

Introduction: Immortal Ben Jonson

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In the biographical materials included in the first volume of the Oxford edition of Ben Jonson (1925–52) are some reminiscences entitled *Memorandums of the Immortal Ben*. Based on early handwritten marginalia found in a copy of the 1674 quarto of *Catiline*, these purport to be an account of Jonson's writing habits, in his own voice:¹

Memorandum, I laid the plot of *Volpone*, and wrote most of it, after a present of ten dozen of sack from my very good Lord Treasurer. That play I am positive will last to posterity, and be acted when I and envy are friends, with applause.

Memorandum, the first speech in my *Catiline*, spoken by Sulla's ghost, was writ after I parted from my boys at the Devil Tavern; I had drunk well that night and had brave notions. There's one scene in that play which I think is flat; I resolve to mix no more water with my wine.

Memorandum, upon the 20th of May the King, heaven reward him, sent me £100. I went often to the Devil about that time, and wrote my *Alchemist* before I had spent £50 of it . . .

Memorandum, *The Tale of a Tub*, *The Devil is an Ass* and some others of low comedy were written by poor Ben Jonson. I remember that I did not succeed in any one composition for a whole winter; it was the winter honest Rafe the drawer died, and when I and my boys drank bad wine at the Devil.

And so on. The *Memorandums* amusingly evoke Jonson's reputation for self-conceit and alcohol consumption, but perhaps unsurprisingly they turned out to be a spoof. In an early review of the Oxford edition E. K. Chambers expressed doubts about their authenticity, then in 1936 Mark Eccles revealed that they derived from some humorous journalism written in 1715 by Lewis Theobald. The Oxford editor, Percy Simpson, had been so convinced by their tone, and so hopeful their biographical nuggets were real, that he edited

¹ C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson (eds.), *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925–52), vol. 1, pp. 188–9 (modernized, and contractions expanded). Percy Simpson edited this section of volume 1.

and annotated them as carefully as he did authentic recollections of Jonson left by William Drummond and others. Tellingly, when first challenged, Simpson backpedalled somewhat, but still clung to his instinct that the *Memorandums* might echo ‘traditional gossip’ or preserve ‘some scraps of Jonson’s talk crudely reported in the first person’.²

The enshrining of this *jeu d’esprit* at the heart of the twentieth century’s most authoritative work of Jonsonian scholarship is a capsule example of the topic with which this volume engages: the intriguing and at times perplexing ways in which Jonson’s legacy, reputation, and afterlife have passed down through cultural history. The Oxford text is a scholarly landmark, yet Percy Simpson embraced the *Memorandums* with an eagerness that bespeaks the conflicting associations which Jonson evokes. If the Oxford edition emphasized Jonson’s erudition and seriousness, Simpson’s willingness to credit this mildly absurd fiction about his private life exposes the inconsistency with which he is regarded, the countervailing myths of gravity and pettiness between which his reputation oscillates.

Few writers have experienced such conflicting assessments. The first literary celebrity, or pedantic self-promoter; convivial father of the Cavalier poets, or envious detractor of Shakespeare and other rivals; toady to a decadent court, or bold satirist and defender of liberty; obese embodiment of excess, anally retentive misanthrope, or voice of Horatian moderation and stoic self-control – Jonson has been called all these things and more. This confused and colourful picture arises in part from the sheer range of his writings, the length of his career, his astonishing mastery of forms, and his involvement with multiple literary markets (theatre, court, print-shop) and audiences (popular, aristocratic, civic, scholarly). Yet it also reflects an underlying uncertainty: in comparison with other writers, the polarization of the reaction to Jonson between extremes of veneration and censure is almost unparalleled.

Reception theory teaches that the traces authors leave and the histories of reaction to them are central to the processes by which their meanings come into being.³ An author’s afterlife is not a stable thing, or a mere pendant to their writing, but the very condition in which their significance is made, as successive generations of interpreters add to the changing continuum of literary response. Jonson’s afterlife is an especially acute

² *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 608 (additional notes, printed in 1927); Simpson eventually disavowed the *Memorandums* in 1952 (vol. 11, p. 587). See also M. Eccles, ‘Memorandums of the Immortal Ben’, *Modern Language Notes*, 51 (1936), 520–3; W. Bang, ‘Memorandums of the Immortal Ben’, *Modern Language Review*, 1 (1906), 111–15; and Craig, *Jonson: Critical Heritage*, pp. 368–70.

