

Everyman in His Humour

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 of *Every Man in His Humour*

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.

Other Books Related to *Every Man in His Humour*

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 about *Every Man in His Humour*

- 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 for *Every Man in His Humour*

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.

Every Man in His Humour 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. Bogadil shows him some sword-fighting techniques in an effort to prepare Matthew for any future altercation.

Act Two begins at the house of Kitley, a London cloth merchant. Kitley complains to Downright about the behavior of Wellbred, who has been lodging with him. According to Kitley, Wellbred has been keeping bad company and filling his house with “lascivious jests.” Matthew and Bogadil 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 Bogadil highly irritating. As Cob comes by to deliver water, Kitley begins to worry that he is being cuckolded. When Dame Kitley 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, Bogadil 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. Bogadil 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, Kitley’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 Kitley is inside; Cash lets slip that Kitley has gone to Justice Clement’s. Bogadil lights some tobacco, praising its quality ridiculously. Cob is offended by the smoke, causing Bogadil to beat him with a cudgel. Cash dispatches Cob to recall Kitley, 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, Kately 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 Kately's house, where Downright chastises Dame Kately for allowing Wellbred at the house; she protests that there's very little she can do about it. Mistress Bridget (Kately'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. Kately arrives, prompting the others—apart from Downright—to exit. Downright vents his frustration; Bridget, Dame Kately, and Kately try to calm him down. By now, Kately 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 Kately's house, Wellbred explains Downright's angry actions as merely being his nature. Brainworm arrives, now dressed as Roger Formal, and tells Kately that Justice Clement has summoned him. Kately frantically searches for Cash and Cob to act as "sentinels" while he is gone. Dame Kately wonders why her husband is always searching for Cob; Wellbred craftily suggests that Cob's wife, Tib, runs a brothel and facilitates Kately's adultery. In her own fit of jealousy, Dame Kately grabs Thomas and heads for Cob's house. Wellbred turns his attentions to Bridget, trying to persuade her to marry Edward. Kately 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. Kately and Dame Kately 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, Kately, Dame Kately, Cash, Tib, and Cob assemble at the irreverent Justice Clement’s house. He quickly figures out that Knowell, Kately, and Dame Kately have been duped, pointing out that both Kately 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.

Language Theme Analysis

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 Theme Analysis

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 confluents, 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, cholera/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 humours, but more to the idea of character traits being taken to extremes—and the ensuing consequences. For example, Kately, a married merchant, is obsessed with the idea that his wife, Dame Kately, 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 Kately and his wife rush to Cob's house thinking that they will catch the other in the act of adultery. Neither Kately 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 (Kately'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 Theme Analysis

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 Theme Analysis

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 Kately. 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.

Poetry

Symbol Analysis

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 pretensions 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 Symbol Analysis

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.

Cuckold Term Analysis

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 Term Analysis

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).

Edward Knowell Character Analysis

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 Character Analysis

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 Character Analysis

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 Character Analysis

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 Character Analysis

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. Kately and Dame Kately'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 Character Analysis

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 Kately 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 Character Analysis

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 Character Analysis

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.

Kately Character Analysis

Kitely is a cloth merchant, married to Dame Kitley 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, Kitley grows more and more paranoid that he is being "cuckolded"—that his wife is having an affair. This manifests in increasingly desperate behavior, as Kitley 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, Kitley embodies jealousy at its worst. He is cured, a little unbelievably, by Justice Clement.

Dame Kitley Character Analysis

Dame Kitley is Kitley's wife. Just like her husband, she is tricked by Wellbred into rushing to Cob's house, expecting to find Kitley 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 Character Analysis

Bridget is Kitley'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 Character Analysis

Cash is Kitley's business assistant. According to Kitley, 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 Kitley's jealous paranoia. Kitley at one stage stations Cash at his house to watch out for Wellbred and his entourage. Like her husband, Dame Kitley also uses Cash to try and catch her spouse in the act of adultery.

Cob Character Analysis

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 Character Analysis

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 Kitley and Dame Kitley 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 *Character Analysis*

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.