Introduction

I’d like to start by thanking LERMA, and the organizers of this series of seminars on “The Emotions” for inviting me to speak with you this evening on Ben Jonson and envy. Your invitation has given me the opportunity to reflect on Jonson’s place in the history of the emotions; it has also allowed me to confront my own work on envy in the works of Jonson from a new angle. For me, in other words, this evening has already been extremely beneficial! My aim is to share some of my findings with you this evening, but also to suggest ways in which these findings may be pertinent to your ongoing discussion of the emotions.

In the first session of this series, Damien Boquet noted the “explosion” of scholarly literature on the emotions and the sentiments in the last decade. Many of the books on emotions or passions that were useful to me in the rewriting of my thesis as a book were published precisely within the period described by Bosquet. Yet, my initial work on envy, begun in the mid-1990s, did not consciously seek to participate in this new and quickly expanding field of study in the emotions. My interest in envy emerged from my reading of Ben Jonson’s works: his poems, his court masques and his plays. It is probably worthwhile remarking that Ben Jonson’s career (1572-1637) spanned the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline periods. He is known today primarily as the foremost rival of Shakespeare and as a key figure in the history of copyright, as he published not only his poems, but also his plays and court masques (unheard of at the time) in folio format during his lifetime. The aim of my book was to understand the extraordinarily frequent number of references to envy in Jonson’s work. No other author of the period was so apt to depict envy throughout his or her works, in any genre. And, this is saying much, for references to envy, embodied and personified in the hypercritical reader or Zoilus, was a widespread topos in the period. Jonson’s work is a perfect laboratory for a study of envy. At the same time, much of what can be gleaned about envy in Jonson may be useful, not only for a study of the representation of envy later in the 17th century, but, for an anthropological basis for textual production.

I will be dividing my talk into two parts. In the first part, I will talk about envy in relation to the theory of humours. In the second, I will talk about Jonson’s legendary envy of Shakespeare. I will suggest that scholarly fascination with the rivalry between Jonson and Shakespeare has prevented them from seeing envy as a kind of ritualistic confrontation between the writer and his reader. This ritual confrontation is part of an authorial strategy to defend his text against defacement by readers as well as a motor for narrative production. Envy is at the heart of a
ritual to create what could be called literary sanctuary and monument and a motor for copia.

I’d like to begin, though, by treating the question of terminology first. As you have seen in the first session, “emotion” has become a useful term for scholars who wish to share their findings on the subject with scholars of different periods and disciplines. Yet, “emotion” is a rubric that is clearly anachronistic for the period of the 16th and 17th centuries, which had its own terms such as passion, affection, temperament, and humour. Emotion then can only be understood as a cover term. In an essay on Hobbes’ Treatise on the Passions in Book I, Chapter 6 of Leviathan (1651), Franck Lessay provides a snap-shot of the terminology available to Hobbes by the mid-seventeenth century. According to Lessay:

Lorsque Cicéron évoque la passion (dans les Tusculanes), il parle de perturbationes: c’est qu’il traduit le pathos de Zénon et des autres Stoïciens, qui pensent la passion en termes de conflit avec la raison. Sénèque, pour sa part, emploie affectus, usage qui est repris par beaucoup de Pères de l’Eglise, pour lesquels passio connote la souffrance et évoque, en particulier, les souffrances du Christ lors de la Passion. Ce n’est que peu à peu que passio s’affranchit de cette connotation et devient interchangeable avec d’autres termes, comme on le voit chez saint Augustin, qui propose quatre mots pour traduire pathos : perturbatio, affectio, affectus, passio.1

Hobbes’ choice of terminology was in keeping with those terms used in the veritable explosion of treatises on the passions in the early 17th century in England and later in France, such as Timothy Bright’s Treatise on Melancholy (1586; 1612), Thomas Wright’s The Passions of the Mind, in General (1601) and to a certain extent Robert Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy (1621), all of which conformed to the use of the word “passio” by Thomas Aquinas. The subtle differences in these terms can only be appreciated in their various contexts. In Jonson’s court masque, Hymenaei, for instance, the “Affections” of the anti-masque denote, not the love between the newly wedded couple the masque is celebrating, but those passions or emotions contrary to reason. That said, I’d like now to consider envy within Jonson’s theory of humours.

