

# 1 Jonson and the Elizabethans

In the summer of 1618, Ben Jonson set out from London for Edinburgh. He made the journey purely for pleasure and, despite the comic dismay of Francis Bacon, who told him that he did not like to see poetry going on any feet other than spondees and dactyls, he covered the entire distance, there and back again, as a pedestrian. This was not necessity, but personal whim. Jonson in 1618 was certainly not rich, but he was a famous man. During the months that followed his arrival in Edinburgh, early in August, the dignitaries of the city, its nobility and its men of letters, were proud to honour and entertain this visiting scholar and poet, the master of royal entertainments and friend of their own King James, a man of formidable classical learning, who had published his *Works* in an impressive Folio volume two years before, was about to receive an honorary M.A. from Oxford University, and who had been for long a familiar and respected presence in some of the choicest and most aristocratic houses of England.

The distinguished, if somewhat intractable, traveller who settled down for the Christmas season at Hawthornden, near Edinburgh, as the guest of its owner William Drummond, was a large, impatient man in his mid-forties. He was at the high point of his fortunes and, in the figurative sense quite as much as the literal, he had come a very long way indeed on his own feet. Jonson's early disadvantages were considerable. Both Lorenzo Junior and Ovid, in his Elizabethan comedies *Every Man In His Humour* and *Poetaster*, are afflicted with domineering fathers who try to dissuade them from the study of poetry in favour of a more 'serious' and profitable vocation: the Law. But Jonson, the posthumous son of a clergyman, as he told Drummond, was saddled with a stepfather who barely allowed him to finish at Westminster School, to which he had been sent by an unknown benefactor, before forcing him into his own trade of bricklayer – one of the lowliest and least skilled of Elizabethan crafts. Jonson completed his training and, in 1598 or 1599, even became a freeman of the Company of Tylers and Bricklayers. He remained, however, so sensitive on the subject that in talking to Drummond about his early life, he apparently

## BEN JONSON, DRAMATIST

could not bring himself to name the trade to which he had been forcibly apprenticed. The evasion was futile. Drummond, like almost everybody else, knew perfectly well what it was. Jonson's early sufferings with the trowel and the plumb-line may or may not have been as traumatic as those of Dickens in the blacking factory. But at least Dickens in later life did not have to hear constantly from his enemies that the menial occupation of his youth was the one for which he was genuinely fitted. Jonson did, and if his own arrogance often provoked such taunts, it was also true that the arrogance itself was the product of an almost pathological fear of being undervalued and slighted, and that this condition was one for which bricks were largely responsible.

Apart from Westminster School and his master there, William Camden (to whom Jonson said he owed 'All that I am in arts, all that I know', *Epig.* xiv, 1–2), there was little about his youth that Drummond's guest seemed to remember with pleasure. He had married young, but he told Drummond only that his wife was a shrew, but honest, and that for a number of years they had lived apart. Certainly the conversations with Drummond give the impression that Jonson was considerably more interested in other men's wives than in his own. The one bright spot of his early life, after he had been obliged to interrupt his formal education, seems to have been his service as a soldier in the Low Countries. This episode, as Jonson shaped it, obviously fuelled his innate romanticism – in particular the need to validate the classical literature he loved by making it part of his own, deeply felt experience. The man who told Drummond about how he had dared one of the enemy to single combat, killed him in the sight of both the armies, and taken 'opima spolia' from him, clearly did what he did at the time because he was acting out things he had read. The powerful repudiation, in both *The New Inn* and *The Magnetic Lady*, of 'valour for a private cause' (*NI* iv. 4. 47, *ML* iii. 6. 95–6), suggests that with time Jonson came to feel less happy about that 1598 duel with the actor Gabriel Spencer in which, as he boasted to Drummond, the adversary he killed at Shoreditch had possessed a sword ten inches longer than his own. All his life, however, it pleased Jonson to remember that he had been a soldier as well as a literary man. He liked to assure his readers that he had a right to attack false and braggart warriors, Lieutenant Shift and Captain Hungry, Bobadilla or Colonel Tipto, because the 'great profession' such men disgraced was one 'which I once, did prove: / And did not shame it with my actions, then' (*Epig.* cviii, 6–7).

