

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus,
Volpone, Epicoene, or The Silent Woman
Edited by Johanna Procter
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

THE SELECTED PLAYS OF
BEN JONSON
VOLUME 1

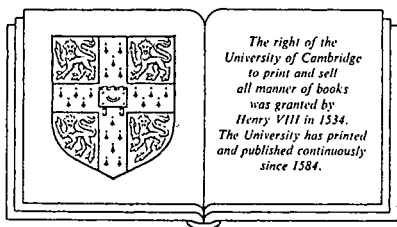
Sejanus

Volpone

Epicoene, or The Silent Woman

EDITED BY
JOHANNA PROCTER
Lecturer in English, University College of Swansea

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
MARTIN BUTLER
Lecturer in English, University of Leeds



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE
NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE
MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus,
Volpone, Epicoene, or The Silent Woman
Edited by Johanna Procter
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1989

First published 1989

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Jonson, Ben, 1573–1637
The selected plays of Ben Jonson. – (Plays
by Renaissance and Restoration dramatists).
Vol. 1
I. Title II. Procter, Johanna III. Series
822'.3

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Jonson, Ben, 1573?–1637
The selected plays of Ben Jonson.
(Plays by Renaissance and Restoration dramatists)
Vol. 1, edited by Johanna Procter.
Contents: Sejanus; Volpone; Epicoene, or
The Silent Woman
I. Procter, Johanna. II. Title. III. Series.
PR2602.B87 1988 822'.3 88–9568

ISBN 0 521 21747 4 hard covers

ISBN 0 521 29248 4 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 1999

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus,
Volpone, Epicoene, or The Silent Woman
Edited by Johanna Procter
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

<i>Preface to the series</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Introduction</i>	vii
SEJANUS	
Introductory note	3
Text	7
VOLPONE	
Introductory note	135
Text	142
EPICOENE, OR THE SILENT WOMAN	
Introductory note	295
Text	301
<i>Notes</i>	
Textual notes	431
Additional notes	435

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus,
Volpone, Epicicene, or The Silent Woman

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE TO THE SERIES

This series provides the best plays (in some cases, the complete plays) of the major English Renaissance and Restoration dramatists, in fully-annotated, modern-spelling texts, soundly edited by scholars in the field.

The introductory matter in each volume is factual and historical rather than critical: it includes, where appropriate, a brief biography of the playwright, a list of his works with dates of plays' first performances, the reasons for the volume editor's choice of plays, a short critical bibliography and a note on the texts used. An introductory note to each play then gives the source material, a short stage-history, and details of the individual editions of that play.

Short notes at the foot of the page are designed to gloss the text or enlarge on its literary, historical or social allusions. Editors have added explanatory notes and have commented on textual variants.

The volumes are intended for anyone interested in English drama in two of its richest periods, but they will prove especially useful to students at all levels who want to enjoy and explore the best work of these dramatists.

Graham Storey

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus,
Volpone, Epicoene, or The Silent Woman

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Life

Ben Jonson was born between October 1572 and May 1573, the posthumous son of an impoverished gentleman who had 'turned Minister' of religion. His mother's remarriage to a master bricklayer of Westminster and the temporary apprenticeship to his stepfather's craft which the young man would later undergo left him especially sensitive to imputations of meanness of birth, but despite being 'brought up poorly' he was educated (through the good offices of an unknown benefactor) at Westminster School under the great schoolmaster William Camden; with this man, and with other scholars of his circle, such as John Selden and Robert Cotton, Jonson maintained an enduring friendship. Before appearing in the books of the theatre financier Philip Henslowe in 1597, Jonson had served as a soldier in Flanders (during which service, he later claimed, he had killed an enemy in single combat), and spent some time as a strolling player. He had also married; his wife, 'a shrew yet honest', was to bear him at least two children, both of whom died in infancy.

