

every man in his humour summary

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every man in his humour summary sparknotes provides a comprehensive overview of Ben Jonson's satirical masterpiece, exploring its intricate plot, memorable characters, and enduring themes. This article delves into the play's exploration of human folly, the pursuit of wealth, and the societal pressures of Elizabethan England. We will dissect the primary character arcs, examine the dramatic structure, and illuminate the satirical targets Jonson so skillfully skewers. Understanding this seminal work offers valuable insight into the comedic and social commentary prevalent in Renaissance theatre, making this detailed summary an essential resource for students and enthusiasts alike.

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Understanding the Play's Premise

Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*, a landmark of Elizabethan comedy, is fundamentally an exploration of the dominant passions and obsessions that define individuals. The play's title itself directly refers to the Elizabethan concept of the "humours," bodily fluids believed to influence temperament and personality. Jonson uses this framework to create a vibrant tapestry of characters, each dominated by a particular disposition or "humour" that drives their actions and often leads them into absurd situations. The play is set in London, and its satirical gaze is firmly fixed on the pretensions, vanities, and eccentricities of its inhabitants.

The core of the play's premise lies in its ingenious plot, which centers on a group of young gentlemen from the country visiting London. Their urban adventure quickly becomes entangled with the schemes and misunderstandings orchestrated by the more established city dwellers. Jonson masterfully weaves together multiple subplots, all converging on a central narrative of misguided pursuits and mistaken identities. The humour arises not just from the characters' eccentricities but also from the complex machinations that Jonson employs to expose their flaws.

Key Characters and Their Humours

The strength of *Every Man in His Humour* lies in its richly drawn characters, each embodying a distinct and often exaggerated "humour." These characters are not merely caricatures but are presented with a degree of psychological depth that makes their foibles relatable and, ultimately, humorous.

Master Kitley: The Jealous Merchant

Master Kitley is the central figure around whom much of the play's dramatic tension revolves. His defining humour is an overwhelming and unfounded jealousy, particularly directed towards his wife. This paranoia infects his every thought and action, leading him to misinterpret innocent events as proof of infidelity. His incessant suspicion creates a self-perpetuating cycle of anxiety, isolating him and driving the plot forward through his misguided attempts to catch his wife in a supposed act of deception.

Bobadill: The Braggart Soldier

Captain Bobadill is a quintessential Jonsonian creation. He is a pompous, cowardly, and utterly self-deluded braggart who presents himself as a seasoned warrior with a vast repertoire of deadly fencing skills. In reality, Bobadill is a parasite who relies on others for his sustenance and living expenses. His "humour" of boastfulness and false bravado makes him a prime target for satire, as his inflated ego consistently clashes with his pathetic reality. His pronouncements are filled with outlandish claims and threats that are never followed through.

Wellbred: The Witty Gentleman

Wellbred represents a more sophisticated and less extreme form of wit and social awareness. He is a gentleman who enjoys the pleasures of London life but is not consumed by vice or obsession. He often acts as a catalyst for action, orchestrating gatherings and observing the follies of others with amusement. His character provides a foil to the more extreme humours, offering a sense of balance and rationality amidst the chaos.

Others Defined by Their Humours

The play features a host of other characters, each defined by a specific humour:

- **Master Stephen:** A foolish and simple-minded country cousin of Kitley, easily led and obsessed with acquiring fashionable attire and appearing sophisticated.
- **Master Matthew:** A self-proclaimed poet and flatterer, prone to quoting verse and seeking patronage, whose talent is as questionable as his sincerity.
- **Cob:** A rough and boisterous waterman, whose coarse humor and language reflect the lower strata of London society.
- **Dame Kitley:** Kitley's wife, who, while not as extreme as her husband, suffers from his jealousy and is often frustrated by his accusations.
- **Thomas:** Kitley's bookish and somewhat melancholic brother-in-law, whose quiet disposition

contrasts with the more boisterous characters.

Plot Summary: The Deceptions of Kitely

The narrative of *Every Man in His Humour* unfolds primarily through the increasingly convoluted schemes of Master Kitely, driven by his consuming jealousy. He suspects his wife, Dame Kitely, of being unfaithful, and his paranoia escalates with every innocuous event. He concocts elaborate plans to catch her in the act, often involving his friends and acquaintances, which invariably backfire and lead to further misunderstandings.

The arrival of Stephen and Matthew in London sets several subplots in motion. Stephen, the naive country gentleman, is easily influenced by the more worldly Bobadill and Matthew, becoming entangled in their schemes and attempts to impress. Wellbred, meanwhile, enjoys observing the antics of these characters, often orchestrating social gatherings that become the stage for their humours to play out.

A central device in the plot is the supposed elopement of Kitely's sister-in-law, Bridget, with Edward Knowell. This rumour, fueled by Wellbred and Edward's friends, is largely fabricated to create a pretext for gathering the characters and exposing their underlying motivations. Kitely's jealousy is further inflamed by this apparent betrayal, leading him to confront various individuals and accusing them of conspiracy.

The climax of the play occurs when Kitely, convinced he has finally caught his wife and her supposed lover, bursts into his own house, armed and ready for a confrontation. This leads to a chaotic scene where everyone's true identity and intentions are revealed. It becomes clear that no actual elopement or infidelity has occurred, and Kitely's suspicions were entirely unfounded. The play concludes with a general resolution, where the characters are brought back to a semblance of order, and the folly of their respective humours is exposed.