Jonson's service in the Netherlands seems to have been brief. In talking to Drummond, he was deliberately vague about how he employed himself after his return to England. If Thomas Dekker is to be

### *Jonson and the Elizabethans*

believed, this was because Jonson was almost as reluctant to recall the occupation for which he had initially abandoned bricklaying as he was the bricklaying itself: 'thou hast forgot how thou amblest (in leather pilch) by a play-wagon, in the high way, and took'st mad Ieronimoe's part, to get service among the Mimickes'.<sup>1</sup> Jonson seems to have been a mediocre actor, although reputedly an excellent instructor. Later, when he came to write for the children's companies, he was able to indulge his natural instinct to teach, both by exerting a greater directorial control over his own plays than was possible with adult actors, and by functioning as a kind of unofficial academic tutor for some of the boys. As an actor, however, even with a ragged provincial company of the kind Dekker describes, Jonson must always have been limited by his unprepossessing physical appearance. While he was still in his late twenties, and had yet to develop the Falstaffian girth which, as he said ruefully in his verse epistle to Lady Covell, cracked coaches and broke his friends' chairs (*Und.* lvi, 8–12), already Jonson's face could plausibly be likened to a bruised, rotten russet apple, or a badly pock-marked brass warming pan.<sup>2</sup> Dekker, at the time he formulated this description, had no reason to love Jonson, but his malice was supported by a certain amount of truth. In the famous, and much-copied, portrait of the mature Jonson attributed to Abraham van Blyenberch, the sitter almost seems to belong to a different race from Sidney, Spenser, Marlowe, Raleigh and Donne – or even from the Shakespeare who stares out from the woodenly inept Droeshout engraving. Jonson's broad, blunt, vigorously plain face dissociates itself oddly in any portrait gallery from the more elegant, attenuated faces of his Elizabethan contemporaries. His artistic detachment from them, during much of his life, was equally radical.

Speaking to Drummond, that winter of 1618–19, Jonson, with characteristic high-handedness, dismissed a number of celebrated poets, both living and dead, who like himself had begun writing during the reign of Elizabeth. He expressed unqualified impatience at that time with Thomas Campion, Samuel Daniel, Sir John Davies, Thomas Dekker, Michael Drayton, Edward Fairfax, Sir John Harington, Gervase Markham, John Marston and Thomas Middleton. Jonson for years had stood stubbornly apart from the mainstream of Elizabethan literature, and this black-list was obviously far from complete. Anthony Munday, satirized as Antonio Balladino in the revised version of Jonson's early comedy *The Case Is Altered*, is absent. So is Thomas Kyd, the author of that stubbornly memorable play *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587), a play which haunted Jonson even more persistently and cruelly than it did other dramatists of his generation. Not only had he acted the leading part himself, according to Dekker, but he had written 'additions' to

## BEN JONSON, DRAMATIST

Kyd's text in order to refurbish the play for Henslowe. The language and the revenge form of *The Spanish Tragedy* were offensive to his artistic principles, but this was not the only reason why he could never get the play out of his head. Marlowe too, at least the Marlowe whose *Tamburlaine* (1587/8) was indirectly responsible for so much of that 'scenicall strutting and furious vociferation' deplored by Jonson in *Discoveries* (lines 778–9), rather surprisingly seems to have escaped censure in Drummond's presence.

For his friend George Chapman, for one lyric by Sir Edward Wotton, and for Robert Southwell's poem 'The Burning Babe', Jonson did find words of unalloyed praise. But when he came to what seem to us now to be the four great names of Elizabethan poetry – Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, John Donne and William Shakespeare – his response was significantly divided. Jonson had a shrewd sense of what the judgement of posterity on this quartet of writers was likely to be. They were not poetasters. Whatever their faults, they were men who mattered, which is why Jonson returns to them again and again. Yet the feelings they aroused in him had, for a long time, been contradictory and a little defensive.