The first title connected with his name was the 'sedytious' comedy *The Isle of Dogs*, part authorship of which earned him two months' imprisonment in 1597. In the next two years he saw prison twice more: once for debt, once for the manslaughter of a fellow actor, Gabriel Spencer, killed in a duel after a quarrel. During this third imprisonment he became a Catholic, though he returned to the Church of England around 1610. By 1599 he was already being listed as among 'our best for Tragedie', but his earliest surviving successes were comedies performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, *Every Man in his Humour* (1598) and *Every Man out of his Humour* (1599); the latter was the first of three 'comical satires' that broke away from the norms of Elizabethan romantic writing represented by his own *The Case is Altered* (1598), a play he chose not to include among his collected works. In the other comical satires, *Cynthia's Revels* and *The Poetaster*, both staged in 1601 by the Children of the Chapel, Jonson attempted to work out his highly individual and experimental ideas of comic form, but found himself embroiled with John Marston and Thomas Dekker in the so-called 'War of the Theatres'. Hostilities were not so acrimonious that Jonson was unwilling to collaborate with Marston in *Eastward Ho!* (1605), but he did retire temporarily from the stage after *Poetaster*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: *Sejanus*,
Volpone, *Epicœne*, or *The Silent Woman*

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

viii

to live on the patronage of Sir Robert Townshend and Lord Aubigny.

The product of retirement was the massive, scholarly and almost equally experimental tragedy *Sejanus* (1603), written in collaboration, probably with George Chapman, and published in revised form as Jonson's own in 1605. This play was cried down by the popular audience at the Globe, but seems to have been a personal catalyst for the establishment of the mature Jonsonian comic form two years later in *Volpone* (1605), written for the King's Men. The following ten years saw a succession of major comedies:

Epicœne, written for the Children of Her Majesty's Revels (1609–10), *The Alchemist*, performed by the King's Men (1610), and *Bartholomew Fair*, written for the Lady Elizabeth's Men at the Hope (1614). This decade deservedly established Jonson in the eyes of contemporaries as the foremost literary figure of the age; his only theatrical failure was his other demanding classical tragedy *Catiline* (1611), for which the King's Men failed to find an 'understanding auditory'.

These years also saw Jonson fulfilling the role of the leading court poet. One of the contributors to the coronation pageantry in 1604, he was invited to write the queen's entertainment for Twelfth Night, 1605, and *The Masque of Blackness*, staged in collaboration with the architect and scene designer Inigo Jones, initiated what would become a twenty-year career as foremost writer of court masques. However, Jonson's relationship with the court remained ambivalent: his conservative predilection for a stable, responsible monarchy was compromised by his moral idealism and his realism about the nature of the Jacobean dispensation. Unfriendly interpretation of suspect passages in *Sejanus* led to his being accused of 'popery and treason' at the council table in 1604, and jokes about the new king's Scottish favourites in *Eastward Ho!* left him in prison and in danger of losing his ears. Nonetheless in 1605 Jonson was making up for his indiscretions by assisting in the investigations consequent on the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, while dedications and poems from this period attest to friendships with powerful aristocratic families such as the Sidneys, the Herberts and the Cecils, some of whom may have been instrumental in obtaining his release from his latest imprisonment. The award of a small royal pension in 1616 made Jonson poet laureate in all but name, while the folio volume of his *Works*, meticulously

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus, Volpone, Epicoene, or The Silent Woman

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

ix

edited and published the same year, marked a moment of personal culmination.

And yet, after *Bartholomew Fair*, *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) seems a curiously impoverished comedy, and there are hints in both plays of Jonson's dissatisfaction with his public audiences and with the forms within which he was working. Capitalising on his court success, Jonson ceased temporarily to write for the professional stage altogether; his literary output for ten years was confined to masques for Whitehall and projects other than plays, while at the Apollo Room of the Devil Tavern he presided over an informal literary club, the 'Tribe of Ben'.

