Every Man in His Humour

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BEN JONSON

Ben Jonson was a prominent English playwright and poet, second only in reputation to William Shakespeare. His father died in 1572 two months before he was born; his mother soon remarried a master-bricklayer. Jonson received a good education at Westminster school, where he was under the influential tutelage of William Camden, to whom he later said he owed "all that I am in arts, all that I know." In 1588, Jonson was denied his wish to attend Oxford University and was forced to make an abortive attempt at learning the bricklaying craft. Soon after, he took military service in the Low Countries (Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg). In 1594, he is thought to have married Anne Lewis. Soon after his return from military service, Jonson entered the world of theater, working as an actor and, before long, a playwright. In 1597, he was briefly imprisoned for the controversial *The Isle of Dogs*, of which no copy exists. In 1598, *Every Man in his Humour*, an attempt to apply the principles of Latin comedy to the English stage, was performed to great success by the Lord Chamberlain's Man—Shakespeare's company. The same year, Jonson was imprisoned for the manslaughter of Gabriel Spenser, escaping capital punishment on a religious technicality. From 1605, Jonson was held in high regard by the court of King James I, employed by the monarch to write regular masques, often in collaboration with the influential designer and architect, Inigo Jones. During Charles I's reign, however, Jonson began to fall out of favor, and he was paid a regular pension largely out of deference to Charles' father. One of Jonson's disciples, Thomas Carew, even tried to get the famous writer to recognize his own decline. Jonson died in 1637, his funeral well-attended by the nobility of the time. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, close to where he had attended school as a young boy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Every Man in his Humour was written during the tail-end of the Elizabethan era. More widely, it is part of the English Renaissance, a rich period in English theatrical history in which Elizabeth and her successor James I encouraged close links between the art form and the court. Theater was a hugely popular art form, comparable to television or the internet in the 20th and 21st centuries. The Elizabethan era more widely represents something of a "golden age" for Britain—a time of cultural advancement, the navigation and exploration of the globe through figures like Francis Drake, and increase in military prowess. It was also a relatively peaceful time, in terms of the ongoing religious conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism. That said, the era was not without its conspiracies and intrigues, with multiple high-level plots against the monarch.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Every Man in his Humour represents an attempt on Jonson's part both to innovate and to embody tradition in one play. It is indebted and respectful to the Greek New Comedy, which dates roughly from the first three centuries AD. This placed an emphasis on the satire of "typical" citizens, rather than a focus on especially prominent public figures. The distinct characterizations of the play take after the Roman classical comedies of writers like Plautus and Terence. But Jonson also defined his play as much by what it was *not* as what it was—he saw it as something as a reply to the theater of the day, choosing to portray what he saw as the realism of London life as opposed to the more contrived technique in fashion at the time. Running throughout the play is a gesture towards his contemporaries: for example, lines from Thomas Kyd, whose *Spanish Tragedy* Jonson had acted in, make an appearance. *Every Man in his Humour* is a quintessential example of the "comedy of the humours," in which each character is made to represent, in Jonson's own words, "some one peculiar quality" that dominates their every action. This is closely linked, but not synonymous with, the medical theory of the humours popular at the time. The theory held that an individual's health depended on the fine balance of the four humours—blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile—and that an excess of one would manifest itself in the character of the individual (e.g. too much yellow bile would make a person "choleric"). However, Jonson is more interested in the dominance of one particular thought, feeling, or character trait than in specifically rendering these four humours in the play. In whatever case, the play was hugely influential, spawning a host of cheap imitations. While Jonson's reputation fluctuated over the coming centuries, he is now generally held to be the second most important writer of the time after Shakespeare.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Every Man in his Humour
- **When Written:** 1598
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** first performed in 1598
- **Literary Period:** English Renaissance
- **Genre:** Comedy
- **Setting:** London (Florence in an earlier version)
- **Climax:** The meeting at Justice Clement's House

- **Antagonist:** Old Knowell
- **Point of View:** Drama

EXTRA CREDIT

The Bard on stage. William Shakespeare certainly acted in *Every Man in his Humour*, though which role he took is up for debate.

Great minds. Though Shakespeare and Jonson definitely knew each other, the precise nature of their relationship is not known. One contemporary, Thomas Fuller, recorded that the two men would spend many hours debating in London's Mermaid Tavern.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play begins with a prologue setting out the playwright's aims. Firstly, Jonson seeks to give an accurate depiction of the "deeds and language" of Elizabethan London. Secondly, he wants to fill the play with characters that "show an image of the times." If the play can achieve this portrait of "popular errors," the audience will laugh at them and agree "there's hope left" that they "may like men."

Act One begins with Old Knowell asking Brainworm, his servant, to call his son, Edward. Old Knowell is happy that Edward seems to be enjoying his studies, but worried that he is too preoccupied with "idle **poetry**." Knowell's nephew, Master Stephen, comes by and asks Knowell if Edward has any books on hawking and hunting, to which Knowell chastises his nephew for being "wasteful." A servant brings a letter intended for Edward, but Old Knowell decides to read it secretly first. It is an invitation from a roguish London gallant, Wellbred, bidding Edward to come and spend time in the Old Jewry and generally make mischief. Its tone offends Knowell; this prompts him to worry about the company his son keeps and consider whether he should actively intervene. Brainworm then delivers the letter to Edward and, instead of hiding the fact that Old Knowell has read it, tells Edward right away. Edward is delighted by the letter and plans to meet Wellbred later with Stephen in tow. Elsewhere in the city, the buffoonish townsman, Master Matthew, calls on Captain Bogadil, a braggart soldier. Bogadil is lodging at the house of Cob, a lower-class water-carrier. Matthew quotes pretentiously from Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* and complains that Downright, Wellbred's half-brother, recently insulted his fashion sense. Bobadil shows him some **sword**-fighting techniques in an effort to prepare Matthew for any future altercation.

Act Two begins at the house of Kitely, a London cloth merchant. Kitely complains to Downright about the behavior of Wellbred, who has been lodging with him. According to Kitely, Wellbred has been keeping bad company and filling his house with "lascivious jests." Matthew and Bobadil come by, looking for Wellbred; they leave soon after learning that he isn't there. Downright gets increasingly angry about Wellbred's reported behavior and finds Matthew and Bobadil highly irritating. As Cob comes by to deliver water, Kitely begins to worry that he is being cuckolded. When Dame Kitely and his sister, Mistress Bridget, show up, he pretends that his distress is due to a fever.

On London's Moorfields, Brainworm enters disguised as a vagrant ex-soldier. He plans to follow Old Knowell, who is intending to spy on Edward, and relay any information he gleans back to the latter. When Edward and Stephen arrive, Brainworm stays in character and sells Stephen a sword. Stephen thinks his purchase is a good one, but in reality the sword is of poor quality. Soon after, Old Knowell comes by, wondering whether he ought to be intervening in Edward's life or keeping his distance. Brainworm appears, still disguised, and begs for money from Old Knowell. Brainworm announces his name as Fitzsword. Old Knowell is disapproving, but agrees to take on Brainworm as a servant (not realizing the man he is talking already *is* his servant).

At the start of Act Three in a nearby tavern, Bobadil tries to complain to Wellbred about Downright but Wellbred refuses to hear anything bad said about his brother. Edward informs Wellbred about Old Knowell's interception of the letter, and the two of them look forward amusedly to what might happen. They both mock Stephen, who insists on the extreme melancholy of his character without realizing he is the butt of the joke. Bobadil boasts about his previous war exploits and, taking a look at Stephen's sword, informs him that he has been ripped off. Brainworm comes by; Wellbred and Edward laugh as Stephen tries to complain about his purchase. Brainworm reveals his true identity and informs Edward that his father is attempting to spy on him.

Meanwhile, Kitely's jealousy and fear of being cuckolded are getting worse, so much so that he can't concentrate on his business. Eventually he leaves to complete a transaction, instructing his servant, Cash, to report to him immediately if Wellbred and his entourage arrive at the house. Sure enough, the young gallants arrive soon. Wellbred and Edward praise Brainworm for his "absolute good jest." Wellbred asks Cash if Kitely is inside; Cash lets slip that Kitely has gone to Justice Clement's. Bobadil lights some tobacco, praising its quality ridiculously. Cob is offended by the smoke, causing Bobadil to beat him with a cudgel. Cash dispatches Cob to recall Kitely, who by now is at the house of Justice Clement, the local legal authority.

Receiving Cob's message that Wellbred and his entourage have arrived at his house, Kitely rushes back in a fit of paranoid jealousy—despite Cob saying that he saw nothing untoward happening. Cob asks Justice Clement for an arrest warrant for Captain Bobadil, but, on hearing more about what happened, the judge comes close to imprisoning Cob for insulting tobacco.

Act Four starts back at Kitely's house, where Downright chastises Dame Kitely for allowing Wellbred at the house; she protests that there's very little she can do about it. Mistress Bridget (Kitely's sister), Matthew, Bobadil, Wellbred, Stephen, Edward, and Brainworm all come in. Edward and Wellbred laugh as Matthew tries to woo Bridget with plagiarized lines of poetry. Downright enters in a fit of rage. When Wellbred describes Matthew's behavior as "tricks" to Mistress Bridget, some of the characters take this as a sexual euphemism. Downright is especially irate and demands that Wellbred leave, taking his entourage with him. They draw their swords, but are split up by the others. Kitely arrives, prompting the others—apart from Downright—to exit. Downright vents his frustration; Bridget, Dame Kitely, and Kitely try to calm him down. By now, Kitely is certain that he has been cuckolded, thinking that Wellbred and the others are hiding in his house. He goes in to search for them.

At Cob's house, Cob starts to suspect his wife, Tib, of cuckolding him. He orders her to stay inside and not admit any visitors, suspecting her of taking Bobadil as a lover. Meanwhile at the tavern, Edward and Wellbred instruct Brainworm to take a message for them. Wellbred announces his intention to help Edward marry Bridget.

Brainworm, still in disguise, finds Old Knowell again in a street in the Old Jewry; the latter man is with Roger Formal, Justice Clement's assistant. Cunningly, he tells Old Knowell that Edward has discovered his father's plans to spy on him; furthermore, he was involved in an altercation with Edward and his entourage earlier in the day. According to Brainworm (as Fitzsword), Edward can be found cavorting with "brave citizens' wives" at the house of Cob. Formal wants to hear about Fitzsword's life and goes out with him to drink wine.

Matthew, Edward, Bobadil and Stephen discuss Downright. Bobadil and Matthew promise to get back at him. Excited by this fighting talk, Bobadil brags once more about his heroic behaviors in battle, having seemingly been at all of the major ones of the previous years. Just then, Downright appears. He challenges Matthew and Bobadil, disarming the latter man with ease. Matthew runs away, leaving Bobadil to try and make excuses for his cowardly behavior. Stephen takes Downright's discarded cloak.

Back at Kitely's house, Wellbred explains Downright's angry actions as merely being his nature. Brainworm arrives, now dressed as Roger Formal, and tells Kitely that Justice Clement has summoned him. Kitely frantically searches for Cash and Cob to act as "sentinels" while he is gone. Dame Kitely wonders why her husband is always searching for Cob; Wellbred craftily suggests that Cob's wife, Tib, runs a brothel and facilitates Kitely's adultery. In her own fit of jealousy, Dame Kitely grabs Thomas and heads for Cob's house. Wellbred turns his attentions to Bridget, trying to persuade her to marry Edward. Kitely returns from Justice Clement—who hadn't sent for him—and, on hearing that his wife has gone to Cob's, rushes there too. In a London street, Matthew and Bobadil encounter Brainworm—who they think is Roger Formal—and ask him for a warrant for Downright's arrest. In lieu of money, they give him jewelry and silk stockings. Brainworm tells the audience of his intentions to pawn these items to disguise himself as a "serjeant" to make the arrest.

Knowell arrives at Cob's house, hoping to find Edward; Tib doesn't know what he's talking about. Kitely and Dame Kitely arrive, each thinking they will find the other in the act of adultery. Hearing of his wife's alleged behavior, Cob beats Tib for her wrongdoing. They all resolve to go to Justice Clement to get his judgment on what has happened. Brainworm, disguised as a "serjeant," encounters Matthew and Bobadil, who point them in the direction of Downright—except it's actually Stephen, wearing Downright's cloak. Downright does arrive soon, however, and agrees to be taken to Justice Clement, but only if Stephen goes too for stealing his coat.