Jonson's mixed attitude towards Shakespeare is notorious. The scandalous inventor of tales, tempests, servant monsters, sea-coasts in Bohemia, and mouldy yarns like *Pericles*, 'wanted Arte' (*Conv.* line 50). He wrote too glibly, and often 'fell into those things, could not escape laughter' (*Disc.* 662). But Shakespeare was also a man Jonson loved personally, to whom he applied the adjective 'honest' – the one he most cherished, and most wished other men to associate with himself. (Drummond recorded Jonson as saying that he had carefully preserved 'ane hundreth letters so naming him', *Conv.* 631–2.) In *Discoveries*, he professed himself willing to honour Shakespeare's memory as a writer '{on this side Idolatry} as much as any' (655). The commendatory poem he wrote for the First Folio, 'To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare: And what he Hath Left Us', presents him as the master of 'well torned, and true-filed lines', a man to be praised precisely for his 'Art'. In tragedy, he was the peer of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides and, in comedy, of Aristophanes, Plautus and Terence, a writer 'not of an age, but for all time' (*Ung.* V. xxvi, 68, 55, 43).

Less attention has been paid to the fact that Jonson's response to Sidney, Spenser and Donne displays a strikingly similar inconsistency. Sidney obviously obsessed Jonson as the realization of a personal ideal: the good poet who was also a conspicuously good man, who brought his life and his art into just that harmonious accord which Jonson prized and found it so difficult in his own case to achieve. In 'To Penshurst',

### *Jonson and the Elizabethans*

Sidney is the poet at whose 'great birth . . . all the Muses met' (*For.* II, 14). His name is talismanic throughout Jonson's work, the great, the 'god-like Sidney', who exhausted the wealth of the Muses' springs, placed his Stella 'where never Star shone brighter yet', and who 'stood' (in the sense in which Jonson uses that word in the Cary/Morison ode) as a type of human excellence (*For.* XII, 91, *Epig.* LXXIX, 1–4, *Und.* XXVII, 25–6, and LXX, *passim*). In *Discoveries*, Jonson asserted that in Sidney's art 'all vigour of Invention, and strength of judgement met' (909–10). *Epicoene* even turns Sidney into a professional man of letters, admittedly by somewhat sophisticated means. When Sir John Daw sneers at men who are obliged to live by their verses, Dauphine punningly slaps him down: 'And yet the noble SIDNEY lives by his, and the noble family not asham'd' (II. 3. 117–18).

It is clear, all the same, that most of Sidney's work made Jonson distinctly uneasy. The neo-classicism of *The Defence of Poesy* was predictably appealing, one of the places where the minds of the two men genuinely engaged. *Arcadia* and *Astrophil and Stella*, the fictions through which, in fact, Sidney 'lives', were another matter. The Jonson who talked to Drummond regarded romance literature with distaste. Moreover, as he pointed out disapprovingly, in *Arcadia* Sidney violated the principles of classical decorum, failing to distinguish the speech of princes from that of hinds. While it is true that Saviolina and Fungoso in *Every Man Out of His Humour* are constantly reading *Arcadia* and introducing its choicer phrases into their discourse, the admiration of such half-wits in no way honours Sidney's book. As for *Astrophil and Stella*, it was largely responsible for the sonneteering vogue of the 1590s, and Jonson made it clear to Drummond that he deplored the sonnet, that tyrannical bed of Procrustes, as he called it, in which sense is distorted in the interests of form. It is all too tempting to brush aside as casual flattery Jonson's poem in *The Forest* in which he assures the Countess of Rutland, Sidney's daughter, that she is (or might become, with a little more effort) a poet quite as good as her father. Unfortunately, Jonson reiterated this opinion in talking to Drummond, and that is altogether more embarrassing.

As for Spenser, Jonson told Drummond that he did not like either his stanzas or his matter. But he also revealed that he had troubled to work out an explication of the allegory of *The Faerie Queene*, which he sent to Raleigh. He filled his own personal copy of what he called 'Spenser's noble booke' (*Und.* LXXVIII, 24) with marginal annotations. In *Discoveries*, he advised young men to read Spenser specifically for his matter, and he informed a presumably puzzled Drummond that, after all, Arthurian material was the best for an heroic poem. 'In affecting the

## BEN JONSON, DRAMATIST

Ancients', Jonson grumbled, Spenser 'writ no Language' (*Disc.* 1806–7). But Drummond records that his guest liked to recite sections of *The Shepherd's Calendar* from memory. *The Masque of Queens* praises 'grave and diligent Spenser' (599), and in *The Golden Age Restored*, he stands beside Chaucer as one of Apollo's 'sons' (115) who accompanies Astraea on her return to earth.

