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978-0-521-51378-4 - Ben Jonson and the Politics of Genre

Edited by A. D. Cousins and Alison V. Scott

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Introduction

A. D. Cousins and Alison V. Scott

There have been many discussions of Jonson's political vision – or visions – but this is the first book-length study of how Jonson deployed 'the resources of kind' in order to shape his political fictions. As with the counterpart to this volume, *Donne and the Resources of Kind*, our starting point is Bakhtin's insistence that each genre offers a window on the world: that each of the kinds makes available a perspective on the world, one which is inherited and variously renewed (or sometimes, of course, inherited but not renewed).¹ The questions arising from such a consideration necessarily include these. If genres each offer a perspective – which is to say, in effect, a confluence of perspectives – on the world, how does any given writer use what they make available? How are those perspectives enlarged or diminished, redirected or subverted, violated or endorsed? In this case, then, how does Jonson use genre to offer representations of the political – to refigure what he perceived as the political actualities of early Stuart society? Thus, correlatively, to what extent does he involve his readers in the remembering and remaking of genre, thereby drawing them into recognition of and putative acquiescence with his renderings of political concepts and relations?

Engaging with the Jonson canon by way of those and other such questions, this book at once complements current scholarship and reinterprets major Jonsonian texts. It offers a widely ranging overview of the Jonson canon but does not lay claim to completeness – a task that would necessitate a very much larger volume. Recent commentary on Jonson's works has tended to focus upon the politics of possessive authorship, addressing in particular questions of textual materiality and consumption that surround Jonson's production of the 1616 Folio.² In its reconsideration of the Folio as cultural artifact, however, that scholarship relies on a range of studies which investigate pervasive aspects of Jonson's work. Those include Jonson's classicism (Maus, 1984), his patronage relations (Evans, 1989), his laureate ambitions (Helgerson, 1983), his humanism (McCanles,

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1992), and his realism (Haynes, 1992).³ Such studies have focused enquiry into the relationships among Jonson's texts, their varied readers/audiences, and the forms of authority they seek, shape, and are shaped by which the present volume reconsiders and advances in relation to Jonson's politics of genre.

If there is anything upon which recent Jonson commentators agree it is that the relationships Jonson crafts with his reader/s are complex, deliberate, and political. Borrowing the notion of a 'theatre of poetry' from Martial, as Rosalind Miles points out, Jonson challenges his reader to become his 'ideal audience . . . and to share his standards and accept his assessments'.⁴ Persistently engaged in the task of creating that ideal reader – most obviously in the *Epigrams* as A. D. Cousins' essay in this volume discusses, but also across the canon – Jonson's contrary attempts to assert authority over his text and image at the same time as he is forced to acknowledge his ultimate lack of authority over his subject have provided an abiding critical focus.⁵ A 'Men-making' poet who was nevertheless unavoidably dependent upon the men (and women) that he 'made', Jonson employed the rhetoric of wisdom, virtue, and understanding to assert the value of his texts and, by implication, of his reader/s. Ideally, the value of text, subject, and reader correspond – the subject of a text lives up to the praise Jonson offers, his writing is revealed as truth, and his judicious reader understands this and never mistakes it for anything less noble. Nevertheless, Jonson's anxieties about that ideal and the points at which it might potentially break down permeate his work.

Apart from the *Epigrams'* famous appeal for understanding, then, which obviously implies a fear of and disgust for *misunderstanding*, Jonson expresses regret at having praised a 'worthless lord' in 'To My Muse', variously seeks the protection (from a rancorous and ignorant multitude) of wise and charitable critics in the prefaces to his drama, and asserts that his 'sound and nourishing' masques are not for those of 'airy tastes' in *Hymenai*. Picking up on those anxieties and directives, many recent studies of the Jonsonian canon – particularly material studies focusing on the politics of publication – have engaged with the twin ideas of authority and authorship to illuminate tensions in and among the texts and in relation to Jonson's self-presentation. Joseph Loewenstein's work is exemplary in that regard, perceiving the 1616 Folio as 'a groping move forward to later authorial property rights' while at the same time acknowledging that it is modelled on and authorized by 'the economics of patronage'.⁶ Sara Van den Berg, meanwhile, advances what has become a customary association between the Folio's organization and the identity of the author. In her

