

Ben Jonson and the Story of Charis

IAN DONALDSON

I

'A Celebration of Charis in Ten Lyric Pieces' (*The Underwood*, 2) is one of the most attractive and seemingly most accessible of all Ben Jonson's poetic works. Subtle, humorous, and enchanting, these often admired lyrics appear at a casual reading to present few problems of exegesis or interpretation. Yet the sequence has provoked sharply divergent readings over recent years. There is continuing disagreement amongst critics about the tone and seriousness of the sequence, about the contexts (intellectual, historical, and literary) within which it may need to be understood, and even about the main outlines of the narrative which these seemingly simple lyrics seemingly unfold.

Part of the problem in reading the 'Charis' poems lies precisely in that tension between their narrative and lyric functions: between a view of the poems as constituting (on the one hand) a single, continuous, and organically related whole — 'the story' which the poet announces in the opening poem — and (on the other hand) ten discrete 'lyric pieces' to be independently savoured and understood. A somewhat similar tension is to be found within the 'ten pieces' on Lady Venetia Digby which make up the sequence 'Eupheme', placed in seeming counter-balance to the 'Charis' poems near the end of *The Underwood* (number 84) in the 1640-41 folio; and within those larger groups of poems, the *Epigrams* and *The Forest*, in Jonson's 1616 folio.¹ In all of these cases, poems written at different times and for different occasions are lightly but significantly organized within a new structural grouping whose continuities and contiguities encourage subtly different readings from those which the poems might have attracted in their original

1 It is not known whether the ordering of poems in the posthumously published *Underwood* reflects Jonson's own wishes, or the management of his literary executor, Sir Kenelm Digby. On the ordering of poems in the 1616 folio, see Edward Partridge, 'Jonson's *Epigrammes*: The Named and the Nameless', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, VI (1973), 153-98; James A. Riddell, 'The Arrangement of Ben Jonson's *Epigrammes*', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 27 (1987), 53-70; Alastair Fowler, 'The *Silva* Tradition in Jonson's *The Forest*', *Poetic Traditions of the English Renaissance*, ed. Maynard Mack and George deForest Lord (New Haven and London, 1982), pp. 163-80. Unless otherwise indicated Jonson quotations are taken from the Oxford Authors *Ben Jonson*, ed. Ian Donaldson (Oxford and New York, 1985).

literary or social contexts. Jonson's early poetic tributes to Robert, Earl of Salisbury, for example (*Epigrams* 63, 64), are innocuous enough if read as self-contained poems of praise, but that praise is subverted if we read them in the carefully organized sequence of *Epigrams* in the 1616 folio, where they are followed by a strategically-placed poem 'To My Muse' (*Epigram* 65) beginning

Away, and leave me, thou thing most abhorred,
That hast betrayed me to a worthless lord . . .

Jonson's Catullan translation, 'Come, my Celia', seems (likewise) to possess a subtly different character when sung in the third act of *Volpone* by the Magnifico of Venice in the course of his attempt to seduce Corvino's wife Celia, and when recontextualized as the fifth song of *The Forest*, where it is placed in company with a number of poems solemnly addressed to noble ladies. In a similar way, the verses beginning 'Do but look on her eyes' have a different flavour when sung during Wittipol's wooing of Frances Fitzdottrel, wife of the doltish Fabian Fitzdottrel, in the second act of *The Devil is an Ass*, and when incorporated into the mythological pageantry of the fourth lyric in 'A Celebration of Charis', and read in relation to the multiple shifts and balances of the sequence as a whole.