Old Knowell, Kitely, Dame Kitely, Cash, Tib, and Cob assemble at the irreverent Justice Clement's house. He quickly figures out that Knowell, Kitely, and Dame Kitely have been duped, pointing out that both Kitely and his wife got their information from Wellbred. Bobadil and Matthew arrive; Justice Clement is deeply unimpressed with the reports of Bobadil's cowardice. Clement is surprised to see Downright arrive with Brainworm and Stephen, mocking Downright for agreeing to be arrested without seeing an official warrant. At this point, Brainworm comes clean about his exploits, and also informs the group that Edward and Bridget are getting married. Instead of being angry, Clement is impressed by Brainworm's behavior, saying he deserves to "be pardoned for the wit o' the offence." Edward, Wellbred, Bridget, and Roger Formal arrive. Clement congratulates the newly-weds, and also mocks Matthew's poetic pretenses. He orders there to be a "merry" feast to celebrate the marriage, and implores everyone to "put off all the discontent." In high spirits, Clement talks about how the adventures of the day will be remembered and applauded for a long time into the future.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Edward Knowell – Edward Knowell is a young man and son of Old Knowell. He is deeply invested in his education but, to his father's disapproval, also has a penchant for "idle **poetry**." He is a bit impressionable, but also smarter and savvier than his dimwitted cousin Stephen. Edward receives a letter from Wellbred inviting him to spend time at the Old Jewry, where Wellbred promises him much amusement (mostly at the expense of others). With Brainworm's help, Edward keeps tabs on his father's attempt to spy on him and enjoys evading his

attention. Edward develops a mutual attraction with Mistress Bridget; Wellbred then conspires to marry the two of them, distracting the other characters so that the lovers can elope in secret. At the end of the play, Edward receives Justice Clement's blessings for his marriage.

Brainworm – Brainworm is servant to Old Knowell and Edward Knowell but allies more with his younger master. His function in the plot is as a master of disguise and deception, which he uses to help Edward evade the attentions of his father. Much of the play's momentum comes from Brainworm's actions; he can thus be considered as a version of the archetypal witty slave found in Ancient Greek and Roman theater. Brainworm's first disguise is as Fitzsword, which he uses to glean information about Old Knowell's attempts to spy on Edward. He then disguises himself as Roger Formal, Justice Clement's assistant, before in turn taking on the appearance of a policeman and making the arrest of Downright. Ultimately, Brainworm is commended—not condemned—for his deceitful actions when they come to light. Justice Clement believes that Brainworm deserves no punishment because of the great "wit" of his scheming, and that, furthermore, generations to come will be taking about his—and the wider—story.

Old Knowell – Old Knowell is an old gentleman, Edward's father and Brainworm's master. He is an overbearing parent, worrying about Edward's interest in "idle **poetry**" and the company that he keeps (young gallants such as Wellbred). Though he attempts to talk himself out of doing so, Knowell ends up trying to spy on his son, intercepting a letter meant for him and following him towards the Old Jewry (where Edward intends to meet up with Wellbred). Brainworm, more on the side of Edward, tricks Old Knowell by pretending to be an ex-soldier who takes on a role as Old Knowell's servant. This means that Edward quickly gets wind of what Old Knowell is up to. Old Knowell learns of Brainworm's and Edward's deceptions but, ultimately, forgives them. He is reassured by Justice Clement that he is worrying too much about his son, and seems glad to see that Edward marries Mistress Bridget. Perhaps Old Knowell's most important contribution comes in Act 2, Scene 5, in which he delivers a long speech on the nature of parenthood, wondering whether parents imbue their children with the same faults that they had.

Master Stephen – Stephen is a young "country gull," the nephew of Old Knowell and the cousin of Edward Knowell. Stephen is foolish and obedient, desperate to fit in. His first appearance sees him asking Old Knowell for books on hawking and hunting—two activities fashionable at the time. This annoys his uncle, who considers him a "wasteful" character. Towards the middle of the play, Stephen is tricked by Brainworm (disguised as Fitzsword) into buying a cheap and inferior **sword**. Stephen gets himself into trouble when he picks up Downright's cloak, discarded after the latter's brawl with Bobadil. When Bobadil and Matthew try to have Downright arrested, Downright notices that Stephen has stolen his cloak and drags him to Justice Clement too.

Wellbred – Wellbred is a roguish young gallant with a taste for mischief. He is Downright's half-brother, and deliberately causes much of the confusion that runs throughout the play (e.g. Kitely and Dame Kitely's corresponding fears that the other is being adulterous). His letter to Edward, a friend, puts the play in motion, inviting the latter man to meet him at the Old Jewry. Wellbred enjoys exposing and mocking the foolishness of others—such as Matthew's propensity for awful **poetry**—seeing this as fair game for a man like himself. Wellbred also orchestrates Edward's marriage to Mistress Bridget.

Downright – Downright is a no-nonsense squire with a fiery temper, and Wellbred's half-brother. He frequently rubs people up the wrong way and lacks tact, resulting in his feud with Captain Bobadil and Master Matthew. The roguish behavior of Wellbred and his entourage angers Downright, at one point causing him to blame Dame Kitely for allowing the young gallants to spend time at her house. He is, however, considerably braver than the boastful Bobadil. When the two men nearly come to blows, Downright quickly disarms his opponent; Matthew, for his part, runs away. Downright roughly represents anger—or "choler" in the scheme of the four humours—but also acts as counterfoil to Matthew and Bobadil's pretentiousness. He is, in a word, authentic.

Master Matthew – Matthew is described as a "town gull"—that is, he is a foolish young urbanite. He is a poetaster—someone who writes inferior **poetry**—and is particularly given to passing off other people's verse as his own. He admires the (false) bravado of Captain Bobadil and follows him around. Bobadil shows him how to **swordfight**, but, when confronted by Downright, Matthew's first reaction is to run away. In the play's closing scenes, Justice Clement is deeply unimpressed with Matthew's plagiarism and refuses him an invite to the celebratory wedding feast that evening.

Captain Bobadil – Bobadil is a braggart soldier who lodges at Cob's house. He is extremely boastful, talking constantly about his exploits in this war or that. He takes on Matthew as a protégé, teaching him his self-professed knowledge of **swordsmanship** and dueling. Bobadil enters a feud with Downright, who embarrasses the captain by disarming him with ease. Bobadil, afraid of the dent to his reputation, tries to make increasingly desperate excuses about his cowardly behavior; he later seeks to get Downright arrested. In the play's closing resolution at Justice Clement's, the judge reserves special scorn for Bobadil, perceiving his inauthenticity and lack of bravery to be especially damning characteristics.

Kitely – Kitely is a cloth merchant, married to Dame Kitely and brother of Mistress Bridget. He is also the unfortunate landlord of Wellbred, increasingly upset by the latter's behavior

and the company that he keeps. Over the course of the play, Kitely grows more and more paranoid that he is being "cuckolded"—that his wife is having an affair. This manifests in increasingly desperate behavior, as Kitely tries to guard his house using his assistant, Cash, and runs across town trying to catch his wife in the act. In keeping with Jonson's aim to have each character dominated by one particular trait or characteristic, Kitely embodies jealousy at its worst. He is cured, a little unbelievably, by Justice Clement.

Dame Kitely – Dame Kitely is Kitely's wife. Just like her husband, she is tricked by Wellbred into rushing to Cob's house, expecting to find Kitely committing adultery (while he thinks that *she* is the one cheating). In the end, Justice Clement points out the error of her ways, and she makes her peace with her husband.

Mistress Bridget – Bridget is Kitely's attractive and virginal sister. She doesn't get many lines in the play, functioning mainly as an object of attraction for Master Matthew and Edward Knowell. She is attracted to Edward and is persuaded by Wellbred to marry him (Edward) in secret while the other characters are distracted.

Cash – Cash is Kitely's business assistant. According to Kitely, Cash was taken in by his master at a young age. He serves as a go-between, initially for business matters but in the main for Kitely's jealous paranoia. Kitely at one stage stations Cash at his house to watch out for Wellbred and his entourage. Like her husband, Dame Kitely also uses Cash to try and catch her spouse in the act of adultery.

Cob – Cob is a working-class waterbearer—a man who delivers water from house to house. Captain Bobadil beats him for complaining about his tobacco smoke, causing Cob to seek a warrant for Bobadil's arrest. Clement, a fan of tobacco, refuses and nearly sends Cob himself to jail. At one stage, Cob suspects his wife, Tib, of cuckolding him and acting as a bawd; for this, he beats her. In the end, though, they resolve their differences.

Justice Clement – Justice Clement is a rambunctious old man who acts as the play's legal authority. His most important role is at the end of the play, in which he draws proceedings to a relatively forced resolution. He points out that Wellbred has tricked Kitely and Dame Kitely into each thinking the other is adulterous. He is not a clear-cut morally virtuous or disinterested figure, however, as he praises Brainworm for the "wit" of his deceptive actions throughout the play. He reserves special hatred for Bobadil and Matthew, both of whom he thinks are false (as a soldier and **poet** respectively). Clement concludes the play by ordering a banquet to celebrate the marriage of Edward Knowell and Mistress Bridget.

Roger Formal – Roger Formal is Justice Clement's clerk and assistant, tasked with fulfilling his boss's administrative requirements. Late in the play, he is intrigued by Brainworm's alter-ego, Fitzsword, and goes out to drink wine with him and hear about his backstory as an ex-soldier. Brainworm gets Formal drunk and steals his clothes, enabling him to serve Downright with a (false) arrest warrant on behalf of Captain Bobadil and Master Matthew—who give him jewels and clothing in exchange.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Tib – Tib is Cob's wife. She is wrongly characterized as a bawd (a woman who runs a brothel) by Wellbred, causing Cob to beat her. By the play's end, Justice Clement gets Tib and Cob to resolve their differences.

TERMS

Cuckold – If a man is cuckolded, it means that his wife has had an illicit affair. The term originally alluded to the cuckoo bird, which had a habit of laying its eggs in other birds' nests.

Humours – The four humours refers to an ancient medical theory that the human body depended on a balance between blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. An excess of these produced a defect often manifested as an undesirable character trait (e.g. an excess of black bile was associated with melancholy).

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LANGUAGE

Every Man in his Humour, arguably Ben Jonson's most famous play, is ironically one of his works for the stage in which the least action actually takes place. The plot is tenuous and disorientating to a modern reader, with disparate parts and an artificial wrapping-up in the conclusion. To focus too intently on this aspect of the play, though, would be to mischaracterize Jonson's intentions and to miss what makes it still worth reading. Rather than a tightly woven plot of the sort found in Shakespeare's work, Jonson was more concerned with giving what he felt to be an accurate rendering of the language and mannerisms of the time and place—Elizabethan London (Jonson revised an earlier version of the play to make London the setting rather than the more conventional Italy). Ultimately, it is language and attitudes toward language that provide the play's beating heart in lieu of any obviously gripping action, conflict, or adventure. Jonson's play shows the power of language—how it can accurately

record and depict time, people, and places—while also demonstrating to hilarious effect the way language can be abused by people seeking to portray themselves as especially in command of their words.

Jonson clearly aims to bring sixteenth-century London to life through his language. In fact, the prologue that begins the play very keenly stresses the realism of what follows. In this, Jonson seeks to draw a link between his play and those of his contemporaries. He tells his audience that no "Chorus" or "thunders" "from any "tempestuous drum" will make an appearance—that is, the play will eschew the fashionable theatrical elements of the time. Instead, it will employ "deeds, and language, such as men do use: / And persons, such as Comedy would choose / When she would show an image of the times." The play's express aim, then, is to give its audience an honest account of the life and language of its characters and their environment. That said, Jonson's insistence that *Every Man in his Humour* is a comedy reminds the audience that, within his overall project of realism, the playwright will exercise his license for exaggeration, parody, and satire in the service of capital-c Comedy (that is, in keeping with the long-running traditions of Greek and Roman theater).

Jonson use the play's form to demonstrate the power of language to accurately depict a time and place. He makes frequent use of prose as opposed to the more fashionable iambic pentameter—metrically organized verse—to bring London and his characters to life in a realistic way. This makes much of the play sound fresh and unstilted even now: if people don't talk in iambic pentameter, goes the logic, then neither should most of the characters in the play. In this, Jonson takes a different approach to his writing than his contemporary, William Shakespeare. The Elizabethan era was an interesting time for the English language, with Shakespeare making brilliant use of the malleability of the English language by yoking together the different influences exerting themselves on the language and making up words when he needed them. Jonson's play functions as a kind of counterpoint to this overall project.

With the above in mind, one of the most interesting elements of the play is the way in which Jonson depicts its characters' attitudes to their own language. In particular, Jonson's stylistic choices and the characters' different attitudes showcase the dynamism and diversity that characterized **poetry** as a much-debated topic of the time. Many of the characters in the play—Old Knowell and his son, Edward Knowell; the two foolish "gulls," Stephen and Matthew; the water-carrier Cob; even the legal authority Justice Clement—seem to have strong opinions about poetry and its merit (or lack thereof).

For the younger characters like Edward and the roguish Wellbred, poetry seems to have a kind of currency in the world—it's an indicator of "the cool," fashionable, desirable, and refined. This attitude worries Old Knowell, who frets that his son is "dreaming on naught but idle poetry / that fruitless and unprofitable art." Cob laments the way the gallants of the town use "rascally verses" and "poyetry" (his pronunciation) to entertain and seduce women. Poetry is thus shown to be a powerful force in sixteenth-century London, for better or for worse depending on an individual's attitude towards the art. Some characters even pass off other writer's lines as their own in an effort to win the respect of their peers. Overall, then, Jonson conjures a world in which poetry—and language more generally—is a living, breathing force in everyday life.

