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978-0-521-89571-2 - Ben Jonson in Context
Edited by Julie Sanders
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Introduction

Ben Jonson has always been many things to many people. For the playwright Edward Bond, who in his 1973 play *Bingo* depicted him in the midst of a heavy drinking session with his rival William Shakespeare, he was a cantankerous old man, hateful of his rivals and the very art form in which he was required to work, as well as himself.[1] For the poet U. A. Fanthorpe, speaking on behalf of William Drummond of Hawthornden, with whom Jonson stayed during his 1618 trip to Scotland (he walked there and back, a considerable feat of performance in itself), he is a swaggerer and a bully who is nevertheless the creator of sweet and tender verse.[2] Fanthorpe herself would regularly select Jonson poems when asked to contribute to anthologies on particular themes so it was clearly an opinion she shared. Even in his own lifetime he was satirized on the public stage for his lowly origins and installed in a role that was the forerunner of the Poet Laureate by King James VI and I. His generic range is in some respects a marker of the difficulty of categorizing him as an author: he was involved in everything from poetry to plays to masques and entertainments to prose. His plays were performed in different types of playhouses and contexts, and he tried his hand at various times at comedy, tragedy and romance.

The popular figure of myth and legend suggests a heavy drinker and gourmand; Jonson's increasing bulk as he grew older occasioned comment from himself as much as anyone, and yet, and there always appears to be an 'and yet' where Jonson is concerned, he managed that aforementioned walk to Scotland. He is renowned as a man quick to argument, someone who had been tried and only narrowly acquitted for the murder of an actor in a duel in the early part of his theatrical career (he was branded with a T for 'Tyburn' on his thumb as a permanent reminder, a literary mark of some note). And yet this is also the Westminster-educated classicist, the invoker of Horace and Tacitus, Martial and Juvenal, the man who added copious new terms to the English language. Compared to Shakespeare, and, as this volume attests, this was a comparison which

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dogged Jonson even in his own lifetime, Jonson is frequently held up as a social documenter, the man whose work is less for 'all time' than embedded, sometimes inextricably, in its own time, its jargons and its grievances, its political pressure points and its spatially and temporally specific structures, actual and cultural. More than anyone, perhaps, he is linked to the space and site of the expanding capital itself in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. For that is another point about the Jonsonian career – that it is remarkably long, and that alone would caution against simple categorizations. Jonson wrote plays and poems during the reigns of Elizabeth I, James VI and I, and Charles I, and it would be a strange beast indeed that did not alter and change with the flow of political life.

It is, then, *all* of these Jonsons that this volume seeks to contextualize. The first part, 'Life, works and afterlife', looks, as the title suggests, at the man's life and works but from a range of perspectives. Biographical, textual and theoretical approaches to Jonson are deployed here, and his rich and varied afterlife in criticism and performance is also considered. The second part on 'Cultural and historical contexts' selects a range of themes, many of a socio-historical angle, not only to shed light on the subject matter and operations of particular plays and poems but also to examine and make visible the events and contexts that were the backbone of Jonson's writing life and experience. The aim is not to offer comprehensive surveys of the Jonsonian canon nor to offer closed-down versions of his life but rather to offer a series of vibrant interventions and discussions, sometimes operating in sharp contrast to one another, in order to emphasize the sheer plurality of our subject, in the hope that these will inspire new and newly engaged encounters with Jonson and his work on the part of readers.

NOTES

1. Edward Bond, *Bingo* in *Plays: Three* (London: Methuen, 1987).
2. See U. A. Fanthorpe, 'Jonson at Hawthornden', published in *Queuing for the Sun* (Cornwall: Peterloo Poets, 2003).