'A Celebration of Charis' was probably put together early in the 1620s, but some of the lyrics, including the song from *The Devil is an Ass*, were evidently written at various times throughout the preceding decade.² The lyrics are assembled in an apparently casual fashion, to form a narrative that is continuous yet at the same time intermittent. There are leaps and gaps in the story of Charis, which often moves by hints, implications, and seemingly contradictory transitions rather than by the denser, more comprehensive narrative method which Jonson characteristically favours in his plays. The story, which is much concerned with guessing, speculation, and mistaking, must itself be completed by a measure of guesswork on the reader's part: a fact that helps to account for the

2 Herford and Simpson reckon the first of the lyrics to have been written in 1623 (a literal reading of 'fifty years'), and the remaining pieces 'after 1612, when Jonson made up his lyrics for *The Forest*, and before 1616, when *The Devil is an Ass*, containing II.iv. 11-30, was acted at the Blackfriars': *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and P. and E. Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1925-52), XI. 49. Why lyrics ii-x had to be completed before the performance of *The Devil is an Ass* the editors do not explain. The seventh lyric was amongst 'the most commonplace of his repetition' when Jonson visited Drummond in 1618-19: see *Conversations with Drummond*, 66-75 (Oxford Authors edn). The reference to Queen Anne of Denmark's dancing in vi.28 indicates a date before her death in March 1619.

highly discrepant interpretations which the sequence has attracted in recent years.

And it is only in recent years (it would seem) that much attention has been paid to the nature of this story, or to the structural organization of the sequence as a whole. Historically, 'A Celebration of Charis' was known and enjoyed chiefly on account of its individual lyrics; and in particular, of 'Her Triumph', which seems always to have been the best loved poem in the group. Its early popularity is suggested by the number of manuscript versions and variants that survive from the seventeenth century. The song was parodied by Sir John Suckling, imitated by James Shirley, and later shamelessly appropriated by David Garrick for his operatic version of *The Tempest* in 1756: a recontextualization that Jonson himself, with his well-known views on those who beget Tales and Tempests, might perhaps have viewed a little wryly.³ It was popular even in the nineteenth century, when Jonson's literary reputation was at its lowest ebb. Hazlitt paused in the midst of his generally disparaging remarks about Jonson in his *Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth* in 1820 to express a liking for Jonson's 'detached poetry' and his 'fugitive and lighter pieces', including 'Her Triumph'; though his praise is interestingly tempered by a suspicion that even these lyrics — and in particular the famous song celebrating Charis — are marred by some stubbornly prosaic or unromantic element:

but still often in the happiest of them, there is a specific gravity in the author's pen, that sinks him to the bottom of his subject, though buoyed up for a time with art and painted plumes, and produces a strange mixture of the mechanical and fanciful, of poetry and prose, in his songs and odes. For instance, one of his most airy effusions is the Triumph of his Mistress: yet there are some lines in it that seem inserted almost by way of burlesque.⁴

About 'His Discourse with Cupid' Hazlitt was more enthusiastic, though he regarded this lyric also as a detached piece rather than as part of a poetic sequence: it 'is infinitely delicate and *piquant*, and without one single blemish', he wrote; 'It is a perfect "nest of

3 Sir John Suckling, *Non-Dramatic Works*, ed. Thomas Clayton (Oxford, 1971), pp. 29-30, James Shirley, *Poems, &c.* (London, 1646), p. 9 (once incorrectly ascribed to Thomas Carew: see his *Poems*, ed. Rhodes Dunlop (Oxford, 1949), p. 197); Davick Garrick, *Plays*, ed. H. W. Pedicord and F. L. Bergmann (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1981), III. 294; 'Tales and Tempests': *Bartholomew Fair*, Induction, 130 (Herford and Simpson edn).

4 *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, after the edition of A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover (London, 1931), VI. 239-40.

spicery”’.⁵ The poem is a *nest*, as Venus’s breasts are said to be within the lyric itself: a location delightful in, and sufficient to, itself, from which there is no incentive to move. Charles Cowden Clarke in 1871 echoed Hazlitt’s description of this lyric (‘so exquisite a thing as to have been aptly termed “a nest of spicery”’), and also praised ‘Her Triumph’: ‘Every glee-singer knows those pompous lines, “See the chariot at hand”, sounding the glories of his mistress, and which are as sonorous without as with music’.⁶ While other lyrics from the sequence enjoyed some popularity during the nineteenth century, it was ‘Her Triumph’ that established itself as the standard Jonsonian anthology piece in Victorian times (along with ‘Drink to me only with thine eyes’ and ‘It is not growing like a tree’, from the Cary/Morison Ode).⁷ The lyric has continued to find its way into anthologies right up to the present day, where it can still be read as an example of what Hazlitt called ‘detached poetry’.⁸ Thus decontextualized, it is thought to achieve what Jonson’s Oxford editors describe as a ‘romantic note . . . sadly lacking, as a rule, in Jonson’s portrayal of love’.⁹