However, though honours continued to come in the 1620s, Jonson began to find that his position was being undermined from within, as his relations with Whitehall were made difficult by his personal and intellectual disagreements with his masque designer, Inigo Jones, and by his own ambivalent attitude to the new order arising under Prince Charles and the Duke of Buckingham. After the death of James, Jonson found himself rather out of place in the polite, elegant and attenuated atmosphere of the Caroline court. His slender royal pension fell increasingly into arrears, and only once, in 1631, did Charles invite him to provide a masque; on this occasion his poor artistic relationship with Jones came to a head in a major public row from which Jonson emerged the loser. In 1628 he was among those questioned about the authorship of verses in praise of the assassin of the Duke of Buckingham. A series of begging letters from this time testifies to his reduced circumstances, and though he was appointed Chronologer of the City of London in 1628, his salary was withheld from 1631 to 1634 owing to non-performance of his duties. By this stage he had suffered a stroke and was confined to his bedchamber; a project for a second volume of his works collapsed in 1631. A combination of circumstances was conspiring to force him back to the professional stage again. Jonson's late plays (*The Staple of News*, 1626; *The New Inn*, 1629; *The Magnetic Lady*, 1632; *A Tale of a Tub*, 1633; and the unfinished *Sad Shepherd*) have been overshadowed by the catastrophic failure of *The New Inn*, which was hissed from the Blackfriars stage, but the other plays, if not equalling Jonson's best work, do not deserve the label 'dotages' which Dryden stuck on them. They are, rather, an astonishing period of renewed productivity in a career already remarkable for its length, and mark a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: *Sejanus*,
Volpone, *Epicœne*, or *The Silent Woman*

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

x

courageous and hard-won return to a changed theatre by a master playwright reassessing both his own theatrical preferences and his relationship to the dominant cultural modes of an unsympathetic age.

Though in the 1630s Jonson was shamefully neglected by the court (one courtier in 1632 expressed surprise to hear that he was still alive), his last years were not devoid of friends and supporters. His last patron, the Earl of Newcastle, provided financial help and commissioned two entertainments for presentation to the king when he visited the earl's Nottinghamshire estates; and Jonson's friendship with Edward Hyde put him in touch with a circle that included the Earl of Falkland, William Chillingworth, John Earle, Tom May and Thomas Carew. It seems to have been largely from this group that the initiative came for the volume of posthumous elegies, *Jonsonus Virbius*. Jonson died on 6 August 1637. 'All or the greatest part of nobility and gentry then in the town' attended his funeral at Westminster Abbey. His goods were valued at £8 8s 10d.

The text of this edition

Jonson was unique in his own time for closely supervising the publication of his plays in person. Consequently, the early published texts of the plays in this volume carry an unusually high degree of authorial intention in the matter of accidentals, even taking into account the unreliability of seventeenth-century typesetting. The copy-text for all three plays is the great folio volume of *Works* (1616), over which Jonson seems to have exercised considerable editorial control, though reference has also to be made to two earlier quartos. *Sejanus* had already been printed in a scrupulously exact quarto in 1605, replete with commendatory verses and substantial annotation in the margins concerning Jonson's Latin sources (mostly removed in the folio text). *Volpone* appeared in quarto in 1607, again in a text unusually reliable by Jacobean standards. Both plays were revised for their appearances in the folio, *Sejanus* more heavily than *Volpone* (though significant alterations were made to the punctuation of *Volpone*). *Epicœne* remained unpublished until the folio. Gifford mentioned a 1612 quarto, but this seems to have been a ghost (and the 1620 quarto carries no independent authority, being a careless reprint of the folio text).

In the preparation of this volume, an attempt has been

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus, Volpone, Epicoene, or The Silent Woman

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xi

made to conserve as much as is appropriate in a modernised edition of Jonson's intentions as manifested in these early editions. The main differences from other modernised texts are:

(1) This edition preserves some of Jonson's contracted verbal forms, particularly observing *yo'are* and *yo'were* which distinguish tenses obscured by the modernised *you're*, and for which Jonson exhibits a marked preference.

(2) Some of Jonson's preferred spellings have been tentatively retained, where there would seem to be grounds for doing so. For example, Jonson preferred the form *porcpisce* to *porpoise*, as it preserved the word's etymology (*Sejanus*, V.[vii].638, *Volpone*, II.i.40); he used *moile* for *mule* at *Volpone*, I.ii.39–41, where it would seem to be in keeping with the joky tone of Mosca's show; so too *kastril* for *kestrel* at *Epicoene*, IV.iv.210 preserves the pun on *cast* in the same line.