³ For a useful overview, see Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1984).

case of the shaping power of reception, manifesting as it does the volatility of the judgments that over time he has received. In part, this is due to the complexity of the record. Given his vigorous participation in London's literary world, his posthumous fame as the most respected writer of his day, his eighteenth-century entanglement with the canonization of Shakespeare, his chronicle of revivals in the theatre, and his role in modern academic discourse, the materials for studying his afterlife are vast.⁴ At the same time, understanding of his memory is conditioned by a network of assumptions concerning his works, his relationship to his times, his impact on other authors, and even his personality. As a result, we cannot encounter him without at some level having to deal with the Jonson 'myths', or navigate a tangle of suppositions about what he means, or can be supposed to mean.

There are, broadly speaking, five factors that mark the contours of his reception. One is the extraordinary variation in the levels of interest and appreciation that, over time, he has attracted. Lauded at his death as England's most distinguished man of letters, his reputation declined steeply in the eighteenth century, so much so that by the end of the next century he commanded little attention and, especially in the theatre, had almost completely dropped from view. In modern times his importance to the English canon has been reasserted, but outside the universities he has never wholly recovered from this peak-to-trough profile, and he continues to be a much less familiar name to non-academic readers than are many of his contemporaries.

⁴ See J. F. Bradley and J. Q. Adams (eds.), *The Jonson Allusion Book: A Collection of Allusions to Ben Jonson* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1922); Herford, Simpson, and Simpson (eds.), *Ben Jonson*, vol. II, pp. 305–569; Craig, *Jonson: Critical Heritage*; and *CWBJ Online*, Life Documents and Literary Record. Modern thinking about Jonson's reputation is shaped by Ian Donaldson's seminal essays in *Jonson's Magic Houses*. For other important studies, see G. E. Bentley, *Shakespeare & Jonson: Their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945); Robert C. Evans, 'Jonsonian Allusions' in M. Butler (ed.), *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson: Text, History Performance* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999), 233–48; James Loxley, *The Complete Critical Guide to Ben Jonson* (London: Routledge, 2002); Brian Woolland (ed.), *Jonsonians: Living Traditions* (Aldershot: Routledge, 2003); Lockwood, *Jonson in the Romantic Age*; Julie Sanders (ed.), *Ben Jonson in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Donaldson, *Ben Jonson, A Life*; and the essays forthcoming in Eugene Giddens (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ben Jonson*, especially those by Ruth Connolly ('Model Followers: *Imitatio* Amongst the "Sons" of Ben'), Jennifer Brady ('Jonson's Reception in the Restoration and Eighteenth Century'), and Tom Lockwood ('Jonson's Reception: The Nineteenth Century'). A good unpublished study is Andrew N. Lynn, 'The Impact of Ben Jonson, 1637–1700' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2001). For the stage tradition, see Noyes, *Jonson on the English Stage*; Ejner J. Jensen, *Ben Jonson's Comedies on the Modern Stage* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985); Lois Potter, 'The Swan Song of the Stage Historian', in Butler (ed.), *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson*, 193–209; and the various essays on individual plays in *CWBJ Online*, Performance Archive.

Secondly, his large and heterogeneous body of writings has been quite selectively remembered, with significant areas of his works being overlooked for long periods. Although his core texts – the most central being *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, some of the poetry such as ‘To Penshurst’ and ‘Drink to me only’ – have been enduringly popular, widely taught and read, his reputation rests on a narrow base, leading to significant misconceptions about the range of his writing as a whole. Even in modern academic studies his works tend to be compartmentalized, between plays, poems, and masques. The tension between the virulent satirist and the delicate lyricist is just one of the disparities that provoke surprise in readers familiar with only parts of the canon, while a recurrent trope for reviewers of a Jonson revival in the modern theatre is the comment that his plays act much better than they expected.⁵