When in the late Victorian period some interest in the narrative and sequential aspects of the Charis poems was at last displayed, it was by scholars intent upon finding an historical explanation for that perceived ‘romantic note’. ‘A Celebration of Charis’ (like

- 5 Ibid., p. 241. ‘Nest of spicery’ is from *Richard III*, IV.iv. 424 (Richard speaking to Queen Elizabeth, about her daughter’s womb).
- 6 Charles Cowden Clarke, ‘On the Comic Writers of England: II — Ben Jonson’, *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, May 1871, p. 635.
- 7 The seventh lyric was admired by ‘Barry Cornwall’ (B. W. Procter) in his *Memoir of the Life and Writing of Ben Jonson* (London, 1838), p. xxxix, and by Nathan Drake, *Shakspeare and his Times* (Paris, 1843), p. 306. On nineteenth-century anthologies and their part in the formation of Jonson’s poetic reputation, see Ian Donaldson, ‘Jonson’s Ode to Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, VI (1973), 139-52.
- 8 ‘Her Triumph’ was thus anthologized (to give just a few examples) in *English Lyrics* (London, 1883), *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1918*, ed. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (Oxford, 1900), *Lyrics from the Dramatists of the Elizabethan Age*, ed. A. H. Bullen (London, 1901), *The Pageant of English Poetry* (London etc., 1916), *English Verse*, ed. W. Peacock, 5 vols. (London, 1929), vol. II, *Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, ed. John Hayward (London, 1948), *Elizabethan Lyrics*, ed. Norman Ault (New York, 1949), *The Penguin Book of English Verse*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth, 1956), *English Masterpieces*, ed. Leonard Dean, III: *Renaissance Poetry* (Englewood Cliffs, 1961), *Poets of the Early Seventeenth Century*, ed. Bernard and Elizabeth Davis (London, 1967), *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1972), *Everyman’s Book of English Verse*, ed. John Wain (London etc., 1981).
- 9 Herford and Simpson, XI. 49.

Shakespeare's sonnets and *Astrophil and Stella*) was viewed as an exercise in semi-fictional autobiography; the 'story' that was looked for was a story about Jonson himself. If the poems were scrutinized with sufficient care, it was believed, the thin veil of fiction would fall away, and the historical truth would stand revealed. The lover who is dramatized within the Charis sequence is a bearded fifty-year-old poet named 'Ben', a transparent representation (it was assumed) of Jonson himself. Charis was thought to represent some actual lady of the court circle. F. G. Fleay in 1891 suggested that she was Lady Elizabeth Hatton (wife of the jurist Sir Edward Coke), with whom he believed Jonson had had a romantic entanglement which he commemorates in these lyrics.¹⁰ The fact that one of the lyrics from the Charis sequence had previously appeared in *The Devil is an Ass*, like the fact that phrases and images similar to those found throughout the sequence recur elsewhere in Jonson's work, simply encouraged Fleay to pursue his 'story' more widely, collecting apparently substantiating hints and clues from Jonson's masques, comedies and other poetic writings. As the search spread, the hypothesis became increasingly attenuated and implausible. In the end, Fleay's biographical speculations turned out to be neither provable nor disprovable; they served simply to distract attention from the dramatic life of the sequence and from the (quite possibly) wholly fictitious narrative which it presents.

