to those who made them by sheer talent" (Jovanović, 2012, p. 347). His theoretical grounding in "an abstract and rigid kind of realism" notably allowed his comedies to diverge from purely classical models (Jovanović, 2012, p. 347). This theoretical approach, when applied in practice, was profoundly transmuted by his exceptional gift for observation and his enthusiastic moral commitment that culminates in a genuinely realistic and incisive satirical vision of life. When Ben Jonson suffered a stroke and died in August 1637, he was buried upright in consequence of the contemporary Dean of Westminster's dispraising him on being buried at the Poet's Corner to which Jonson's reply is believed to be: "I am too poor for that and no one will lay out funeral charges upon me. No, sir, six feet long by two feet wide is too much for me: two feet by two feet will do for all I want" (westminster-abbey.org, par. 3).

Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* as a satirical city comedy

Among Jonson's prolific output, *Bartholomew Fair*, a five-act Jacobean comedy - first staged in 1614 at the Hope Theatre by Lady Elizabeth's Servants and later included in the second volume of his *Works* in 1631- is notably considered his fourth "great" play (Evans, 2000, p. 196). *Bartholomew Fair* is widely recognized as one of the period's most experimental plays due to its strong engagement with contemporary social realities and the evolving political landscape of London. The setting of the play is a rich one as it signifies the time that people from all sections of the society gather for a reason. The play's setting, the chaotic and vibrant Bartholomew Fair itself, also serves as a rich microcosm where diverse societal strata converge that facilitates both communal festivity and blatant public demonstration such as executions alongside mundane activities. Besides, the play "does not seek to imitate or interpret the reality of Bartholomew Fair, [...] but to make an argument that conceptualizes reality, a function of rhetoric" (Noe, 2005, p. 422).

The play opens with Mr. John Littlewit, Quarlous – at times the spokesman of the author – and Winwife's conversation about the chance of the last two of them to win the favor of Dame Purecraft who is the mother-in-law of John Littlewit, a Puritan and wealthy widow. Knowing that she is in a romance with Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, a Banbury man, they plot to part them and Littlewit suggests that the Bartholomew Fair would be convenient to reach their goal. He also convinces them by saying that he will make Dame Purecraft come to the fair by telling her that her pregnant daughter has that great urge to eat pig at the fair. In the beginning of the second act, the audience is introduced to a police officer. Adam (Justice) Overdo, representative of law and order but disguised "in the habit of a fool" (Jonson, 1989, II.i.10), is charged with overseeing and spying the "detection of those foresaid / enormities" (Jonson, 1989, II.i.52-53) in a district called Pie-Corner, Smithfield located outside London where the annually held fair in the honor of St. Bartholomew takes place. Upon trying to stop a pickpocket, Overdo is accused of stealing the socks and sent to the jail. Meanwhile, Winwife changes his mind upon marrying Dame Purecraft and pursues a younger and more beautiful Grace Welborn with whom also Quarlous also desires to marry. On the other hand, there is a turmoil going on caused by Costrad's dropping of a basket of pears and complaining about Mr. Busy's preaching without license. At that point, Overdo escape from the prison and stops the puppet-show on the grounds that it is immoral as the puppets are not wearing gender appropriate clothes. When the puppets reveal that they have no genders, Overdo reveals his identity and lists all the crimes that he has witnessed. He vomits on his chest and ashamedly

declares that all the “sins” will be forgiven. The conclusion reached at the end of the play is the realisation of the foolishness of the mankind by the spokesman, Quarlous who address to Overdo saying “remember you are but Adam, flesh and blood! / You have your frailty; forget your other name of / Overdo” (Jonson, 1989, V.vi.114-16). His command suddenly reassures the confusion and invites harmony.

Concerning the play's portrayal of the city, Robinson (1961) vividly describes the play's atmosphere as “rich with delights and pleasures, with the smells and noises of a seventeenth-century Smithfield holiday,” making it a quintessential “city comedy” aimed to convey an immersive urban experience (p. 65). The play's distinctive realistic, energetic and humorous tone is directly linked to its specifically chosen setting. Jonson generates a popular four-day summer fair that exemplifies as a vibrant microcosm of London society. Regarding the “plotlessness” of the play in a classical sense, Evans (2000) clarifies that the play's structure is “complex but never chaotic” that skillfully interweaves five primary storylines involving characters such as Littlewit, Purecraft, Busy, Cokes and Overdo who all centrally connected by the figure of Ursula who “connects all these plotlines; that the loose structure matches the play's realism and emphasis on surfaces; and that the work shows Jonson's debt to classical four-part designs and/or to morality plays and masques” (p. 199). Indeed, *Bartholomew Fair* notably exemplifies this genre through its narrative's unique display of the urban experience that stands out as a noteworthy quality McDonald (2000) frames as:

The genuine artist transmutes the people and places of the London underworld into a theatrical object that clarifies experience and forces the audience to see itself and its faults. The same immediacy governs the action of *Bartholomew Fair*, in which the audience members become fairgoers. We recognize ourselves as self-deceivers, Jonson as the real cunning man. (p. 108)

In this regard, *Bartholomew Fair* underscores Jonson's significant preoccupation with the urban environment as a deliberate thematic concern which Van Den Berg (2000) identifies as second only to Thomas More in English literature (p. 15).

This loosely plotted work distinguishes itself within his canon through its pronounced “vision of comic release and comic celebration” (Colley, 1977, p. 63). This intentional celebratory tone is achieved and represented through the confrontation of human flaws. Jonson invites the readers/ playgoers to realise the human nature and experience an unexpected joy in that shared reality. In Colley's (1977) words, Jonson “restores a kind of magic to transfigure madmen, opportunistic suitors and poetasters so that they can become fellow celebrants at the final banquet of comic harmony” (p. 63). Ben Jonson's innovative approach extends to his deliberate cultivation of a dynamic relationship with his audience by way of integrating their presence as an integral component of the theatrical experience. This is exemplified at the play's outset by an “elaborate contract with the audience” which functions as “the first of the many ‘warrants’ that structure the action and relationships” within the drama (Van Der Berg, 2000, p. 9). This metatheatrical device explicitly outlines the reciprocal expectations between playwright and spectators. According to the contract:

spectators and hearers, as well the curious and envious, as the favouring and judicious, as also the grounded judgements and understandings, do for themselves severally covenant and agree to remain in the places their money of friends have put them in, with patience, for the space of two hours and an half, and somewhat more. In which the time the

author promiseth to present them, by us, with a
 new sufficient play called Bartholomew Fair,
 merry, and as full of noise as sport: made to delight
 all and to offend none; provided they have either
 the wit, or the honesty to think well of themselves. (Jonson, 1989, Induction. 87-98)

This detailed prologue thus establishes a unique participatory framework wherein the audience is not merely passive but an active participant in the comedic enterprise.

With regard to the fair as an event gathering people from all classes and providing an insight to the society, *Bartholomew Fair* itself actively champions and exemplifies theatrical performance as a powerful mode of satire. The play primarily stands for and defends theatrical performance as a satire “mocking not authority but its abuse; as replicating rather than repudiating capitalist economics; as collapsing the playwright’s usual emphasis on judgment and distinctions; and therefore as free, freeing, deconstructive, ambiguous, and fluid, but also as an event Jonson seeks to control” (Evans, 2000, pp. 198-99). The play masterfully blends elements of satire and myth by means of carefully deconstructing “an anatomy of folly” by exposing “childish innocence, simple-minded affectations, conscious choice to act foolishly, and ingenuity applied to trivial pastimes” to ridicule (Bradfield, 1983). Thus, the sharp edges of Jonson’s satire ultimately serve a transformative purpose, allowing for a unique form of comic harmony. Mirroring the inclusive nature of theatrical spectacles, the fair functions as a unique social gathering that unites two principal societal groups: the high-ranking London gentry who attend for leisure and entertainment and the resident individuals who form the functional populace of the fair itself. Within a distinctly meta-theatrical framework, the staged depiction of Bartholomew Fair functions as a compelling representation “of the world in which the norms of everyday life are inverted and exploded” (Bevington, 2000, p. 85). In Act Five, Leatherhead presents a puppet play supposedly written by the talentless John Littlewit that epitomizes the corrupt artistic endeavors prevalent throughout the fair. By illustrating this puppet-show, Jonson not only powerfully underscores the meta-theatrical dimensions of *Bartholomew Fair* but also implicitly asserts the artistic superiority of his own dramatic composition in stark contrast to the poor execution of the play-within-a-play. With the intent to expose microcosm of the contemporary theatre through the show,

in the tradition of Latin satirists, Jonson uses the puppet play to react to a generation of worn-out mythological, larger-than-life themes of the theater by devising a life-as-it-is burlesque of them; however. Jonson multiplies the irony of his own burlesque attack by upbraiding, simultaneously, worn out myth. coarse popular taste, drama written down to such taste. and those who would censure theater for the wrong reasons. (Bevington, 2000, p. 60)