Envy as a Humour

The roots of envy can be traced to the classical and Christian traditions, both of which reveal a deep interest in this emotion. The early modern conception of envy was firmly anchored in both traditions. The Renaissance conception of envy, in particular its fatal gaze and iconography as Medusa, can be traced to a combination of pagan and Christian traditions. The emulation between Homeric heroes or the rivalry between potters in Hesiod’s Workes and Dayes, Plutarch’s disquisition on envy as a disease of the eye, which he calls Ophthalmia, in the Moralia and the personification of Envy in Ovid’s Metamorphoses as a kind of fury exist side by side with Christian representations of envy as one of the seven

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deadly sins, popular in the medieval period right through to Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. In Ben Jonson’s work, envy, jealousy or anger may be located in the dramatist’s experiments in what might be called “humours drama”, in other words, the representation on stage of character types based on combinations and permutations of the four basic Galenic humoral types: phlegmatic, choleric, sanguine and melancholic.

Philippe Hamou well summarizes the relationship between humours and passions on the early modern English stage:

Dans le monde des lettres, c’est peut-être au théâtre que s’élabore le plus nettement une réflexion sur les passions : si Chapman propose une méditation sur la colère et la résistance stoïcienne aux emportements de l’âme, et si la comédie des humeurs de Jonson reste encore largement tributaire de l’ancienne médecine galénique, Shakespeare inaugure un théâtre moderne de la passion où l’amour, vécu comme un destin, apparaît comme autrement dangereux que ne le laissait penser la psychologie humorale.2

In her article, published along with that of Frank Lessay, cited earlier, in a special volume on *The Passions*, “Shakespeare–From Humours to Passions”, Gisèle Venet ambitiously seeks, in fact, to construct a chronological progression such as that described by Hamou from Galenic humoral based characterizations in the theatre to the great “tragedies” of Shakespeare, inaugurating, so to speak, a “modern” theatre based on “passions”. Venet traces Shakespeare’s progress, from the early history cycles where characters such as Falstaff and Richard III are still based in the medieval Vice figure and whose characterization is influenced by the Galenic medical theory of humours, to the creation of Othello whose passions are not innate but “wrought” by the machinations of the humoral Iago. Venet’s progressive model, in which humours are considered a lower form of characterization is based on what I see as a traditional view of Jonson’s theory of humours. Jonson’s oft-quoted “statement concerning Humorous characterization” in the Prologue to his “second” humour play, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, gives us a clue as to what Jonson was trying to do in his humoral theatre. (*N°1 on hand-out*). For Jonson, his theatre is a theatre of two kinds of “humours”, not just one: first, “a genuinely ingrained temperament in accord with humoral physiology based in Galenic theory of the humors; the other “an assumed or temporary characteristic” in other words, a pseudo-humor of affectation and eccentricity in which the outer manifestations of the disposition are meant to pass for a “humour” as Henry Snuggs has written.3 Jonson’s theatre, in other words, was equally interested in both genuine, medical-based humors and affected or “staged” humours. According to James Redwine, Asper’s definition of humours in the induction to *Every Man Out* shows that Jonson is not interested in humours in the strictest sense (i.e. based on Galenic humoral theory). Asper’s disquisition is,

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according to Redwine, three-fold: in addition to genuine humour characters, there are characters who abuse the word “humour” by reducing it to fashionable and meaningless jargon, and there are characters who affect humours, ignorantly attributing petty whims, quirks, or idiosyncrasies to their “humours”.4 Let’s turn briefly to an example of a Jonsonian manifestation of the humour of “jealousy” as a “disease” in Every Man In His Humour. (N°2 on hand-out). Here, we have a description, by the sufferer himself, who is aware of a certain imbalance of humors and the way in which the “flux” or “motion” of these humours causes his illness.