Over the past thirty years various attempts have been made to find a different sort of narrative, thematic, or methodological coherence in 'A Celebration of Charis'. Paul M. Cubeta, conceivably provoked by the 'nest of spicery' school of appreciation, argued in 1958 that Jonson's poetic purposes in the sequence were largely satirical and parodic. Throughout the ten lyrics, Cubeta suggested, Jonson makes fun of the conventions of Petrarchan love poetry, and also makes fun of himself; in the rare moments when parody is suspended (as briefly in 'Her Triumph'), the tone is still that of 'high comic irony', for Jonson is bent upon exposing Charis in all her 'affectation and vanity'. The 'celebration' of Charis is thus akin to Pope's 'celebration' of Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*, being deeply undermined by irony.¹¹ G. J. Weinberger was later to extend this reading, suggesting that the entire sequence, including 'Her Triumph', was to be interpreted as a mock-encomium of a lady

10 F. G. Fleay, *A Biographical Chronicle of the English Drama, 1559-1642*, 2 vols. (London, 1891), I, 324-5.

11 Paul M. Cubeta, ' "A Celebration of Charis": An Evaluation of Jonsonian Poetic Strategy', *ELH* 25 (1958), 163-80.

undeserving of such high estimation.¹² Wesley Trimpi in 1962 offered a very different interpretation, arguing that the poems should be seen not as humorous anti-Petrarchan exercises but as more serious explorations of the nature of love and beauty and the good life, modelled upon Neoplatonic *discorsi*. Trimpi viewed Charis herself not as an object of satire but as a lady of intelligence and discernment, sturdy enough to tease her poetic admirer, but not unworthy of the adulation he offers. Charis's description of the ideal lover in the ninth lyric, Trimpi argued, enshrines courtly and ethical notions which Jonson himself would have admired. Such irony as can be found in the sequence, he suggested, is not at Charis's expense; it turns rather on the fact that Charis, in stating her preference for an ideal young courtier, thereby rejects the uncourtly, middle-aged poet who is most ardent to possess her.¹³ Richard S. Peterson, viewing the sequence in yet another light, denied that Charis *does* reject the poet, arguing that the final lines of the ninth lyric ('But of one, if short he came, / I can rest me where I am') imply Charis's recognition that her ideal lover is unattainable, and that she will stay instead with the poet. Peterson argued that Jonson in these poems is reworking the theme of pleasure reconciled to virtue, which he had treated in his court masque of 1618. At the outset of the sequence, the lady seems bent upon virtue, while the poet is pursuing pleasure, but finally they strike a happy compromise.¹⁴

Most of these interpretations, in attempting to relate the Charis poems to a learned or poetic tradition, seem in danger of running

- 12 G. J. Weinberger, 'Jonson's Mock-Economiasic "Celebration of Charis"', *Genre* 4 (1971), 305-28.
- 13 Wesley Trimpi, *Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study of the Plain Style* (Stanford, 1962), pp. 210-27.
- 14 Richard S. Peterson, 'Virtue Reconciled to Pleasure: Jonson's "A Celebration of Charis"', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, VI (1973), 219-68. Peterson's interpretation of the significance of the closing lines in the ninth lyric has been independently supported by Anne Ferry, *All in War With Time: Love Poetry of Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Marvell* (Cambridge, Mass., London, 1975), p. 162. For other accounts of the sequence see Sara Van Den Berg, 'The Play of Wit and Love: Demetrius *On Style* and Jonson's "A Celebration of Charis"', *ELH*, 41 (1974), 26-36; S. P. Zitner, 'The Revenge on Charis', in *The Elizabethan Theatre IV*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (London and Basingstoke, 1974), pp. 127-42; R. V. Leclercq, 'The Reciprocal Harmony of Jonson's "A Celebration of Charis"', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, XVI (1975), 627-50; and Raymond B. Waddington, '"A Celebration of Charis": Socratic Lover and Silenic Speaker', in *Classic and Cavalier: Essays on Jonson and the Sons of Ben*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburg, 1982), pp. 121-38.

their theses a little hard, and of missing what is perhaps the most attractive feature of the sequence: its extraordinary flexibility and variety. Throughout the Charis poems, Jonson shifts deftly and rapidly through a range of poetic forms, voices, and moods, modulating with wonderful suppleness from satire to celebration, from pathos to playfulness, switching emotional registers and angles of vision in order to create a complex total picture of the developing and dwindling relationship between Charis and her adoring lover.

