



TRINITY COLLEGE FOR WOMEN NAMAKKAL Department of English

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Epicoene Or, The Silent Woman



Ben Jonson



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Author Introduction

Benjamin Jonson (c. 11 June 1572 – c. 16 August 1637)^[2] was an English playwright and poet. Jonson's artistry exerted a lasting influence upon English poetry and stage comedy. He popularised the comedy of humours he is best known for the satirical plays *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), *Volpone, or The Fox* (c. 1606), *The Alchemist* (1610) and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) and for his lyric and epigrammatic poetry. "He is generally regarded as the second most important English dramatist, after William Shakespeare, during the reign of James I



In 1598, Jonson wrote what is considered his first great play, *Every Man in His Humor*. In a 1616 production, William Shakespeare acted in one of the lead roles. Shortly after the play opened, Jonson killed Gabriel Spencer in a duel and was tried for murder. He was released by pleading "benefit of clergy" (i.e., by proving he could read and write in Latin, he was allowed to face a more lenient court). He spent only a few weeks in prison, but shortly after his release he was again arrested for failing to pay an actor.

Under King James I, Jonson received royal favor and patronage. Over the next fifteen years many of his most famous satirical plays, including *Volpone* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610), were produced for the London stage. In 1616, he was granted a substantial pension of 100 marks a year, and is often identified as England's first Poet Laureate.



Sources

Jonson utilised a variety of sources to write *Epicœne*. While most details of characterisation and plot are his own invention, the scenario originates from two orations by Libanius: in one, a groom in Morose's situation argues for permission to commit suicide to escape his marriage, while in the other an elderly miser plans to disinherit a nephew who laughed at him. The coup de théâtre of *Epicœne*'s unveiling, while traditionally viewed as derived from the *Casina* of Plautus, is closer both in spirit and in execution to *Il Marescalco* of Aretino. Finally, the comic duel between La Foole and Daw is usually seen as an echo of the mock-duel between Viola and Aguecheek in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Some more local details are also borrowed from the classical misogynistic tradition. Truewit's speeches condemning marriage borrow from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and Juvenal's *Satire VI*. John Aubrey's claim that Morose was modelled on Elizabethan businessman Thomas Sutton is no longer credited.



Characters

Morose: A gentleman that loves silence

Sir Dauphine Eugenie: A Knight, Morose's nephew

Ned Clerimont: A Gentleman, Dauphine's friend

Truewit: Dauphine's other friend

Epicoene: A young Gentlewoman, supposedly the silent woman

Sir John Daw: A Knight, Epicoene's servant

Sir Amorous la Foole: A Knight

Thomas Otter: A land and sea Captain

Cutbeard: A barber, also aids in tricking Morose

Mute: One of Morose's servants

Madame Haughty: Ladies Collegiates

Madame Centaure, Ladies Collegiates

Mistress Mavis, Ladies Collegiates

Mistress Trusty, The Lady Haughty's woman

Mistress Otter, The Captain's wife

Parson

Pages

Servants



Plot

The play takes place in [London](#), primarily in the home of Morose. Morose is a wealthy old man with an obsessive hatred of noise, going as far as to live on a street too narrow for carts to pass and make noise. He has made plans to disinherit his nephew Dauphine by marrying. This is due to the schemes and tricks Dauphine has played on him in the past. To combat this, Dauphine concocts a plan with Cutbeard, Morose's barber. Cutbeard presents Morose with a young (and supposedly) silent woman to marry.

When Morose meets Epicœne, he tries to find out if she is really a silent woman, testing her obedience. He tells her not to succumb to the temptations of the court and tells her about the virtues of silence. Under the assumption that his fiancée, Epicœne, is an exceptionally quiet woman, Morose excitedly plans their marriage. Unbeknownst to him, Dauphine has arranged the whole match for purposes of his own.



At the same time there is an alliance of women with intellectual pretensions called the Ladies Collegiates. They are married women who live away from their husbands and speak their minds. They talk about how women can use sex to control their husbands.

Truewit, hoping to secure his friend's inheritance, attempts to persuade Morose that marriage would not be good for him. Truewit says that no matter what, Morose will find himself unhappy in marriage, regardless of whether she is pretty, ugly, rich, poor, or even if Morose loves her.

[1] Truewit tells Morose that it is not the women's fault; all of them are corrupted.



He also tells Morose to kill himself instead of getting married. The couple are married despite the well-meaning interference of Dauphine's friend Truewit. Morose soon regrets his wedding day, as his house is invaded by a charivari consisting of Dauphine, Truewit, and Clerimont; a bear warden named Otter and his wife; two stupid knights (La Foole and Daw); and an assortment of Collegiates. The house is overrun with noise and clamor, much to Morose's chagrin. Worst for Morose, Epicoene quickly reveals herself to be a loud, nagging mate.



Mistress Otter has a dominant personality compared to her husband. She has the same characteristics as Katherine from *[The Taming of the Shrew](#)*. She is intimidating and in charge of domestic resources. She yells at him in front of Truewit and his friends and she tells him that he is sullyng her image. It appears that she had great options in life but she ended up settling for him.



Desperate for a divorce, Morose consults two lawyers (who are actually Dauphine's friends Cutbeard and Otter in disguise), but they can find no grounds for ending the match. Finally, Dauphine promises to reveal grounds to end the marriage if Morose agrees to give him his inheritance. The agreement made, Dauphine strips the female costume from Epicœne, revealing that Morose's wife is, in fact, a boy, and therefore their marriage cannot be upheld. Morose is dismissed harshly, and the other ludicrous characters are discomfited by this revelation; Daw and Foole, for instance, had claimed to have slept with Epicœne.



Notable performances

Epicoene in America

Major American revivals of *Epicoene* have been rare. In Washington D.C., the Shakespeare Theatre company produced the play in 2003, with Daniel Breaker starring as Truewit. The play has been performed only twice in New York in recent years: once in the 1980s at Jean Cocteau Repertory theatre and in 2010 as part of the "Anybody But Shakespeare Classics Festival" by (re:) Directions Theatre Company.

Adaptations

The play was adapted for radio by the BBC and featured Marius Goring, Laidman Browne, Gabriel Wolf, Norman Shelley, Vivienne Chatterton, June Tobin, and David Spenser.



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