Language, then, is at the heart of *Every Man in his Humour*. Close to the end of the play, Justice Clement remarks that poets "are not born every year [...] There goes more to the making of a good poet, than a sheriff." That is, one of Jonson's closing thoughts—Clement's remark paraphrases a favorite aphorism of the playwright—is that a good poet is a rare thing that ought to be cherished. In the space of his play, then, Jonson manages both to take aim at "false" poets, praise those who write authentically, and, crucially, make the case for an attentiveness in writing that must be paid to the contemporary moment and environment.

HUMAN FOLLY

Hardly anyone in *Every Man in his Humour* comes across well. Jonson was interested in displaying human folly on stage—celebrating it, even—and made sure to fill this play to the brim with strange behavior, crossed purposes, and satire. In fact, the play established the "comedy of the humours" genre on the English scene, and is imbued with an absurdist wit throughout that seems to show humanity at its most foolish. Jonson focuses on human folly for two primary reasons: firstly, he aims to satirize the society Elizabethan society and show that, for all its mores and mannerisms, foolishness is never far from the surface. Secondly—and importantly—this isn't an attempt to merely disparage his society; he actively wants his audience to *enjoy* the human folly that he draws out of his characters and recognize themselves in the play. As he states in the prologue, this constitutes a kind "hope" that may help his audience to "like men" (with men meaning mankind, rather than just the male sex).

Jonson's approach to writing *Every Man in his Humour* was to think of each character as the embodiment of a particular trait. This allows him to show that a wide range of such traits, when taken to their extremes, lead their proponents into foolishness. Perhaps the best summary of Jonson's aims is found in the sequel to *Every Man in His Humour*, the much less popular *Every Man out of his Humour*. In this, Jonson sets out the terms of the comedy genre: "Some one peculiar quality / Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw / All his affects, his spirits, and his powers, / In their confluctions, all to run one way." This is linked to the popular medical theory of the four humors, which was

dominant at the time of the play's writing. Put crudely, the four humours—blood, phlegm, choler/yellow bile, and black bile—were conceived of as liquids within the body that needed to be in harmony in order for a person to be in good health. All were linked to different personality traits (and also to the natural elements), and an excess of any humour would lead to an imbalance in a person's harmony and express itself in an undesirable form. For example, an excess of yellow bile could lead to a person being "choleric"—a word still used today to denote bad-tempered and angry.

Jonson's play, though, is not slavishly wedded to the medical idea of the humuors, but more to the idea of character traits being taken to extremes—and the ensuing consequences. For example, Kitely, a married merchant, is obsessed with the idea that his wife, Dame Kitely, is cuckolding him, or having an affair. Despite no evidence to support his claim, the idea consumes him entirely. Likewise, Matthew's desire to be one of the city gallants—one of the fashionable men about town—gets him into trouble when he annoys the fiery-tempered—choleric—country squire, Downright. There's no character in the play with anything especially redeeming about them—everyone has their flaws. This is part of the form of Jonson's play, and allows him to comically highlight the different facets of human folly. This folly doesn't just define the individual characters, but the interactions between them too. Jonson avoids tying the different strands of the tenuous plot too closely together, with them bound only by the relatively unified time and place. The play is dominated by misunderstanding and misrepresentation, suggesting that people are too self-obsessed to notice their own folly and its effects on the world around them.

It's fair to say that practically nothing happens in *Every Man in his Humour*. Instead, the play revolves more around characters *thinking* that something has happened, showing them to be at cross purposes and fundamentally misunderstanding of one another. For example, Wellbred orchestrates a scenario in which both Kitely and his wife rush to Cob's house thinking that they will catch the other in the act of adultery. Neither Kitely nor his wife had any real evidence that the other was unfaithful—they were just gullible and jealous. They fundamentally misunderstand the intentions of one another and are unable to see clearly their own foolishness. Likewise, characters are frequently getting into squabbles, or even physical fights, with one another because of misunderstandings. One character will mishear another's words, take offense, and then try to redress the situation. There's very little common sense throughout the play, in keeping with Jonson's project to satirize the manners of the society he lived in.

The overall effect of the above, then, is that the play ends with the sense that it has all, essentially, been pointless. This "pointlessness" is Jonson's way of poking fun at the human folly exhibited by his characters—they expend all this energy for nothing. Jonson concludes the play at Justice Clement's house. He resolves the characters' differences, pardons them for their foolishness, and invites them to celebrate the craftily organized wedding of Edward Knowell and Mistress Bridget (Kitely's sister). This artificial conclusion, in which all conflict is waved away, highlights Jonson's overall approach. Like Clement, he delights in observing the foolishness of human beings—in a way even celebrating mankind's capacity for self-trickery, embarrassing behavior and misunderstanding.

AUTHENTICITY

Every Man in his Humour examines what it means to be authentic. Some of the characters try to occupy particular roles, arrogantly performing what they think is expected of them. Like many of the other personality traits on display, Jonson takes great pleasure in showing these up as a sham. Likewise, the playwright employs disguise and deception to suggest that identity—specifically, how people like to see themselves—is inherently unstable and unreliable. That is, there is a gap between what people think of themselves and how they are actually are.

Many of the characters in the play try to present idealized versions of themselves, often to their discredit. They desperately try to show themselves to be authentic, and in doing so, demonstrate exactly the opposite. One of the best examples of the above is provided by the character of Captain Bobadil. He is a boastful braggart soldier and tells tall stories of his military escapades. These impress the simple mind of Master Matthew, who takes a lesson in **swordsmanship** from Bobadil early in the play. But Bobadil's tales of combat grow increasingly fantastical over the course of the play—he seems to have fought in every battle of recent times. Ultimately, Bobadil is shown up to be presumptuous and dishonest when he chickens out of a duel with Downright, who disarms him with ease. There is a vast difference, then, between the personality Bobadil wishes to portray and the reality—in a word, he is inauthentic.

Similar to Bobadil, Matthew wishes to be seen as a mysterious, alluring **poet**. He, too, discredits himself, revealing the disparity between how people think of themselves and how they actually are. Matthew constantly tries to impress those around him by quoting verse, attempting to pass off misremembered quotes as his own work. Wellbred and Edward Knowell find great sport in teasing Matthew, encouraging him to recite his poetry. They have too much knowledge of poetry for Matthew to get away with pretending his quotations are his own. When Matthew quotes, loosely, from Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, his words indicate the desired effect he would like his poetry to have: "Would God my rude words had the influence, / To rule thy thoughts, as thy fair looks do mine." He longs for authentic powers of seduction, but only embarrasses himself. This

reinforces two overall points made by Jonson: firstly, that people are, in general, inauthentic. Secondly, that true artistry is rarely found but often impersonated. Matthew's false artistry echoes the wider argument that people often try to impersonate others to raise themselves above their given stations.

The final important way that Jonson employs his characters to make his case for the overall instability of people's identities is through Brainworm, the servant of Old Knowell and Edward Knowell. Brainworm is a deliberate deceiver from the very beginning of the play. When Old Knowell intercepts a letter from Wellbred intended for his son, Brainworm promises to deliver the letter to Edward without informing him that his father has read it. He immediately reneges on this promise. His motivations for the above are not instantly obvious, but as the play progresses it becomes evident that Brainworm delights in disguise and deception—he has an anarchic streak that contributes to the exposure of inauthenticity. For example, he disguises himself as a vagrant soldier and sells Matthew a bad sword, playing on the latter's desire to be accepted by Bobadil and seem brave and gallant. Likewise, Brainworm uses his disguise to glean Old Knowell's intentions from him with regard to following and spying on his son. Though Old Knowell outwardly wishes to let Edward live his own life, Brainworm exposes this to be inauthentic. As if to validate Brainworm's actions, Jonson has Justice Clement approve of them when, in the final scene, all of his deception is exposed. This suggests that Brainworm serves an important function—not just in furthering the action (or inaction) of the plot, but in drawing inauthenticity from the shadows and into the light.

Overall, then, the characters of *Every Man in his Humour* are deeply inauthentic. The women, perhaps, are less so, but then they arguably play a minor role in what takes place. Inauthenticity, Jonson seems to suggest, is practically the natural state in Elizabethan society. Identity is thus shown to be destabilized and highly performative, which for some characters functions to their detriment and to others is used to further their own aims.

PARENTHOOD

The theme of parenthood appears in the play through the relationship between Old Knowell and his young, aspiring gallant of a son, Edward Knowell. It is, by and large, a tension that takes hold because of generational differences. Old Knowell sees himself in his son, but also, being older, thinks he knows better. This creates the starting point for the play and reoccurs sporadically throughout. Through their father-son relationship, Jonson brings to life the complications of parenthood, showing it to be a constant pull between the urge of parents to protect their young from the world and, conversely, to come to terms with their children as being their own independent selves.

Jonson introduces the complicating process of parenting from the play's beginning. Act One opens with Old Knowell showing that he is fully aware that his son is growing up and building his own world. Old Knowell is a rich man and wants the best for Edward, whom he is pleased to see is taking well to his education. However, Old Knowell has deep concerns about the company Edward keeps and the things he seems to be interested in. The set-up of the play stems from Old Knowell's conflicted state when it comes to his son. When a messenger arrives with a message for Edward, Old Knowell cunningly takes it for himself to read. The letter is from Wellbred, inviting Edward to spend time with him in the Old Jewry (a street in London frequented by gallants at the time). The contents of the letter—its risqué wit especially—make Old Knowell fear the moral corruption of his son: "why, what unhallowed ruffian would have writ / In such a scurrilous manner to a friend!" But Old Knowell is self-conscious about his concerns, observing that "affection makes a fool / Of any man, too much the father." This sets up gives the audience insight into Old Knowell's state of mind, and more generally brings to life the thorny issue of how a parent should best prepare their child for the world.

This expresses itself as a kind of duality in conflict within Old Knowell's thoughts and behavior. On the one hand, Old Knowell wants to give Edward space and not try too hard to govern his life. This expresses one way of parenting—the hands-off approach. "I am resolved, I will not stop his journey; / Nor practice any violent mean, to stay / The unbridled course of youth in him." He believes that, if he exercises restraint, Edward will develop into a more rounded man and respect him the better: "There is a way of winning, more by love, / And urging of the modesty, than fear." Old Knowell at this early stage in the play, then, seems to give expression to this particular way of parenting, espousing the virtues of letting his child make his own mistakes.

But in keeping with Jonson's practice of exposing foolishness in his characters, Old Knowell's commitment to keeping his distance shows to be a hollow promise. He actually resolves to spy on his son, attempting to follow him to the Old Jewry and observe his behavior. In Act Two Scene Five, Jonson adds nuance to Old Knowell by having him speak at length about the nature of fatherhood. In this lengthy speech, Old Knowell reflects on the way that any bad traits he sees in his son must have been passed down by him: "The first words / We form their tongues with are licentious jests!" That is, parents are responsible for what their children become. Ultimately, Old Knowell is confused. He wants to do well by his son, and also is aware of the complexity of the relationship between a parent and their child—and between that child's young life and their development into adulthood.

As part of the relatively forced resolution of the play's closing scenes, Edward Knowell marries the respectable Bridget Kitely. This seems to bring an element of security to Old

Knowell's state of mind, who is further assuaged by Justice Clement's insistence that he need not worry, but the overall impression left with the audience is that Old Knowell will never truly let go of his concerns for his son's well-being, keeping him in a kind of limbo which perhaps suggests the nature of parenting itself. Like the other central questions of the play, then, parenthood is left unresolved and unreduced into a simple moral message. Jonson is more interested in exploring the complexity of such issues, and the way they express themselves in people's behavior—particularly behavior that is contradictory and, at times, nonsensical. Jonson, then, offers no answers, but tries to get his audience to revel in the difficulties and absurdities of what it meant—and what it still means—to be alive.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

POETRY

Poetry occupies an important role in the play. Firstly, Old Knowell worries that his son, Edward Knowell, is too invested in "idle poetry." Master Matthew, an urban fool, constantly tries to impress people with verses that he says he has "extemporized"—made up on the spot. Generally, though, he's actually plagiarizing other, more legitimate Elizabethan poets. Poetry, then, foregrounds the play's overall preoccupation with language, as set up in the Prologue's promise that what follows will use "language such as men do use." That is, Jonson promises to have his characters speak authentically, using the words, grammar, and syntax that were contemporary of Elizabethan London. Poetry thus comes to embody language more generally, with Jonson using it to show both the pretentions and the marvels that are possible. Poetry goes right to the heart of questions about identity and authenticity, with Jonson keen to stress, through the words of Justice Clement, that a *good* poet is a rare thing indeed—there are many imitators like Matthew. Poetry is a multi-functional symbol then, representing language both at its worst and its best.