These contrasts and variations go well beyond what is suggested by any notion of a 'love debate': *debating* is scarcely what the characters get up to, nor do the lyrics themselves address and answer each other in anything resembling a dialectical manner. The lyrics are variously spoken and variously directed. The first, second, and third of the lyrics are in the voice of the poet, who is at once the presenter and principal actor in this little drama. The story he tells is of events which have already occurred; it appears to be leading to a conclusion that is already known to him. In the closing lines of the third lyric, however, the narration moves suddenly into the present tense ('Loser-like, now, all my wreak / Is that I have leave to speak', etc.), and the fourth lyric, 'Her Triumph', dramatically describes an occurrence that is happening *now*, even as we watch and listen: 'See the chariot at hand here of Love, / Wherein my lady rideth!' The fifth, sixth, and seventh lyrics seem to ignore us, the by-standers and witnesses of this story, being addressed instead to Cupid and to Charis. The most intimate of these, the seventh ('Begging another, on colour of mending the former'), bases its plea indeed on the assumption that the lovers are now alone: 'Here's none to spy, or see'. The eighth lyric briefly remembers our presence, returning for a dozen lines to the original narrative mode before turning once again to Charis and addressing her directly. Other listeners are now present: the lover's tone is accordingly less intimate and more peremptory than in the preceding song. The ninth lyric is addressed by Charis to the poet, once more in the presence of others; it is a public answer to a public challenge, studiously casual in manner, teasingly non-committal in its declarations. The tenth lyric is spoken by another lady 'present at the hearing' in a witty aside directed presumably to Charis or members of her retinue. This courtly circle grouped around Charis has seemingly replaced the original audience to which 'Ben' addresses his early lyrics.

This is not exactly the conclusion that we might have anticipated at the outset of the sequence. Something surprising has happened to

the story along the way. The poet who began with would-be dignity to tell a (past-tense) narrative about himself that he vowed would move us to sorrow and gladness has now been silenced by the emergence of a (present-tense) drama that is more likely to move us to a smile. The last word is delivered not by the infatuated narrator but by a skittish lady of the court. 'Ben' has seemingly been marginalized not only as a lover but also as a poet; to have lost not merely Charis, but control of the story about Charis which he was attempting to relate.

To follow the changing narrative shape of the Charis sequence in this way is to realize that the poems are not simply concerned with charting the progress of a love affair, as older scholars believed; they also chart the progress of *a story about* an amorous affair. Jonson is writing not only about the adventures of a lover, but also about the adventures of a poet; about the power of love and the power of poetry; and about the humorous, sublime, and troublesome ways in which those two great forces may tangle and intersect.

II

The love-struck poet in the opening lyric is dignified yet faintly absurd. 'His Excuse for Loving' is an attempt to control our responses to the story that he is about to tell. We are not to wonder, not to laugh; to be ready for sorrow, ready for gladness. The would-be firmness of these injunctions is gently dissolved through the nursery metre of the lines, and the banality of the rhymes:

If you then will read the story,
First prepare you to be sorry . . .
(i. 13-14)

These subversive effects are to become more noticeable in the second of the lyrics:

Far I was from being stupid,
For I ran and called on Cupid . . .
(ii. 5-6)

Here the naked stupidity of the rhyme itself humorously denies the overt proposition of the lines. In a similar way, the very appeal *not* to laugh at the outset of the first lyric paradoxically alerts the reader to the possibility of comicalities to come; a possibility that is nevertheless held in check through a steadying modulation of the lines:

Poets, though divine, are men:
 Some have loved as old again.
 And it is not always face,
 Clothes, or fortune gives the grace,
 Or the feature, or the youth;
 But the language, and the truth,
 With the ardour and the passion,
 Gives the lover weight and fashion.
 (i. 5-11)

The last three lines, with their anaphoric repetitions and skilful deployment of vowels ('With the ardour and the passion'), themselves demand to be read with a certain deliberation or 'weight': a word which, as Anne Ferry has shown, has a precise, stylistic, sense in Jonson's critical vocabulary, yet also possibly reminds us at subliminal level of the poet himself, whose 'weight is twenty stone, within two pound' (*The Underwood*, 56.11).¹⁵ 'Fashion' has a similarly humorous double life, for the term could be used either in the lightly modish sense which Charis intends when she later expresses her preference for a lover 'French to boot, at least in fashion' (ix.7), or with the deeper sense of poetic artistry and endeavour that is to be found in Jonson's lines to the memory of Shakespeare:

For though the poet's matter nature be,
 His art doth give the fashion. And that he
 Who casts to write a living line must sweat
 (Such as thine are) and strike the second heat
 Upon the muses' anvil: turn the same
 (And himself with it) that he thinks to frame . . .
 (*Ungathered Verse*, 26. 57-62)¹⁶

In a poetic sense, 'Ben' may indeed have exemplary 'weight' and 'fashion', but whether Charis seeks this kind of fashion, whether she fancies this (or any other) kind of weight in her lover, remains to be discovered.

