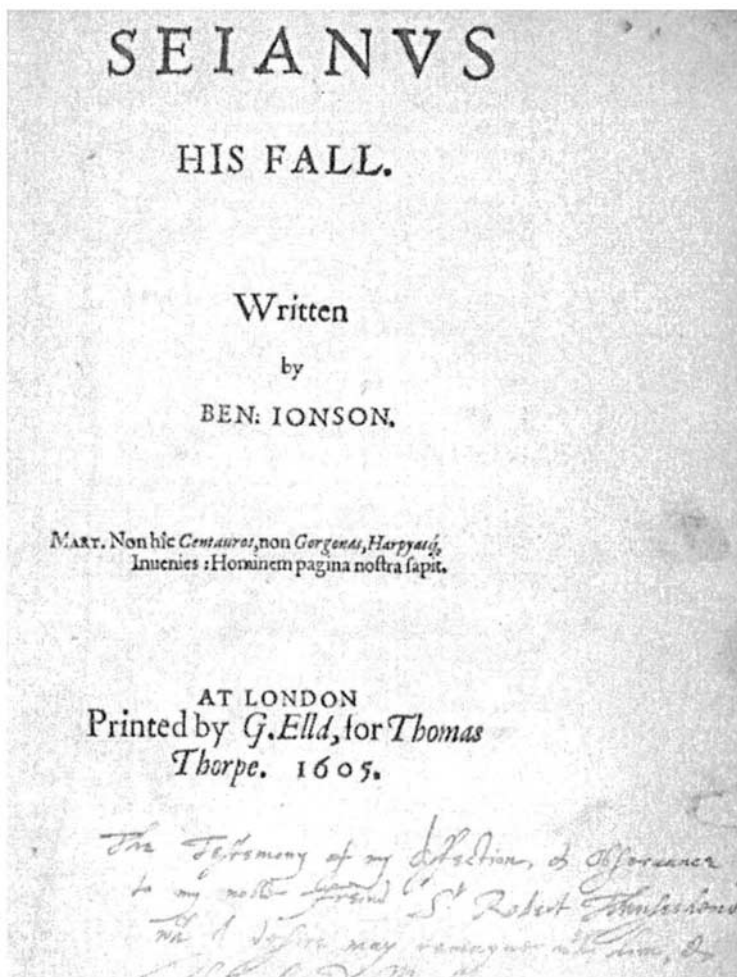


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Title-page from the 1605 quarto, with Jonson's autograph inscription to Sir Robert Townshend, reproduced by permission of the British Library.

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*Motto*

'Not here will you find centaurs, or gorgons or  
harpies; my page smacks of man' (Martial, *Epigrams*,  
X.iv.9–10)

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

## Sources

*Sejanus* presents a rare triumph in the use of sources: a faithful adherence to the contents, and frequently the letter, of the originals, in an imaginative recreation of history intended to convey moral truth and its lessons to the contemporary audience; as the subsequent accusation of Jonson showed, not without danger to the dramatist. The play is a tissue of classical writings on the reign of Tiberius and of material from ancient and Renaissance authorities which Jonson applied to the Rome of that date. The notes to W. D. Briggs's edition and the commentary and notes of Herford and Simpson, vol. IX, give full details of Jonson's sources; the section on *Sejanus* in the Select Bibliography (p. xvi above) refers to the main articles on his use of sources. This account outlines the main features.

The prime source for *Sejanus* is the *Annals* of Tacitus, books I–VI, but especially books IV and V which recount the events that form the action of the play: Sejanus's bid for power, and Tiberius's defeat of his former favourite. Whilst Jonson favours the interpretation which saw a determined calculation in Sejanus's ambition, and presents only the cruel and ruthless side of Tiberius, he follows Tacitus closely, sometimes translating passages of the *Annals*; most notably, Tiberius's speech, I.[i].454–502, and Cremutius Cordus's defence before the Senate in III.[i].407–60. On occasions he alters the time-sequence, as in III.[i], where Silius's suicide unhistorically becomes the climax of his trial; the other show trial of the scene, the accusation of Cordus, took place a year or so after Silius's. Arruntius, the play's most outspoken critic of Sejanus and Tiberius, does not figure in Tacitus's historical narrative until after the fall of Sejanus, but his reputation for independence and integrity makes him, like Lepidus, suitable for the roles of commentator and chorus. Tacitus is augmented by other writings; Suetonius's gossipy *Life of Tiberius* provides details such as Tiberius's hatred of flattery, fear of thunder, and ability to see in the dark; and the fall of Sejanus, lost from the defective book V of the *Annals*, is supplied from Dio Cassius's *History of the Roman People*, books LVII and LVIII, supplemented by Juvenal's account of the popular reaction to Sejanus's downfall in his Tenth Satire. The account of the dismemberment comes from Claudian's description of the fate of Rufinus (in *Against Rufinus*) some three centuries after Sejanus's death; but its tone is in keeping with Jonson's