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essay 'Ben Jonson and the Ideology of Authorship', she argues that the Folio represented an attempt by Jonson to 'reconcile the impersonal resources of genre and rhetorical mode with the personal resource of his own unique voice'; its frontispiece more an announcement of authorship than an advertisement for the contents of the book.⁷

Tackling those and related questions from a different perspective, meanwhile, critics such as Barbara Smith, Michael G. Brennan, Helen Ostovich, and Julie Sanders have recently investigated Jonson's textual authority in relation to gender politics; Sanders, in particular, broaches the problem of reconciling Jonson's antifeminist depictions of female communities (*Epicene's* collegiates) in the drama with his 'feminocentric ventures into the masques'.⁸ A recent article by Christopher Gaggero draws on Sanders' discussion to argue that Jonson's portrayal of women in fulfilling public roles in *Catiline* marks an attempt to mobilize the gender politics of civic humanism to challenge the positions of political absolutism.⁹ Nevertheless, in terms of Jonson's gender politics, there is important ground yet to be covered. In her exploration of the politics of gender and genre in *A Celebration of Charis*, and the interconnectedness of its representation of the female with Jonson's praise of Mary Wroth, Marea Mitchell goes some way to addressing that gap here. Significantly, her chapter in this volume highlights important intersections between Jonson's politics of genre and the gender politics of his work, and suggests how Jonson's 'imagining of a female point-of-view ... illuminates the corners and shadows of seventeenth-century sexual conventions'.

Other critics have approached the politics of Jonson's works from a more specifically ideological perspective, focusing especially on his classicism.¹⁰ For several commentators, Jonson's imitation of and allusions to classical authors are legitimizing tools, and fundamental within his self-presentation as discriminating author. In her fine study of *Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind*, then, Katharine Eisaman Maus influentially argues that Jonson inherits 'a set of moral and psychological assumptions [from the Roman moralists] that condition the way he construes ethical, social, and artistic issues'.¹¹ Pivotal, that inheritance shapes his critical perspective, his preference for particular literary genres, and his complex relationships with his audiences and readers. Similarly, Michael McCanles has asserted the centrality of the classical tradition of *vera nobilitas* – a set of arguments concerning 'the true foundations of aristocratic status' redeployed by Renaissance humanists to serve their own 'educational agenda' – in Jonson's work.¹² As both John Roe's chapter on Jonson's verse epistles and Robert C. Evans' chapter on his country house poems discuss,

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however, the politics of the gift provide a point of intersection between Jonson's poetics of ethics and the material world he seeks to transcend: Jonson's 'free labours' must finally seek payment.

Invoking classical authors enables Jonson, as Roe observes here, 'to establish the desired relationship between himself and his patron . . . a relationship of equals', but that relationship is always problematic because 'the world that exploits gift-giving, and wilfully disregards the relationship of mutual respect that Jonson is eager to promote' always threatens to obtrude. In an innovative reconsideration of *Volpone* (the culmination of a career-long interest in the play and a host of related publications), Richard Dutton reads the relationship between *Volpone* and Mosca in terms of those most difficult aspects and contradictions of the patronage relations Jonson was obliged to pursue, even after he had come to resent the patron in question.¹³ Dutton argues that *Volpone* is unusual (for a 'comedy') in its directly political attack on Robert Cecil's 'perverse exploitation of religion . . . in pursuit of wealth and power'. In connecting the play's examination of metempsychosis with Donne's poem 'Metempsychosis, or the Progress of the Soul', Dutton's chapter brings Donne criticism to bear on the Pythagorean show of *Volpone*, and illuminates a specific and hitherto unexamined political context of Jonson's drama.

