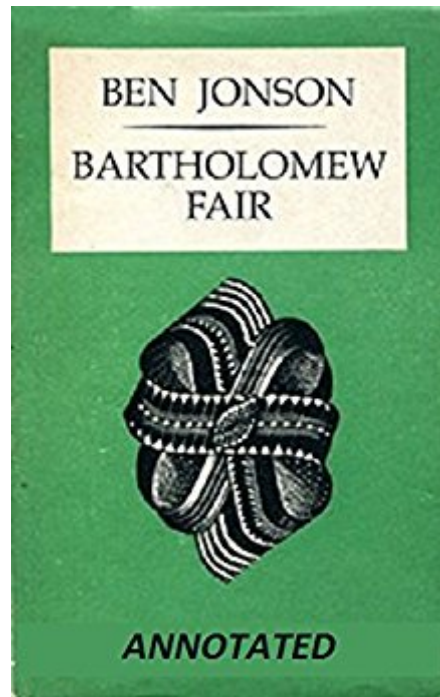


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# Bartholomew Fair (Annotated)



## Synopsis

Bartholomew Fayre: A Comedy is a comedy in five acts by Ben Jonson, the last composed of his four great comedies. It was first staged on 31 October 1614 at the Hope Theatre by the Lady Elizabeth's Men. Written four years after *The Alchemist*, five after *Epicæne, or the Silent Woman*, and nine after *Volpone*, it is in some respects the most experimental of these plays. The play proper begins with a proctor and amateur dramatist Littlewit and his friends, Quarlous and Winwife; they are plotting how to win Dame Purecraft (a widow, and Littlewit's mother-in-law) from *Zeal-of-the-Land Busy*, a canting, hypocritical Puritan. This edition has been formatted for your Kindle, with an active table of contents. The play has also been annotated, with additional information about the work itself and also Ben Jonson, including an overview, background, synopsis, analysis, stage history, biographical and bibliographical information.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ben Jonson requires effort. His allusions to topical events tend to be obscure today, his penchant for having some characters quote Latin phrases can be a barrier (some characters misquote Latin, and we, the alert audience, are supposed to chuckle), and his use of unfamiliar colloquialisms and bawdy comments is yet another challenge. Despite these difficulties, Jonson's humor has weathered

four centuries and most readers - with a little persistence - will enjoy Jonson's better known plays like *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*. In some ways I found *Bartholomew Fair* to be more difficult than either *Volpone* or *The Alchemist*. Even with a second reading, I still needed to refer to the cast listing to keep track of the multitude of characters (thirty-five or so) that come and go. To make matters worse some characters insist on wearing disguises and changing their names. The dialogue, as I alluded earlier, nearly overwhelmed me at times, but I was rescued by the excellent footnotes by G. R. Hibbard in the New Mermaid edition to unravel obscure comments. Thanks in part to Hibbard's footnotes, not only did I survive, I have actually developed a liking for *Bartholomew Fair*'s fortune hunters, country bumpkins, foolish gentry, zealous Puritans, bawdy lower class elements, a pompous judge, purse snatchers and con men. *Bartholomew Fair* has a rather unusual introduction in which Ben Jonson cautions his audience that the author is sensitive to criticism and it would be best that they behave. Jonson had not forgotten the acrimonious reception for his most recent play, a tragedy titled *Catiline*, and he had no intention of having this play suffer likewise.

Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) is zany, much like the classic movie *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad World*. Respectable gentlemen and ladies of London somewhat unwisely visit the annual *Batholomew Fair*. Encountering an odd mix of conniving characters, they become embroiled in a maze of plots, deceits, and disreputable festival activities and are robbed, tricked, mocked, beaten, thrown into stocks, and recruited as prostitutes. I was continuously overwhelmed by the comings and goings of characters of all sorts, almost as though I was being jostled along in a festival crowd. I have now read *Bartholomew Fair* several times, and yet I still find it necessary to revisit the cast listing as new characters appear. Many characters are aptly named: the attorney John Littlewit, the suitor Winwife, the zealous Judge Overdo, the quarrelsome Tom Quarlous, the satirical Humphrey Wasp, the respectable Grace Wellborn, the madman Trouble-All, and the ballad singer Nightingale. Other names are simply memorable: Joan Trash, Lantern Leatherhead, Ezekiel Edgeworth, Mooncalf, Captain Whit, and Punk Alice. The list goes on. In Jonson's time little concern was given for the setting. Stages were largely empty, with perhaps a simple prop or two. Unexpectedly, Jonson has the second act begin with trades people assembling their stalls and booths on stage. The booths remain on stage throughout the play, helping the audience orient themselves as the action jumps from one spot to another. The Drama Classics series published by Nick Hern Books of London provide affordable, tightly bound, small paperback editions of plays for students, actors, and theatregoers. The introduction by Colin Counsell to *Bartholomew Fair* was quite good.

Ben Jonson creates in this play a complex atmosphere of constant trespassing of social everyday norms to produce an action- and wit-packed experience in which we could easily drown. All possible means are used : trespassing normal life with funfair folly ; trespassing normal social conditions with cutpurses, ballad singers, funfair-merchants, one puritan, one crazy person, a puppet show, etc. But he also embeds in this action some more pregnant issues. Some weddings, for example, that are supposed to be founded on love and not the buying of a license. The puritan who is a gross hypocrite who always finds the right religious words to condemn the sins of other people and to cover his own gluttony. Some women who want some excitement and try to play the easy ladies they dream of being but do not dare to be except behind a mask. A justice who wants to discover reality and true deep crime by using various disguises. The puppet play that reveals two things : first the violent domination of women by men and the subsequent negation of love ; second the vanity and ridicule of the puritan who wants to prevent the show that he calls immoral and profane and expell the puppets that he considers as idols. The puritan is easily negociated into sounding silly, illogical and vain. The justice sees crimes that are not crimes and does not see other crimes that are real crimes. Then he tries to accuse and convict innocent people. He is ridiculed and silenced by his wife taking off her easy lady's mask and revealing herself in that game to his utmost astonishment. The weddings are the result of a certain amount of freedom on the side of women. But the whole play is loose in its plot and lacks the dynamism of a closely-knit action.

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