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978-0-521-28596-4 - Ben Jonson: To the First Folio

Richard Dutton

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The 1616 folio and its place in Jonson's career

Pray thee, take care, that tak'st my book in hand,
To read it well: that is, to understand.

(*Epigrams* 1)

Ben Jonson suffers from being at once too well known and too little read or understood. He is the sort of author with whom we are immediately on first-name terms, 'rare Ben' with his 'mountain belly, and . . . rocky face',¹ the 'Spanish great galleon' of the famous wit-battles with the 'English man-of-war', Shakespeare.² The vivid and convincing portrait in the National Picture Gallery and the fortuitous survival of his racy *Conversations* with William Drummond of Hawthornden have both contributed to our sense of his being a colourful character in a colourful age. On the other hand, his works (with one or two notable exceptions) have not commonly inspired the same kind of enthusiasm; their characteristics – classicism, 'humours', realism, satire, moral earnestness, occasional lyric grace – are commonly acknowledged and as commonly taken for granted.

Despite prodigious scholarly efforts in recent years, T. S. Eliot's summary of Jonson's reputation is as true today as when first written, sixty years ago: 'To be universally accepted; to be damned by the praise that quenches all desire to read the book; to be afflicted by the imputation of the virtues which excite the least pleasure; and to be read only by historians and antiquaries – this is the most perfect conspiracy of approval.'³ Sometimes the approval shades into boredom, as when eminent scholars dismiss Jonson's masques as 'of small literary value'⁴ or remark coolly of essays on his poems that 'as could be expected of their subject, they do not offer any surprising revelations or startling new insights'.⁵

There is, in short, a familiarity about Jonson, a familiarity which has bred not contempt but complacency, a feeling that he is known, weighed up, comprehended – a colourful character, perhaps, but not the most exciting of writers. I wish in this book to question the general estimate of Jonson as a writer that I have just outlined and, if possible, to rediscover the challenging *literary* figure that he clearly was for his contemporaries. It was as a writer, not as a colourful personality, that Jonson continually found himself in conflict with

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the Privy Council, in danger on at least one occasion of having his ears and nose cut (see p. 8, below). It was at least as much his beliefs about the importance of literature as his fiery temper that led to heated altercations with such men as John Marston, Inigo Jones and George Chapman and to his notorious differences with Shakespeare, as well as to those quarrels with the world in general in the odes 'To Himself'⁶ provoked by the reception both of *Poetaster* and of *The New Inn*. And it was first and foremost as a writer that Jonson earned the accolade 'rare' that was later carved on his tombstone, attracting around him in his later years a 'tribe' of aspiring younger writers who were proud to be known as his 'sons'.

This is not the place to rehearse the history of Jonson's declining reputation,⁷ but rather to ask why all the scholarship devoted to Jonson in recent years has done little to reverse the process, to replace the familiar Jonson with what his contemporaries saw – something less predictable and more challenging. The fact is that the best scholarship *has* done something of this; books like Jonas Barish's *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy*, for example, or Stephen Orgel's *The Jonsonian Masque*,⁸ have helped us to see Jonson as a more complex and stimulating artist than many people suspected. But it is noticeable that such works have tended to focus on relatively limited areas of Jonson's achievement and have been for the specialist rather than the general reader. It has been when writers have attempted to confront Jonson's career as a whole that it has proved difficult to generate the same kind of excitement, to keep before us the same kind of challenging figure: it is easier to keep reproducing the old familiar Ben.

The reasons for this are not hard to find. The length of Jonson's career, together with the sheer quantity and variety of his output, poses intimidating problems: an attempt to confront everything he wrote almost inevitably degenerates into a bland survey, while any attempt to select the best or most representative of his work inevitably loses touch with the real scope and complexity of the subject. Jonson's literary career lasted some forty years, longer than that of any of his major contemporaries. His earliest surviving works date from the last years of Elizabeth's reign, yet he was still writing virtually up to his death in 1637, only a few years short of the Civil War. He outlived all his notable friends and rivals, including Shakespeare, Donne, Bacon, Chapman, Webster, Middleton, Beaumont and Fletcher. He started writing while Spenser was still alive and died just as Milton was emerging as the major poet of the mid seventeenth century (and Dryden, the major poet of the end of the

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century, was preparing to go to Jonson's old school, Westminster). During this long and varied career, beset alike with triumphs and catastrophes, Jonson produced a wide diversity of works – comedies, tragedies, masques, entertainments, non-dramatic verse (lyrics, satires, poems of praise, remembrance, piety and self-justification), translations and critical prose.