The first lyric, ostensibly celebrating the power of Charis, also celebrates the power of poetry itself. The verses we are about to hear will arouse our feelings (the poet assures us) just as Charis has aroused his own. The makers of poetry are both 'divine' and human (i.5), like the subject of these poems, Charis herself. Charis fulfils the prophecies of poetry, being one

15 *All in War With Time*, pp. 159-61.

16 Cf. *Discoveries*, ll. 2184, 2214 (Oxford Authors edn).

Of whose beauty it was sung,
 She shall make the old man young,
 Keep the middle age at stay,
 And let nothing high decay,
 Till she be the reason why
 All the world for love may die.
 (i. 19-24)

She will miraculously halt the progress and incursions of time, just as poetry itself is alleged to do, both for its practitioners and the subjects whom they immortalize.¹⁷ The lyric invites us simultaneously to smile at the naive trustfulness of the narrator, and to respect his noble praise. 'Of whose beauty it was sung': the allusion, if it is one, has not been traced. But the hyperbolic tribute to the powers of Charis in these lines is curiously like the hyperbolic tribute to the powers of the poet in the Epistle Dedicatory addressed to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge which Jonson prefixed to the 1607 quarto edition of *Volpone* (an epistle which functions in one sense like the opening lyric of the Charis sequence, making a similar bid to raise our admiration and control our responses to the narrative that follows):

He that is said to be able to inform young men to all good disciplines, inflame grown men to all great virtues, keep old men in their best and supreme state. or, as they decline to childhood, recover them to their first strength; that comes forth the interpreter and arbiter of nature, a teacher of things divine no less than human, a master in manners; and can alone (or with a few) effect the business of mankind: this, I take him, is no subject for pride and ignorance to exercise their railing rhetoric upon. (ll. 20-7)

In 'A Celebration of Charis', these fine truths are humorously tempered by a shrewd awareness of the actual limits of the poet's powers. 'Poets, though divine, are men': the apology contains its own comic potential, which the second lyric is soon to exploit.

In the Epistle Dedicatory to *Volpone* Jonson expresses his hope that 'men will impartially, and not asquint, look toward the offices and function of a poet' (ll. 17-18). This stress upon right and wrong ways of seeing is characteristic of Jonson:

Look here on Breton's work, the master print,
 Where such perfections to the life do rise.
 If they seem wry to such as look asquint
 The fault's not in the object, but their eyes.
 (*Ungathered Verse*, 2. 5-8)

17 Cf. *The Forest*, 13. 121-4; *The Underwood*, 27.

Look up, thou seed of envy, and still bring
 Thy faint and narrow eyes to read the king
 In his great actions: view whom his large hand
 Hath raised to be the port unto his land!
 (*The Underwood*, 73. 1-4)

The poet's task is to encourage right ways of seeing, to lead the reader to a viewpoint from which the truth will be revealed in its proper lineaments and proportions:

For as one coming with a lateral view
 Unto a cunning piece wrought perspective
 Wants faculty to make a censure true;
 So with this author's readers will it thrive:
 Which, being eyed directly, I divine,
 His proof their praise will meet, as in this line.
 (*Ungathered Verse*, 2. 9-13)¹⁸