(3) In punctuating, respect has been given to Jonson's indications of dramatic emphasis as far as it is consistent with modernisation. A very strong case can be made out for the practical value of Jonson's punctuation. Jonson had sophisticated notions of the function of punctuation (for which see his *English Grammar*), and evolved his own highly developed system of pointing which, though it seems heavy to modern readers and has been dismissed as merely rhetorical or grammatical, can repeatedly be shown to carry real theatrical force. The outstanding instance is *Volpone*, I.v.78 ('Am not I here? whom you have made? your creature?'), in which the syntactically disruptive question marks can only be explained in terms of their significance for the actor's delivery, but there are many comparable examples. In the same play, the darting, fly-like movement of Mosca's mind is underlined by the commas and semicolons that break his soliloquy into short, swooping phrases (III.i). Similarly, in *Epicoene* the capacious emptiness of La Foole's mentality is wonderfully signalled in the punctuation of his first extended speech (I.iv.41–75), held together as it is by only commas and dashes, while Truewit tortures Morose with a seemingly inexhaustible battery of clauses, linked paratactically by semicolons and subdivided by commas into part upon endless part (II.ii.21–35). So too in *Sejanus*, Silius's impotent rage at Sejanus is signalled dramatically by an explosion of clotted punctuation that obstructs the free movement of his speech (I.[i].201–12) and which contrasts

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: *Sejanus*,
Volpone, *Epicene*, or *The Silent Woman*

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xii

with the impression of absolute control conveyed by the heavier, exact pointing of his death speech (III.[i].319–39). In Tiberius's mouth, such weighty pointing is ominous, his laboured colons and semicolons hinting tacitly at more meaning than he intends publicly to acknowledge (III.[ii].675–89).

Inevitably, there has to be some lightening and regularising of Jonson's pointing for the convenience of the modern reader, but simply to repunctuate from scratch, following modern principles, is to forfeit an important dimension of the Jonsonian text: a comparison between the contemporary editions and any of the more radically repointed modern versions reveals starkly the loss of dramatic immediacy and even clarity which is involved. As far as possible punctuation has been respected which could be held to have potential as theatrical signals, and Jonson's punctuation has been revised only where it threatens to obscure the sense. Jonson's distinctive use of parentheses to mark asides or interruptions to otherwise continuous dialogue has been allowed to stand, as it offers no great difficulty to the modern reader.

The text of *Sejanus* follows other editions in giving continuous line numbering for each act. In references to the play in the commentary, scene numbers are placed within square brackets, as for example V.[vii].638.

The standard edition of Jonson, to which all subsequent editors are indebted, not least for its substantial introductions and notes, is the monumental 11-volume Clarendon text, *The Works of Ben Jonson* (ed. C. H. Herford, and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, Oxford, 1925–52), hereafter referred to as Herford and Simpson or H&S. A remarkable achievement for its time, this edition is not likely to be superseded in the foreseeable future. The principal editions before Herford and Simpson were those of Peter Whalley (7 vols., 1756), William Gifford (9 vols., 1816), and Francis Cunningham's revision of Gifford (3 vols., 1871). A modernised version of Herford and Simpson in four volumes with inadequate commentary has been prepared by G. A. Wilkes (1981–2). The many single-volume editions of individual plays are listed in the introductions to each play. The editor of this volume most gratefully acknowledges her indebtedness to all those preceding editors whose work has revealed the richness and vitality of Jonson's drama.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus,
Volpone, Epicoene, or The Silent Woman

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xiii

Select bibliography*Biography*

It is remarkable that the life of this many-sided figure has attracted so little serious attention. At the moment, the choice of biographies is between Marchette Chute's *Ben Jonson of Westminster* (London: Robert Hale, 1954) and Rosalind Miles's *Ben Jonson, His Life and Work* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); the former inclines to the leisurely and sentimental, the latter to the workmanlike and breezy. Richard Helgerson has studied Jonson's processes of self-definition as a writer in *Self-Crowned Laureate* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), and Jonathan Goldberg, in his dense and provocative book *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), has investigated Jonson's contribution to the language and iconography of Stuart kingship. The shape of Jonson's career has been examined in relation to the cultural and political pressures of the day by Philip Edwards in *Threshold of a Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and by David Norbrook in *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), but there is still plenty of room for a full-scale literary and intellectual biography, if a scholar can be found brave enough to attempt it. Much the best direct approaches to Jonson the man are through the comments of contemporaries collected in Herford and Simpson (XI, pp. 305–494) and in *The Jonson Allusion-Book* (ed. J. F. Bradley and J. Q. Adams (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922)), and through Jonson's *Conversations with William Drummond* (Herford and Simpson, I, pp. 128–78), his own informal, unreliable but utterly fascinating self-assessment.

