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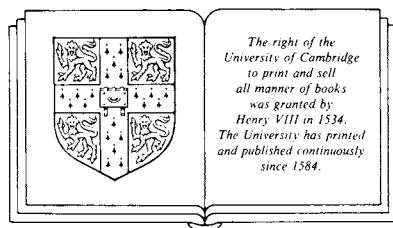
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To JOHN KERRIGAN

Stand forth my Object, then, you that have beene
Ever at home: yet, have all Countries seene:
And like a Compasse keeping one foot still
Upon your Center, doe your Circle fill
Of generall knowledge; watch'd men, manners too,
Heard what times past have said, seene what ours doe.
(‘An Epistle to Master John Selden’)

Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage,
Ou comme cestuy là qui conquit la toison,
Et puis est retourné, plein d’usage & raison,
Vivre entre ses parents le reste de son aage!
(Joachim du Bellay, ‘Les Regrets’ LV1)

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Preface

The Jonson who wrote the great laudatory poem for the Shakespeare First Folio of 1623 had often been critical of the art he now set out to praise. During the years that followed, he would be so again. He knew nonetheless, and generously put it down on paper, that his old friend 'was not of an age, but for all time' (*Ung. V. xxvi, 43*). Two centuries later, when considering Jonson's own work, Coleridge recorded a harsher verdict. Jonson, Coleridge declared, did not transcend his age; he was 'like the Mammoth and Megatherion fitted & destined to live only during a given Period, and then to exist a Skeleton, hard, dry, uncouth perhaps, yet massive and not to be contemplated without [a] mixture of Wonder and Admiration'.¹ The terms of praise are discouraging, implying as they do that to encounter Jonson is like paying a visit to some Museum of Natural History, where all forty feet of Brontosaurus, down to the last, bony articulation of the tail, defy the onlooker either to ignore the creature, or to believe that it can ever have been clothed with flesh and alive. It is an ironic fate for the man Drummond described as 'pasionately kynde and angry, carelesse either to gaine or keepe' (*Conv. 687–8*), the Jonson who frequently exasperated his contemporaries, arousing extremes of dislike as well as devotion, but who was always vividly present to them both as a human being, and as a writer touched by that divine madness which Plato associated with true poets.

Ever since Dryden made his famous, and destructive, distinction ('I admire [Jonson], but I love *Shakespeare*'²), Jonson has often seemed, in T. S. Eliot's words, 'damned by the praise that quenches all desire to read the book . . . afflicted by the imputation of the virtues which excite the least pleasure'.³ Certainly it is true that he has fewer readers than he deserves, and that the contemporary theatre (which ought to know better) appears nervously unwilling to trust him. Jonson himself must bear part of the blame for his ossification in the minds of later generations. The severity, exclusiveness and authoritarian nature of many of his critical and moral pronouncements, the classicism and conservatism so strenuously advanced, have all too often managed to

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block out the other, and artistically equally fertile, if formally less well defined, side of his personality and art. Jonson was out to establish poets as the acknowledged legislators of mankind, both because that was in truth the role he believed they should occupy and because he needed, for himself, to cancel out the disappointments and ignominy of his early years, making his own professional status clear and unassailable. He advocated an Horatian control of the emotions, an ideal of rationality and self-restraint, because he genuinely felt them to be desirable standards of human conduct, but also because he was keenly aware of his own tumultuous nature, and of the need to impose some discipline upon it. His engagement with the classical world, although sometimes pedantic, was redeemingly romantic at heart. (The sensibility which kept him awake at night, watching Tartars and Turks, Romans and Carthaginians in battle around his great toe was certainly not Horatian.) Jonson's classicism was balanced, moreover, by a compensating attraction towards the irregular, the gothic, the contemporary and the strange. The rage for order which shapes his work is almost always met and, in a way, substantiated by an equally powerful impulse towards chaos and licence.

