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 Edited by Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart  
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## I

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## True relation: the life and career of Ben Jonson

Because Ben Jonson creates such a powerful representation of himself in his poetry and in the prologues to his plays, he seems to stand before us a stable and knowable self. Abraham van Blyenberch's painting of Jonson in the National Portrait Gallery shows a man alone, without any symbolic accoutrements. Jonson's enormous head and shoulders fill the canvas: there is nothing to see but Jonson, plainly dressed, large featured, deep eyed, craggy faced. To describe Jonson's life means to fill in the blank background of the canvas, to show all we can of the relationships that created and constituted what Jonson terms the "gathered self." Even a brief sketch of his life requires attention to the way relationships were crucial to him, both in his life and in his work. There are few personal lyrics among his poems, no soliloquies in his plays: his is an art of community and contest. It is also a professional art: Jonson was the first Englishman to earn his living as a writer, exploiting every form of the literary medium to address private, public, and courtly audiences. This brief account of his life will focus on his relationships with his family, friends, rivals, patrons, and audience, setting his works in that dynamic context.

Born in 1572, Jonson rose to prominence as a playwright and man of letters, only to lose popularity, suffer a stroke, and die in relative obscurity in 1637. Little is known about his family beyond what William Drummond records in their *Conversations* (1619):

His grandfather came from Carlisle and he thought from Annandale to it; he served Henry VIII, and was a Gentleman. His father lost all his estate under Queen Mary; having been cast in prison and forfeited, at last turned minister. So he was a minister's son. He himself was posthumous born a month after his father's decease; brought up poorly. (Donaldson 600)

Of his mother only one incident is reported in the *Conversations*. Jonson, Chapman, and Marston were imprisoned for writing "something against the Scots" in *Eastward Ho!*, and it was feared "they should then had their ears cut and noses." When the three men were released unharmed, Jonson feasted all his

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friends, and “at the midst of the feast his old mother drank to him, & 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” (Donaldson 601). The bond between mother and son, it seems, had endured despite her marriage to a bricklayer, perhaps Robert Brett (Warden and Master of the Tile and Bricklayers Company), whose trade the boy Ben “could not endure.”<sup>1</sup> Jonson married Anne Lewis in 1594, when he was only twenty-two years old and halfway through his loathed apprenticeship as a bricklayer. Their first child, Benjamin, was born in 1596; by that time Jonson had terminated his apprenticeship and found employment as a journeyman player. By 1599, when Anne gave birth to Joseph, their second child, Jonson had seized the opportunity to pursue a new and risky career as a playwright, and had already been imprisoned for his part in writing *The Isle of Dogs*. Their third child, Mary, born in 1600, lived only six months. Jonson’s tender epitaph describes her as “the daughter of their youth” (*Epig.* 22) and implies that something of their youthful exuberance and hope died with her. We hear no more about Anne’s tears, but only Jonson’s gruff comment to Drummond that “she was a shrew, yet honest” – faithful despite the five years he was absent from her in the house of Lord d’Aubigny (HS 1:139). Jonson not only lost his father but his firstborn son as well. According to Drummond, Jonson was away from home when the plague broke out in 1604, just as King James was entering England for his coronation, and the poet had a vision of his eldest son “w[i]t[h] the mark of a bloody cross on his forehead, as if it had been cutted w[i]t[h] a sword.” The next day “comes th[e]r[e] letters from his wife of the death of th[at] boy in the plague. He appeared to him, he said, of a manly shape, and of th[at] growth that he thinks he shall be at the resurrection” (Donaldson 601). Jonson expressed his enormous sorrow in an epitaph for his son, exhausting all the familiar consolations and crying out, in a pun that expresses both the fullness of his grief and the futile wish he could somehow escape it, “Oh could I lose all father now” (*Epig.* 45). By the time he visited Drummond, Jonson lived alone, depending on friends for comfort and community. The *Conversations with Drummond* begin with gossip about his friends and comments about the London literary scene; the intimate revelations about his family come in the center of the text; and subsequent comments indicate Jonson’s withdrawal into “narratives of great ones” and bawdy jokes. Although the organization of the *Conversations* may be Drummond’s design, it is also plausible to speculate that Jonson’s most personal revelations came in the midst of the two men’s encounter, and that Jonson then pulled back into impersonal commentary, perhaps realizing that Drummond was not especially sympathetic to him.