No wonder it is difficult to keep all this in the same challenging focus. Certain threads may, of course, be traced through most of what he wrote, adding up to what we might call his vision or his philosophy of literature. In the Prologue to *Volpone* (1606), for example, we find the declaration:

In all his poems, still, hath been this measure,
To mix profit, with your pleasure. (7–8)

Twenty-five years and several reiterations later, he is still rehearsing the same formula in the text of one of the last of his Court masques: 'all representations . . . either have been, or ought to be the mirrors of man's life, whose ends . . . ought always to carry a mixture of profit, with them, no less than delight'.⁹ But the idea of literature mixing 'profit' (or moral instruction) with the delight or entertainment of the reader/audience is only a stock formula. It derived ultimately from the Roman poet and critic, Horace, with whom Jonson felt an affinity, but was widely reiterated by Renaissance writers, notably Sir Philip Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry* (published 1595). Such a formula imposes no real restraints, either of style or subject-matter, upon an author, and in itself it tells us nothing about the peculiar qualities of Jonson's writing. To focus on such a theme inevitably runs the risk of reinforcing Jonson's reputation as an unimaginative classicist, while telling us nothing about the real variety and complexity of his work.

My own answer to the problem of doing proper justice to the diversity of Jonson's career in the compass of a single book may not be perfect, but it has the virtue of being Jonson's own answer. I have chosen to focus not on themes or on my own selection of the 'best' of Jonson, but on the great first folio of his *Works*, which Jonson himself saw through the press in 1616. Such a decision involves making many sacrifices, of course; I am effectively excluding those works written before 1616 which Jonson chose not to print in the folio, and everything printed after that date, including more than half of the non-dramatic verse, some of the most interesting masques, all the critical prose and some unduly neglected plays. I particularly regret not being able to find room to discuss *The Devil is an Ass* (1616), *The*

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Gypsies Metamorphos'd (1621), *The Staple of News* (1625) and the lyric sequence, 'A Celebration of Charis in Ten Lyric Pieces', printed in *The Underwood* (published 1640) – the more so if my decision gives further credence to the unwarranted myth that the second half of Jonson's career was a long, slow falling off from the triumphs enshrined in the 1616 folio.

Given, however, that a choice *had* to be made, I would defend this one on two grounds. Firstly, the folio does contain most of the works which have attracted modern attention and are likely to be familiar to readers of this book – *Every Man In His Humour*, *Sejanus*, *Volpone*, *Epicoene*, *The Alchemist*, the earliest and most heavily annotated masques, and poems such as 'On My First Son', 'To Penshurst' and those 'To Celia'. The most unfortunate omission in this respect is *Bartholomew Fair*, the most ambitious single work that Jonson seems ever to have attempted, and in many people's view his finest achievement, even if it has never enjoyed the popularity of *Volpone* or *The Alchemist*. It was written two years before the folio was printed, may be said (as I shall argue later) to encapsulate the principles that inform the folio as a whole, and was only omitted from it for lack of space. For all these reasons, I have therefore seen fit to break my own rule to the extent of including a chapter on *Bartholomew Fair*. The second argument with which I would defend my decision is the more important one: the very fact that the 1616 folio is not a complete record of Jonson's career to that date, but his own deliberate selection from it, gives that volume a value which many people have overlooked. It points to various connections between the different facets of his career which Jonson himself wished to emphasise. When the folio was first published it was scorned by many as a piece of pretentiousness, in the main because it printed plays alongside poems in a prestige volume, and play-scripts had not hitherto been regarded as serious literature. In retrospect, we can see Jonson's decision as a brave and important moment in the history of literature, redefining the significance of drama and paving the way for the Shakespeare first folio of 1623 (as well as the publication of many other Jacobean plays which might otherwise have been lost). Unfortunately today Jonson's folio has little more than this archaeological interest; its historical significance seems in some perverse way to have obscured its intrinsic value as a statement by Jonson himself about the nature of his career. The mixture of plays, poems, masques and entertainments that Jonson put together was deliberate and artful, the whole amounting to more than the sum of the parts. Failure to observe this fact has helped to maintain the serious

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modern undervaluation of Jonson as a living and challenging writer. By returning to Jonson's own view of what was vital in his own career up to that point we may put ourselves in a better position to appreciate why his contemporaries thought so much of him and what he still has to offer today.