Nothing has been more injurious to Jonson than his own formal dicta and theories. In particular, his loosely formulated (and inconsistent) theory of humours has told against him. Especially after Shakespeare's way of handling character became established as an ideal, the supposed tyranny of 'humours' has served to blind readers to the subtlety and humanity of mature Jonsonian characterization. It is emphatically not the intention of this book either to sentimentalize Jonson or to make him over in the image of Shakespeare. Their voices are very different. Jonson always preserved a sense of distance between himself and his great rival. And yet the polarity of these two dramatists, however convenient as a critical generalization, has been over-estimated and largely misunderstood. Hazlitt's famous distinction between the natural spring of Shakespeare's wit and the 'leaden cistern' in which Jonson's is confined, Shakespeare's living men and Jonson's machines, 'governed by mere routine, or by the convenience of the poet',⁴ has come to possess an authority it does not merit.

It is true that the young Jonson of the 1590s forged a comic style for himself largely by dissenting from the Elizabethan popular tradition which achieved its finest realization in the comedies of Shakespeare. He was not, however, although critics have often pretended otherwise, a man who could remain content for long with any single, comic mode. Tirelessly experimental, he fought his way out of the brilliant but restricting manner of the early humour plays, with the help of

Preface

Aristophanes and his own *Sejanus*, to write *Volpone*. Jonson's first four Jacobean comedies have always been regarded as his finest dramatic achievement. That verdict remains unchallenged here. This book will argue, nonetheless, that Jonson's Caroline plays – the 'dotages' of Dryden's unhappily memorable dismissal – are works of substance and delight. *The New Inn*, *A Tale of A Tub* and *The Sad Shepherd*, in particular, have been seriously mis-read and underestimated. This entire group of plays, heralded by *The Devil Is An Ass* in 1616, represents a late style, a radical re-thinking of both his Elizabethan and his Jacobean comic modes, like that we have come to associate with Shakespeare's late plays. Jonson too ended by writing extreme, self-conscious comedies which, in his case, not only reach back to Elizabethan forms he had once disdained, but re-think some of his own early work.

Jonson's greatness as a writer of comedy can be seen only when his output is considered as a whole. To regard him as a dramatist who, after a series of false starts, produced *Volpone*, *Epicoene*, *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*, and then inexplicably lost his way, is to misconstrue his achievement. The four great Jacobean comedies themselves lose by such an approach. This book emphasizes the centrality of *The Alchemist*, but it does so because that play signals an important change of attitude on Jonson's part, not because it is a culminating achievement. Apart from the 'chapter interloping', a résumé of Jonson's handling of characters' names from *The Case Is Altered* up to *Bartholomew Fair*, the material has been arranged chronologically. This structure seemed mandatory, and yet the continuity of Jonson's work for the theatre creates a problem of exposition. Although some issues, such as the dramatist's sensitivity to father/son relationships, can be resolved almost as soon as they present themselves, others must remain in suspense until a late stage of the argument. As often as not, it is these less stable concerns which reflect most tellingly Jonson's changing view of the world and of his own art: his response to Shakespeare and other Elizabethan writers, for instance, his treatment of women, of romance plots, families, trust among individuals, names.

No one can work on Jonson for any length of time without incurring a substantial debt of gratitude to the great Oxford edition prepared by C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson. Although I sometimes take issue with Jonson's Oxford editors over matters of dating, authorship and critical assessment, I have depended heavily upon these eleven volumes of text and supplementary material. I am also grateful to the Cambridge English Faculty for asking me, some twelve years ago, to

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give a course of lectures on Jonson. Those lectures not only pushed me into acquiring the Oxford edition before it became virtually unobtainable, but made me realize that I wanted eventually to write this book. At a later stage, the Warden and Fellows of New College generously granted me several invaluable periods of sabbatical leave.