Major Themes in Every Man in His Humour

Ben Jonson's enduring comedy delves into a rich array of themes that resonated with Elizabethan audiences and continue to hold relevance today. The play is a sharp critique of societal norms and individual failings, delivered with wit and incisiveness.

The Nature of Humour and Human Folly

The most prominent theme is the exploration of human eccentricity and the dominance of individual "humours." Jonson satirizes how these ingrained dispositions can warp judgment, lead to irrational behavior, and create self-inflicted suffering. The play suggests that many of our personal tragedies and comedic situations stem from our inability to control or moderate our dominant passions.

The Pursuit of Wealth and Social Ambition

London in the play is depicted as a place where the pursuit of wealth and social status can lead to moral compromise and absurd pretenses. Characters like Kiteley are driven by financial concerns, while others, like Bobadill and Matthew, engage in elaborate charades to appear more prosperous or respectable than they are. Jonson critiques the superficiality and greed that often accompany these aspirations.

Deception and Mistaken Identity

The plot is rife with deception, both intentional and unintentional. Characters constantly misunderstand each other, and false rumors spread like wildfire. Mistaken identities and misinterpretations are crucial to the comedic unfolding of events, highlighting how easily truth can be obscured by prejudice and personal biases. The play demonstrates how appearances can be deceiving and how easily one can be led astray.

The Contrast Between Country and City Life

Every Man in His Humour also touches upon the perceived differences between the rustic innocence of the country and the sophisticated corruption of the city. Characters like Stephen represent the unpolished country bumpkin, easily impressed and manipulated by urban wiles. Conversely, the city dwellers, while often more cunning, are depicted as being consumed by vice and vanity. This contrast serves to highlight the unique pressures and temptations of urban living.

Critical Reception and Legacy

Upon its premiere in 1598, *Every Man in His Humour* was met with considerable success, solidifying Ben Jonson's reputation as a major playwright. The play was lauded for its sharp wit, its realistic portrayal of London life, and its innovative use of characterization based on the "humour" theory. Its influence on subsequent English comedy was profound, paving the way for a tradition of character-driven satire.

The play's enduring appeal lies in its universal themes and its brilliantly crafted characters. While set in a specific historical context, the struggles with jealousy, vanity, and the pursuit of social standing remain timeless. The characters, though exaggerated, represent recognizable human types whose foibles continue to amuse and provoke thought. The play's structure, its intricate plotting, and its masterful dialogue have been studied and admired by generations of scholars and theater practitioners.

How to Use This Summary for Study

This detailed summary is designed to be a valuable resource for students and anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*. It provides a structured approach to grasping the play's complexities, from its character-driven narrative to its thematic depth. By dissecting the key characters, tracing the plot's progression, and exploring the central themes, this guide aims to illuminate the play's comedic brilliance and its lasting significance.

For academic purposes, this summary can serve as a starting point for essay writing, exam preparation, or class discussion. It offers a concise yet comprehensive overview of the play's essential elements, allowing for a more informed and analytical engagement with the text. Familiarity with the plot points, character motivations, and thematic underpinnings will enhance comprehension and critical interpretation, making it an indispensable tool for literary study.

FAQ

Q: What is the main theme of Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*?

A: The main theme of Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour* is the exploration of human folly and eccentricity, specifically how dominant personal "humours" or passions can drive individuals to absurd and self-defeating actions. The play satirizes the various obsessions and vanities that plague its characters.

Q: Who are the most important characters in *Every Man in His Humour*?

A: The most important characters include Master Kitley, a jealous merchant; Captain Bobadill, a boastful and cowardly soldier; Wellbred, a witty gentleman; Master Stephen, a foolish country gentleman; and Master Matthew, a pretentious poet. These characters, among others, embody distinct "humours" that drive the plot.

Q: How does the concept of "humours" influence the characters in the play?

A: The concept of "humours," rooted in Elizabethan medical theory, dictates the defining traits and behaviors of the characters. Each character is dominated by a specific humour, such as jealousy, vanity, or foolishness, which shapes their perceptions, motivations, and ultimately leads to their comedic predicaments.

Q: What is the central conflict or plot driver in *Every Man in His Humour*?

A: The central conflict is driven by Master Kiteley's overwhelming jealousy, which leads him to suspect his wife of infidelity. His paranoid attempts to catch her in a supposed act of deception, along with the machinations of other characters pursuing their own humours, create a complex web of misunderstandings and comedic chaos.

Q: Is *Every Man in His Humour* a tragedy or a comedy?

A: *Every Man in His Humour* is definitively a comedy. While it explores human flaws and societal critiques, its overall tone is lighthearted, its resolutions are generally positive, and its primary aim is to amuse the audience through the exposure of human foibles.

Q: What is the historical context of *Every Man in His Humour*?

A: The play premiered in 1598 and is a significant work of Elizabethan theatre. It reflects the social customs, linguistic styles, and philosophical ideas, particularly the theory of humours, prevalent in London during that period. It was a major success for Ben Jonson.

Q: What is the primary target of Ben Jonson's satire in this play?

A: Ben Jonson's primary target of satire in *Every Man in His Humour* is the pretentiousness, vanity, greed, and folly of individuals in Elizabethan London. He critiques the superficial pursuit of wealth and social status, as well as the absurdities that arise from unchecked personal obsessions.

Q: How does the play conclude?

A: The play concludes with the unmasking of all the deceptions and misunderstandings. Kiteley's unfounded jealousy is revealed, and the characters are brought back to a more rational state. The comedic resolution emphasizes the exposure of folly and the return to social order.

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