SWORDS

In Elizabethan London, it was not uncommon for men to carry swords or daggers; accordingly, there's quite a few mentions of them in *Every Man in his Humour*. When Master Matthew calls on Captain Bobadil, a braggart soldier, early on in the play, Bobadil doesn't waste any time in (falsely) bragging about his exploits in wars and duels. He shows Matthew some swordfighting techniques, demonstrating his machismo and bravado in the process to his impressed companion. On the hand, then, swords represent exactly that: male aggression and status. This is played on throughout. In one instance, country simpleton Stephen buys a cheap knock-off sword from Brainworm (who is disguised as an ex-soldier), thinking it will enhance his prowess. He soon learns that it isn't, in fact, a genuine Spanish Toledo. Later in the play, Downright challenges Bobadil and quickly disarms him; this represents a kind of emasculation, with Downright depriving his opponent of the (phallic) symbol of his male vigor. More generally, the abundance of swords in the play speaks to the tense, powder-keg atmosphere—the audience senses that a fight could happen at almost any time, if someone says or does the wrong thing.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Five Plays* published in 2009.

Prologue Quotes

He rather prays you will be pleased to see
One such, today, as other plays should be.
Where neither chorus wafts you o'er the seas;
Nor creaking throne comes down, the boys to please;
Nor nimble squib is seen to make afeard
The gentlewomen; nor rolled bullet heard
To say it thunders; nor tempestuous drum
Rumbles, to tell you when the storm doth come;
But deeds, and language, such as men do use,
And persons, such as Comedy would choose,
When she would show an image of the times,
And sport with human follies, not with crimes.
Except, we make 'em such by loving still
Our popular errors, when we know they're ill.
I mean such errors, as you'll all confess,
By laughing at them, they deserve no less:
Which when you heartily do, there's hope left, then,
You, that have so graced monsters, may like men.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This comes right at the start of the play, preceding any of the actual action. It sets out Jonson's intentions, acting as a kind of mission statement. Deliberately situating *Every Man in his Humour* in the theatrical landscape of Elizabethan

London, Jonson intends his play to be something different from the dominant fashions of the day. He discusses the theatrical trends, distancing himself from their usage, e.g. a Greek-style chorus or over-zealous sound effects (the thunder of the "tempestuous drum"). The prologue explicitly promises to make the "deeds" and "language" of the day at the play's heart, in order to develop "an image of the times." That is, Jonson aims for realism—to bring Elizabethan London to authentic life on the stage. At the same time, the quote also foregrounds the play's focus on "human follies," promising to bring them to the fore. In doing so, Jonson intends to make his audience laugh and restore a certain kind of "hope" that comes with recognizing humanity at its most absurd.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

How happy yet should I esteem myself,
Could I, by any practice, wean the boy
From one vain course of study he affects.
He is a scholar, if a man may trust
The liberal voice of fame in her report,
Of good account in both our Universities,
Either of which hath favoured him with graces:
But their indulgence must not spring in me
A fond opinion that he cannot err.
Myself was once a student, and indeed,
Fed with the self-same humour he is now,
Dreaming on nought but idle poetry,
That fruitless and unprofitable art,
Good unto none, but least to the professors;
Which then I thought the mistress of all knowledge:
But since, time and the truth have waked my judgment.
And reason taught me better to distinguish
The vain from the useful learnings.

Related Characters: Old Knowell (speaker), Edward Knowell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8-10

Explanation and Analysis

This early quote gives the audience insight into the mind of Old Knowell, who is worried about his son's path from adolescence to adulthood. Here, this worry is explicitly tied to the question of poetry. Though Old Knowell appreciates that Edward is doing well with his studies, seemingly of his own accord, Old Knowell also feels that his son spends too much time thinking about "idle poetry." Old Knowell thus expresses the view that poetry is distinctly purposeless, establishing poetry and language more generally as a common theme in the play. The audience doesn't learn Old Knowell's profession, but it is probably something altogether more financially rewarding than poetry. Ironically, Old Knowell admits that he was like Edward when he was a youth—as an older man, he now buys into a utilitarian worldview: that interests should be prioritized according to how useful they are.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

I am resolved, I will not stop his journey;
Nor practise any violent means, to stay
The unbridled course of youth in him; for that,
Restrained, grows more impatient; and, in kind,
Like to the eager but the generous greyhound,
Who ne'er so little from his game withheld,
Turns head, and leaps up at his holder's throat.
There is a way of winning, more by love,
And urging of the modesty, than fear:
Force works on servile natures, not the free.
He that's compelled to goodness may be good;
But 'tis but for that fit; where others, drawn
By softness and example, get a habit.
Then, if they stray, but warn 'em, and the same
They should for virtue have done, they'll do for shame.

Related Characters: Old Knowell (speaker), Edward Knowell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Early on in the play, Old Knowell expresses his concern for his son, Edward. He can sense that Edward is growing into his own person—a fact which he finds difficult to deal with. On the one hand, he wants to let him be his own man; at the same time, he feels an urge to exert a controlling influence over his son. Here, Old Knowell seems to plot the first course: his intention is to win "more by love" than "fear"—that is, he thinks a more hands-off approach will benefit both him and his son. But the metaphor that he uses in this speech is somewhat unfortunate; by comparing his son to an "eager" greyhound, he's not really acknowledging that Edward is becoming his own man. The image suggests a lingering sense of ownership. The quote also creates a

comic set-up because, though Old Knowell seems reasonable here, the next time the audience sees him he has decided that he will, in fact, spy on Edward.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

He useth every day to a merchant's house (where I serve water), one master Kitely's, i' the Old Jewry; and here's the jest, he is in love with my master's sister, Mrs. Bridget, and calls her mistress; and there he will sit you a whole afternoon sometimes, reading o' these same abominable, vile (a pox on 'em, I cannot abide them), rascally verses, poyetry, poyetry, and speaking of interludes; 'twill make a man burst to hear him. And the wenches, they do so jeer, and tee-hee at him.

Related Characters: Cob (speaker), Mistress Bridget, Tib, Master Matthew

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes when the audience first encounters Cob, who is a humble working-class water-carrier. He is talking to his wife, Tib, about Master Matthew, who is something of an urban fool. The audience learns here that something is amiss with Kitely's house—that other characters are assembling there and using it is as a kind of hang-out. Cob, though he is not of refined learning, can sense that Matthew's (decidedly bad) poetry is inauthentic. Cob, in a way similar to Downright, has a distaste for pretentiousness, embodying one of the principal concerns of the play: the use and abuse of language. This also sets up the love rivalry—if it can be called that—between Matthew and Edward, who compete for Mistress Bridget's affections. In reality, there is no contest, as Matthew cuts a desperate, embarrassing figure.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

A new disease? I know not, new, or old,
But it may well be called poor mortals' plague;
For, like a pestilence, it doth infect
The houses of the brain. First it begins
Solely to work upon the fantasy,
Filling her seat with such pestiferous air,
As soon corrupts the judgment; and from thence,
Sends like contagion to the memory:
Still each to other giving the infection.
Which, as a subtle vapour, spreads itself
Confusedly through every sensive part,
Till not a thought, or motion, in the mind,
Be free from the black poison of suspect.
Ah, but what misery is it, to know this?
Or, knowing it, to want the mind's erection
In such extremes? Well, I will once more strive,
(In spite of this black cloud) myself to be,
And shake the fever off, that thus shakes me.

Related Characters: Kitely (speaker), Dame Kitely

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in the second Act, and shows the development of Kitely's jealousy. This is based on the behaviors of Wellbred, who lodges at Kitely's house, and his entourage. Kitely is concerned that they are engaged in illicit behavior, and here that concern extends to a fear that he will be cuckolded—that his wife will sleep with someone else. This quote is also useful for developing a sense of the role of the four humours medical theory in the play. The four humours were phlegm, blood, black and yellow bile: a healthy person maintained a balance of these within their body, and an excess of any was thought to lead to negative consequences for the individual. For example, an excess of yellow bile was associated with being "choleric" (quick-tempered). Despite the play's title, Jonson doesn't stick to this formula too strictly. Rather, he takes the general idea of the four humours—an "unwell" individual's domination by a given character trait—and extends it as he sees fit. Kitely, then, is made to represent the essence of jealousy.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

Nay, would ourselves were not the first, even parents,
That did destroy the hopes in our own children:
Or they not learned our vices in their cradles,
And sucked in our ill customs with their milk.
Ere all their teeth be born, or they can speak,
We make their palates cunning! the first words
We form their tongues with, are licentious jests!
Can it call, whore? cry bastard? O, then, kiss it!

Related Characters: Old Knowell (speaker), Edward Knowell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as Old Knowell, despite his earlier resolve to a keep distance from his son, tries to follow Edward across the Moorfields of London and spy on him. Old Knowell is alone on stage when the speech is delivered, and therefore his words can be taken as the expression of his innermost thoughts. The quote shows the complex, thorny issue of parent-child relationships. Old Knowell is distressed, thinking about the way that parents influence their children and in particular are prone to passing on their bad faults. He also rallies against what he sees as a corruption of the time—too much illicit behavior and swearing. The implication is that adults actively enjoy encouraging their children to grow up this way.

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

STEPHEN: Ay, truly, sir, I am mightily given to melancholy.

MATTHEW: Oh, it's your only fine humour, sir: your true melancholy breeds your perfect fine wit, sir. I am melancholy myself, divers times, sir, and then do I no more but take pen and paper presently, and overflow you half a score, or a dozen of sonnets at a sitting.

Related Characters: Master Matthew, Master Stephen (speaker), Edward Knowell, Wellbred

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place near the Windmill Tavern, where a number of the characters assemble in Act 3. It represents a kind of competition between two fools—Stephen is the country fool and Matthew the urbanite. They are each trying to impress their peers—primarily Edward Knowell and Wellbred—and are attempting to outdo each other on their level of melancholy. As implied by Matthew's words, there is a connection between melancholy (thought to be caused by an excess of black bile) and poetry; that is, there is a certain romance to being melancholy because suffering and great art go together. Matthew isn't a real poet, but wants to be seen as one—he desires the associations that come with the status. The exchange brings much amusement to Edward and Wellbred, who love nothing more than observing the foolishness of those around them.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

EDWARD: Ay, by his leave, he is, and under favour: a pretty piece of civility! Sirrah, how dost thou like him?

WELLBRED: Oh, it's a most precious fool, make much on him: I can compare him to nothing more happily than a drum; for every one may play upon him.

Related Characters: Wellbred, Edward Knowell (speaker), Brainworm, Master Stephen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes when Edward and Wellbred are walking with Stephen and encounter Brainworm in disguise. The two men are talking about Stephen, and the conversation provides a neat summary of how they see the world. To them, other people—foolish people—represent entertainment, and they see it as a kind of sport to draw human folly out of those around them. This is part of their overall project to identify as gallants—young, rebellious men who affect an air of disinterestedness and disdain. Wellbred uses a musical image to describe Stephen, suggesting he is an instrument for the playing.

Act 3, Scene 4 Quotes

COB: Humour! Mack, I think it be so indeed; what is that humour? some rare thing, I warrant.

CASH: Marry I'll tell thee, Cob: it is a gentlemanlike monster, bred in the special gallantry of our time, by affectation; and fed by folly.

Related Characters: Cash, Cob (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief exchange, Cash tries to introduce Cob to the theory of the four humours. Cob is annoyed, not with any clear particular reason, and Cash tries to suggest that his frustration must be due to an imbalance of the humours. Cash's description of this imbalance as a "gentlemanlike monster, bred in the special gallantry of our time, by affectation" is particularly useful in conceiving Jonson's overall strategy for the play. Undesirable character traits are linked with an excessive desire to fit in and be respected, thus linking the idea of psychological or bodily imbalance to the notion of inauthenticity. And, as Cash says, this particular monster feeds on folly.

Act 3, Scene 6 Quotes

Bane to my fortunes! what meant I to marry?
I, that before was ranked in such content,
My mind at rest too, in so soft a peace,
Being free master of mine own free thoughts,
And now become a slave? What? never sigh;
Be of good cheer, man; for thou art a cuckold:
'Tis done, 'tis done! Nay, when such flowing-store,
Plenty itself, falls into my wife's lap,
The cornucopiae will be mine, I know. But, Cob,
What entertainment had they? I am sure
My sister and my wife would bid them welcome! Ha?

Related Characters: Kitely (speaker), Cob, Mistress Bridget, Dame Kitely

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

As the play progress, Kitely's irrational jealousy intensifies. Here, he convinces himself that he has already been cuckolded and manically tries to come to terms with it. "Cornucopiae" refers to the image of horns associated with the cuckold. Kitely's speech is abrupt and jarring, representing the confused agitation of his inner state. His exclamation that "'tis done" carries with it a sexual innuendo, with "done" referring to the act of sex. Kitely's jealousy is becoming so all-consuming that it even extends to his sister, Mistress Bridget. Cob is bemused as he—like Kitely, in fact—has seen no evidence of adultery on Dame Kitely's part.

Act 3, Scene 7 Quotes

Your cares are nothing: they are like my cap, soon put on, and as soon put off. What! your son is old enough to govern himself: let him run his course, it's the only way to make him staid man.