Criticism

Jonson has always received sympathetic commentary from practising poets. Detailed criticism begins with Dryden's account of *Epicoene* in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668). To Coleridge, Jonson seemed a 'Mammoth or Megatherion', but he praised his 'sterling English diction', and accounted *The Alchemist* one of 'the three most perfect plots ever planned' (R. F. Brinkley (ed.), *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1955), pp. 637–49). T. S. Eliot's ambiva-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus, Volpone, Epicoene, or The Silent Woman

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xiv

lent praise in his famous essay of 1919 (collected in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932)) has had an ambivalent effect on succeeding criticism; but A. C. Swinburne's *A Study of Ben Jonson* (1888–9), though ridiculed by Eliot, deserves to be much better known, not least for its enthusiasm and its endearingly eccentric preference for *The Staple of News*.

The seminal work for modern scholarship has been L. C. Knights's *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1937), which made the first serious attempt to assess Jonson's plays in the light of their socio-economic context. Knights's approach has been refined by Brian Gibbons in *Jacobean City Comedy* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968), and criticised by Don E. Wayne, 'Drama and society in the age of Jonson: an alternative view' (*Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 13 (1982), pp. 103–29). Nicholas Grene examines the implications of Knights's failure to take *Bartholomew Fair* seriously in 'L. C. Knights's *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*' (*Themes in Drama*, I (1979), pp. 291–8).

Dryden's neo-classical account of the principles of Jonsonian comic form was attacked by Freda L. Townsend in *Apologie for Bartholomew Fayre: The Art of Jonson's Comedies* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1947), but Townsend's structural formula of 'unity in variety' has itself been modified by Wallace A. Bacon in 'The magnetic field: the structure of Jonson's comedies' (*Huntington Library Quarterly*, 19 (1955–6), pp. 121–53). Gabriele Bernhardt Jackson's wide-ranging *Vision and Judgment in Ben Jonson's Drama* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) includes a brilliant analysis of the structural mechanics of Jonsonian comedy; some of her analyses have been built upon by Gail Kern Paster in 'Ben Jonson's comedy of limitation' (*Studies in Philology*, 72 (1975), pp. 51–71). Jonson's formal debt to the Tudor morality play is investigated by A. C. Dessen in *Jonson's Moral Comedy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), while Leo Salinger has examined the influence of Aristophanes in 'Comic form in Ben Jonson' (reprinted in his *Dramatic Form in Shakespeare and the Jacobean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 153–74). Thomas M. Greene traces one structural pattern in 'Ben Jonson and the centred self' (*Studies in English Literature*, 10 (1970), pp. 325–48).

Amongst recent book-length studies, the most important has been Anne Barton's *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: *Sejanus*,
Volpone, *Epicene*, or *The Silent Woman*

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xv

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), which traces throughout Jonson's career his twin rages for order and for chaos, radically revising the traditional stereotype of an aloof, Horatian dramatist. A similarly complex Jonson emerges from Richard Dutton's rather uneven book, *Ben Jonson: To the First Folio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), while he is altogether less genial a figure in Douglas Duncan's *Ben Jonson and the Lucianic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) which tellingly investigates the humanist roots of Jonson's strategies for teasing his audience towards judgement. Katharine Eisaman Maus's *Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) is an important study of Jonson's personal investment in classical Latin literature, while the most recent study, Peter Womack's *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), attempts to approach Jonson from within a Bakhtinian perspective. A range of Jonsonian topics is treated by Alexander Leggatt in *Ben Jonson: His Vision and His Art* (London: Methuen, 1981), by L. A. Beaurline in *Jonson and Elizabethan Comedy: Essays in Dramatic Rhetoric* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1978), and by George Parfitt in his brief but suggestive collection of essays, *Ben Jonson: Public Poet and Private Man* (London: Dent, 1976). Amongst the older studies, Edward B. Partridge's *The Broken Compass* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958) continues to be an influential account of Jonson's imagery; Robert E. Knoll's *Ben Jonson's Plays: An Introduction* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) remains a useful introductory work, if rather earnest in its emphasis on the morality of Jonson's writing. Most of these books give space to the three plays contained in this volume.