On the other hand, an example of the eminently theatrical quality of his notion of “humours” can be seen in Every Man out of his Humour: one of the characters, a dandified young man, is described as being merely a “flux of apparel”. By borrowing the medical notion of “flux” or “fluxion”, which is, above all, movement and applying it not to blood or phlegm but to clothing, Jonson is able to play with the relationship between interiority and outward appearance. The Galenic humoral theory is perfectly parodied in the characterization of a young blood whose “humour” is fabricated, literally: he is simply the sum of the movements of his apparel. Jonsonian humour then is not only an outgrowth of a certain medical theorization of the body, but also intimately linked with the Theophrastan idea of “caractère”, which, in the early modern period, was a “marque”, “graveur” and “empreinte” and thus une “marque propre à une personne ou à une chose” selon Philippe Hamon.5 It is perhaps of interest that Every Man In His Humour was written only six years after the publication of Causabon’s translation of Theophrastus’ “Characters”. In Every Man Out of His Humour, we see that the “cast of characters” is nothing less than a volume of “Characters” in miniature.

Jonson’s “humour” plays consist of the early, so called “satiric comedies”, Every Man In His Humour, Every Man Out of His Humour, and Cynthia’s Revels, and the late Magnetic Lady, Or Humours Reconciled, in which the author quite clearly announces that he has decided to return to “the studies” with which he began, namely, studies in humoral characterization. The Boy of the Prologue offers the members of the audience the Author’s wares: “What do you lack, Gentlemen? What is’t you lack? Any fine Phansies, Figures, Humours, Characters, Ideas, Definitions of Lords and Ladies? Waiting-women, Parasites, Knights, Captains, Courtiers, Lawyers?” In these plays, critics are generally agreed, “pure” Galenic based humours are rare. For the most part, Jonson is interested in displaying “humorous” behavior on the part of characters not “born” with a particularly obvious humoral make-up. The envious Macilente, of Every Man Out, and Morose of Epicoene (whose humor is that he cannot bear noise) are both considered “genuinely ingrained temperaments in accord with humoral physiology”. As with certain other humourous characters, both Macilente and Morose are “cured” of their respective humor by a sudden, traumatic shock. It was believed at the time that one’s very temperament could change under great stress of emotion. The sudden and abrupt vision of Queen Elizabeth effectively purges Macilente of his envious humour; and the vision of the boy actor playing the “silent woman” cures

Morose’s humor for a silent wife.

To conclude this section, I’d like to suggest that Jonson’s multiple “studies”, as he calls it, of humours and humours types demands closer attention in order to understand the motivations and emotions of characters such as Iago and Othello, as well as the way in which the period conceived of the relationship between disease, the brain and the imagination as well as the outward manifestations of interior signs. At the same time, an examination of envy as a humor or a humoral quality is of interest in terms of the relationship between emotions and characterization, but it does not provide us with the terms sufficient to understand the role and the nature of envy in Jonson.