Related Characters: Justice Clement (speaker), Edward Knowell, Old Knowell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes when Old Knowell is at Justice Clement's house, probably in order to seek advice, guidance, or judgment regarding his son. Justice Clement is a rambunctious old man who has legal authority over the area. He is meant to represent a kind of common sense, not given to the excessive behaviors and foolish traits that consume the other characters. Here, he tries to reason with Old Knowell that he ought to leave Edward be; that is, he speaks to the part of Old Knowell that knows Edward is his own man. This is part of the overall restoration of order as the play works towards its somewhat forced conclusion.

Act 4, Scene 8 Quotes

No harm done, brother, I warrant you: since there is no harm done, Anger costs a man nothing: and a tall man is never his own man, till he be angry. To keep his valour in obscurity, is to keep himself, as it were, in a cloak bag. What's a musician, unless he play? What's a tall man, unless he fight? For, indeed, all this, my wise brother stands upon, absolutely: and that made me fall in with him so resolutely.

Related Characters: Wellbred (speaker), Kitely, Downright

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

By this point in the play, Downright has become increasingly ready for a fight (including with his half-brother Wellbred). Here, Wellbred is discussing Downright's behavior with Kitely, defending him by appealing to masculine ideals. Essentially, he is saying that a "tall" man—that is, a brave man—has to prove his bravery demonstrating his prowess in confrontation. And though Wellbred and Downright nearly came to blows in a preceding scene, Wellbred sees that as merely part of their nature. Fighting to a man, according to Wellbred's logic, is akin to the playing of an instrument for a musician—necessary and part of their identity.

Act 5, Scene 1 Quotes

JUSTICE CLEMENT: I see, rank fruits of a jealous brain, mistress Kitely: but did you find your husband there, in that case, as you suspected?

KITELY: I found her there, sir.

JUSTICE CLEMENT: Did you, so? that alters the case. Who gave you knowledge of your wife's being there?

KITELY: Marry, that did my brother Wellbred.

JUSTICE CLEMENT: How? Wellbred first tell her? then tell you, after? Where is Wellbred?

KITELY: Gone with my sister, sir, I know not whither.

JUSTICE CLEMENT: Why, this is a mere trick, a device; you are gulled in this most grossly, all!

Related Characters: Kitely, Justice Clement (speaker), Wellbred, Dame Kitely

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation represents the beginning of the play's somewhat artificial resolution, in which all conflicts are neatly explained away. As the characters assemble at Justice Clement's house, he starts to hear the grievances, acting as a relatively cool head amidst all the confusion. His questions to Kitely and Dame Kitely, who in a recent both rushed to Cob's house expecting to find the other committing adultery, quickly reveal the mischievous role that Wellbred has played in the proceedings. If they had stopped to talk to each other, instead of being so wrapped up in their foolish jealousies, they too might have come to the same conclusion as Justice Clement. In this way, this moment reflects the play's broader attention to instances of human folly.

Act 5, Scene 2 Quotes

JUSTICE CLEMENT: Nay, keep out, sir; I know not your pretence. You send me word, sir, you are a soldier: why, sir, you shall be answered, here, here be them that have been amongst soldiers. Sir, your pleasure.

BOBADIL: Faith, sir, so it is, this gentleman, and myself, have been most uncivilly wronged, and beaten, by one Downright, a coarse fellow, about the town, here, and for mine own part, I protest, being a man in no sort given to this filthy humour of quarrelling, he hath assaulted me in the way of my peace; despoiled me of mine honour; disarmed me of my weapons; and rudely, laid me along, in the open streets: when I not so much as once offered to resist him.

JUSTICE CLEMENT: Oh God's precious! Is this the soldier? Here, take my armour off quickly, 'twill make him swoon, I fear; he is not fit to look on't, that will put up a blow.

Related Characters: Captain Bobadil , Justice Clement (speaker), Wellbred, Downright

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 90-91

Explanation and Analysis

This scene takes place when Bobadil and Matthew arrive at Justice Clement's, hoping the judge will send Downright to prison for his acts of aggression. On hearing that a soldier has come to see him, Justice Clement comically prepares himself for a fight, thinking the soldier has a vendetta against him. Bobadil quickly demonstrates that he is not a fighting man, despite all of his fighting talk, and pleads with Clement to punish Downright like a child wronged by their sibling. Bobadil's complaints against Downright portray him as distinctly unlike a brave soldier, proving the depth of his inauthenticity. Clement reserves a special scorn for the contradiction between Bobadil's boastfulness and his cowardice.

Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

JUSTICE CLEMENT: Why, Master Downright, are you such a novice, to be served, and never see the warrant?

DOWNRIGHT: Sir. He did not serve it on me.

JUSTICE CLEMENT: No? how then?

DOWNRIGHT: Marry, sir, he came to me, and said, he must serve it, and he would use me kindly, and so—

JUSTICE CLEMENT: Oh, God's pity, was it so, sir? He must serve it? Give me my longsword there, and help me off; so. Come on, sir varlet, I must cut off your legs, sirrah; nay, stand up, I'll use you kindly, I must cut off your legs, I say.

Related Characters: Downright, Justice Clement (speaker), Brainworm

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 90-91

Explanation and Analysis

This scene is part of Act 5's conclusion of the play, which sees the various characters assemble for judgment from Justice Clement. Downright has just arrived, thinking he is under arrest—actually, he has been taken in by the disguised Brainworm. Downright didn't actually see legal proof that he was to be arrested, taking the "serjeant" (Brainworm) at his word, suggesting that Downright is not quite as wise to the world as he might think. Justice Clement quibbles with the word "must," which formed the basis of Downright's willingness to be arrested. He mockingly pretends that he "must" cut Brainworm with his sword, while of course doing no such thing. This makes a wider point about the distance between language and action, and also gestures towards the power of misplaced words.

And I will consider thee in another cup of sack. Here's to thee, which having drunk off this my sentence: Pledge me. Thou hast done, or assisted to nothing, in my judgment, but deserves to be pardon'd for the wit of the offence.

Related Characters: Justice Clement (speaker), Brainworm

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

With Brainworm's various disguises and deceptions quickly unravelling at Justice Clement's house, Brainworm feels no choice but to reveal his true identity and hopefully avoid jail. The audience might reasonably expect the judge to punish Brainworm for his mischievous behavior, but the truth is quite the opposite. Clement is actually *impressed* by Brainworm's actions, seeing in them great "wit;" he actually drinks a toast to Brainworm, celebrating what's happened. Justice Clement, then, seems to have a taste for mischief too, especially when it is conducted ingeniously and serves a greater purpose. Brainworm's deceptions have both drawn out the folly in the other characters—thus mirroring Jonson's overall project with the play—and created a distraction that allows Edward to marry Bridget.

Act 5, Scene 5 Quotes

EDWARD: We are the more bound to your humanity, sir.

JUSTICE CLEMENT: Only these two have so little of man in 'em, they are no part of my care.

Related Characters: Justice Clement, Edward Knowell (speaker), Master Matthew, Captain Bobadil

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as the play draws to a close. Edward has arrived at Justice Clement's, now married to Mistress Bridget. He thanks Justice Clement for his decisions, which he feels represent "humanity." That is, Clement is portrayed as being a fair voice of reason. Clement's ultimate judgment is reserved for Captain Bobadil and Matthew, whose actions he is extremely disparaging about primarily because they have been self-serving and deeply inauthentic. But it's not inauthenticity *per se* that so riles Clement: he enjoys hearing about Brainworm's deceptions, which depended on the servant pretending be something—or various things—that is not. Clement is annoyed by the cowardly reasoning behind Bobadil and Matthew's behavior, the purpose of the deceit. That is, Bobadil has pretended to be an accomplished soldier to make himself more impressive; likewise, Matthew has passed off other people's poetry as his own in order to increase his social status. Clement is a fan of true artistry—in fact, that's how he perceives Brainworm—and hates the fakery that Bobadil and Matthew represent. There is an art, then, to being inauthentic, which Bobadil and Matthew have failed at

hopelessly.

They are not born every year, as an alderman. There goes more to the making of a good poet, than a sheriff.

Related Characters: Justice Clement (speaker), Master Matthew

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of Justice Clement's closing remarks as he brings the play to an end, restoring a sense of peace and order to the other characters. It can be fairly interpreted as Ben Jonson's own aphorism: that a good poet is a rare and precious thing. Implicitly, then, Matthew is criticized for having made a pretentious claim to his own poetic ability without putting in the hard work that accompanies good writing. The quote ties in with the prologue, which promised to bring Elizabethan London to life through the accurate deployment of its people's language. This, of course, is no mean feat, achievable only by someone with true command of the English language. By offering up this pithy phrase at the play's end, Jonson subtly angles the audience towards considering whether he has achieved what was set out in the prologue's mission statement.

JUSTICE CLEMENT: Good complement! It will be their bridal night too. They are married anew. Come, I conjure the rest, to put off all discontent. You, master Downright, your anger; you, master Knowell, your cares; Master Kitely and his wife, their jealousy.

[...]

'Tis well, 'tis well! This night we'll dedicate to friendship, love, and laughter. Master bridegroom, take your bride and lead; everyone, a fellow. Here is my mistress, Brainworm! To whom all my addresses of courtship shall have their reference. Whose adventures, this day, when our grandchildren shall hear to be made a fable, I doubt not, but it shall find both spectators, and applause.

Related Characters: Justice Clement (speaker), Tib, Cob, Brainworm, Dame Kitely, Kitely, Downright, Old Knowell, Mistress Bridget, Edward Knowell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

These are the last words of the play and again belong to Justice Clement. Though he doesn't feature until fairly late on in the action, he acts as an important figure: he is a mouthpiece for Jonson's own judgments and the mechanism through which the play is brought to a close. Here, he quickly dispenses his thoughts about each character, pointing out their flaws and restoring them to their "true" selves—except, as the resolution of the ending feels quite forced, it is perhaps implied that there will again be a similar sequence of confusing and ridiculous events before too long. Clement's speech here is useful for confirming which character has which flaw. Ultimately, Clement wishes the importance of the marriage between Edward and Mistress Bridget (which again feels a little forced) to supersede the worries and neuroses that have played the other characters thus far. Amusingly for the audience, his last sentence is used to give special praise to Brainworm for his part in bringing about the marriage and more generally sowing the seeds of mischief throughout the play. The story of what has happened, to Clement, is more important than any of the actual grievances between the characters—it will have value in posterity and, if the prologue is correct, serve a valuable function of both entertaining those who hear it and exposing the follies of humankind.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The prologue is spoken anonymously—there is no character assigned—but it can be taken as an expression of Ben Jonson's own thoughts. It gives a brief overview of the English theater scene at the time, referencing Shakespeare. It also makes mention of the lineage of theater, gesturing towards Greek theater with its mention of the "Chorus"—of which, in this play, there will be none.

The prologue functions as a kind of mission statement, with Jonson differentiating his play from that of the styles and trends of his contemporaries. It's also intended to gesture towards his deep knowledge of Elizabethan theatrical scene.

The prologue sets out Jonson's approach, promising to employ "deeds, and language, such as men do use: / And persons, such as Comedy would choose, / When she would show an image of the times, / And sport with human follies, not with crimes." It invites the audience to laugh at "our popular errors;" if they do, it promises, there's "hope" left.

Jonson, then, aims to give an authentic account of the times. He sees this as a redemptive act, exposing human folly so that it can be come to terms with.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

The play opens with Old Knowell at home. He asks Brainworm, his servant, to call for his son, Edward Knowell—but not to disturb him if he is studying. Old Knowell expresses gladness that Edward is engaged with his education, but worries that he spends too much time "dreaming on naught but idle **poetry**, / That fruitless and unprofitable art."

This introduces Old Knowell's dilemma: he is conflicted over how best to parent Edward. Part of him wants to be controlling, and part of him wants to let his son lead his own life. This is an early mention of poetry, which functions in various ways throughout: as social currency, evidence of pretention, and a tool with which to bring reality to theatrical life.

Master Stephen, Old Knowell's dim-witted nephew from the countryside, comes in. Stephen asks if Edward Knowell has any books on the "sciences of hawking and hunting" that he could borrow—he's heard they are fashionable. Old Knowell chastises his nephew for being wasteful with his time and money, calling him a "prodigal absurd cockscomb."

Stephen is something of a fool, clearly in search of validation from his peers. He is trying to find—and follow—the fashions of the time. In this way, Old Knowell sees him as representative of his worries about Edward. A "cockscomb" is a vain and silly individual.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

A servant comes in with a letter for Edward. Old Knowell decides, as he too is called "Edward," to read the letter and check up on his son. Stephen almost gets in a fight with the servant over nothing before exiting. Old Knowell summons Brainworm to make the servant a drink.

The letter is meant for his son, but Edward craftily uses the servant's misunderstanding to take it for himself to read. At this point, then, Edward is veering towards his more controlling side. Stephen's aggression is just meant to characterize him further as a fool.

Old Knowell reads the letter, which is from Wellbred, a roguish London gallant. It invites Edward to come and spend time at the Old Jewry, promising him that there are some unwittingly amusing people for him to meet there. Knowell is offended by the "profane and dissolute" tone of the letter and worries about Wellbred's potential influence on his son. He worries if he's worrying too much—"affection makes a fool / Of any man, too much the father."