John Donne, like Shakespeare, was a personal friend. Jonson recommended his satires to the Countess of Bedford as 'Rare poemes', and saluted their author in another of the *Epigrams* as 'the delight of PHOEBUS, and each Muse' (XCIII, 6, XXIII, 1). He told Drummond that Donne was 'the first poet in the World in some things' (117–18) – a judgement with which it is difficult to quarrel – sent him his own poems with a trepidation that seems unfeigned and (again according to Drummond) introduced him as a speaker in his lost apology for *Bartholomew Fair* under the name of Criticus. Interestingly enough, it was the Elizabethan and not the later Donne who appealed to Jonson. All Donne's best poems, he claimed, had been written before the age of twenty-five. He himself had memorized 'The Bracelet' and parts of 'The Calm'. But this brilliant contemporary, 'Whose every worke', Jonson had asserted in his *Epigrams*, 'Came forth example, and remains so, yet' (XXIII, 3–4) was also, it seems, a wilfully obscure poet who 'for not being understood would perish' and who 'for not keeping of accent deserved hanging' (*Conv.* 196, 48–9).

Jonson found it easy to condescend to the lesser stars of Elizabethan poetry. The four great planets, Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare and Donne, compelled respect. But their achievements, which he was too intelligent not to recognize, also, and quite understandably, made him uneasy. They were, for the most part, achievements at odds with the Greek and Roman models which Jonson cherished, and with the formal literary theory which the Renaissance had derived from these classical works. The great men, as well as the poetasters and the lesser lights, had helped to define his own alienation from the popular currents of late sixteenth-century poetry and drama. During the 1590s, Jonson developed a distinctive poetic and (more particularly) a distinctive comic mode by reacting against a generalized Elizabethan norm. In this respect, he was the exact opposite of Shakespeare, who forged his own style during the last decade of the sixteenth century by assimilating and then transcending the native tradition.

All his life, Jonson wanted to 'sing high and aloofe' (*Und.* XXIII, 35), separating himself from what, in the Prologue to *Every Man In His Humour*, he called 'th'ill customes of the age' (4). In the Epistle prefixed to the 1607 quarto of *Volpone*, he not only spoke contemptuously of 'the

### *Jonson and the Elizabethans*

present trade of the stage, in all their misc'line enter-ludes', which any 'learned or liberall soule' must abhor (87–8), but proclaimed his more general intention to 'raise the despis'd head of poetrie againe . . . stripping her out of those rotten and base rags, wherwith the Times have adulterated her form' (129–31). The year 1607 was not a moment at which English poetry stood in much need of rescue by any writer, however great. This fact seems self-evident now. It was also visible to many of Jonson's contemporaries – and even, at intervals, to Jonson himself. The part of him that exalted classical writers as paradigms, from which even men like Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare and Donne dissociated themselves to their cost, was both articulate and creative. To a large extent, this conservative, orderly and anti-romantic self shaped him as an artist. And yet Jonson was always deeply involved, emotionally as well as professionally, with that irregular, untidy, frequently grotesque Elizabethan literature which, in both its courtly and popular forms, he felt impelled to reject. The alternative art of his contemporaries – even such humble modes as morality drama, proverbs, rogue literature, pamphlets and ballads, crude tragedies of blood, or the kind of romantic comedy which Shakespeare transformed – irritated but also haunted Jonson from the start in ways which were to take him many years to understand.

Although an exponent of classical harmony, balance and restraint, Jonson all his life was drawn temperamentally towards what Hopkins called 'things counter, original, spare, strange'.<sup>3</sup> He deluged the fastidious Drummond with anecdotes which cannot have been much to the latter's taste, but which Jonson clearly savoured: the story of the page, the eggs and the muscatel, of the large fish that swallowed a packet of letters dropped overboard by accident, and subsequently delivered them, still fairly legible, at Flushing, of what Sir Henry Wotton said on being caught fornicating when he was supposed to be in church, Jonson's own quixotic disguise as an astrologer, his encounter with a ghost, or the strange attempt to father an angel made by the Puritan preacher John Dod. 'Oppressed with fantasie', as Drummond reports (*Conv.* 692), he confessed that he had sometimes 'consumed a whole night in lying looking to his great toe, about which he hath seen tartars & turks Romans and Carthaginians feight in his imagination' (*Conv.* 322–4). He was an incorrigible snapper-up of unconsidered trifles, a connoisseur of the out of the way and bizarre.