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Drummond's own assessment of Jonson is less than admiring:

He is a great lover and praiser of himself, a contemner and scorner of others, given rather to lose a friend than a jest, jealous of every word and action of those about him (especially after drink, which is one of the elements in which he liveth), a dissembler of ill parts which reign in him, a bragger of some good that he wanteth, thinketh nothing well but what either he himself, or some of his friends and countrymen hath said or done. He is passionately kind and angry, careless either to gaine or keep, vindicative, but, if he be well answered, at himself.

(Donaldson 611)

Drummond's comments make it clear that the encounter between the two men was an abortive attempt at friendship. Despite Drummond's strictures, his remarks indicate that Jonson greatly valued friendship, and indeed he was the first English poet to make that theme central to his art. As a man without the advantages of family, rank, or privilege, Jonson considered friendship not only an ideal but a necessity. Among his friends he counted men who were his fellow writers, men who led the intellectual life he valued, and powerful aristocratic men and women who were his readers and patrons. The loss of a friendship or the failure of a relationship roused him to anger, and he made art of rage and betrayal, of envy and contempt, as well as of affection and respect.

Jonson's friends included many of the finest writers of his day: privileged men and women who circulated their works in manuscript, professionals who depended on public sales and private patronage, and scholars who published books (both their own and the translations of others) in order to disseminate humanist learning. Jonson devoted one cluster of his epigrams and many poems in *The Forest* to the Sidney–Pembroke circle, the most important aristocratic circle of literary patrons in England at the time. Jonson praises the Countess of Rutland, daughter of Sir Philip Sidney, for her poetry (*Epig.* 79; also *For.* 12 and *Und.* 50); Lady Mary Wroth, author of *Urania* and *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (*Epig.* 103, 105; also *Und.* 28); the Countess of Montgomery, to whom Wroth dedicated *Urania* (*Epig.* 104); Sir Robert Wroth (*For.* 3), husband of Lady Mary Wroth; William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, who was Lady Wroth's lover and the "Amphilanthus" of her sonnet sequence (*Epig.* 102); Sir Robert and Lady Barbara Sidney, whose estate is celebrated in "To Penshurst" (*For.* 2); their eldest son, Sir William Sidney, who died before Jonson's birthday ode to him was published (*For.* 14); Edward Herbert, later Lord Herbert of Cherbury, a poet and philosopher best known today as the brother of the poet George Herbert (*Epig.* 106); and Benjamin Rudyerd (*Epig.* 121, 122, 123), poet and friend of Pembroke. Another of Pembroke's friends, the pastoral poet William Browne, is also the subject of a complimentary epigram (*UV* 21). Other poems praise John Donne

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(*Epig.* 23) and his circle, notably Christopher Brooke (*UV* 19), Sir John Beaumont (*UV* 32), Sir Henry Goodyere (*Epig.* 85, 86) and Lucy Harington, Countess of Bedford (*Epig.* 76, 84, 94). Goodyere and the Countess of Bedford are praised as readers who value learning and appreciate sophisticated poetry; not writers themselves, they are friends to poetry and poets. Late in his life, Jonson praised another woman, Mrs. Alice Sutcliffe, for her *Divine Meditations* (*UV* 40), as well as several young writers, including Joseph Rutter (*UV* 42) and Robert Dover (*UV* 43). Jonson composed complimentary epigrams to his fellow professionals as well – Francis Beaumont (*Epig.* 55), John Fletcher (*UV* 18), George Chapman (*UV* 23), Richard Brome (*UV* 38) – and to the actor Edward Alleyn (*Epig.* 89), who acted major parts in Jonson’s plays; to the musician Alphonso Ferrabosco (*Epig.* 130, 131), who composed the music for Jonson’s masques; and to the lyricist-translator Edward Filmer (*UV* 33). Katherine Duncan-Jones has recently discovered an epitaph Jonson wrote for Thomas Nashe,<sup>2</sup> and one of Jonson’s most important poems is the tribute to William Shakespeare prefixed to the First Folio (*UV* 26).

The first group of poems returns repeatedly to issues of the poet’s sincerity and the subject’s superiority; in the poems to fellow professionals Jonson copes with his own envy and with the general question of the artist’s vulnerability. In at least one of these poems, “The Vision of Ben Jonson, On the Muses of His Friend M. Drayton” (*UV* 30), it is impossible to decide the poet’s answer to his initial premise: “It hath been questioned, Michael, if I be / A friend at all; or, if at all, to thee.” Jonson had competed with Drayton for patronage, and the poem is saturated with a sense of tension, resentment set against affection. Jonson praises Drayton’s book, yet labels it a “strange Mooncalf.” Rather than exorcizing his envy, as he does in most poems to friends and rivals, Jonson transfers it to the world which envies him and must judge him. Envy remains, and the poem concludes with what seems self-serving rather than selfless praise.