In his poetry, his drama, and his masques Jonson reflects on the difficulties and disjunctions of his relations with the patronage economy and, conversely, with the emerging literary marketplace. Rosalind Miles' study – *Ben Jonson: His Craft and Art* – is distinctive in stressing the dramatic qualities of Jonson's poetry and perceives a Jonson in constant dialogue with himself, playing out various roles in his poetry and utilizing interlocutors to test, affirm, and/or unravel particular views.¹⁴ In his study of Jonson's rhetoric of discrimination, however, McCanles advances a complementary view that the *vera nobilitas* argument enables what he calls dialectic 'ethical perceptions' that make the 'praise of true nobility' possible for Jonson only when it is connected with an 'attack on those who do not possess it, who pretend to it, and who therefore pervert it'.¹⁵ Intersecting with that idea, Robert C. Evans returns in his chapter to his earlier discussion of the inherent tensions of Jonson's poems for the Sidney circle to demonstrate how the idealistic praise of 'To Penshurst' and the political criticism of 'To Sir Robert Wroth' complement one another to promote the same ethical values and to present the same reflexive relationship between discriminating poet and subject.¹⁶ '[T]he credibility of poet and of addressee stand or fall together', as McCanles eruditely remarks of Jonson's poetry;

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as such, the poet's relationship with his addressee has been deemed key to his self-presentation as ethically discriminating.

McCanles' notion that Jonson's praise of true nobility is essentially enabled by his attacks on those who do not possess it suggests the complex dynamic of Jonson's pervasive didacticism. In his reading of Jonson's tragedies here, Tom Cain demonstrates that Jonson utilizes such an ethical dialectic in his dramatization of the dangers of political ambition and corruption in Roman history, while A. D. Cousins demonstrates how the *Epigrams* 'juxtapose vision with lie . . . the dystopian against the eutopian, the satiric against the epic' in order to set apart the virtuous understanders of Jonson's book from the ignorant misunderstanders of the same. Discussing stoic and humanist models of wisdom and virtue, both chapters implicitly challenge the new historicist construction of the relationship between Jonson's texts and royal authority.¹⁷ Of course, Jonathan Goldberg's landmark study *James I and the Politics of Literature* (1983), which furthered Stephen Orgel's seminal work on the Jonsonian masque, famously asserted the alignment of Jonson's writing with James' kingship, discussing the one as reflexive of and dependent upon the authority of the other for legitimation.¹⁸ In her reassessment of the politics of the Jonsonian masque in this volume, Alison Scott draws on that critical history to further Martin Butler's astute challenge to Orgel's and Goldberg's 'totalizing' treatments of the subject.¹⁹ Where Butler asserts that Jonson's masques 'negotiated' variant political processes of power, acting as 'transactions that served to shift, manoeuvre and reshape the forms in which power circulated', Scott demonstrates the crucial role of classical notions of decorum in that negotiation.²⁰ Her chapter illuminates the politics of Jonson's interdependent defences – of his ethical integrity as a humanist writer, and of the significance of the 'royal form' he dominated for the majority of James' reign.²¹

As royal masque writer, even more than as laureate poet (Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates*), Jonson's political position arguably grew in its complexity as James' reign advanced. In particular, as several recent critical readings have suggested, his audiences multiplied and diversified.²² As a result, the Jonsonian masque was shaped by various and sometimes conflicting patronage networks, at the same time as his politics (the way he wrote for the king, *and* the royal family, *and* his courtly audience) was shaped by the limitations, and also by the freedoms of the genre. Critical enquiry into the ways in which Jonson adapted his work for different audiences and for different readers – within both patronage and sale economies – has led some critics to speak of many different Jonsons, an idea which several of the