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PART I

Life, works and afterlife

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CHAPTER 1

Tales of a life

Richard Dutton

In 1925, just as the first two volumes of their magisterial Oxford *Ben Jonson* went press, C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson were faced with a devastating challenge to the material in those volumes which are largely concerned with Jonson's life. C. L. Stainer published an eighty-page booklet, whose title is self-explanatory: *Jonson and Drummond: Their Conversations – A Few Remarks on an 18th Century Forgery.*[1] The account left by William Drummond of his conversations with Jonson, when Jonson visited Edinburgh in the winter of 1618/19 and stayed for a time at Drummond's Hawthornden estate, has long been the cornerstone of our knowledge of Jonson's eventful life and no less colourful opinions. An edited summary of what Drummond wrote was published under the title of 'Heads of a Conversation betwixt the Famous Poet Ben Johnson, and William Drummond of Hawthornden, January 1619' in the 1711 folio of Drummond's *Works,* edited by Bishop John Sage and Thomas Ruddiman. The original document was lost after they saw it, but not before an apparently full and faithful transcript of it was made by Sir Robert Sibbald, a physician and antiquary. In 1843, that transcript (Sibbald MS.33.3.19) – much fuller and more unbuttoned than Sage and Ruddimans' version – was discovered by David Laing in the Advocates' Library of the National Library of Scotland.[2]

From the very beginning there were those who *wished* that it might have been a forgery. Opinions such as that 'Shakespeare wanted art' would hardly endear themselves to bardolators, and even Jonson's defenders feared that it reinforced a reputation for being envious, ambitious and possibly mean-spirited. Some of its frank and bawdy anecdotes, moreover, were unrepeatable in polite Victorian society. And, in the wake of notable Shakespearian forgeries by William Henry Ireland and John Payne Collier, the circumstances of the transmission of Drummond's document did leave some scope for conspiracy theories. But Stainer went completely over the top. He dubbed Sibbald's 'transcript' a clumsy forgery; he

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suggested that Sage and Ruddiman knew it was a forgery but rejected it in favour of concocting their own rival version, adding to it forged letters by Drayton and Jonson to Drummond (Sage was a bishop, remember); he even argued that Drummond's son, Sir William Drummond, was a consenting party to the whole business.

It fell to Percy Simpson to expose Stainer's unscholarly tissue of mendacity and so maintain the *bona fides* of the 'Life' section of the *Oxford Jonson,* which in fact were largely the work of his partner, Herford. He did this in 'The Genuineness of the Drummond "Conversations"'.[3] Where, for example, Stainer doubted that the 'Johnson' indicted for killing the actor Gabriel Spencer in 1598 was the poet, Simpson was able to cite the independent witness of Philip Henslowe, who in a letter records that 'gabrell' had been 'slayen in hogesden fyldes at the hands of benge[men] Jonson bricklayer'.[4] This was published in 1841, far too late for Sibbald, Sage or Ruddiman, but Stainer should have known about it before he started making such claims.

The whole business is of critical importance in the narrative Drummond tells: 'being appealed to the fields, he had killed his adversary, which had hurt him in the arm, and whose sword was ten inches longer than his; for the which he was imprisoned, and almost at the gallows. Then took he his religion by trust of a priest who visited him in prison. Thereafter he was twelve years a papist' (*Informations,* 13.186–90). This offers itself as a decisive, life-changing sequence of events. As I myself have suggested, for example, 'It is difficult not to read Jonson's religious conversion in 1598 as an act of defiance against the authority to which he had so nearly forfeited his life, in what he regarded as a matter of honour … The assertion of his authority as a writer coincides with his adoption of Roman Catholicism as an act of symbolic resistance to the overweening state.'[5] If Stainer's claims had been substantiated, this entire construction of what many would regard as the most critical years of Jonson's life would have no foundation.