The significance of the 1616 folio will be easier to grasp if we place it in the context of Jonson's life and times. He was born, either in 1572 or 1573, probably on 11 June and very probably in London. He was thus nearly ten years younger than the Warwickshire-born Shakespeare, but almost an exact contemporary of John Donne, who was born in Bread Street, London, in the first half of 1572. Jonson's father, a clergyman, died about a month before Ben (as he chose usually to be called) was born, and his mother was soon remarried, to a Westminster bricklayer. Jonson was later to tell William Drummond of Hawthornden how he was 'brought up poorly, put to school by a friend (his master Camden), after taken from it, and put to another craft'¹⁰ – almost certainly that of bricklaying. In later years his enemies taunted him for his association with this 'demeaning' occupation.¹¹ The school was Westminster, and it was clearly here that Jonson laid the foundation of the classical scholarship which was to underpin his entire career.

It was presumably to escape the bricklaying that Jonson joined the army in the Low Countries that was fighting the Spanish; the Counter-Reformation was at its height and the European struggle between Catholics and Protestants was an important back-drop to Jonson's early life. A characteristic anecdote tells how 'in the face of both the camps (he) killed an enemy and (took) *opima spolia*¹² from him' (244–6). He shortly returned 'to his wonted studies', however, and to a marriage in 1594 to Anne Lewis, of whom little is known beyond Jonson's memorable testimony that she was 'a shrew yet honest'. The precise number of their children is not known, though they included the daughter, Mary, and the son, Benjamin, whose early deaths are movingly recorded in *Epigrams* 22 and 45. We may surmise that the marriage was sometimes a stormy one from the fact that they were once separated for a period of five years, during which time Jonson 'remained with my lord Aubigny' (255),¹³ though against that must be set the testimony: 'In his youth given to venery. He thought the use of a maid nothing in comparison to the wantonness of a wife' (287–8).

By the mid 1590s Jonson was already associated with the theatre. He seems to have acted briefly with a 'strolling company', one of the

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parts with which he was associated being Hieronimo in Kyd's phenomenally popular *The Spanish Tragedy*; eventually he was employed as an actor–writer by the theatrical entrepreneur, Philip Henslowe. In 1597 Jonson first came to the attention of the authorities for acting in, and apparently part-writing, the lost satirical play, *The Isle of Dogs* (the principal author was Thomas Nashe); he was arrested and imprisoned for his part in the production – not the most auspicious of débuts on the stage of history, but typical of the man. This is an early indication of how strict the theatrical censorship of the day was. Various other plays which have survived in one form or another seem to belong to this period, notably *A Tale of a Tub* (which was only belatedly published in the form that Jonson revised for production in 1633),¹⁴ and *The Case Is Altered*, which was not published until 1609, and then probably without Jonson's help or approval. *Every Man In His Humour*, performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men (Shakespeare's Company) in 1598, seems to have been Jonson's first *major* theatrical success; it was the first work which, albeit in a much-revised form, he was to include in the 1616 folio.

The year 1598 also had a less pleasant side for Jonson. He killed a fellow-actor, Gabriel Spencer, in a duel and only escaped hanging by pleading benefit of clergy¹⁵ – one of the last men in England to do so. As he told Drummond, 'being appealed to the fields he had killed his adversary, which had hurt him in the arm, and whose sword was ten inches longer than his: for the which he was imprisoned, and almost at the gallows. Then took he his religion by trust of a priest who visited him in prison. Thereafter he was twelve years a papist' (246–51). The conversion to Roman Catholicism was just as dangerous in its way as the manslaughter, since Catholics were looked on with dark suspicion by the Elizabethan authorities, who always assumed that their loyalties might lie with the Pope and Spain rather than with Queen and country. This probably explains the following mysterious episode: 'In the time of his close imprisonment, under Queen Elizabeth, his judges could get nothing of him to all their demands but "aye" and "no". They placed two damned villains to catch advantage of him, with him, but he was advertised by his keeper; of the spies he hath an epigram' (256–60).¹⁶

Every Man Out of His Humour, apparently a sequel to *Every Man In His Humour* but actually a very different, more openly satirical style of play, was performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men at their new theatre, The Globe, in 1599. Jonson followed this up with two satires, *Cynthia's Revels* (1600) and *Poetaster* (1601); these were written for one