Parts of chapter 12 have appeared in *English Literary Renaissance*, 9 (1979). Chapter 14 incorporates an article published in *English Literary History*, 48 (1981). A paper on 'Shakespeare and Jonson' which I gave at Stratford-upon-Avon in August 1981, summarizing a section of my overall argument, is included in *Shakespeare, Man of the Theatre: Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Shakespeare Association, 1981* (University of Delaware Press, 1983). I should like to thank all the editors concerned for permission to re-use this material.

A number of colleagues and friends have been unsparing of their time and scholarly assistance. Penry Williams has patiently answered queries, suggested reading, and tried to prevent me from making too many historical mistakes. Kevin Sharpe, whose book on Robert Cotton I have found indispensable, has supplied me with material from his files on Arundel, and also talked with me about the Caroline court and Elizabethan nostalgia, altering many of my earlier preconceptions. George Forrest, the proximity of whose rooms to mine in the front quad of New College places him at particular risk, has endured having his books borrowed, and himself exploited as an encyclopedia of classical knowledge, with immense good humour.

Peter Holland read the entire book in typescript and offered a number of valuable criticisms and suggestions. John Creaser also read it at this stage. I am deeply grateful to him for the meticulous care with which he isolated errors, inaccuracies and misjudgements of various kinds, as well as for the perceptiveness and sensitivity of his own commentary on the plays. I should also like to thank Nigel Relph, who checked the quotations before the book went to press. My most profound indebtedness I have tried to acknowledge in my dedication. John Kerrigan has been involved with this book in all its various drafts and stages. He has taken a great deal of time from his own research to listen while I tried to talk out my ideas, has pinpointed muddles – and often suggested ways of resolving them – while forcing me continually to re-write and re-think. I like to believe that the words of Jonson's dedication to Camden have their own special significance here: *Alumnus olim, aeternum Amicus*.

New College, Oxford
 May, 1983

Abbreviations and chronology of plays

Quotations from Jonson refer to *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols., Oxford, 1925–53 (referred to as H. & S.). I have altered i/j and u/v spelling forms to accord with modern practice. Titles of works by Jonson and characters' names appearing in my own text have been modernized, usually in the forms adopted by his Oxford editors in their introductions and commentary.

Quotations from Shakespeare refer to the Riverside edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans *et al.*, Boston, 1974.

Unless otherwise indicated, dates given for plays are those suggested in *Annals of English Drama 975–1700*, by Alfred Harbage, rev. S. Schoenbaum, London, 1964. This chronology is based on the modern calendar year, using 1 January as the point of division.

- The Alchemist* (1610) Alc.
Bartholomew Fair (1614) BF
The Case Is Altered (1597) CA
Catiline (1611) Cat.
Conversations with Drummond Conv.
Cynthia's Revels (1601) CR
The Devil Is An Ass (1616) DA
Discoveries Disc.
Eastward Ho! (1605) EH
Epicœne (1609) Ep.
Epigrams Epig.
Every Man In His Humour (1598) Q EMI
Every Man In His Humour (rev.) F EMI
Every Man Out of His Humour (1599) EMO
The Forest For.
The Fortunate Isles (1625) FI
The Golden Age Restored (1615) GAR
The Gypsies Metamorphosed (1621) GM

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- Hymenaei* (1606) *Hym.*
Love's Welcome at Bolsover (1634) *LW*
The Magnetic Lady (1632) *ML*
The Masque of Owls (1624) *MO*
The Masque of Queens (1609) *MQ*
Mercury Vindicated (1616) *MV*
Mortimer His Fall (1637) *M*
The New Inn (1629) *NI*
Poetaster (1601) *P*
The Sad Shepherd (1637) *SS*
Sejanus (1603) *Sej.*
The Spanish Tragedy (rev. 1601–2) *Sp. T.*
The Staple of News (1626) *SN*
A Tale of A Tub (1633) *TT*
The Underwood *Und.*
Ungathered Verse *Ung. V.*
Volpone (1606) *Volp.*
The Welbeck Entertainment (1633) *WE*