Thirdly, there is the tendency of the life to bleed into the works, and for assumptions concerning Jonson the man to condition expectations about how the plays, poems, and other texts are to be understood. In comparison with most of his contemporaries, his career and character are richly documented. Indeed, it is symptomatic of the crossover between his writings and life that he is the first English poet for whom we have a psychologically convincing portrait (see Figure 8.7). The common cliché is that Jonson was opinionated, conceited, self-regarding, ambitious, combative, resentful, irascible, and not infrequently drunk. These hostile assessments take no account of the intense rivalries created by the congested literary milieu in which he worked, and are hard to reconcile with the contrary evidence we have for his sociability, convivial living, and capacity for friendship, not to mention the charmingly humane portrait. In addition, his success at court and cultivation of friendships amongst elite social circles has often led to accusations of flattery and careerism. So Jonson the scourge of tyranny (in *Sejanus*, for example) and critic of worthless aristocrats (in the *Epigrams*) has competed for visibility with his alleged role as James I’s ‘chief metrical sycophant’.⁶

Fourthly, there is the assumption that Jonson’s works are daunting to later readers and audiences, either for being too erudite, or too bound up with forgotten contemporary matters. Despite his success in the theatre

⁵ One notable example of reevaluation based on renewed attention to neglected texts was Anne Barton’s *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), which reread his output from an angle determined by a new focus on the late plays, long dismissed as artistic failures or ‘dotages’.

⁶ B. T. Boehrer, ‘Renaissance Overeating: the Sad Case of Ben Jonson’, *PMLA*, 105 (1990), 1071–82 (p. 1081). Jonson the careerist became a familiar type during the wave of ‘New Historicist’ criticism in the 1990s.

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of his time and the circulation of hundreds of manuscript copies of his poems, his seriousness about his art, view of himself as a literary reformer, and commitment to exposing ignorance and stupidity have all contributed to a reputation for pedantry and inappropriately displayed learning. The writer that Dryden wryly called ‘labouring Jonson’ continues to be disparaged when today’s critics complain about the ‘harsh, pugnacious intellectualism’ that, supposedly, comes to mind when thinking of him.⁷ So too his life on the modern stage has been limited by the presumption that his concerns are anachronistic or insufficiently universal. One might expect that a writer so engaged with the urban scene, with money and the marketplace, news and gossip, manners and social posing would have wide appeal, but the long absence of theatre revivals suggests that managers have shied away from plays which they assume are bound up with local matters and in need of updating, explanation, and finessing in order to work. For example, when in 1921 *Bartholomew Fair* received its first performance for 200 years, reviewers saw it mainly as a curiosity, a ‘relic of the past’ that in some respects was ‘too revolting for decency’.⁸

Behind this – and fifthly – lies Jonson’s entanglement in the reception of Shakespeare, in which he figures as the other writer’s perpetual whipping-boy. In the process by which Shakespeare came to be acclaimed as the literary genius who transcends his time and place, it was Jonson who served as the merely interim eminence against whom Shakespeare’s unassailable supremacy could be established. The rationale for this was unrelated to anything intrinsic in Jonson’s works, and had everything to do with his success in his own lifetime. Since, by common consent, at his death he bestrode the literary landscape, his dethronement as poetic monarch was the inevitable first step in enabling Shakespeare to be installed in his position. Crucially, if Shakespeare were to be hailed as the universal writer, who escaped the shackles of merely local concerns, then Jonson had to be relegated to the status of an anachronism. He thus came to be seen as the writer trapped by his origins, whose works were tied to their moment and became less meaningful, their subjects and language harder to understand, as they disappeared into an ever remoter past. The entwining of his career with Shakespeare’s has done more than anything else to shape his long-term reception.

⁷ J. Dryden, Prologue to *The Tempest* (1667); W. Sharpe, ‘Framing Shakespeare’s Collaborative Authorship’, *Shakespeare Survey*, 67 (2014), 22–43 (p. 30).

⁸ *CWBJ Online*, Stage History, *Bartholomew Fair*, quoting *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 June 1921, and *The Observer*, 2 July.