The third group of complimentary poems is addressed to scholars, men of humanist learning who translated classical texts and published their own scholarly works. These scholars include the historian Henry Savile (*Epig.* 95); Clement Edmondes, author of *Observations upon Caesar’s De Bello Gallico* (*Epig.* 110, 111); Thomas May, translator of Lucan’s *Pharsalia* (*UV* 29); and John Selden, a noted jurist and scholar of Hebraic law (*Und.* 14). Jonson praises these men for their knowledge, wisdom, and good judgment. He does not presume to be their rivals, so envy is not an issue in these poems.

It must be noted that these three groups were not entirely separate. Many members of the Pembroke circle, the newly professional writers, and the men of learning were associates at the Inns of Court. Members of the legal community known to associate with Ben Jonson include Benjamin Rudyerd, Thomas Overbury, and Sir John Beaumont of the Middle Temple; Francis Bacon and

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Henry Goodyere of Gray's Inn; Sir John Harington, Christopher Brooke, and John Donne of Lincoln's Inn; and John Selden and Francis Beaumont of the Inner Temple.<sup>3</sup> A two-part poem (*Und.* 52), written to Sir William Burlase, should be linked to the legal community among whom Jonson found so many friends. Herford and Simpson mistakenly conclude that Jonson addresses the Sir William Burlase who was Sheriff of Buckinghamshire. It is far more likely that the poem was written to his son, a man of Jonson's own age who lived in London and associated with many of Jonson's friends.

Jonson's poems to all three groups develop the theme of friendship. To the Countess of Bedford he sends a copy of Donne's satires, commenting that "Rare poems ask rare friends." Or to another friend, "Yet when of friendship I would draw the face, / A lettered mind and a large heart would place / To all posterity: I will write *Burlase*." He celebrates other friendships as well: of John Selden and Edward Hayward, of Lucius Cary and the late Henry Morison (*Und.* 70). Indeed, the words "friend" and "friendship" in their various forms occur more than 124 times in Jonson's poetry. He works out the idea most thoroughly in his long poem, "On Inviting a Friend to Supper" (*Epig.* 101), developing Erasmian ideals of liberty, honesty, and simplicity as the foundation of true friendship. Every guest can speak freely; no spies will betray a confidence; nothing will be done or consumed to excess. He argues for personal integrity and mutual trust as well, most powerfully in the "Epistle Answering to One that Asked to be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben": "... First give me faith, who know / Myself a little. I will take you so, / As you have writ yourself" (*Und.* 47).

The "Tribe of Ben" epistle grows out of another situation too frequently the subject of his poetry: failed friendship. Drummond's criticism of Jonson was not entirely off the mark. Jonson in fact had a quick temper, which could escalate to violence and simmer over years. As a young man, Jonson killed another actor, Gabriel Spencer, in a brawl that probably had its origin when the two men were imprisoned for their part in *The Isle of Dogs* (now lost). Jonson was brought to trial, and narrowly avoided execution by pleading "benefit of clergy" (because he could read the prescribed "neck verse," a passage from Psalm 51). His later quarrel with two other playwrights, John Marston and Thomas Dekker, escalated onto the stage in the so-called War of the Theatres. Dekker resented the murder of Gabriel Spencer and attacked Jonson in *Satiromastix*. In *What You Will*, Marston ridiculed Ben Jonson, who responded by ridiculing Marston in *Every Man in his Humour* and again in *Cynthia's Revels*. These quarrels were at once personal and professional; putting their rivalries on stage was good box-office if nothing else. Failed friendships seem more painful in his poems to patrons and collaborators. "To my Muse" relates Jonson's rueful awareness of misplaced trust and unwarranted respect (*Epig.* 65). When he was disappointed in a woman, his contempt spilled into misogyny: "A woman's friendship! God

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whom I trust in, / Forgive me this one foolish deadly sin" (*Und.* 20). Feeling betrayed, he condemns his own failure as well as woman's perfidy: "Knew I all this afore? Had I perceived / That their whole life was wickedness, though weaved / Of many colours; outward, fresh from spots, / But their whole inside full of ends and knots?" This general rage against womankind yields to a specific attack: "Do not you ask to know her; she is worse / Than all the ingredients made into one curse, / And that poured out upon mankind, can be!" Jonson appropriates conventional misogynist attacks on Eve to attack a specific woman, most likely Cecilia Bulstrode, whom he mocks elsewhere in a bitter epigram (*Epig.* 79). She was a close friend of the Countess of Bedford, and Jonson seems to have changed his opinion, or at least thought better of it by the time Cecilia Bulstrode died, when he composed a generous, complimentary epitaph (*UV* 9).