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of the new children's companies, the Children of the Chapel Royal, who performed in an indoor or 'private' theatre, and these two works seem to have comprised Jonson's contribution to the so-called War of the Theatres. Playwrights employed by the various acting companies always seem to have made comic mileage out of poking fun at each other, but for a time – perhaps inspired by the competition from the new children's companies¹⁷ – it developed into an all-out 'war'. Jonson's particular targets were Dekker, who replied in kind with *Satiromastix* (1602), and Marston: 'He had many quarrels with Marston, beat him, and took his pistol from him, wrote his *Poetaster* on him; the beginning of them were that Marston represented him in the stage' (284–6). It is difficult to know how seriously to take any of this; certainly the quarrels did not preclude Marston and Jonson from collaborating on a play a few years later. Jonson's 'comical satyres' were all reprinted, with some alterations, in the 1616 folio, but a number of other works, like *Page of Plymouth*, *King Robert II of Scotland* and *Richard Crookback* (for all of which he was paid by Henslowe between 1599 and 1602) were not to be included and have not survived at all.

The year 1603 was another traumatic one in Jonson's life, firstly because it saw the death of his eldest son:

When the King came in England, at that time the pest was in London, he being in the country at Sir Robert Cotton's house with old Camden, he saw in a vision his eldest son (then a child and at London) appear unto him with the mark of a bloody cross on his forehead as if it had been cutted with a sword, at which amazed he prayed unto God, and in the morning he came to Mr. Camden's chamber to tell him, who persuaded him it was but an apprehension of his fantasy at which he should not be dejected; in the mean time comes there letters from his wife of the death of the boy in the plague. He appeared to him he said of a manly shape and of that growth that he thinks he shall be at the resurrection. (261–72)

That year also saw at least one further altercation with the authorities: 'Northampton was his mortal enemy for brawling on a St. George's day one of his attenders, he was called before the Council for his *Sejanus* and accused both of popery and treason by him' (325–7). It is not clear whether it was *Sejanus* – the first of his extant tragedies, but not well received on its first performance – or the brawling that elicited the charges of popery and treason, but Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, was a dangerous man to choose for an enemy, being one of the closest advisors of the new King. That was the other notable development of 1603: the death of the old Queen and the accession of her cousin of Scotland,

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James VI and I – a development of crucial importance in Jonson's career.

Jonson and Dekker between them were entrusted by the city authorities with devising the dramatic pageants which were to greet King James on his ceremonial entry into the City of London (an event actually delayed by the plague until March 1604).¹⁸ Jonson also created a charming entertainment at Althorpe for the new Queen, Anne, on her journey south. These may have led to his eventually being given the commission to write *The Masque of Blackness*, which was performed at Court on Twelfth Night 1605, with Queen Anne and her ladies in the leading roles. It seems to have been a success since Jonson and his stage-designer collaborator, Inigo Jones, were regularly employed on such masques at Court thereafter. Jonson composed on average about a masque a year throughout the reign of King James, usually for performance about the Christmas and Twelfth Night celebrations. These gorgeous and costly entertainments, so long neglected until recent scholarship began to rediscover their significance, were of very practical importance to Jonson. He complained to Drummond that 'of all his plays he never gained two hundred pounds' (566) and it was clearly the case that no playwright could support himself comfortably just by producing playscripts (unless, like Shakespeare, he also happened to be an actor and shareholder in the company that produced them). The regular masque commissions were well rewarded and helped enable Jonson to escape the treadmill of hack-writing for the likes of Henslowe in a way that writers like Dekker, Webster and Heywood never really managed. Unlike Shakespeare, Jonson never achieved real financial security, perhaps because he was not the most provident of men with his money – 'Sundry times he hath devoured his books; once sold them all for necessity' (328–9) – but at least he enjoyed a relative freedom, which allowed him to think of his writing as an art and not merely a craft. This was clearly a significant factor in the evolution of the 'pretentious' 1616 folio.

The fact that Jonson was writing regularly for the Court did not, however, protect him from the authorities; nor does it seem to have inclined him to avoid contentious material in the plays he wrote for the public stage.

He was delated by Sir James Murray to the King for writing something against the Scots in a play *Eastward Ho* and voluntarily imprisoned himself with Chapman and Marston,¹⁹ who had written it amongst them. The report was that they should then have their ears cut and noses. After their delivery he banqueted all his friends, there was Camden, Selden and others.