In Jonson's old age, his 'son' James Howell filled an entire letter to him with a weird story he had just heard about a French lady whose husband tricked her into eating the heart of the man she truly loved, and

## BEN JONSON, DRAMATIST

had been prevented from marrying. When her nasty spouse told her what she had done, 'in a sudden exultation of joy, she with a far-fetch'd sigh said, *This is a precious Cordial indeed*; and so lick'd the dish, saying, *It is so precious, that 'tis pity to put ever any meat upon't*. So she went to bed, and in the morning she was found stone dead.' This, Howell opined, was 'choice and rich stuff for you to put upon your Loom and make a curious Web of . . . in your way'.<sup>4</sup> Jonson's friend was not being imperceptive. The gothic tale he relates has obvious affinities with the Thyestean feast in *Titus Andronicus*, or the goblet containing her lover's heart which the cruel father sends his daughter at the end of *Gismond of Salerne* (1566), and yet it does not really belong to the world of high tragedy. Howell was essentially right to think that Jonson would be taken with this strange history of Captain Coucy and his lost love, Madame Faiel. Incidents of this kind, weaving together the wild and extreme with a kind of gritty, domestic realism verging on the ludicrous, were just what he liked. Although Jonson had nothing but contempt for the enervated fictions of *Palmerin of England* and *Amadis de Gaul*, he habitually ferreted out and cherished 'true' stories, whether from books, report, or his own experience, which were in their own way equally fantastic.

Much of this material was inherently comic – the obsessive habits of the contemporary who reputedly gave Jonson the idea for Morose, or the misfortunes of young Thomas Rogers, the real-life prototype of Dapper in *The Alchemist*, who in 1609 was conned into believing that (after certain cash payments had been made) he would be able to marry the Fairy Queen.<sup>5</sup> But it also helped to shape Jonson's highly idiosyncratic brand of historical tragedy. Despite their Roman subject matter, the dependence upon nuntius speeches in both plays and the presence of a formal Chorus in one, neither *Sejanus* nor *Catiline* is really classical in temper. Perverse and wayward plays, which constantly undercut the dignity of virtually everyone in them (not least the protagonists), they shy away from any serious exploration of tragic experience in order to focus broadly on a social order overtaken not only by violence and injustice, but by the grotesque. Tragedy dissipates itself among the indiscriminate welter of unguents, face powders, laxatives and poisons on Livia's dressing table in *Sejanus*, or in the irrelevancies, petty shifts and compromises of *Catiline*. Jonson's two Jacobean tragedies are brilliant and perceptive studies of social behaviour in a nightmare world, but their informing mode is the grimly funny rather than the heroic or grand. His lost Elizabethan tragedies must have been even less in accord with neo-Aristotelian principles.

Jonson set aside and repudiated a great deal of his past work when he



### *Jonson and the Elizabethans*

came to assemble the 1616 Folio. Only two years after its publication, he could remark casually to Drummond that half of his comedies were not in print. *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Devil Is An Ass* were both, at this date, among the missing, but for these he had plans. Seven comedies were included in the Jonson First Folio. An eighth, *The Case Is Altered*, had crept out in an unauthorized quarto in 1609. If Jonson's statement to Drummond is to be trusted, this leaves some six plays unaccounted for. Furthermore, he apparently said nothing to Drummond about the unpublished tragedies for which Francis Meres was praising him in 1598, every one of which is lost. Only *The Case Is Altered*, three unplaced passages assigned to Jonson by Robert Allott in *England's Parnassus* (1600), the much-disputed additions to *The Spanish Tragedy*, and the bare titles of five other plays remain to indicate what the bulk of his writing may have been like during the last years of Queen Elizabeth's reign.