The failure of his friendship with Inigo Jones caused Jonson his greatest anger and disappointment. The two men collaborated on masques at court, Jones designing sets and costumes, Jonson writing the script. Each man rose to prominence during the reign of King James (1603–25), but Jones slowly superseded the poet. In "An Epistle Answering to One that Asked to be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben" (*Und.* 47), composed in 1623, Jonson works through his feelings about Jones. Jones had excluded him from planning the festivities to welcome the Spanish Infanta to the English court. Although the Spanish Infanta never came and her planned marriage to Prince Charles never occurred, Jonson knew the slight to him was "a blow by which in time I may / Lose all my credit with . . . [the] animated porcelain of the court" (51–3). Jonson's quarrel with Jones reflected both personal animosity and the different aesthetic values of the two men. Jonson privileges the ear over the eye, language over spectacle.<sup>4</sup> He derides spectacle as transient and deceptive illusion, and makes Jones' sets into a metaphor for false friendship, contrasting "square, well-tagged, and permanent" friendships to those "built with canvas, paper, and false lights, / As are the glorious scenes at the great sights," all too soon revealed as mere "Oily expansions, or shrunk dirty folds" (64–8).

Although Jonson uses the "Tribe of Ben" epistle to overcome his bitterness and take a chance on commitment to a new friendship, he held a deep grudge against Jones for the rest of his life. After the two men quarreled again in 1631 because Jonson's name appeared first on the title page of a court masque, *Love's Triumph through Callipolis*, Jonson attacked Jones and his "mighty shows" in two vitriolic poems, "An Expostulation with Inigo Jones" (*UV* 34) and "To Inigo, Marquis Would-Be A Corollary" (*UV* 35). He also wrote caricatures of Jones into three works. The Master of the Revels required that Jonson omit "Vitruvius Hoop" from *A Tale of a Tub*, but Jonson contrived to keep "In-and-In Medlay," another gibe at Jones, in the script. He also inserted "Coronel Vitruvius" into *Love's Welcome at Bolsover* and "Damplay" into *The Magnetic Lady* (HS X.342n).



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The “Tribe of Ben” epistle, like another long poem of 1623, “An Execration upon Vulcan,” can be read as a poem of loss and resolution. Just as Jonson had suffered a blow at court, so he had also suffered the devastating loss of his extensive library and working papers in a fire. Jonson composed a third long poem in 1623, the eulogy for Shakespeare prefatory to the First Folio. Here, Jonson subdues his own values in order to praise a rival he respected. When these three long poems are taken together, the first can be characterized as a poem of introspection, the second of bitter recrimination, the third of admiration. In all three poems, Jonson takes the occasion of loss to spell out his own literary values, developing a humanist theory of art as high culture, both moral and learned.

The foundation of Jonson’s humanist values can be traced to his education at Westminster School, made possible by its famous headmaster, the antiquarian scholar William Camden. Jonson thanks Camden in a lavish epigram:

Camden, most reverend head, to whom I owe  
 All that I am in arts, all that I know,  
 (How nothing’s that?) to whom my country owes  
 The great renown and name wherewith she goes;  
 Than thee the age sees not that thing more grave,  
 More high, more holy, that she more would crave.  
 What name, what skill, what faith hast thou in things!  
 What sight in searching the most antique springs!  
 What weight, and what authority in thy speech!  
 Man scarce can make that doubt, but thou canst teach.  
 Pardon free truth, and let thy modesty,  
 Which conquers all, be once overcome by thee.  
 Many of thine this better could than I;  
 But for their powers accept my piety. (Epig. 14)

Jonson’s comments about himself and what he learned, from arts to piety, frame his praise of Camden. The poet not only compliments his teacher, but by moving from pride to piety imitates Camden and enacts the education Camden gave him. The poet’s highest compliment to Camden consists of dramatizing the Camden in himself. Camden is celebrated as the perfect teacher in style (grave, high, holy), knowledge (name, skill, faith, and research), and presentation (weight and authority in speech). Camden is also celebrated for his particular work. As an antiquarian, he sought to locate signs of the Roman occupation of Britain, and in two books – *Britannia* and *Remains of a Greater Work Concerning Britain* – popularized the Latinized name of the nation. The Latinized name, which can be traced in the writings of Cicero, Pliny, and Tacitus, testifies to the significance of Camden’s work: he searches the “antique springs” of Roman history in England to show the continuity of the ancient and modern empires.