Sejanus has proved to be oddly resistant to criticism, and there is still no entirely satisfactory full-scale treatment of the play. Two significant early essays are J. A. Bryant's defence, 'The nature of the conflict in Jonson's *Sejanus*' (*Vanderbilt Studies in the Humanities*, ed. Richard Beatty *et al.* (1951), pp. 197–219), which tends to blunt the play's pessimism, and K. M. Burton's comparative study, 'The political tragedies of Chapman and Ben Jonson' (*Essays in Criticism*, 2 (1952), pp. 397–412), which emphasises the social dimensions of the tragedy. In a later and more substantial comparative essay, G. R. Hibbard examines Jonson's and Chapman's contrasting responses to the legacy of the immoral Marlovian hero ('Goodness and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: *Sejanus*,
Volpone, *Epicone*, or *The Silent Woman*

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xvi

greatness: an essay on the tragedies of Ben Jonson and George Chapman', *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, 11 (1967), pp. 5–54).

By far the best work on *Sejanus* has been done on its politics, the classic statement here being Geoffrey Hill's fastidious and moralistic essay, "The world's proportion": Jonson's dramatic poetry in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*' (in J. R. Brown and B. Harris (eds.), *Jacobean Theatre* (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 1, London, 1960), pp. 112–31; reprinted in G. Hill, *The Lords of Limit* (London: Deutsch, 1984)). J. W. Lever's *The Tragedy of State* (London: Methuen, 1971) takes an urgent, contemporary line on the play, and there is a brief, suggestive treatment in Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984). By contrast, K. W. Evans's argument that the play's politics are formulaic and anachronistic is perverse and unconvincing ('*Sejanus* and the ideal prince tradition', *Studies in English Literature*, 11 (1971), pp. 249–64). The difficulties of relating *Sejanus* to its political setting are approached by M. H. Wikander in "Queasy to be touched": the world of Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*' (*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 78 (1979), pp. 345–77), and by Philip J. Ayres in 'Jonson, Northampton and the "treason" in *Sejanus*' (*Modern Philology*, 80 (1982–3), pp. 356–63), while the implications of Jonson's choice of a Roman subject are pursued by Annabel Patterson in "Roman-cast similitude": Ben Jonson and the English use of Roman history' (in P. A. Ramsey (ed.), *Rome in the Renaissance* (Binghamton, New York: The State University of New York, 1982), pp. 381–94). Jonson's manipulation of his sources in order to address political issues is explored in two essays, D. C. Boughner's '*Sejanus* and Machiavelli' (*Studies in English Literature*, 1 (1961), pp. 81–100) and Richard Dutton's 'The sources, text and readers of *Sejanus*' (*Studies in Philology*, 75 (1978), pp. 181–98; partially reprinted in Dutton's *Ben Jonson: To the First Folio*).

On more purely literary matters, Christopher Ricks describes one dimension of the play's language in '*Sejanus* and dismemberment' (*Modern Language Notes*, 76 (1961), pp. 301–8), and Arthur F. Marotti discusses the play's fascination with its own theatricality in 'The self-reflexive art of Jonson's *Sejanus*' (*Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 12 (1970), pp. 345–77). In his introduction to the Yale edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), Jonas A. Barish reflects thoughtfully on ways in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus, Volpone, Epicoene, or The Silent Woman

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xvii

which the play mediates between poetry and history. John G. Sweeney's 'Sejanus and the people's beastly rage' (*ELH*, 48 (1981), pp. 61–82) is a psycho-sexual study which reads the conflict between Tiberius and Sejanus as a projection of Jonson's own anxieties about authorial control.

Much of the literature on *Volpone* has revolved around the related issues of the difficulty of judging the play's central figure and the question of how seriously to take Celia and Bonario. The older ironic reading of Volpone as a character who unconsciously exposes his own inadequate values is best represented by A. B. Kernan's *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), and by S. L. Goldberg's 'Folly into crime: the catastrophe of *Volpone*' (*Modern Language Quarterly*, 20 (1959), pp. 233–42). Both of these essays have their ambivalences, but the now widespread view which presents Volpone as appealing positively to our unacknowledged sympathies or to our delight in theatricality, and which sometimes involves debunking Celia and Bonario, came fully to the fore with William Empson's provocative but untrustworthy essay 'Volpone' in *The Hudson Review* (21 (1968–9), pp. 650–66), and with Alexander Leggatt's 'The suicide of Volpone' (*University of Toronto Quarterly*, 39 (1969–70), pp. 19–32). Much the most eloquent and sympathetic account of Volpone comes from John Creaser in 'Volpone: the mortifying of the fox' (*Essays in Criticism*, 25 (1975), pp. 329–56), while the play acquires almost tragic dimensions in Robert Westcott's 'Volpone? – or The Fox?' (*The Critical Review* (Melbourne), 17 (1974), pp. 82–96). Despite its title, Stephen Greenblatt's 'The false ending in *Volpone*' (*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 77 (1976), pp. 90–104) is concerned with the theatricality of the title character.