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chapters here explore.²³ While the notion of multiple Jonsons deploying various political strategies in particular genres of writing and for particular audiences appears incongruous for a writer who expressed his horror of what Ian Donaldson has called ‘the loose self’, Maus’ work suggests that such flexibility and pragmatism on Jonson’s part does not necessarily sit in opposition to his longstanding ideal of the ‘centred’ or ‘gathered’ self.²⁴ In her reading, it is possible to ‘see Jonson’s work in different genres as a series of strategies for representing possible relationships between desire and its objects, between demand and supply’, where the comedies manifest a desire to accumulate in a climate of scarcity, as opposed to the masques and celebratory poetry that depict a world of plenty, which risks satiety but which can also escape the competitive acquisitiveness of the comic world.²⁵

James Loxley perceives the necessity of writing for multiple audiences as a task which puts Jonson politically at odds with himself and causes him to manifest a self-multiplication of the kind so often satirized in the comedies,²⁶ but Maus asserts a contrary view. She suggests that Jonson’s emphasis on the virtues of his own poetic labours persists across genres, audiences, and politic designs allowing him ‘to exempt himself both from the implausibilities of his ideal worlds, and from the reductiveness of his satiric ones’.²⁷ Richard Burt stresses a similar point when he notes that ‘[i]n order to “fit in” with one audience, Jonson willingly censored himself; yet the censored criticism emerged in another context’.²⁸ Dutton’s reading of *Volpone* in his chapter suggests that the play represents one of those moments in which criticism censored elsewhere emerges in another context, while Eugene Hill’s discussion of *Timber* illuminates how it might be understood as simultaneously censorious and censored in its approach to issues of politics. The contradictions implicit in that authorial flexibility and diverse literary production for different markets appear primary to the radical disjunctions in the perspectives on life, and particularly on what constitutes a virtuous life, that Jonson offers in the different genres of his writing. In considering how Jonson deploys genre to offer a confluence of perspectives on the world, then, the chapters in this volume bring together many related strands of Jonson criticism to advance our understanding of the author, his work, the politics of his writing, and the political contexts of its production in important ways.

The chapters themselves are diversely interactive. Discussing the politics of *Epigrams*, A. D. Cousins suggests that Jonson begins his collection with a sequence of political representations designed apparently to encompass rather than to subordinate those that follow – and which enable him to

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evoke, and notionally to overgo, the epigrams of Martial. Jonson feigns at the start of *Epigrams*, Cousins argues, that eutopian commonwealths and a eutopian political economy characterize the Jacobean state. The quintessence – not the totality – of James I's Britain can be discerned in an ideal community of national worthies (recurrently portrayed in stoic or neostoic terms), itself linked epistemically with an ideal community of understanders (who thus belong as well to the republic of letters), which is crowned by the elaborately mythologized presence and rule of the king. Political fabling and mythologizing, then, inaugurate *Epigrams*; the eutopian is feigned – with some wariness – in order that it may encompass its necessarily acknowledged and excoriated opposite. Eutopian and dystopian visions are also considered by Robert C. Evans in his chapter on Jonson's country house poems. Having engaged robustly with the extensive commentary on the politics of Jonson's *To Penshurst* and *To Sir Robert Wroth*, Evans proceeds to contrast the poems by highlighting especially the country-court dialectic informing the second. The emphatic eutopianism of the former he sets against the emphatic dystopianism of the latter as it boldly satirizes the court in favour of the community centred upon Wroth's country house. Evans' chapter invites us to reconsider Jonson's depictions of class and of hierarchy in the twin country house poems.