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At the midst of the feast his old mother drank to him and show(ed) him a paper which she had [if the sentence had taken execution] to have mixed in the prison among his drink, which was full of lusty strong poison and that she was no churl she told she minded first to have drunk of it herself. (273–83)

It had been a close shave, and Jonson was properly alarmed; he had written to Sir Robert Cecil – the King’s first minister and a key figure in Jonson’s life, as we shall see²⁰ – asking him to intercede on behalf of Chapman and himself. In this letter²¹ Jonson confesses to his ‘first error’ (*The Isle of Dogs? Sejanus?*) but protests that since then ‘I have so attempered my style, that I have given no cause to any good man of grief.’

This appeal, or one like it, must have secured Jonson’s release, but he appears not to have escaped the authorities’ net. Around Michaelmas Term (October) of 1605 one ‘Benjamin Johnson’ was noted as having been seen in the company of a group of disaffected Catholic gentry who were to go down to history as the Gunpowder Plotters. On 7 November, moreover, two days after the infamous Plot was discovered, he was given a warrant by the Privy Council to act as a go-between from themselves to an unnamed Catholic priest ‘that offered to do good service to the state’. Nothing came of this because, as Jonson reported to Salisbury, ‘that party will not be found, (for so he returns answer)’.²² He concludes, however, with protestations of loyalty to the state, to the King and to Salisbury himself (as Cecil had now become). We must assume that the Privy Council chose Jonson for this mission because he was known to be Catholic, with access to underground Catholic circles, but thought to be trustworthy. It is possible, however, that it was not as straightforward as that. We know that, within the period of May to November 1605, Jonson was imprisoned and under threat of severe penalty for *Eastward Ho*, released – perhaps through the intercession, certainly with the knowledge, of Salisbury – associated with the Gunpowder Plotters and then used by Salisbury in the efforts to track the Plotters down. The possibility that Jonson was for some of this time, either willingly or unwillingly, a double-agent, working for Salisbury under the cloak of his Catholicism, is difficult to discount. It is a possibility we shall have cause to consider further in relation to *Volpone*, the *Epigrams* and *Catiline*.

None of this seems to have interfered with Jonson’s devising of his next Court masque, *Hymenaei*, which was given early in 1606 to celebrate the wedding of the young Earl of Essex and Lady Frances Howard. Nor did it impede the writing of *Volpone*, of which he claimed ‘five weeks fully penned it’ (Prologue, 16) before it was

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presented by the King's Men (as the Lord Chamberlain's Men had now become), some time prior to March of that year. That spring, however, Jonson and his wife were arraigned for failing to attend the Church of England, as required by law; he was let off fairly lightly, perhaps in view of his services to the government, but it was a reminder of his precarious position. This was, nevertheless, the beginning of what many would see as the most fruitful decade of Jonson's career; the four comedies – *Volpone* (1606), *Epicoene* (1609), *The Alchemist* (1610) and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) – are generally regarded as his finest achievements; the one 'failure', *Catiline* (1611), survived its disastrous first performance to become perhaps the most respected tragedy of the seventeenth century; the masques of the period show an inventive flair equal to Inigo Jones's remarkable innovations in the staging; and Jonson was able to display the best of his non-dramatic verse in carefully devised selections: *Epigrams* (which he planned to publish as an independent volume in 1612 but apparently did not) and *The Forest*.

These were also the years of the Mermaid Tavern, nostalgically recalled by Francis Beaumont in his 'Letter from the Country' (1616):

What things have we seen,
Done at the Mermaid! heard words that have been
So nimble, and so full of subtle flame,
As if that every one from whence they came,
Had meant to put his whole wit in a jest,
And had resolv'd to live a fool, the rest
Of his dull life.

Later ages have shamelessly romanticised this piece of hyperbole,²³ making the Mermaid the setting for Jonson's 'wit-battles' with Shakespeare, surrounded by all the great names of Jacobean literature – Donne, Bacon, Raleigh, Beaumont and Fletcher. Sadly, there is little corroborative evidence for this. Jonson probably met there with young admirers like Beaumont, and there is a possibility that Donne was there on at least one occasion. But the closest that Shakespeare has been traced to the Mermaid is in the fact that its landlord was a party to his last known property transaction,²⁴ while Bacon was probably too much of a politician for such conviviality and Raleigh could not possibly have been there (see the next paragraph). It is perhaps sufficient to note that there is ample evidence, particularly in *Epigrams* and the posthumous commonplace book, *Timber, or Discoveries*, that Jonson was on terms of strong mutual respect, and possibly of friendship, with all these men,²⁵ as he was with such