The other major debate has been over the subplot, the seminal essay here being Jonas A. Barish's 'The double plot in *Volpone*' (reprinted, with a selection of other helpful criticism, in Barish's anthology *Volpone: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1972)). This essay has now been superseded by John Creaser's spirited reevaluation, 'A vindication of Sir Politic Would-be' (*English Studies*, 17 (1976), pp. 502–14). Also worth consulting is Judd Arnold's 'The double plot in *Volpone*' (*Seventeenth-Century News*, 23 (1965), pp. 47–52). The play's concern with sickness is examined by Harriet Hawkins in 'Folly, incurable disease, and *Volpone*' (*Studies in English Literature*, 8 (1968), pp. 335–48), and more urgently by Ian

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus, Volpone, Epicoene, or The Silent Woman

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xviii

Donaldson in 'Volpone: quick and dead' (*Essays in Criticism*, 21 (1971), pp. 121–34). Two vigorous and informative essays by R. B. Parker concern the play's sources and stage history: 'Volpone and Reynard the Fox' (*Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 7 (1976), pp. 3–42) and 'Volpone in performance: 1921–1972' (*Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 9 (1978), pp. 147–73).

Essential reading on *Epicoene* is a remarkable chapter in Jonas A. Barish's *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), which goes well beyond its initial concern with style. An earlier essay by Barish, 'Ovid, Juvenal and *The Silent Woman*' (*PMLA*, 71 (1956), pp. 213–24), sparked off an arid little debate on the play's supposed uncertainties of attitude; the last word on this is probably John Ferns's 'Ovid, Juvenal and *The Silent Woman*: a reconsideration' (*Modern Language Review*, 65 (1970), pp. 248–53). Much more central has been the growing realisation that the comedy is nowhere near as pleasant as it pretends to be: this has been strongly argued in relation to the play's festive background by Ian Donaldson (in *The World Upside Down* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970)) and in relation to the three wits by Alexander Leggatt in 'Morose and his tormentors' (*University of Toronto Quarterly*, 45 (1975–6), pp. 221–35). W. D. Kay attempts a determined but finally unsuccessful defence of the wits in 'Jonson's urbane gallants: humanistic contexts for *Epicoene*' (*Huntington Library Quarterly*, 39 (1975–6), pp. 251–66). The first person to ask why the play was so noisy was Ray L. Heffner Jr, in 'Unifying symbols in the comedy of Ben Jonson' (reprinted in R. J. Kaufmann (ed.), *Elizabethan Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 170–86), and the links between the noise and the city setting are brilliantly pursued by Leo Salinger in 'Farce and fashion in *The Silent Woman*' (reprinted in his *Dramatic Form in Shakespeare and the Jacobean*, pp. 175–88); a similar tack is taken by Emrys Jones in 'The first West End comedy' (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, 68 (1982), pp. 215–58). Terence Hawkes relates the play's noise to Jonson's ideas about the social functions of language in *Shakespeare's Talking Animals* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973). There is a recent feminist reading by Barbara C. Millard, '“An acceptable violence”: sexual contest in Jonson's *Epicoene*' (*Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 1 (1984), pp. 143–58).

Finally, mention should be made of an important study

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29248-1 - The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson, Volume 1: Sejanus,
Volpone, Epicoene, or The Silent Woman

Edited by Johanna Procter

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xix

of the theatre history of Jonson's plays, R. G. Noyes's *Ben Jonson on the English Stage 1660–1776* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935). There is a fairly recent consolidated bibliography of Jonson by William L. Godshalk in T. P. Logan and Denzell S. Smith (eds.), *The New Intellectuals* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), pp. 3–116.