Religion is crucial, as Evans acknowledges, to Jonson's representations of class and of community; and so is myth, particularly of course in his imaging of the king. Cousins pays close attention to the myth-making, masque-like celebration of James in Jonson's fourth and fifth epigrams. Alison Scott, when discussing the masques themselves, explores 'the way in which Jonson draws attention in his masques to the paradoxical nature of the genre's political work (truthfully reflecting *and* truthfully praising James and his court), and then deliberately evokes classical ideas of *kairos* (timeliness) and decorum (seemliness) in order to forge a feasible reconciliation of those contraries', thereby effecting what David Lindley calls 'self-sufficient myth' through a process of courtly negotiation.²⁹

Essential to that outcome, Scott argues, is this: 'Jonson rhetorically positions his audience/reader as Apollonian, in line with the ideals of the masque proper, rather than as Dionysian in terms of the disproportions and distortions of the antimasque, at the same time as he entertains them with Dionysian revels.' A Nietzschean perspective on the mythologizing politics of the genre as deployed by Jonson takes us beyond entrenched new historicist critique, illuminating the nuances of negotiation throughout the masques. 'The politics of the Jonsonian masque', Scott concludes, 'are . . . always at once engaged with Platonism and Sophism, the affirmation

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of immutable truth and the adaptation to contingent truth; and they thus invoke and construct a Ciceronian decorum that unites political utility with ethical discrimination and honesty'. Yet sexual politics, no less than those of the court, are represented in mythic terms by Jonson, and Marea Mitchell's chapter focuses on 'A Celebration of Charis in Ten Lyric Pieces'. There, she claims, 'Jonson . . . constructs a dialogue that allows not one but two women to speak, and also gives them the last word'. She continues:

'Charis' . . . redefines notions of female desire as an active rather than a negative virtue. Two women express their opinions concerning desirable features in men, and part of their power over the speaker lies in the fact that the hypothetical ability to say yes or no to the poetic lover seems to have a material force absent from so many other poetic and sonnet sequences.

Mitchell proposes that Jonson re-voices the (male) erotic lyric in order to deflate male-centred notions of romance. His doing so, she observes, would have interested an innovative writer of romance such as Mary Wroth, with whom the sequence has at times been associated. In fact, as Mitchell subsequently demonstrates, to consider Wroth's *Urania* in relation to 'Charis' is to appreciate the literary as well as the personal links between Jonson and his patron.

The politics of patronage – which is at once to say, of clientage and praise and counsel – are further considered by John Roe in his chapter on the verse epistles. Engaging with Jonson's desire to appear independent but also with his obligation to be variously deferential, Roe makes this point, which ties in with Cousins' account of how stoic discourse functions in *Epigrams*: 'When we consider the political aspect of Jonson's poems, particularly the epistles, then we need to take into account his extraordinary capacity for transforming the subject and enabling it to enlist different values all at once.' Roe adds, in a reading of *To Sir Robert Wroth* complementary to that by Evans: 'Jonson applies the stratagem . . . of gently urging his subject to undertake an appropriate conduct by depicting him as already doing it.' It is a remark which illuminates the political nuances of gift-giving in Jonson's verse: as occasion suits, Jonson enacts the role of humanist counsellor by offering a hypothetically persuasive gift of praise, that is to say, a hypothetically seductive likeness of a potential self. It illuminates, too, the politics of Jonson's dealing with female patrons, for it highlights one of the means by which Jonson attempts to bring sameness, on his terms, out of unavoidably emphasized social and gender differences.

How Jonson used the perspectives of comic or tragic drama to shape political fictions is discussed by Richard Dutton and by Tom Cain. The former

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examines the politics of patronage, of religious conflict, and of state affairs as represented in *Volpone*. Focusing in particular on the ‘show of the metempsychosis of the soul of Pythagoras, performed for Volpone by Nano, Androgyno and Castrone early in the play’, and on that ‘show’ in relation to Donne’s poem *Metempsychosis*, Dutton explores the extent to which Jonson’s beast-fable comedy offers an amused and bitter commentary on Robert Cecil and the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot. Cecil benefited from the Plot, as English Catholics saw it, but they – Jonson’s co-religionists at the time – of course did not. Like Roe, Dutton is interested by Jonson’s being ‘trapped in a world of patronage compromise’; and he sees *Volpone* as concerned with the politics of patronage yet as being preoccupied with a specific patron at once grandiose, widely dangerous to believers in the Old Faith, and intrusive into the creative process. Since, Dutton suggests, ‘what is at issue in [Jonson’s] play’ is ‘the perversion of a society’s soul’, *Volpone* pushes comedy to the border of tragedy.