All this raises the question of how Jonson's legacy is to be retrieved: how he has been affected by appropriation and adaptation, what his reputation has meant for later audiences and readerships, and why he is associated with the values that tend to be attributed to him. This is a large and complex issue, for his afterlife is only one strand in the revaluation of early modern literature more generally, and modern assessments are conditioned by our sense of the likenesses and antagonisms that structure comparisons with his contemporaries. Of course, the legacies of other writers have been no less eventful. If we set Shakespeare aside as the exceptional case,⁹ the obvious parallels are with Milton, Donne, and Marlowe, all of whom went through periods of enthusiasm and neglect. The importance of Milton was never in doubt, though his politics and religion mean that his impact has been vigorously controverted, and his potent poetic voice felt as both enabling and constraining, a spur to later writers and a source of resentment.¹⁰ Donne, though widely praised at his death, was eclipsed for generations, only in the twentieth century fully regaining his reputation as the foremost early modern poet of erotic love and religious anxiety.¹¹ As for Marlowe, after his death his plays dropped from view altogether, and not until the nineteenth century did readers re-discover his daring, sublimity, and transgressiveness, qualities that are fully acknowledged today. His revival is underpinned by the popular idea of Marlowe the spy, though this exists in the teeth of debate amongst academics as to whether the murky documentary sources really can sustain the sensational interpretation of his life.¹²

For all their ups and downs, the profiles of Milton, Donne, and Marlowe are distinctive. Generally speaking, the long-term impact of

⁹ The relevant bibliography is vast, but see especially Brian Vickers (ed.), *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage 1623–1801*, 6 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974–81); Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London: Hogarth, 1989); Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997). Interest in Shakespeare's afterlife is such that it extends to his characters and his wife: see, for example, Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (eds.), *The Afterlife of Ophelia* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and Katherine West Scheil, *Imagining Shakespeare's Wife: The Afterlife of Anne Hathaway* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Milton's afterlife is concisely surveyed in Paul Hammond and Blair Worden (eds.), *John Milton: Life, Writing, Reputation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹¹ See A. J. Smith (ed.) (and completed by Catherine Phillips), *John Donne: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1975–96); and Dayton Haskin, 'Donne's Afterlife', in A. Guibbory (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 233–46.

¹² For rival readings of Marlowe's life, see J. A. Downie, 'Marlowe, May 1593, and the "Must-Have" Theory of Biography', *Review of English Studies*, 58 (2007), 245–67; and Constance Brown Kuriyama, 'Marlowe Biography: Fact, Inference, Speculation', in Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan (eds.), *Christopher Marlowe at 450* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 327–40.

their work, and what it enabled for their successors, is clear. But with Jonson, who can be co-opted neither as a visionary nor a rebel, the picture is more elusive, so amongst these competing posthumous narratives his influence on successive generations is harder to isolate. His literary legacy is evident in the prevalence of ‘humours’ characterization on the Restoration stage, which directly built on his example, and in his pioneering of a poetic language which fused the neoclassical and vernacular into a single, flexible mode – described by Colin Burrow as Jonson’s crucial bequest to the world of Dryden and Pope.¹³ However, claims that one might identify a modern school of Jonson – John Arden, Joe Orton, and (more intriguingly) David Mamet have all been suggested – are difficult to sustain, and founder on uncertainty about what, beyond a taste for caustic irony and gulling plots, might today be seen as ‘Jonsonian’.¹⁴ The unfamiliarity of his plays on the modern stage, the loss of the court masque as a living form, the restrained, undramatic character of his poetry, and his own dauntingly self-conscious exploration of the practice and ethics of *imitatio*, mean that he is not an easy model for imitation.¹⁵ Unlike, say, the positively deployed adjectives ‘Shakespearean’, ‘Marlovian’, or ‘Miltonic’, the term ‘Jonsonian’ frequently has pejorative associations – ‘pedantic’, ‘obsessive’, or ‘anal’. His reputation as Shakespeare’s antagonist or as a testy drinking companion outweighs other possible Jonsons that could be remembered: Jonson the scourge of fanatics, the friend of intellectuals, the poet passionate for ‘humanity and liberty’ (as the dedication to *Every Man Out of His Humour* puts it (line 1)).

The essays collected in this volume examine the multivalent constructions of that authorial entity known as ‘Ben Jonson’: they explore a history of imitation, adaptation, annotation, borrowing, editing, illustrating, and reinvention in which he is appropriated and reconstructed according to the

¹³ Colin Burrow, *Imitating Authors: Plato to Futurity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 278.