The method Camden applies in archaeology Jonson attempts in poetry: he

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appropriates two of Pliny's letters to shape his own complimentary poem. Jonson quotes Pliny's praise of Corellius, a learned man who advised him and helped him advance in society.<sup>5</sup> He also echoes Pliny's praise of Titius Aristo, an intimate friend.<sup>6</sup> Translating the spirit as well as the text of Pliny, Jonson affirms not only his debt to Camden but also their mutual link to the Roman past. Pliny's friendships live again in Jonson's poem, and Jonson's poem receives from Pliny the weight of authority and tradition.

Belief in the continuity of classical past and English present was not only a humanist ideal Jonson learned from Camden but also the governing principle of his dramatic practice.<sup>7</sup> The only one of his early plays to survive, *The Case is Altered*, was performed by the Children of the Chapel and published a decade later in quarto. Although it hardly seems stageworthy today, it shows the characteristics of his subsequent work: classical plotting, an Italian setting, effusive comic prose. Because Jonson did not include the play in the 1616 Folio edition of his works, critics have been somewhat hesitant to attribute it to him; those who do often dismiss the play as an early trial run, a work Jonson would just as soon have forgotten.<sup>8</sup> However, a reading of the play indicates that Jonson was following the fashion of the 1590s (as did Chapman and Shakespeare) by combining Plautine comedy, an Italian setting, and native English morality and jokes. Jonson develops his plot from two Plautine comedies, *Captivi* and *Aulularia*, and sets the action in Milan. *Captivi* provided sentiment, *Aulularia* satire. In Jonson's play, Count Ferneze of Milan has two daughters and a son named Paulo. A second son, Camillo, had been lost in infancy. When Paulo is captured on the battlefield, Camillo (in the guise of a commoner, Gasper) is about to exchange him for a French prisoner of war. Ultimately, of course, Camillo is recognized and both sons are reunited with their father. *Aulularia* provides a plot in which Jaques, a miser, has stolen gold from his French employer and moved to Milan with his daughter Rachel. Two servants, Juniper and Onion, steal his gold, and he is tricked into revealing his crimes. Every "case" or set of relationships in the play is "altered" as identities are restored and truth recognized. Gold is "muck," virtue golden. Like Shakespeare in *The Comedy of Errors*, Jonson doubles and redoubles his story and characters. What is most unusual is the invention of a second male friendship, between Paulo and a new character, the villainous Angelo, which ends in betrayal. Like so many Jonsonian comedies, *The Case is Altered* begins in lack and explodes into excess: plot is piled on plot, words on words.

In subsequent plays, Jonson slowly moves away from combining classical sources, Italian settings, and English jokes. *Every Man in his Humour* and *Every Man out of his Humour* were revised to transfer the action from Italy to London. In *Cynthia's Revels*, the raucous and gritty world of London constantly impinges



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on the world of courtly myth. *Poetaster* is set in the Rome of Horace and Ovid, without Italian decadence. *Volpone*, on the other hand, is immersed in Italian vice without a hint of Roman glory. Jonson's great city comedies – *Volpone*, *Epicœne*, and *The Alchemist* – were framed by two Roman tragedies, *Sejanus* (1603) and *Catiline* (1611). In *The Alchemist*, and in his subsequent city comedies *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Devil is an Ass*, Jonson turned from classical plots and Italian settings to place the action entirely and uproariously in the London just outside the theatre door. The combination of classical sources and Italian settings, raised to the level of myth, Jonson mostly transferred to his court masques. Despite his reverence for classical art, Jonson was a man of London. He knew its streets and its citizens, its noise, density, and energy. His audiences in the public theatres most wanted to see the image of themselves and their folly he set forth, and for that they would eagerly pay.