As I shall go on to argue, we still need to be circumspect about the precise terms in which Jonson, Drummond, or both record such events. But it is helpful, to say the least, to have corroboration such as Henslowe's letter to testify to the factual basis of it all. And whenever we *can* corroborate Drummond in such matters, his account holds up. There are, of course, apparent untruths there: 'Next himself only Fletcher and Chapman could make a masque' (*Informations,* 3.38). There is no record of Fletcher ever writing a masque. But this is an entirely plausible slip in the context of Drummond writing things up after the event, where talk of Beaumont

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and Fletcher might very understandably have been confused in his memory. On biographical matters concerning Jonson, however, he has not been shown to be wrong on any significant item. Stainer, for example, tried to follow up his denial of the Spencer killing with claims that '[t]hereafter he was twelve years a papist' are belied by Jonson's own writings: 'The quarto of *Every Man In His Humour*, published in 1601, with its phrase, "Nor rigid *Roman*-catholike," shows that he was a Protestant at that time.'[6] This was a sitting duck for Simpson: 'The quarto of 1601 says nothing of the kind. Mr. Stainer does not know that he is quoting the revised text of the play first printed in the folio of 1616.'[7] Personally I would add that even in 1616 the phrase does not prove 'that he was a Protestant at that time': the catch is in the force of 'rigid'.

But enough of Stainer. Simpson's damning dismissal is accurate in all particulars: 'He is grossly ignorant of the facts of Jonson's life. He makes a parade of minute knowledge which is often erroneous, he misreads evidence, and he ignores obvious facts which tell against him. In fact, the book is a monument of misreading and perversity.'[8] Drummond was vindicated, and has continued to be so by subsequent scholarship. For example: 'He himself was posthumous born a month after his father's decease; brought up poorly, put to school by a friend (his master Camden), after taken from it, and put to another craft (I think was to be a wright or bricklayer), which he could not endure' (*Informations,* 13.180–3). The fact of a stepfather is never mentioned but might be said to be implied. Thomas Fuller, writing more than twenty years after Jonson's death and without citing his authorities, claimed 'when a little child he lived in Hartshorn Lane near Charing-cross, where his mother married a bricklayer for her second husband'.[9] In 1960, J. B. Bamborough put a very plausible name, Robert Brett, to that 'second husband', a building contractor who did in fact live in Hartshorn Lane. And, in 1988, Mark Eccles established not only that Jonson himself was a member of the Tylers and Bricklayers Company, but that he continued his quarterage payments to them until as late as 1611.[10]

So Drummond is factually correct on such matters, as far as we can tell – and as far as he chooses to commit himself. This is an instance (one of many) where we would dearly love to know exactly what Jonson told him. Drummond's 'I think' surely suggests that Jonson himself did not mention the bricklaying, which he may well have heard about from friends in London, where it was certainly no secret, as Henslowe's letter attests. The underlying tale is a very Dickensian one, of an orphaned Ben, whose talents are apparent to some, but not to his (unnamed) stepfather, and who is put to demeaning work, from which he later escapes (implicitly

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on the strength of his own abilities, since his earlier chance of a first-rate education was cut short). But is this tale Jonson's or Drummond's? Ian Donaldson suggests that Drummond was essentially at pains to record what he heard and saw of his famous guest:

for the most part [he] keeps his own opinions well out of view. The title bestowed upon these notes in more recent times, *Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden,* is not only at variance with Drummond's own (alternative) titles, but misleading in its suggestion that the notes record a dialogue or exchange of views between the two men. The opinions noted are unvaryingly those of Jonson himself, though the narrative voice, strongly coloured by Scotticisms . . . is clearly that of Drummond.[11]

But how can we tell the teller from the tale? Was someone being coy about the bricklaying, and, if so, was it the self-made Jonson (at the height of his laureate fame in 1619) or the fastidious Scots laird? The biographical tradition has largely treated the bricklaying as on a par with the work in the blacking factory of David Copperfield and indeed of Charles Dickens himself, a dark secret from which the later life was always a slightly neurotic, even Oedipal escape. Yet this may be to see it through Victorian eyes or indeed the eyes of a member of the Scots gentry who never had to work for a living. Jonson himself left no direct comment on the matter (unlike his enemies, who did indeed taunt him with it often enough). But the fact that Jonson retained his membership of the Tylers and Bricklayers Company for so long tells a rather different story and one which our recent increased understanding of citizen status, and of relations between the theatres and the livery companies, makes us better able to understand.[12] Even Henslowe's note about 'benge Jonson bricklayer', so often read as a scornful snub, may be no more than an accurate record of the actor-playwright's status in 1598, the kind of thing a successful Elizabethan businessman would want to keep track of.