¹⁴ These links are suggested in the essay collections *Ben Jonson and Theatre*, eds. Richard Cave, Elizabeth Schafer, and Brian Woolland (London: Routledge, 1999) and *Jonsonians: Living Traditions*, ed. Woolland. The most obvious theatrical disciple is Peter Barnes, who adapted *The Alchemist*, *Eastward Ho!*, and *The Devil Is an Ass*, and in *Jonsonians* writes about Jonson with enthusiasm and insight (*Bartholomew Fair*: All the Fun of the Fair’, pp. 43–50). But it is difficult not to feel that the other connections offered are rather impressionistic.

¹⁵ For some examples of poetic influence, see Thom Gunn, ‘An Invitation from San Francisco to My Brother’ (in *The Man with Night Sweats* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992)); U. A. Fanthorpe, ‘Jonson at Hawthornden’ (in *Queuing for the Sun* (Calstock, Cornwall: Peterloo Poets, 2003)); and, in a more dispersed way, the poetry of Geoffrey Hill. Cf. Stefan Hawlin, ‘Epistemes and Imitations: Thom Gunn on Ben Jonson’, *PMLA*, 122 (2007), 1516–30. On Jonson’s own practice of imitation, see Burrow, *Imitating Authors*, pp. 235–78; and Jane Rickard, “‘To Strike the Ear of Time’: Ben Jonson’s *Poetaster* and the Temporality of Art’, *Renaissance Drama*, 48 (2020), 57–81.

changing perceptions of successive readers and spectators. They fall into three sections, focussing (respectively) on the reputation he had in his own time; the response to him by early readers and audiences down to 1830; and some of the more radical metamorphoses of his works and image found in various contexts from the eighteenth century to the present. Ultimately, the key question is not what Jonson means but how he came to mean it, and what this tells us about his use-value for later generations. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith puts it, when theorizing the staying-power of any literary classic: ‘the canonical work [will begin] increasingly not merely to *survive within* but to *shape and create* the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted, and, for that very reason, to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing’.¹⁶ Even more intriguing is the question of whether the story of Jonson’s reception obscures important aspects of his writing. How far does the Jonson we inherit reflect the full possibilities lurking in that vast and complex canon? Do modern constructions of him present a plausible understanding of the literary world he inhabited and his position within it? How has the evolution of his legacy been shaped by and in turn shaped the memory of his contemporaries and successors?

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The essays in the first section of this volume focus on the tensions that underlie Jonson’s reputation in his own lifetime, and explore their roots in the rapidly evolving world of the early modern professional writer. Jonson’s conscious self-construction first surfaces explicitly in 1604, when he names himself ‘B. ION.’ on the title-page of *The Magnificent Entertainment*, announcing that unique brand, ‘Jonson’ without the ‘h’.¹⁷ But already in his earliest printed volume, the 1600 quarto of *Every Man Out of His Humour*, he had called himself the ‘author’ – the first time the term prefaces any published play from the English professional stage. He also emphasized his sole responsibility by claiming that the printed text included what ‘was first composed . . . containing more than hath been publicly spoken or acted’, thus elevating the book as authorized by him over what was seen in performance.¹⁸ All his early quartos bristle with prefaces, summaries, dedicatory verses, digests of characters, and use marginalia and unusual layouts that promote his typographical persona, drawing the texts away from their first audiences or readers and back into

¹⁶ *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 49; cited in John Lyon, ‘The Test of Time: Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne’, *Essays in Criticism*, 49 (1999), 1–20 (p. 15).

¹⁷ *CWBJ*, vol. 2, p. 429. ¹⁸ *CWBJ*, vol. 1, p. 249.