Wellbred is everything that Old Knowell is not—young, rebellious, and an influential figure in Edward's world. Wellbred is a gallant, and enjoys nothing better than making fun of other people's foolishness; that's the basis of his invitation to Edward. Wellbred is partly symbolic, then, of Jonson's overall project to highlight human folly.

Knowell summons Brainworm back into the room. He gives his servant the letter to pass on to Edward, making him promise not to tell him that he has read it—which Brainworm otherwise wouldn't have known anyway. Brainworm exits, and Knowell resolves to "not stop" the "journey" of his son, "Nor practice any violent mean, to stay / the unbridled course of youth in him." He says, "There is a way of winning, more by love" than "fear."

Old Knowell makes a mistake here, letting Brainworm in on his reading of the letter without there being any need to do so. Old Knowell seems to resolve, here, to take a step back from Edward's life and let him be his own man. This is a comic set-up undercut by Old Knowell's actions later in the play.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Brainworm delivers the letter to Edward, immediately and deliberately informing him that Old Knowell has read its contents. Stephen comes in, still annoyed about the servant earlier. Edward reads the letter, laughing heartily. Stephen worries that his cousin is laughing at him.

It's never explained why, but Brainworm shows more loyalty to Edward than to Old Knowell, acting as an informant. Edward's laughter indicates that he is used to this kind of behavior from his father.

Edward explains to Stephen that there is no need for him to be "melancholy"—he was laughing at the letter, not him. He explains that he will go to meet his friend at the Old Jewry by crossing over Moorfields, and invites Stephen to accompany him. His cousin enthusiastically agrees. Edward sarcastically praises Stephen's character—though the latter doesn't pick up on the sarcasm.

Stephen's worry that he is being laughed indicates the fragile state of his ego—a fair criticism for many of the characters of the play. He is constantly looking for external verification about who he is—and, vice versa, always on the look-out for ridicule (which, ironically, he often misses). The Old Jewry is a street in London, which at the time was the site of the Windmill Tavern. Melancholy was representative of one of the four humours, which was the medical theory that the human body depended on a balance between blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. An excess of these produced a defect often manifested as an undesirable character trait (e.g. black bile and melancholy).

ACT 1, SCENE 4

Matthew, the town "gull," arrives at the house of Cob the water-bearer, wondering if the latter man knows the whereabouts of Captain Bobadil. They banter a little, with Cob claiming to be descended from a royal line of fish—he insists that he is related to King Herring, "the king of fish." Matthew is surprised to learn that Bobadil is actually lodging with Cob—he thought he would be staying elsewhere.

Matthew is the urban idiot to Stephen's countryside variant. Cob's comments about his lineage introduce an element of absurdity to the play, and gently mimic and mock the prevalent trend of people talking up their family history. The fact that Bobadil is lodging with Cob is sensed by Matthew as embarrassing, and should serve as a warning sign that Bobadil is not quite the authentically heroic soldier he claims to be.


Cob explains that Bobadil is asleep on a bench inside his house; Matthew goes in to look for him. Cob talks to himself about Matthew. Apparently, Matthew has been frequenting one of the houses where Cob delivers water—Kitely's—and is in love with Bridget Kitely. Cob is appalled by Matthew's habit of reading "**rascally verses, poyetry**" and making the women "tee-hee" at him.

Matthew uses poetry as a way of cultivating an air of sophistication—but his quotes are often plagiarized. Poetry is presented as a potential route to a lover's heart.


ACT 1, SCENE 5

Matthew finds Captain Bobadil, a braggart soldier, inside Cob's house. They talk about the drunken night before, and Bobadil asks Matthew—even though he insists there is no cause for embarrassment—not to tell anyone he is lodging at Cob's.

Bobadil clearly does sense that public knowledge of his lodging at Cob's would be a dent in his social status. Likewise, letting on that it's embarrassing would diminish his status in Matthew's eyes.

Bobadil notices that Matthew is carrying a copy of *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd. They both effusively praise the play; Matthew quotes from it while Bobadil gets dressed. Matthew also recites some lines which he claims are "a toy o' mine own." Matthew says Bobadil should come to his study soon to here his most recent writing.

One of Jonson's first forays into theater was acting in the play mentioned here, which is widely considered as the work that established the revenge genre in English theater. The lines from Matthew are probably plagiarized, but the source has not been traced.


Matthew complains to Bobadil about an argument he had with Downright, the no-nonsense half-brother of Wellbred, about men's fashion. Matthew goes on to say that Downright has threatened to give him the "bastinado" next time he sees him—that is, beat him up. Bobadil, outraged, shows Matthew some tips for dueling with **swords**. They then leave the house to get some food and call on Wellbred to discuss Downright.

The conversation here sets up the conflict with Downright, and also gestures to the fragility of social status in Elizabethan London—Matthew feels slighted that Wellbred talked disparagingly about his look.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Kitely, a cloth merchant, stands in front of his house with his assistant, Thomas Cash, and Downright. Kitely sends Cash away to complete a transaction for him and converses with Downright, explaining how much he trusts Cash—whom he brought up himself.

Kitely is keen to present himself as a virtuous figure.

Kitely has a thorny issue to bring up with Downright—Wellbred. The latter man, who lodges with Kitely, seems to have taken an "irregular" course and suffered a moral fall. Especially irksome for Kitely is that Wellbred has been making his house as "common as a mart, / A theatre, a public receptacle / For giddy humour, and diseased riot." Wellbred and his "wild associates," according to Kitely, have filled his house with "lascivious jests."

Kitely echoes Old Knowell's concerns in Act One that Wellbred is not a character to be trusted. The jokingly disparaging reference to theater gestures towards the debate about poetry and language at the heart of the play—whether it has merit or is a tool for deceit and illicit behavior. Kitely implies that Wellbred has an excess of blood (in the four humours scheme), making him excessively sociable. Bloodletting was a genuine remedy for this—as with many other ailments—at the time.

Downright is annoyed to hear of Wellbred's lewd behavior, and predicts he'll end up in one of the city prisons. Downright wonders why Kitely doesn't confront Wellbred about his actions. Kitely worries that Wellbred would "be ready from this heat of humour" if he was to speak with him. He's also upset about the way Wellbred's associates mock him and his appearance, and fears being cuckolded; he asks Downright to speak with his half-brother.

Downright is much more straight-up and no-nonsense than his half-brother, Wellbred. His name points the audience towards this, too. Kitely diagnoses Wellbred with an excess of yellow bile, which makes an individual "choleric" (angry). If an individual is cuckolded, it means their wife has had an illicit affair. The term originally alluded to the cuckoo bird, which had a habit of laying its eggs in other birds' nests.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Matthew and Bobadil enter, looking for Wellbred. They leave when Kitely explains that he did not return to his lodging last night, but not before Bobadil calls Downright a "scavenger." Kitely has to restrain Downright from going after Bobadil. Kitely implores Downright not to let himself be overrun by "devouring choler." Downright goes into the house for breakfast.

This short scene increases the tension in the play, setting up the "choleric" Downright for a confrontation with Wellbred and Bobadil.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

Cob comes by, delivering water. Kitely laments the fact that he ever let Wellbred into his house, doubling down on his worry that he is likely to be cuckolded: "Beware, / When mutual appetite doth meet to treat [...] It is no slow conspiracy that follows."

This marks the beginning of Kitely's increasing paranoia about being cuckolded. Essentially, he fears that a "mutual" attraction between his wife and Wellbred can only lead to one thing.

Dame Kitely and Mistress Bridget Kitely (Kitely's sister) arrive. Dame Kitely sees that Kitely looks agitated and asks him whether he is feeling okay. Kitely feigns having a fever; his wife asks him to come in out of the cold. In an aside on his way into the house, Kitely worries about his growing jealousy and resolves to try to "shake the fever off, that thus shakes me."

Kitely fakes a fever to hide his growing jealousy. His closing comment links physical health with mental wellbeing, in keeping with the scheme of the four humours (which was also linked to the elements and the seasons).

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Now on the Moorfields, Brainworm enters disguised as a vagrant ex-soldier. He announces his intentions to disrupt Old Knowell's attempts to follow and spy on Edward.

Now part of the urban cityscape of London, Moorfields at the time was an area of open land. Old Knowell has clearly gone back on his earlier decision to give Edward space.

Just then, Edward and Stephen come by. Stephen is fretting about having lost his purse. Brainworm, sensing that he cannot easily hide, greets them in character. He offers Stephen a **sword** for sale, which he promises is "very excellent good." When Edward asks where he has served, he reels off a list of 16th century battles.

Brainworm uses his knack for disguise and deception to aid Edward's cause. His offer of the sword to Stephen is partly an effort by him to make his new character seem convincing, but also mischievously plays on Stephen's desire to manly and respected.


Gullibly, Stephen is convinced that the **sword** is a good one. Brainworm assures him it is a "most pure Toledo." Though Edward tries to persuade him otherwise, Stephen buys the sword. They all exit.

Toledo, a city in Spain, has a long history of sword-making and steel-working stretching back to 500 BC. It is thus seen by Stephen as a symbol of authenticity.


ACT 2, SCENE 5

Old Knowell arrives on the Moorfields and delivers a long speech about parenting. He vacillates between wanting to take control of Edward's life and wanting to give him space. He talks nostalgically about his own youth, reflecting on the change in "manners" of young people in his day compared with now. Parents, he says, often pass on their own faults to their children by setting a bad example.

This speech gives the audience a clear insight into Old Knowell's state of mind, and his difficulties in figuring out how best to parent Edward. On the one hand, he wants to control his son's life; on the other, he remembers developing from a youth into a man and doesn't want to disrupt that process.

Brainworm reappears, still in disguise, and begs Old Knowell for money. He also claims his name is Fitzsword. Knowell tells him he should be ashamed to be begging, suggesting he should go back to "the wars" or find some "honest labour." Knowell, pitying Brainworm, says he will hire him, and exits.

Brainworm appears to have come up with his new name as a way of authenticating his supposed past as a soldier. Knowell's moralizing here rings a little hollow, given he is currently attempting to spy on his own son.



Brainworm delights in the effectiveness of his disguise. He plans to relay any information about Old Knowell to Edward.

Brainworm actively enjoys his role as a deceiver. He loosely embodies the stock character of a "witty slave" found in ancient Greek theater.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

In a street near the Windmill tavern, Matthew and Bobadil tell Wellbred that they were looking for him earlier. Bobadil tries to complain to Wellbred about Downright, but Wellbred insists he change the topic of conversation.

Wellbred, despite his own tensions with Downright, refuses to talk badly about his half-brother, suggesting a sort of code of honor.

Edward enters with Stephen, greeting Wellbred warmly and calling him a "fine gallant" for his letter. Edward explains that Old Knowell contrived to read Wellbred's letter. Wellbred promises Edward that he will enjoy listening—and mocking—Bobadil and Matthew, whom he calls his two "wind-instruments." Likewise, replies Edward, Stephen will bring amusement to Wellbred.

Edward and Wellbred have respect for one another. Wellbred sees Bobadil and Matthew as instruments for the playing—that is, if provoked in the right way, their ridiculous speech and actions will be the source of much amusement. Edward offers Stephen as a kind of exchange.

Stephen introduces himself to Wellbred, insisting that he is "mightily given to melancholy." Matthew, not wanting to be left out, insists that he is melancholy too—and that this is often leads him to "take pen and paper" and "overflow" with the composition of **poetry**.

Stephen plays up his melancholy nature, thinking it might win him respect. Matthew, not to be outdone by Stephen's foolishness, quickly interjects with his poetry.

Bobadil, who has been musing quietly, boasts about his achievements in battle. He claims to have been "the first man that entered the breach" in the battle of Strigonium. Bobadil talks of using his **sword** skillfully, comparing it to mythical weapons like "Excalibur."

Bobadil boasts often about his military prowess, but only the less smart characters take him at his word. The battle he mentions took place in Hungary. Excalibur was the sword of England's mythic hero, King Arthur, who Bobadil would undoubtedly like to be compared to.

Stephen, excited by all the talk of **swords**, shows Bobadil his new purchase, claiming that it, like the one Bobadil talks of, is from Spanish Toledo. Bobadil quickly pours scorn on Stephen's sword, telling that it is a cheap knock-off. Stephen is furious with Brainworm for selling him the weapon (while disguised).

Brainworm's deception with the sword is revealed. Like many of the characters in the play, the sword is a cheap imitation of what it is claimed to be. All the talk of swords also introduces a sense of threat and potential violence.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Brainworm joins the group, still in disguise. Stephen confronts him angrily about the **sword**, with Edward and Wellbred finding this hilarious. Wellbred compares Stephen to "a drum; for everyone may play upon him."

Wellbred continues the musical metaphor from the scene before, suggesting people are there to be played for purposes of entertainment.