Beyond its function as an artistic critique, the puppet-show further serves a polemical purpose by illustrating the play’s reception and putting forward an attack on Puritanical dogma. Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, the archetypal Puritan figure, appears to be only character in the play who “cannot tell that it is a bad play; he knows only that it is a play, and that plays are the work of the devil” (Bevington, 2000, p. 88). This meta-theatrical device, the play-within-a-play, thereby enables Jonson to offer nuanced and ironic commentary on theatrical practice and ensure audience engagement along with simultaneously providing an exploration of the inherent limitations of satire itself. As Parker (1970) observes, Jonson “seems rather to present it as a permanently seamy side of human nature, which it is the duty of comedy to recognize and accept, but which lies beyond reform” that suggests a profound though pessimistic acceptance of humanity’s irremediable follies (p. 305).

In *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson employs unconventional satiric strategies to depict not the individuals but the species as characters and exhibits a fair that indicates a metaphor of a ravening world in which human desire for more is instinctually supported. When considered from a “modern” point of view, the play is noted for the themes as “aggression, authority, carnival, deception, drama, fertility, hypocrisy, language, law, license, manipulation, marriage, pride, and religion, along with bogus power, chaos vs. order, corrupt rhetoric, failed communication, faulty judgment, human debasement, transformative games, self-mockery, and universal foolishness” (Evans, 2000, p. 198). Nevertheless, key themes uncovered by the fair’s portrayal of human nature include appetite, the role of law and the transformative influence of art. These three themes are also serve as the determining features “of the quality of men and societies, so it is no surprise to find that the corruptions of *Bartholomew Fair* include debased drama, or that the art in the fair reflects its corruption in the world outside” (Parker, 1970, p. 300) that brings together an assortment of fools articulating their thoughts as they occur to their foolish minds. The result is a dissection of folly that transcends topical satire and delves into a universal feature of humanity. The change of the subject matter in this specific play points to the fact that Jonson claimed less authoritative position in proportion to his former comedies “as early as *Volpone*, [that] Jonson had moved the source of judgment and justice to the periphery of his comedies in order to give fools and rogues center stage as they expose themselves for what they really are” (Bradfield, 1983, p. 59).

Shifting to a deeper analytical stance that states the play as a more than a realistic one, Robinson (1961) offers a compelling interpretation of the play’s characterization and action through the potent symbolism of “vapor”. He examines vapor as the underlying cause of madness and folly—manifesting as irrational behaviour— that stems from “unnatural heat because of physiological disorder or immoderate passions” (p. 66). The instinctual drives caused by the vapors afflict the fair’s diverse visitors and serve as a critical mirror for comprehending the essence of human nature. This thematic unity centered on the concept of vapor underpins the play’s coherence and dictates its dramatic progression. This perspective resonates strongly with Jonson’s stated purpose for comedy: not only “to fulfil classical concepts of dramatic unity, verisimilitude” but crucially “to imitate the manners of men in order to hold up the mirror to the ridiculous in human nature and thereby instruct as well as delight” (Robinson, 1961, p.66). The indulgence in these immoderate passions renders the participants oblivious and “blind to their own absurdities and enormities” that transform them into individuals “whose humors are in heat, anxious to feed the fires of their vanities and so becloud their brains even more” (Robinson, 1961, pp. 69-70). Among other characters who are absorbed in their distinctive vapors, Win Littlewit’s appetite for eating “Bartholomew pig, and I’the Fair” (Jonson, 1989, I.vi.50) can be recognised as both a physically and socially concerned vapors.

In conclusion, Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* stands as a typical satirical city comedy that masterfully synthesize the conventions of the comic genre with Jonson’s perpetual purpose of presenting a critical mirror to human nature. The play reveals Jonson’s keen eye on the human nature, follies and hypocrisies of urban life in Jacobean London. Set at a uniquely vibrant and chaotic fair, the play sharply critiques the diverse behaviours and flaws of contemporary Londoners via illustrating a society struggling with its own excesses. By incorporating satire and meta-theatrical aspects, Jonson crafts a theatrical space where social critique and comic elements collide and intentionally confronts his audience with the stark realities of their era. In this way, while setting his play as a cornerstone of the genre, he transforms the audience from mere spectators into active moral judges who are forced to assess the human condition/ comedy.

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