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play. Such synthesis of diverse classical literature in *Sejanus* is typical. Juvenal's *Satires* are used to point the baseness and servility of spies and flatterers encouraged by the regime; and the lofty sentiments with which the Germanican patricians face adversity and suffering, their refusal to change with changing circumstances, owe much to the Stoicism of Seneca's *Moral Essays*, even if Jonson's admiration for the Germanicans is not wholehearted.<sup>1</sup> Senecan tragedy, especially *Thyestes*, and Lucan's epic narrative, *Pharsalia*, contribute to the more monstrous aspects of Sejanus's calculating villainy and blind hubris, as in II.[ii].150–6 and V.[i].7 ff.; and to the chilling precepts of tyranny expressed particularly in the conversation between Tiberius and Sejanus in II.[ii]. Their political philosophy is also analogous to the doctrines of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and his *Discourses on Livy*.

Senecan tragedy has an influence on the structure of *Sejanus*, although, as Jonson points out in 'To the Readers', the play is not cast throughout in the classical mould. The emphasis on speeches rather than on stage action, the frequent choric role played by Arruntius and Lepidus, and the narration at the end of the play of the violence carried out against Sejanus and his children, all reflect Senecan practice. Nearer home, the influence of the English history play can be seen in the dramatic realisation of plot and character, and the interaction of character with character. Jonson took up the challenge offered by Shakespeare's first major Roman play, *Julius Caesar* (1599), by writing about a darker period of Roman history, and in a manner that owes nothing to that of his fellow dramatist.

Jonson's practice and attitude to his authorities are aptly summed up in his *Timber, or Discoveries*: 'to all the observations of the ancients, we have our own experience: which, if we will use, and apply, we have better means to pronounce. It is true they opened the gates, and made the way that went before us; but as guides, not commanders.'<sup>2</sup> The result is a play which brings to life a period of ancient history, and demonstrates how little tyranny and its attendant evils have changed down the centuries.

1 See Marvin Vawter, 'The seeds of virtue: political imperatives in Jonson's *Sejanus*', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 6 (1973), pp. 41–60; A. Richard Dutton, 'The sources, text, and readers of *Sejanus*: Jonson's "integrity in the story"', *Studies in Philology*, 85 (1978), pp. 181–98.

2 H&S, VIII, p. 567.

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**Stage history**

The original version of *Sejanus* was a collaboration, almost certainly with George Chapman.<sup>3</sup> It was first performed at court in the autumn or winter of 1603<sup>4</sup> by the King's Men. The list of players appended to the folio text is headed by Richard Burbage and William Shakespeare, who probably played *Sejanus* and *Tiberius* respectively. The play aroused political displeasure, and Jonson later told Drummond of Hawthornden that 'he was called before the Council for his *Sejanus*, and accused both of popery and treason' by 'his mortal enemy', the Earl of Northampton.<sup>5</sup> The grounds and substance of these charges are still a matter of debate,<sup>6</sup> but nothing came of them. *Sejanus* was given a public performance at the Globe in 1604, probably soon after the theatres reopened in April,<sup>7</sup> and was hissed off the stage. Jonson's revisions for the 1605 quarto publication, however, were not made because of the failure in the public playhouse.<sup>8</sup> There appear not to have been any further Jacobean performances. At the Restoration, *Sejanus* was amongst the plays listed as performed by Killigrew's company, but not amongst their principal old stock plays. In 1752 Francis Gentleman made a destructive adaptation of *Sejanus*, which Garrick, to his credit, rejected. William Poel revived Jonson's play at the Holborn Empire, London, in 1928, where he attempted to reproduce the Elizabethan apron stage, and to add to the period atmosphere of the production the actors who took the parts of Arruntius and Cordus were made up to resemble Jonson and Shakespeare. In recent years, there have been two university productions, both with heavy cuts: one by a University of Sussex *ad hoc* company in 1973, and one by the Cambridge Amateur Dramatic Club in 1979. The impression made by *Sejanus* in performance on both