**Jonson’s envy of Shakespeare and the Author**

It is received wisdom that Ben Jonson was envious. This is in part due to his portrait of Macilente, who, like Prospero in *The Tempest*, stage manages the plot and therefore is suspected of being an authorial self-representation. Drawing from his portrait of Macilente, critics, in effect, have used Jonson’s humours theory against him, creating an image of him in the image of his own humorous character. One of the reasons, of course, why the “character” of Macilente in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, is so tempting as a “self-portrait” is that Jonson was perceived as envious of all his rivals, including and above all, Shakespeare. I don’t have the time to go into the intricate, but fascinating, history of the 18th century creation of a personality that served and continues to this day to serve as the anti-thesis to the glorious Shakespeare: the envious rival, a kind of Salieri to Shakespeare’s Mozart. Nicholas Rowe, an early editor of Shakespeare, relates an anecdote (the truth of which we have no way of proving) of how Shakespeare helped the young Jonson get a start in the theatre. This anecdote is related with the aim to highlight the grotesque contrast of Jonson’s envy of Shakespeare in the face of Shakespeare’s generosity toward the young Jonson. The anecdote reminds us that the history of supposed individual and historical temperaments is grafted by posterity onto a much older, even, in this case, medieval opposition of vices and virtues, in which the playwright Ben Jonson plays “envy” to Shakespeare’s “charity”. The historical attribution of individual temperaments (“envious, malevolent, malicious” for Jonson; “generous” and “open” for Shakespeare) is perhaps an important, but unexamined, aspect of literary history. The power of emotions, in other words, to move posterity to a favourable or unfavourable judgement has not yet been analysed in any methodical manner; I would suggest that the study of emotions may indeed be useful in the consideration of the biographical subject in history. And, as I have argued, while the biographical subject and the presence of envy in Jonson’s texts are not unrelated phenomena, there needs to be a clearer division between envy as a biographical characteristic ascribed to Ben Jonson and textual manifestations of a preoccupation with envy. The life and temperament of the author might indeed produce the works of Ben Jonson, but they are no means sufficient to explain them.

In order to understand how the place of envy in Jonson’s works, you must leave aside the notion of “emotion” for a moment and take another perspective on envy: iconographic and anthropological. As we see in emblems and paintings of the period, and as Jean Clair has well noted in his book, *Méduse*, envy, in the
period of the Renaissance, was represented by the figure of Medusa. The fatal gaze of the Medusa, like that of the basilisk, was the fundamental element that linked envy and “oblique oculo” to these monsters of antiquity. Both the Medusa and basilisk are mentioned frequently in Jonson as, I would argue, serve the author as a shorthand for envy. At the same time, envy must be understood as an anthropological phenomenon. It is first and foremost in terms of superstitions surrounding evil eye beliefs and sorcery that Francis Bacon understood envy. In his famous essay “On Envy” Bacon writes:

There be none of the affections, which have been noted to fascinate or bewitch, but love and envy. They both have vehement wishes; they frame themselves readily into imaginations and suggestions; and they come easily into the eye…we see likewise, the scripture calleth envy an evil eye; and the astrologers call the evil influences of the stars evil aspects; so that still there seemeth to be acknowledged, in the act of envy, an ejaculation or irradiation of the eye.

The harmful rays emanating from the evil eye were either fatal or could, according to popular superstition from the 16th century onwards, kill a cow, or prevent it from giving milk; make a man ill or a baby faint. Beliefs still held by certain Bretons up to the mid-twentieth century and still held by Turks and Greeks. André Bernand in Sorciers grecs, calls envy “le moteur de la sorcellerie” for the ancient Greeks. It was the same for Bacon, who in “The Act of Envy…a kind of witchcraft”. There are, of course, a number of different kinds of “counter-charms”, many based on the homeopathic idea that like cures like. An evil eye bead is nothing other than an image of the evil eye itself; the most effective defense, then, against the evil eye is the evil eye. We see the same homeopathic principle at work with gorgons on doors and in doorways. These images of the Medusa and beliefs in the harmful rays of an evil eye lie behind the literary convention of a preface to the reader, referred to as “Envy” or Zoilus (the emblem of the malicious and carping critic in the early modern period). Yet, in a poem “In Authorem”, Jonson places the responsibility for the act of misreading who, voluntarily or involuntarily, looks “asquint” or “awry”: in other words, the writer describes the act of reading as potentially a form of ocular malevolence. Simply put, these lines show that for Jonson there existed readers who read books “oblique oculo” or with an evil or envious eye. I would argue that the writer actively engages in textual strategies and rituals in order to defend his work from the defacing gaze of the reader.