Brainworm unveils his disguise to Edward, informing him about Old Knowell's attempts to follow him. He then tells Edward and Wellbred that Old Knowell is currently at the house of Justice Clement, the local judicial authority.

Brainworm lets the others in on his secret, revealing his intentions to them. This also introduces Justice Clement into the play who, as his name suggests, will fulfil the role of judging the other characters.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

At his warehouse, Kitely frets over an impending business transaction that seems less than above board. His suspicion of his wife, Dame Kitely, has gotten worse. He tells Cash that he will sacrifice the business transaction in order to keep tabs on his wife. Cash reminds him that Kitely needs to go to meet his "scrivener," who has his "bonds."

Kitely's jealousy continues to increase, affecting his ability to conduct his business.

Kitely is of two minds about whether to leave or stay, comparing his brain to an "hour-glass." He wonders if he can trust Cash to look after his home while he's gone—or, more accurately, to look after Dame Kitely and prevent Wellbred or any of his associates from coming by.

Kitely's metaphor suggests that time is imperative—that is, he feels he needs to act quick to either prevent his cuckolding or catch his wife in the act.

Kitely asks Cash to promise to keep a secret, though wonders paranoidly if Cash is deliberately avoiding swearing on his honor. He orders Cash to bring him word immediately if Wellbred shows up at the house, explaining that he (Kitely) will most likely be at Justice Clement's. Kitely then insists that he had no secret and was just checking that Cash is trustworthy.

Kitely never really reveals this "secret," but it's probably his fear of being cuckolded. Cash is set up as a kind of guard. This contributes to the sense that all is not as it seems.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

As Kitely departs, Cob comes by. He is ranting to himself about "fasting days." Cash asks him what has moved him to "this choler." Cash tells Cob that he's probably distressed because of his "humour," which he describes as a "gentleman-like monster, bred in the special gallantry of our time by affectation; and fed by folly."

This discussion foregrounds the role of the four humours in the play. But, as with Cash and Cob's grasp of the medical theory, the theory of the humours is applied quite vaguely throughout. Jonson's intention is to have his characters dominated by particular characteristics, which is similar to the idea of an imbalance of the humours but not rendered in precisely the same way. This conversation also reminds the audience of one of the play's main themes: human folly.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

Wellbred, Edward, Brainworm, Bobadil, Matthew, and Stephen arrive. Edward and Wellbred are praising Brainworm for his skill as an "artificer." They ask Cash for Kitely's whereabouts; Cash, starting to panic at the men's arrival, informs them that Kitely has gone to Justice Clement. Cash frantically calls for Cob.

Edward and Wellbred enjoy Brainworm's antics because they speak to their general taste for mischief and, furthermore, serve Edward's aims of evading his father.

Bobadil takes out some "Trinidado" tobacco, praising it gushingly as the most "divine" tobacco he knows. Cob arrives and complains about the "roguish tobacco," which he says is "good for nothing but to choke a man." Bobadil beats him with a "cudgel." Cash drags Cob away, with Bobadil hurling insults at him.

Bobadil's praise for the tobacco matches his own talent for self-aggrandizement. Bobadil is happy to attack Cob because the latter man seems weak and unthreatening.

Bobadil and Matthew go inside, with the latter hoping to charm Mistress Bridget with his "**verse**." Wellbred and Edward go inside to have the "happiness to hear some of his poetry now."

Wellbred and Edward are delighted to have the opportunity to witness Matthew's foolishness first hand.

ACT 3, SCENE 6

Cob arrives at Justice Clement's house and tells him of Wellbred's arrival there with his entourage. Kitely panics about the "swarm" stinging his "head / With forked stings." In an aside, Kitely shows how gripped he is by the thought that he has been cuckolded. He tries to tell himself to "be of good cheer" as "'tis done."

Kitely's image relates to idea of the "cuckold" as having horns. Kitely has no evidence of his wife's adultery—it's all in his head. Thus here he is coming to terms with something that he doesn't know for sure actually exists.

Kitely frantically asks Cob which of the gang kissed his wife first. Cob insists that he didn't see any kissing at all, but this doesn't allay Kitely's fears. He rushes back to his house, expecting to catch Dame Kitely in the act. Though he tries to bring Cob with him, Cob insists on staying to speak with Justice Clement about Bobadil's attack on him.

Kitely has fantasized a whole scenario in which he is cuckolded. These scenes ramp up the absurdism of the play, with characters rushing frantically to and fro in pursuit of one another, propelled by their foolishness.

ACT 3, SCENE 7

Justice Clement asks his assistant, Roger Formal, whether Kitely has gone. He wonders what made him leave so abruptly. Cob approaches Justice Clement to ask for an arrest warrant for Bobadil.

Clement is an ambiguous character—he doesn't have a clear-cut set of morals but applies his authority according to his own tastes.

Justice Clement laughs at Bobadil's reason for attacking Cob—the insult over tobacco—and instead orders Formal to send Cob to jail. Old Knowell, also present, implores Justice Clement to go easy on Cob. Justice Clement scorns Cob for "abusing the virtue of an herb, so generally received in the courts of princes." Much to Cob's relief, Justice Clement abruptly changes his mind and grants the arrest warrant for Bobadil instead of sending Cob to prison.

Clement's momentary decision to punish Cob for insulting tobacco is based on his respect for status: princes like tobacco, and therefore an insult to the latter is a slight on the former. Clement's abrupt change of mind again reveals him to be an ambiguous character without clear morals.

Evidently in a frivolous mood, Justice Clement tells Old Knowell that his worries about Edward are "nothing"; "Your son is old enough to govern himself," he says.

Clement's words chime with the part of Old Knowell that wants to give his son freedom.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

Back at Kitely's, Downright chastises Dame Kitely for allowing Wellbred and his entourage into the house. He blames her, but she questions how she could possibly "keep out all them, think you? I should put myself against half a dozen men?" She says he has no "sense, or reason!"

Downright's anger is on the increase, setting him up for confrontation. Dame Kitely's point is a fair one; it's also worth noting that the women in the play are not as foolish as the men, though they feature far less prominently.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

Bridget, Matthew, Bobadil, Wellbred, Stephen, Edward, and Brainworm all enter at Kitely's house. Matthew intends to read some **poetry** to Bridget, causing Downright to leave; he'd rather "endure the stocks."

Downright has a distaste for pretentiousness—in fact, it riles him up. The "stocks" refers an old instrument of public punishment, in which a person's feet and hands are locked into holes in a wooden structure.

Edward and Wellbred listen amusedly as Matthew utters "**stolen remnants**" from Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, passing them off as his own: "Would God my rude words had the influence, / To rule thy thoughts, as thy fair looks do mine."

Matthew plagiarizes from another popular work of the time, as in his earlier conversation with Bobadil. The quote is apt though, as it neatly sums up the potential power of words—and the command of them that Matthew would like to have. Marlowe was a contemporary of Jonson.

Wellbred asks Matthew "who made these **verses**." Matthew claims to have written them, "extempore," that very morning. Downright re-enters, increasingly vexed by the people present. Wellbred implores Bridget not to accept Matthew's advances, calling them "tricks."

To extemporize is to make poetry up on the spot, so Matthew is claiming to have come up with his quotes that very morning. Downright is ready for a fight.

Downright takes offence at Wellbred's use of the word "tricks." Tensions between them quickly ramp up, and Downright tells Wellbred to go and "practice your ruffian-tricks somewhere else." He criticizes the company Wellbred keeps and, suddenly, both men draw their **weapons**. Bobadil draws his sword too. The others separate them as Cash enters.

Wellbred's use of the word "tricks", which carries with it sexual innuendo, isn't necessarily a deliberate provocation—but it certainly angers Downright.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

Kitely comes in, wondering about the cause of the commotion. Wellbred blames it on "one of my brother's ancient humours" and leaves, with Stephen, Bobadil, Matthew, Edward and Brainworm in tow. Downright rants about Wellbred, Bobadil, and Matthew. Bridget criticizes him for being too angry.

Wellbred is implying that Downright's behavior is excessively "choleric." Bridget, like Dame Kitely earlier, acts to a degree as a voice of reason.

Bridget and Dame Kitely praise Edward, with Bridget suggesting she has affections for him. Dame Kitely says he is "of an exceeding fair disposition, and of very excellent good parts!" After they exit, Kitely misinterprets "parts" to mean Edward's body, rather than the most likely intended meaning of personal qualities. Kitely thinks the "gallants" are hiding in the house and goes in to search.

Bridget's praise for Edward sets up their betrothal later in the play. Again, a word is taken in a way that it is not necessarily intended. By "parts," Dame Kitely most likely means "characteristics" rather than bodily parts. Kitely's jealousy ensures he can only take it one way, however.

ACT 4, SCENE 4

Now at Cob's house, Cob confronts his wife, Tib, thinking she has cuckolded him. Cob confusedly accuses Tib of sleeping with Bobadil. He orders her to go inside, lock the door and let nobody in. He waves the arrest warrant for Bobadil in the air as she goes inside.

Kitely's jealousy infects Cob, making him fear being cuckolded too. Cob hopes to impose the rule of law on Bobadil and take him to Justice Clement.

ACT 4, SCENE 5

At the Windmill tavern, Edward and Wellbred instruct Brainworm, still disguised, to take a message to Downright. They talk about Bridget Kitely, whom Edward admits he has affections for. Wellbred promises Edward that he (Edward) will have her.

The message for Downright isn't revealed here, but the audience later learns that it is part of an overall distraction tactic employed by Wellbred to help Edward marry Bridget. The lack of any real discernable interaction between Bridget and Edward gestures towards the somewhat forced ending in Act 5.

ACT 4, SCENE 6

Roger Formal and Old Knowell meet in a street of the Old Jewry. Brainworm arrives too, still disguised as a soldier. Brainworm craftily informs Knowell that Edward has received information about his father's attempts to spy on him. Brainworm claims to have been set upon by Edward and his entourage, who somehow knew he was working for Old Knowell.

Brainworm's story is, of course, entirely fictional, serving to help him control the movements of Old Knowell and keep himself—and Edward—informed.

Brainworm relays that, during his run-in with Edward and the others, he gleaned that they are heading to Cob's house—where Edward has his eye on "brave citizens' wives." Knowell instructs Brainworm to stay with Roger Formal and leaves.

Brainworm plays Old Knowell like a piece on a chess board. Now that he's been asked to spend time with Formal, Brainworm senses further mischievous opportunity.

Roger Formal, intrigued by Brainworm's (false) backstory, insists on buying him some wine and hearing about his life. They exit for the Windmill.

Formal's desire to hear about Fitzsword's story plays into Brainworm's hands better than he could have planned.

ACT 4, SCENE 7

Matthew, Edward, Bobadil, and Stephen speak disparagingly about Downright. Bobadil states that, with what he taught Matthew earlier about fighting, the latter should be able to kill Downright easily.

Bobadil continues to boast about his fighting skills. But like the sword that Stephen bought earlier, these boasts are wholly inauthentic.

Bobadil boasts of his past exploits in fighting, acting out as he does so. He brags that, if the Queen knew about him, he could save her three quarters of her annual costs in fighting wars. He says he would select a group of the right men and teach them how to fight properly. Edward (probably sarcastically) points out that Downright ought to be afraid of Bobadil.

This represents the height of Bobadil's self-delusions, essentially saying that he alone could vastly improve Queen Elizabeth's (very strong) military forces. All this talk sets Bobadil up for a fall when Downright re-enters.

Just then, Downright arrives. Amazed that he has run into "these bragging rascals" yet again, he tells Bobadil to draw his **sword**. Bobadil tries to back out of the fight; Downright quickly and easily disarms him. Matthew, terrified, runs away.

Downright's anger towards Bobadil is clearly linked to the latter's constant boastfulness. Embarrassingly for both Bobadil and Matthew, Downright quickly gets the better of them. This shows them both up as inauthentic.

Downright leaves. Bobadil tries to excuse his cowardly behavior to Edward and Stephen by claiming he is bound by a "warrant of the peace" not to fight. Bobadil then claims he was "struck with a planet" that supernaturally prevented him from drawing his **weapon**. He leaves. Stephen picks up Downright's discarded cloak.

Bobadil's excuses are desperate and unconvincing, not to mention contradictory. Firstly, he claims that he is bound by law to act peacefully, which is patently untrue. Secondly, he tries to claim some kind of supernatural intervention that prevented him from fighting—which is patently ridiculous.

ACT 4, SCENE 8

Back at Kitely's house, Wellbred explains to Kitely and Dame Kitely that anger is in Downright's nature—and that there was "no harm done" in the earlier altercation. Dame Kitely says that "harm might have come of it"—Wellbred points out that harm could come from anything, suggesting flippantly that she might have poisoned Kitely's wine.

Wellbred defends his half-brother, essentially blaming Downright's quick temper on his humours. Dame Kitely makes a reasonable point; Wellbred's reply is not intended to be taken seriously.

Kitely, in a fit of paranoia, takes Wellbred's suggestion to heart and says he feels "ill." Wellbred, Dame Kitely and Bridget all tell Kitely to pull himself together.