Of the five lost plays for which titles survive, four seem to have been collaborations: *The Isle of Dogs* (1597) with Nashe and (possibly) others, *Hot Anger Soon Cooled* (1598) with Chettle and Porter, *Page of Plymouth* (1599) with Dekker, and *Robert II King of Scots* (1599) with Dekker, Chettle and what Henslowe calls '& other Jentellman' – possibly Marston.<sup>6</sup> *Richard Crookback* (1602) seems to have been his unaided work, but it was also commissioned by Henslowe, and it would have run in conscious competition with at least two comparatively recent popular plays on the same subject, one of them by Shakespeare. The emphasis of the title suggests that the play itself, had it survived, would offer little comfort to modern defenders of the dignity of that much-maligned king. On the evidence of *Sejanus* later, collaboration did not necessarily debar a play from appearing in Jonson's *Works*, if he could edit out the other hand, and if the revised version seemed to him to form part of what he regarded as his genuine artistic achievement. *Eastward Ho!* (1605) was clearly too much of a seamless garment, the beautifully balanced work of three sharers, to permit such treatment. Jonson seems to have been happy for it to appear in a quarto edition bearing his name as well as those of Chapman and Marston. But he excluded it from his Folio. *Sejanus*, by contrast, on his own admission a play in which originally 'a second Pen had good share' ('To the Readers', 45), he re-wrote carefully so as to make it entirely his own (as well as politically safe), and then published first in quarto and then in the Folio.

Apart from *Every Man In His Humour*, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, *Cynthia's Revels* and *Poetaster*, Jonson consigned all his Elizabethan plays, both the collaborations and those for which he was

## BEN JONSON, DRAMATIST

solely responsible, to oblivion. This hackwork, as he regarded it, did not belong to that coherent and relatively consistent body of literature by which he meant to be remembered. Yet it matters that he should have gone on writing such things concurrently with those early humour plays that he did meticulously preserve. As a dramatist, even more than as an actor, Jonson served out a lengthy apprenticeship to the popular theatre. He chafed under his bondage, but it influenced him more positively than he knew. Many years later, he would return to plays of the type he had dismissed so easily in his youth, his own and those of his Elizabethan contemporaries, and discover in them merits and possibilities he had underestimated or ignored. Jonson's lost comedies and tragedies can never be recovered now, but it is possible – and important – to hazard a few guesses about some of them.

*The Isle of Dogs* landed Jonson in prison (Nashe fled to Great Yarmouth, where he addressed himself to the subject of red herrings) by allegedly 'contaynyng very seditious & sclandrous matter' (H. & S., vol. 1, p. 217). The reaction of the Privy Council, together with everything known about Nashe from his other work, suggests a sharp-toothed, rambling, probably rather irresponsible satire of the kind the authorities were anxiously trying to suppress in its non-dramatic forms at about this time. *Hot Anger Soon Cooled* must have been comedy of a more innocuous sort. Henry Chettle, one of Jonson's two partners in the collaboration, had his finger in such an astonishing number and variety of plays, and what remains of his independent work is so undistinctive, that it is difficult to speculate about the nature and bias of his contribution. Henry Porter is a less shadowy participant. His one surviving unaided play, *The Two Angry Women of Abingdon* (?1588), is a cheerful, unpretentious, middle-class romp in which a number of people, trying either to prevent or accomplish a marriage, stumble about the fields near Abingdon at intricately plotted cross-purposes before arriving at the sensible conclusion that young love might as well have its way. Porter's comedy could perfectly credibly be entitled *Hot Anger Soon Cooled*, and it may well hint at the nature and concerns of the lost play. Certainly it was to something very like *The Two Angry Women of Abingdon* that Jonson was consciously looking back when, almost forty years after *Hot Anger Soon Cooled*, he wrote *A Tale of A Tub*. That much-misunderstood (and now generally mis-dated) Jonsonian exercise in nostalgia sets out to re-create Porter's kind of Elizabethan comedy, complicating and transforming it in much the way that Shakespeare had metamorphosed the outmoded romance dramas of his youth in *Cymbeline* or *The Winter's Tale*.

*Page of Plymouth* clearly drew upon the sensational murder for which