Jonson's relationship to his audience is made part of theatrical experience through his vivid prologues. *Every Man in his Humour* begins by admitting the poet's "need" as his motive for writing the play. *Volpone* promises to "mix (the poet's) profit with your pleasure." *The Alchemist* offers the audience a vision of London and its "natural follies": "No clime breeds better matter, for your whore / Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more . . . which have still been subject for the rage / Or spleen of comic writers." *The Devil is an Ass*, in which the young devil Pug finally pleads to return to Hell – for Hell is but grammar school to London's university of vice – begins with the players' attack on the audience: "Anon, who worse than you the fault endures / That you yourselves make, when you will thrust and spurn, / And knock us o' the elbows, and bid, turn." The playwright's only hope, in *Bartholomew Fair*, is an elaborate contract with the audience, the first of the many "warrants" that structure the action and relationships in the play.

A comprehensive vision of the many audiences Jonson chose for his plays, poems, and masques is constructed in the 1616 Folio edition of his works. A man of the new print culture as well as of court entertainments and the popular stage, Jonson carefully edited his works, dedicating plays to specific people (William Camden, Lady Mary Wroth, Lord d'Aubigny, even "the two famous Universities"). After dedicating his *Epigrams* to the Earl of Pembroke, Jonson instructs the "Reader" in his first poem, and scatters through the collection poems on good and bad readers, good and bad writers. The court masques, originally visual spectacles, become dense texts, heavily annotated to explicate their visual and verbal symbolism.<sup>9</sup>

Just as Jonson felt betrayed by Inigo Jones, so he often felt betrayed by the audience, especially when they rejected *Sejanus* and *Catiline*, classical tragedies closely in accord with his humanist values, and later when *The New Inn* was

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mocked off the stage. As early as *Poetaster*, the figure of the Author vows to “sing high and aloof, / Safe from the wolf’s black jaw, and the dull ass’s hoof.” Jonson later made those lines the conclusion of “An Ode. To Himself,” in which he berates himself for taking the unworthy judgments of the audience so seriously that he is unable to write, “Buried in ease and sloth” (*Und.* 23). His greatest rage against the audience, however, comes out in a second “Ode. To Himself” after the failure of *The New Inn* (1629), which followed the lukewarm reception of *The Staple of News* (1626). The old jokes did not work any more, and Jonson offered little the crowd wanted. Now he genuinely feared the loss of his career, protesting that the audience preferred garbage and junk food (“Husks, draff to drink, and swill”) to true art. Rather than abandon writing, however, he advises himself to return to classic art, to “thine own Horace.” Instead of trying to please the crowd, he vows to “sing / The glories of the King,” so that everyone will know “no palsy’s in [my] brain.”

He did suffer from palsy, having had a stroke the year before. He subsisted on a small allowance from the King’s Treasury (for which he occasionally had to beg) and a small stipend from the City of London. Although he received a gift of money from King Charles and saw his royal pension increased, his salary as City Chronologer was terminated late in 1631. It was only restored at the King’s request in 1634. During these final years, three of his greatest plays were revived by the King’s Men: *Volpone* (1630), *Every Man in his Humour* (1631), and *The Alchemist* (1631). He wrote one new play, *The Magnetic Lady*, and completed *A Tale of a Tub*. He also wrote two masques and two court entertainments, including his final public work, *Love’s Welcome at Bolsover* (1634).

Jonson’s final relationships were with the court and, especially, with his Catholic patrons, Sir William Cavendish and Sir Kenelm Digby. Jonson had converted to Catholicism in 1598 while he was in jail; in 1606 he and his wife had been officially charged with recusancy. Although he stopped practicing his Catholic religion, a number of poems in *Epigrams* and *Underwood* were written to praise English Catholics. It is widely recognized that he returned to Catholicism late in his life, and three “Poems of Devotion” at the beginning of *Underwood* have been dated after 1626.<sup>10</sup>

Jonson had a close relationship with the Cavendish family, for whom he wrote several poems, and with Digby, for whom he wrote *Eupheme*, a baroque sequence of poems commemorating Lady Venetia Digby. These poems show that Jonson was still able to write poetry in new ways, while retaining his old values. Just as he had argued the value of words over images in his quarrel with Inigo Jones and in his more congenial poem to Sir William Burlase, Jonson here stages a contest between himself and “the painter” (Van Dyck) who had been commissioned to paint two portraits of Venetia Digby. Unlike Jones, Van Dyck saw no threat in Jonson; at least, no response to Jonson’s challenge has survived.