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3 See R. P. Corballis, 'The "second pen" in the stage version of *Sejanus*', *Modern Philology*, 76 (1978–9), pp. 273–7.

4 E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), III, p. 367.

5 H&S, I, p. 141.

6 See, for example, Dutton, 'Sources'; Philip J. Ayres, 'Jonson, Northampton, and the "treason" in *Sejanus*', *Modern Philology*, 80 (1982–3), pp. 356–63.

7 Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II, p. 210.

8 See note on 1605 quarto, p. 431 below.

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occasions can be summed up by Peter Holland's verdict: 'it is a superbly theatrical drama'.<sup>9</sup>

**Definitive and individual editions**

The definitive edition of *Sejanus* is in Herford and Simpson (introduction, vol. II; text, vol. IV; stage history, commentary and notes, vol. IX). Herford and Simpson reprint the folio text of 1616; and the folio is the base text for three of the four twentieth-century individual editions of the play: the earliest, that of W. D. Briggs in the Heath Belles Lettres series (Boston, Mass.: Heath, 1911), a wise and still useful edition; that of Jonas A. Barish for the Yale Ben Jonson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), a modernised text, with excellent introduction and the usual full and careful annotation of that series; and that by W. F. Bolton in the New Mermaid series (London: Ernest Benn, 1966), with pithy annotation, modernised spelling, but the folio punctuation. Henry de Vocht, *Materials for the Study of Old English Drama*, vol. XI (Louvain: C. Uystpruyst, 1935), printed the quarto text of 1605, which is reproduced in facsimile by The English Experience (Amsterdam and New York: Da Capo Press and Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1970).

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9 Reviewing the Cambridge production for 'A census of Renaissance drama productions', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, 22 (1979), p. 77; see also vol. 17 of the same journal (1974), p. 70.

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## [DEDICATORY EPISTLE]

TO THE NO LESS  
NOBLE, BY VIRTUE,  
THAN BLOOD:  
Esmé,  
Lord Aubigné

My lord,

If ever any ruin were so great, as to survive; I think this  
be one I send you: *The Fall of Sejanus*. It is a poem, that  
(if I well remember) in your lordship's sight, suffered 5  
no less violence from our people here, than the sub-  
ject of it did from the rage of the people of Rome; but  
with a different fate, as (I hope) merit: for this hath  
outlived their malice, and begot itself a greater favour  
than he lost, the love of good men. Amongst whom,  
if I make your lordship the first it thanks, it is not 10  
without a just confession of the bond your benefits  
have, and ever shall hold upon me.

Your lordship's most faithful honourer,  
BEN. JONSON.

---

*Esmé, Lord Aubigné*: Esmé Stuart, Seigneur d'Aubigné (1574–1624), Jonson's friend, patron, and host for five years, celebrated in *Epigrams*, 127.

3 *poem*: play; that which has a 'fable' (plot) and 'fiction', and contains 'things like the truth' (*Discoveries*, H&S, VIII, p. 635).

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## TO THE READERS

The following, and voluntary labours of my friends,  
prefixed to my book, have relieved me in much,  
whereat (without them) I should necessarily have  
touched: now, I will only use three or four short, and  
needful notes, and so rest. 5