And of Jonson’s political fictions in his Roman tragedies, Tom Cain writes: ‘These were not to be plays of great psychological complexity, nor would their protagonists be particularly heroic. Their profundity would lie in the questions they raised about the business of government and the dynamics of power, past and present.’ He adds: ‘Jonson’s plays during this period show him moving towards a . . . political position . . . involving freedom of speech and limitation of the absolute powers of the monarch.’ Moreover: More and Machiavelli, like Lipsius, Camden, Cotton, and other humanist historians, compared ‘ancient and modern events’ so that readers could ‘more easily draw those practical lessons (*quella utilita*) which one should seek to obtain from the study of history’. In all three of his Roman plays Jonson was to attempt precisely that, dramatizing Rome in the crucial late republican and early imperial period, from 63 BC to AD 31, for the light it could shed on his own political and social milieu. In doing this, however, he did not turn to Rome, even in *Poetaster*, as a paragon to be imitated.

In the case of *Sejanus*, he argues for example, one can discern oblique commentary – in accord with current ‘republican’ thinking – both on the Cecils and on the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot. Nevertheless, ‘Jonson would have wished his audience to apply the lessons of his Roman history, not by identifying exclusive representations of contemporary political actors, but through a recognition of how the dynamics of power and ambition could be discerned in a range of contemporaries.’ In his closing remarks he observes with reference to *Catiline*: ‘This is a treatment of classical republicanism which must at least qualify the characterization of

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Jonson as an ardent monarchist, an authoritarian in politics as in his attitude to his literary output.' His chapter intriguingly complements what Cousins and Scott suggest about Jonson's difficulties in constructing mythic personae for King James.

The difficulties of writing at all about politics are implied, Eugene D. Hill asserts, by Jonson's choice of epigraph for his *Timber, or Discoveries*. Locating the quotation from Persius' fourth satire in context – and in relation to Isaac Casaubon's commentary on that poem – Hill reflects:

Indeed the cue of the Persian tag directs us to an uncanvassed function of the *Discoveries*. Scholars have offered various possibilities: notes for a series of lectures on rhetoric, raw material for future verse compositions, for example. But what if, like Persius, Ben had in mind an assemblage of political commonplaces for political writing?

As he neatly points out, 'Kingship, adulation, virtue, decorum: the text positions its readers at the fruitful fraught intersection of the literary and the political.' Hill argues that in the *Discoveries*, then, 'Jonson was not only identifying with the great known masters of the past, but providing stuff for the unknown readers of the future who would find themselves inclined *rem populi tractare*.' They would be, presumably like Jonson himself, guided but not commanded.

Occasions demanded, and the perspectives of the kinds facilitated, that there be different Jonsons, politically speaking – or, perhaps one could better say, complementary and variously nuanced Jonsonian personae. The chapters of this book show, for example, that if there is an adulatory Jonson voicing the masques, that particular Jonson cannot be thought merely adulatory or univocal. True, the decorums of occasion and of genre fashion as they constrain him but, in being seen always already to do so, they draw attention not only to themselves but to the ways in which he negotiates and inflects them. Something similar can be observed in the rhetoric of the country house poems, where the Jonsonian speaker's hyperbolic praise lays bare its own genial excesses – and exclusion, especially in *To Sir Robert Wroth*, has much to tell. Against such fluidity within confinement one could set, as can be seen elsewhere in what follows, the 'republican' scrutiny of absolutism that pervades the Roman tragedies. The politics of genre in Jonson's hands are therefore those of a humanist scholar who seems to have been, certainly, pugnacious and stubborn yet also quite aware of wisdom's limitations when engaging with political actualities.