What this should bring home to us is that the real worry about Drummond's *Informations* is not that they might be forgeries but that (in addition to the ongoing ambiguity of whether it is actually Drummond or Jonson speaking at any particular moment) we can only see them through modern eyes, which may not always understand what they are seeing. I want to pursue that issue in relation to two of the most widely quoted passages in Drummond, ones for which we have no corroboration elsewhere or where the corroboration we have makes reading them more difficult, not less. These are the mentions of *Sejanus* and *Eastward Ho!,* both texts that brought Jonson into confrontation with state authorities at the beginning of the most fruitful decade of his career.

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'Northampton was his mortal enemy for brawling, on a St George's Day, one of his attenders; he was called before the Council for his *Sejanus,* and accused both of popery and treason by him' (*Informations,* 13.250–2). Thus Ian Donaldson reduces to intelligible modern English one of the more syntactically impenetrable passages that Sibbald transcribed.[13] Unfortunately, Sage and Ruddiman chose not to print this passage, so we do not have their separate authority for it. What, if any, is the relationship between the brawling and being called before the (Privy) Council? What, if any, is the relationship between *Sejanus* and accusations of 'popery and treason'? Is the only common factor between these two events (or three, if the accusations were not part of the Privy Council business) Northampton? Henry Howard, first Earl of Northampton, was a scion of one of the oldest noble families in England and one of the most unprincipled politicians of the Jacobean era. Son of the poet the Earl of Surrey and brother of the 4th Duke of Norfolk (who was executed for plotting on behalf of Mary, Queen of Scots), he changed his religious allegiance four times over the years, though he was widely believed to be Catholic at heart. It is often assumed (though on no authority – this is the only tangible record of their being 'mortal enem[ies]') that the real antagonism between Howard and Jonson would have been over religion: the Catholic peer turned (for now) Protestant polishing his own credentials at the expense of the Protestant-turned-Catholic playwright.

And perhaps it was. But this reading quickly glosses over the beginning of the passage, doubtless to indulge the modern taste for 'popery and treason'. There are other possibilities. When and why did this brawling take place? Throughout Elizabeth's reign Howard was in effect an outcast, sometimes directly under suspicion by the authorities and never with the real access to power that he clearly believed his lineage warranted. If Jonson, for whatever reason, engaged in a quarrel with one of his attendants – like Kent with Oswald in *King Lear* – it was reckless at that time but not exactly foolhardy. Such behaviour would hardly have been out of character with what we learn elsewhere in the *Informations,* which tell us how he fought at least three duels – how he killed an enemy in the face of both camps (13.185), killed Gabriel Spencer (13.186–8) and 'beat [Marston], and took his pistol from him' (13.216). A Freudian could have a field day with this, and not least with Jonson's determination to let Drummond know that Spencer's sword had been 10 inches longer than his own. But this also has to be seen in the context of an extremely contentious age, when matters of honour, status and manhood were often referred to the duelling fields, despite the best efforts of the authorities to stop it. Jonson may simply have

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stood on his dignity in some context.[14] Howard in turn would have felt the affront to the dignity of one of England's most ancient families. Following the famous tennis-court confrontation between them, Elizabeth herself told Sir Philip Sidney in no uncertain terms that he was not fit to match swords with the 17th Earl of Oxford. How much greater was the gulf between Jonson and Howard (or, in this context, even one of Howard's 'attenders', who would have worn his livery and so represented the family honour). Howard would not at that time have carried the authority of an Oxford, but he would have regarded a playwright like Jonson as an upstart nobody, beneath his notice. And he may well have nursed his resentment until he really had the authority to put him in his place.