First, if it be objected, that what I publish is no true  
poem, in the strict laws of time, I confess it: as also in  
the want of a proper chorus, whose habit, and moods  
are such, and so difficult, as not any, whom I have  
seen since the ancients (no, not they who have most  
presently affected laws), have yet come in the way of. 10  
Nor is it needful, or almost possible, in these our  
times, and to such auditors as commonly things are  
presented, to observe the old state, and splendour of  
dramatic poems, with preservation of any popular  
delight. But of this I shall take more seasonable cause  
to speak in my *Observations upon Horace his Art of  
Poetry*, which (with the text translated) I intend  
shortly to publish. In the meantime, if in truth of  
argument, dignity of persons, gravity and height of  
elocution, fulness and frequency of sentence, I have  
discharged the other offices of a tragic writer, let not  
the absence of these forms be imputed to me, wherein  
I shall give you occasion hereafter (and without my  
boast) to think I could better prescribe, than omit the  
due use, for want of a convenient knowledge. 25

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TO THE READERS: see Textual Note, p. 431 below.

1 *following . . . labours*: commendatory verses; see Textual Note,  
p. 431 below.

7 *strict laws of time*: one of the neo-classical ‘unities’ which held  
that the action of a play should take place within twenty-four  
hours. *Sejanus* covers the period AD 23–31. On the unities see  
also the Additional Note to *Volpone*, Prologue 31, p. 439  
below.

8 *habit*: behaviour.

*moods*: manner.

11 *presently affected laws*: at this time adopted the rules (of  
classical drama).

17–18 *Observations . . . Art of Poetry*: Jonson’s commentary was burnt  
in the fire which destroyed his library in 1623; his verse trans-  
lation was published in 1640.

19–20 *truth of argument*: historical accuracy.

20 *dignity of persons*: nobility of characters.

20–1 *height of elocution*: the ‘high’ style proper to noble subjects.

21 *sentence*: maxims.

26 *convenient*: proper.



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## TO THE READERS

9

The next is, lest in some nice nostril the quotations might savour affected, I do let you know that I abhor nothing more; and have only done it to show my integrity in the story, and save myself in those common torturers, that bring all wit to the rack: whose noses are ever like swine spoiling, and rooting up the Muses' gardens, and their whole bodies, like moles, as blindly working under earth to cast any, the least, hills upon virtue. 30

Whereas they are in Latin and the work in English, it was presupposed none but the learned would take the pains to confer them, the authors themselves being all in the learned tongues, save one, with whose English side I have had little to do: to which it may be required, since I have quoted the page, to name what edition I followed. Tacitus, *Works*, ed. Justus Lipsius, in quarto, Antwerp, 1600. Dio Cassius, *History of the Romans*, ed. Henri Etienne, folio, 1592. For the rest, as Suetonius, Seneca, etc. the chapter doth sufficiently direct, or the edition is not varied. 35

Lastly I would inform you, that this book, in all numbers, is not the same with that which was acted on the public stage, wherein a second pen had a good share: in place of which I have rather chosen to put weaker (and no doubt less pleasing) of mine own, than to defraud so happy a genius of his right, by my loathed usurpation. 50

Fare you well. And if you read farther of me, and like, I shall not be afraid of it though you praise me out. 55

*Neque enim mihi cornea fibra est.*

27 *nice*: over-refined.

*quotations*: Jonson's references to classical and Renaissance authorities; see Textual Note, p. 431 below.

30 *in those*: amongst those.

36 *they*: the quotations.

38 *confer*: compare.

39 *one*: Richard Greenway's translation of Tacitus's *Annals* (1598), apparently followed by Jonson in IV.[iv].399.

42–5 *Tacitus . . . 1592*: see Textual Note, p. 431 below.

49 *numbers*: verses.

50 *second pen*: that of George Chapman.

56–7 *praise me out*: thoroughly appraise me; also, 'heartily commend me'.

58 *Neque . . . est*: 'For my heart is not made of horn' (Persius, *Satires*, I.47): I am not unmoved by praise.

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## SEJANUS

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But that I should plant my felicity in your general  
saying 'good', or 'well', etc. were a weakness which 60  
the better sort of you might worthily contemn, if not  
absolutely hate me for.

BEN. JONSON, and no such,  
*Quem palma negata macrum, donata reducit opimum.*

---

64 *Quem . . . opimum*: 'Whom the palm denied sends back lean;  
the palm bestowed, sends back plump' (Horace, *Epistles*,  
II.i.181); expressing Jonson's independent attitude to popu-  
larity; also, a joking reference to his portly figure.