Kitely's mind is confused and suggestible, making him take Wellbred's throwaway words far too literally.

Brainworm comes in, now dressed as Roger Formal. He tells Kitely that his master, Justice Clement, desires to speak with him as soon as possible. Kitely goes to look for Cash and Cob, whom he wants to act as "sentinels" while he goes to Justice Clement's.

This is Brainworm's second disguise, showing that he has considerable skill in trying on different identities to serve his purpose. Kitely wants Cash and Cob to act almost like soldiers, guarding the house from the influence of Wellbred and his associates.

Brainworm explains to Wellbred how he managed to procure Roger Formal's clothes: he got the other man drunk and stole them, leaving Formal in a drunken stupor. Wellbred is impressed. He tells Brainworm to return to Edward and tell him to meet him at "the Tower," where Wellbred has arranged for him to marry Bridget Kitely. Brainworm leaves.

Wellbred, like Edward, has a taste for mischievous behavior—especially that which shows people up for their follies. The Tower refers to an area of London outside of the normal controls of the religious authorities (but not anti-religious).

Kitely comes in with Cash, instructing him to stay at the house, keep note of any visitors, and interrupt any interactions they might try to have with Dame Kitely. He leaves again, looking for Cob.

Kitely essentially wants Cash to act as a kind of spy, echoing Old Knowell's attempts to spy on his son.

Dame Kitely wonders why Kitely is looking for Cob so eagerly. Wellbred mischievously implies that Kitely is interested in Cob's wife, Tib, whom he says is a "bawd." Now jealous too, she drags Cash off to look for Kitely with her.

Here, Jonson ramps up the absurdity, using Wellbred as a vehicle to further confuse the other characters. Dame Kitely now mirrors her own husband's jealousy, both of them thinking the other to be cheating.

Wellbred tries to convince Bridget to marry Edward. She is clearly keen on the idea, but feels that Wellbred is acting too much like "an old knight-adventurer's servant." Just then, Kitely returns, having realized that Justice Clement had not called for him as Brainworm said. Bridget tells him that Dame Kitely has gone to Cob's house with Cash; Kitely heads there in a fit of jealousy.

Bridget does marry Edward, and the hesitancy displayed here is resolved into her decision to accept the marriage. The audience already knows from earlier that she is attracted to him, though. This slight hole in the plot speaks to the fact that, really, it's not the plot that matters in this play—it's the absurd behaviors of the characters.

ACT 4, SCENE 9

Bobadil and Matthew meet in a city street. They worry about their reputations but make their excuses. When Brainworm comes by, dressed as Roger Formal, they complain to him about Downright and ask for an arrest warrant. Brainworm says he will give them what they want in exchange for money, but neither of them has any.

Bobadil and Matthew take a more cowardly route now, hoping to get revenge on Downright for embarrassing them earlier. Brainworm, ever the opportunist, tries to get money out of them. Bobadil and Matthew's trust of Brainworm's disguise speaks to the overall instability of identity shown throughout the play.

Bobadil and Matthew give Brainworm jewelry and silk stockings in exchange for a warrant. Matthew describes Downright as a "tall big man" wearing a cloak with "russet lace." Brainworm promises to get a city "varlet" to serve the warrant to Downright. Bobadil and Matthew exit, Brainworm announces his intentions to pawn Roger Formal's cloak.

Bobadil and Matthew's attempts to pay off Brainworm—who they think is Formal—contributes to the sense of inauthenticity in the play by implying that, to them at least, the law is not an objective reality but something that can be manipulated with the right resources. A varlet is a man or boy acting as a servant, but also carries with connotations of dishonesty—in keeping with the play's theme of authenticity/inauthenticity.

ACT 4, SCENE 10

Old Knowell arrives at Cob's house. He asks Tib who is within the house; not knowing who he is, she is reluctant to say. She tells Knowell that she's never heard of Edward.

Tib and Old Knowell's confusion—neither of them knows who the other one is—is emblematic of the anarchic confusion running throughout the play (mostly Wellbred's doing).

Dame Kitely and Cash arrive. Dame Kitely demands to know where Kitely is, but Tib tells her that he isn't there. Kitely arrives, dressed in a cloak. Thinking he is trying to disguise himself, Dame Kitely chastises Kitely for being an adulterer.

Kitely and Dame Kitely's misunderstanding reaches its peak, with each angrily accusing the other of wrongdoing. Wellbred's project of destabilization is working to great effect.

Kitely, caught up in his own suspicions, thinks Dame Kitely's secret lover is Old Knowell, "this hoary-headed lecher." They angrily accuse one another. Old Knowell sense that a trick has been played on him for spying on Edward—and "half-forgives" Edward if he is behind it all.

Kitely's absurd jealousy sets its sights on Old Knowell, who has no idea what he's talking about. Knowell—who is not a stupid man—starts to realize what's going on, perhaps with a sense of grudging respect for his son's and Wellbred's mischief.

Cob enters, shocked to hear Kitely's claims that Old Knowell has cuckolded him (Kitely) within Cob's house. He beats Tib for being a "bawd." Old Knowell tries to stop the "madness." They all decide to go to Justice Clement for judgment.

Cob's violence towards Tib is intended to be grotesquely comical, rather than genuinely shocking. Justice Clement is seen as the last vestige of authority, the man who can restore authenticity to proceedings—that is, they think he can get to the bottom of what has happened.

ACT 4, SCENE 11

Brainworm, now disguised as a constable, encounters Matthew and Bobadil on a street. He tells them that he is on his way to arrest Downright. As Stephen comes in wearing Downright's cloak, Brainworm puts him under arrest.

Brainworm takes on his third disguise, which he has procured through pawning Roger Formal's clothes. His intentions aren't completely clear, but, as with earlier in the play, he gets swept up in events as the present themselves.

Stephen protests his innocence; Bobadil points out that he is wearing the same cloak as Downright. Just then, Downright comes in. Brainworm in turn tries to serve him with the warrant on Matthew and Bobadil's behalf; Downright agrees to go before Justice Clement.

The quibble over the cloak is in keeping with the instability of identity coursing throughout the play. Downright is a law-abiding citizen and respects what he thinks is his genuine arrest.

Downright asks for his cloak back. With Stephen refusing, Downright tells Brainworm to arrest him for being a thief. Stephen gives him the cloak but is forced to go to Justice Clement anyway. Brainworm tries to talk him out of it, but Downright is insistent. In fact, Downright promises to beat Brainworm if he refuses to arrest Stephen. They all head to Justice Clement's house.

Likewise, Downright's law-abiding nature and his no-nonsense approach cause him to seek justice against Stephen. The characters are all, then, maneuvered towards Justice Clement, where they will receive their judgments.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

Justice Clement, Knowell, Kitely, Dame Kitely, Cash, Tib, and Cob assemble at Justice Clement's house. Clement is trying to get to the bottom of the "false" messages allegedly given by Roger Formal.

Justice Clement is portrayed as a shrewd judge of character—the task thus falls to him restore some sense of order and, by extension, stability of self to those involved.

Clement questions Dame Kitely and Kitely, getting them both to realize that each of them was convinced to search for the other at Cob's house by Wellbred. He points out that it has all been a "mere trick."

Clement establishes that Kitely and Dame Kitely have been deceived—they have both been under a kind of spell. If the two of them had stopped to rationalize their suspicions, they too might have come to the same conclusion; the fact that they didn't highlights the overall impression of foolishness throughout the play.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

A servant announces Matthew and Bobadil's arrival. Justice Clement briefly thinks that Bobadil, described merely as a "soldier" by the servant, has come to fight him. Bobadil explains that his gripe is with Downright; he complains that Downright "despoiled me of mine honour" and disarmed him of his **sword**. Clement is less than impressed with Bobadil's cowardice.

Justice Clement, comically, is put on guard by the suggestion that a soldier has come looking for him. The audience, of course, knows Bobadil's false and timid character. Clement upholds the exact values that Bobadil had so eagerly tried to claim for himself: masculinity and bravado.

The servant announces the arrival of a "varlet" of the city, with two men under arrest according to Justice Clement's warrant. Clement is confused, having not issued any such warrant.

Brainworm's arrival here, with Downright and Stephen, was not necessarily part of the plan, and sets up Brainworm's reveal.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Downright, Brainworm, and Stephen enter. Old Knowell explains that Stephen is his nephew. Stephen says he has been falsely accused by Downright of stealing his cloak.

Stephen is being entirely inauthentic here—he deliberately stole the cloak.

Justice Clement asks about the warrant; Brainworm, in disguise as the "varlet," says he doesn't have it—but that it was Roger Formal who told him to make the arrests. Clement asks why Downright accepted the arrest without seeing the warrant. Downright explains that Brainworm had told him he "must" serve the warrant, and he had therefore complained.

Brainworm's scheming starts to unravel. The "Roger Formal" that he talks about is Brainworm himself. Clement's questioning of Downright implies that the latter's judgment was impaired by his temper.

Justice Clement mocks Downright for following Brainworm's instructions, waving his sword over Brainworm, saying that he "must cut" him—but not doing so. He then instructs Brainworm to be sent to the jail for his "*must*."

Justice Clement's quibble over the word "must" embodies a more serious point about the serious effect of misplaced—or misunderstood—words.

Brainworm protests, throwing off his disguise. Old Knowell is shocked to see his servant; he is annoyed and says he suspects Brainworm "for being of counsel with my son, against me." Brainworm admits that he was Fitzsword, the ex-soldier. He also confesses that he had been sent as a false messenger on numerous times throughout the day; he explains that Wellbred is making use of the distraction to marry Bridget and Edward.

Brainworm has no option left but to reveal his true identity, faced with the prospect of imprisonment. The audience might reasonably expect him still to face punishment for the level of his deception, but his mention of the marriage acts as a distraction.

Justice Clement tells Brainworm to go and fetch the young couple, praising the "good news." He asks Brainworm for Roger Formal's whereabouts; Brainworm explains what happened. Clement says that Brainworm has done nothing terribly wrong and should be "pardoned for the wit o' the offence."

Justice Clement, rather than admonishing Brainworm, is actually impressed with the skill of his deception—especially as, in his eyes, it has served a good aim. Brainworm's role has also served more generally to bring the follies of the other characters front and center.

ACT 5, SCENE 4

Roger Formal, drunk, arrives at Justice Clement's house, followed shortly after by Edward, Wellbred, and Bridget. Clement tells Edward that he has "made your peace […] so will I for all the rest, ere you forsake my roof."

Justice Clement's words pacify any potential anger on Old Knowell's part. His role as peacemaker is foregrounded, bringing the play to a relatively forced conclusion.

ACT 5, SCENE 5

Edward thanks Justice Clement for his "humanity." Clement says that only Bobadil and Matthew "have so little of man in 'em" as to not be any "part" of his "care." Wellbred, in jest, pleads Matthew's case, saying he is Bridget's official **poet**. Clement insists that he will challenge any poet to "extempore," right there and then; he quotes from a sonnet by Samuel Daniel.

Justice Clement's harshest judgments, then, are reserved for the two most haplessly deceptive characters: Bobadil and Matthew. Their inauthenticity was only in service of themselves; Brainworm's served a higher purpose. Clement's poetry challenge, like his earlier readiness to fight the arriving soldier, is a comic reminder of the fragility of the peace.

Wellbred insists that Matthew is more of a "pocket" poet than one who likes to "extempore." Clement notices that Matthew is carrying "commonwealth of paper" and begins to read some of the pages. Clement is incensed to see that Matthew's **verse** is all plagiarized. He sets the papers alight.

Wellbred is just having fun here, mocking Matthew. Justice Clement exposes Matthew's false status as a poet, paradoxically restoring a kind of authenticity—that is, Matthew's true self is put on display for all to see. His inauthentic self is ceremonially set ablaze.

Clement states that a "good **poet**" is a rare thing, "not born every year." Clement announces that everyone will have food and drink that evening to celebrate the marriage of Edward and Bridget—except for Bobadil and Matthew, who will have to "fast it out" for being "so false." He tells Stephen to give Downright his cloak back.

Clement's words about the rareness of good poets are, in essence, those of Ben Jonson. The playwright was famously boastful about his own abilities, and Clement's words carry an implied sense of praise for the play.

Clement then entreats Cob and Tib to be "reconciled"; they make their peace. Clement tells the rest to rid themselves of their "discontent. You, Master Downright, your anger; you, Master Knowell, your cares; Master Kitely, and his wife, their jealousy." Clement adds that "this night" will be dedicated to "friendship, love and laughter." He praises Brainworm and says that, one day, "grandchildren" will hear the stories of his adventures; the stories will find "both spectators, and applause."

All, then, is brought to a resolution. Clement gives forth his diagnoses, spelling out the bad traits that held power over the individual characters. The closing remarks tie in with play's prologue, suggesting that the exposure of human folly is, on one hand, entertainment, but also a kind of catharsis. The audience has supposedly been granted a look at humanity as it actually is: self-deceiving, rash, and foolish. Clement values the story, though, more widely suggesting that Jonson's play itself will be remembered for posterity.

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