From the moment James I came to the throne the Howard family in general were restored to royal favour. Henry was quickly appointed to the Privy Council and on 13 March 1604 was made Earl of Northampton. If Jonson engaged in that brawl after the change of reigns, it was foolhardy in the extreme: Howard carried the authority to match his prestige. And *Sejanus* perhaps gave him just the excuse he needed to exercise it. Unfortunately, we have no corroboration of the circumstances, since the Privy Council records for the period seem to have been destroyed in the Whitehall fire of 1619. We cannot even say whether it was the one (apparently disastrous) performance in 1603 that prompted the Privy Council summons, or the revised text published in 1605.[15] That is one reason we cannot say whether the charges of 'popery and treason' related to the play. They might, for example, have been occasioned by Jonson's arraignment for recusancy, in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot, in January 1606. On the other hand, it was once incomprehensible to twentieth-century readers that *Sejanus* could have troubled the authorities at all, especially in matters of religion. According to John Palmer, for instance, it had not 'the faintest analogy with anything to be observed in English contemporary laws, liberties or persons'.[16] But we are indebted to two recent pieces of scholarship by Gary Taylor and Peter Lake, which demonstrate convincingly (and to that extent yet again vindicate Drummond's *Informations*) just how the play might be coded to address matters of 'popery' and so perhaps also of 'treason'.[17] But even so, which really mattered more to Northampton, supposed 'popery and treason' or the affront to his family honour?

The question is all the more pertinent when we set it against the other passage that I want to consider. 'He was delated by S[i]r James Murray to the king for writing something against the Scots in a play, *Eastward Ho!,* and voluntarily imprisoned himself w[i]t[h] Chapman and Marston, who had written it amongst th[e]m. The report was that that they should then

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had their ears cut and noses' (*Informations,* 13.207–10). There then follows the melodramatic tale of a banquet following their release, attended by 'Camden, Selden and others', at which Jonson's mother produced 'lusty strong poison' which she intended to put in his drink but 'first to have drunk of it herself', if the punishment had been carried out.

In this instance there is – or at least appears to be – corroboration of the imprisonment, if not the banquet. Ten letters have survived, three from Chapman and seven from Jonson, all addressed to major figures of the Jacobean establishment (from the King and the Earl of Salisbury down), asking for help in relation to their joint imprisonment over a play.[18] There is in fact room to doubt whether these letters relate to *Eastward Ho!* No title is actually mentioned, nor is Marston. Stainer (and in this he has not been alone) wanted them to relate to the *Sejanus* business, partly on the grounds that Chapman is widely suspected to be the unnamed co-author of the original version of that play. But the *Eastward Ho!* association seems the more likely because one of Chapman's letters, that to the King, talks of his and Jonson's 'chief offences' being 'but two clauses, and both of them not our own'.[19] This seems to refer to an unnamed third author, presumably Marston. But the implication *seems* to be that Marston was not imprisoned with them. The title page of Marston's *The Fawn,* published only the next year in 1606, explicitly refers to his being out of London, and the two items together have led many to conclude that he 'contrived to avoid arrest until this uproar was over'.[20]

This, of course, contradicts the claim in the *Informations* that Jonson was imprisoned with 'Chapman *and* Marston' (my emphasis). Did Jonson's memory let him down on this? Did Drummond misunderstand? Another of these letters – Jonson's to Salisbury – shamefacedly admits that he and Chapman have been '*committed* to a vile prison',[21] which does not square very well with the *Informations* claim that he '*voluntarily* imprisoned himself' (my emphases in both quotations). It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Jonson embroidered his part in this affair, presumably to impress his Scottish host, though it is less easy to see why he should compound the self-aggrandizing 'voluntarily' with the mistake about Marston being there. Suzanne Gossett has reviewed these matters from Marston's perspective and, agreeing that he probably fled, concludes:

> Marston seems to have had great difficulty developing and maintaining 'the socially sanctioned bonds among men within the institutions of the theatre'. Even Jonson, although capable of killing a fellow actor, normally honored the demands of those bonds; consider his claim that he voluntarily imprisoned himself with Chapman. Even if not true, as 'spin' it reflects an expected attitude towards colleagues.[22]

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