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the author's shaping hand. The culmination was the ground-breaking folio of plays, poems, and masques, *The Works of Benjamin Jonson* (1616), its components elevated into authorized versions by revisions which rendered them sometimes quite different from the forms in which they had first appeared. Pointedly, the *Works* are incomplete, and exclude collaborative texts and many items to which Jonson did not put his name, drawing a line around the acknowledged canon and emphasizing his control over what constituted his writings. Usefully characterized by Trevor Ross as English literature's first 'self-consciously canonical edition' of a writer's works, the folio is a landmark in authorial presence.¹⁹

Yet the legacy Jonson sought to secure was inevitably conflicted. For one thing, it rested on the conditions of a literary profession whose commercial circumstances were at odds with the image of a self-confident author projected in the *Works*. Not only was Jonson more intimately involved in the literary marketplace than the *Works* admitted, he was dependent on its structures to underpin the authorial autonomy to which he aspired, and subject like everyone else to the uncertainty created by the tastes of a paying public. By insisting that his plays be valued as literature, he sought to protect them from the misprision of popular theatre audiences, but in doing so he weakened their bond with the very institution that gave them life, creating a disconnect with the stage that has bedevilled his memory ever since. Moreover, while he framed his texts by invoking the discerning few – *contentus paucis lectoribus*, as the folio epigraph has it²⁰ – he was scarcely more trusting of readers than of theatre spectators. The prefaces to the works repeatedly call for consumers to 'understand', distinguishing the 'reader extraordinary', who makes informed judgments, from the 'reader ordinary' who, it is expected, will always mistake the author's intentions. From the splenetic Apologetical Dialogue in *Poetaster*, couched in the voice of the Author, through to the note to the reader in *The Staple of News*, complaining people liked the jokes but for the wrong reasons, his wish to control interpretation runs up against the difficulty of dictating how he is read. His preoccupation with his reception is, then, a complex negotiation between the desire for authorial ownership and the reality that in the literary marketplace the customer is king.

In the present collection, James Loxley's chapter takes up the question of Jonson's relationship with his public, particularly his self-representation as

¹⁹ T. Ross, *The Making of the English Literary Canon* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), p. 108.

²⁰ 'Neque, me ut miretur turba, laboro: / Contentus paucis lectoribus': nor do I labour for the admiration of the crowd; I am content with few readers (Horace, *Satires*, 1.10.73–4, adapted).

a misunderstood author prone to be judged wrongly by unworthy audiences. Traditionally Jonson has been understood as standing at odds with his audience, his displays of irascibility being seen in pathological terms, as one of his negative personality traits. However, Loxley warns us not to take his tetchiness at face value, but as a conscious strategy through which he engaged with the consequences of popular success and sought to distinguish his appeal from that of writers like John Taylor or Thomas Coryate, who were also celebrated but in ways that he wished to avoid. Pursuing fame, but aware of the peril of being famous for the wrong reasons, Jonson creates the idea of the bad reader or spectator in order to manage his celebrity and forestall becoming a mere public commodity. By crafting the trope of unwilling renown, he is able to curate his image, his seeming disdain for his audiences not being a self-cancelling rejection of them but ‘writerly labour in the creation of reputational value’ (p. 42 below) – a paradoxically self-displaying performance of authorial discontent giving them what he hopes they will expect. As Adam Zucker writes in the next chapter, the real ‘enemy of Art’ is not being misunderstood but ‘a missing audience’ (p. 60).

Zucker’s chapter also addresses Jonson’s persona, focussing on his reputation for pedantry and its associations with vanity, pretentiousness, and ‘empty complexity’ (p. 51 below). In parallel to Loxley, Zucker sees Jonson’s erudition not as an obsession – in Edmund Wilson’s terms, the writer as neurotic, constructing ‘charms against failure’ (p. 45) – but a creative energy meeting the challenge of building a well-informed, intellectually self-aware readership. Zucker emphasizes it is not necessary to grasp all Jonson’s erudition, or follow every allusion, in order for his writing to take effect. Indeed, the scholarship is not designed to be fully understood, for the point is the audience’s experience of productive bafflement, as they participate in and internalize the dialogic relationships between reader, actor, author, and critic that typically structure these texts. In this perspective, Jonson’s writing is working to create a functioning public, enabling his disparate early consumers to conceptualize themselves as a coherent audience or readership. By encouraging readers and spectators to play out their inner disparities and differences in the act of understanding, his displays of arcane knowledge foster the creation of a broad critical consensus, educating them in the playful intellectual gymnastics necessary to become full members of the cultural community.

A different legacy emerges in Jean Howard’s chapter, on ‘Corporeal Jonson’, which foregrounds the contradictions in an author who at one moment is erudite and scholarly and at the next coarse, raucous, and