There is a certain simplicity about the categories of moral and artistic perception that Jonson here entertains: there are wrong ways of seeing things (enviously, narrowly, faintly, wryly, laterally, obliquely, asquint), and there is the right way (directly, impartially). The notion of truth is primitively conceived: it is something that is just *there* to be seen by anyone who aligns himself with it, opens his eyes, and looks straight ahead. Jonson's verse satires are sometimes characterized by fierce exhortations to *look* at this or that example of inequity or supposed happiness, and draw the inevitable conclusion: to see the truth. Thus the friend who is being urged to the wars in *The Underwood* 15 is told to 'Look on the ambitious man', 'Look on the false and cunning man', 'See the grave, sour, and supercilious sir', 'See him, that's called and thought the happiest man' (ll. 11, 15, 19, 23), and so on, until this repeated act of *looking* leads to a small detonation of satirical energy:

Oh, these so ignorant monsters! light, as proud;
 Who can behold their manners and not cloud -
 Like upon them lighten? If nature could
 Not make a verse, anger or laughter would,
 To see 'em aye discoursing with their glass
 How they may make someone that day an ass;
 Planting their purls, and curls spread forth like net,
 And every dressing for a pitfall set
 To catch the flesh in, and to pound a prick.

(ll. 59-67)

- 18 The perspective lines in Jonson's court masques achieved their true effect only when viewed from the king's chair, which was centrally placed: see Allardyce Nicoll, *Stuart Masques and the Renaissance Stage* (London, 1937), p. 34; Stephen Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 66.

These ways of seeing, like the truths they seemingly reveal, are relentlessly singular. The women 'discoursing with their glass' can be seen only as 'monsters', having no life beyond the immediate rhetorical purposes of the satire. It is impossible to move outside the intense but limited field of vision which the poet creates.

The modes of perception and presentation in 'A Celebration of Charis' are strikingly unlike those just described. Through successive lyrics, Jonson offers a complex set of variable, subjective, and competing views of a situation which shifts and alters even as it is being observed. Though the lover in the first lyric speaks proudly of 'the truth' (i. 10) which he, as poet, presents and represents, we quickly realize that the truth about Charis may be larger and more various than his story at first admits.¹⁹ The sequence itself becomes a humorous meditation upon ways of seeing, and the elusive subjectivity of narrative 'truth'. The title of the second lyric, 'How He Saw Her', hints not simply at a time when and place where the poet first beheld Charis, but at his whole manner of seeing (and not seeing) her: of perceiving, assessing, adoring, approaching, pursuing, lamenting, wooing, scolding, exalting, writing verses to and about. *Seeing Charis*, the poet at once calls upon the blinded Cupid to see her too, and unties the cloth around Cupid's eyes. His sight restored, Cupid prudently and instantly flees. The poet looks at Charis again, hoping to strike her with love; instead she throws a look that immobilizes and strikes him blind. It is this blinded poet who comically attempts to share his vision with us: his vision of 'the truth'. In the third lyric, his eyes and limbs restored, the poet is struck in the heart, yet vows to write on:

Loser-like, now, all my wreak
Is that I have leave to speak,
And in either prose, or song,
To revenge me with my tongue;
Which how dextrously I do,
Hear, and make example too.
(iii. 21-6)

In the following lyric, 'Her Triumph', the wounded poet urges us (as he had once urged Cupid) to *look* at Charis, to look on those eyes that have already been his undoing, to share his present way of seeing them as agents not of harm but of divine good:

19 Wesley Trimpi's remarks on Jonson's general high regard for 'the truth' overlook this point: *Ben Jonson's Poems*, p. 210.

Do but look on her eyes, they do light
 All that Love's world compromiseth!
 Do but look on her hair, it is bright
 As Love's star when it riseth!
 Do but mark, her forehead's smoother
 Than words that soothe her!
 And from her arched brows, such a grace
 Sheds itself through the face,
 As alone there triumphs to the life
 All the gain, all the good, of the elements' strife.
 (iv. 11-20)

Lines 17 and 18 were ridiculed by Swinburne for their apparent clumsiness; Trimpi and Peterson detect in them a learned reference to the Neoplatonic association of the light that emanates from God and from a lady's eyes.²⁰ In acknowledging such an allusion, however, it is necessary also to notice the delicate ironies that surround it: 'arched brows' remind us that Charis's looks, which are now seen to be like grace itself issuing from the Godhead, were observed in the second lyric to be baleful arrows shooting from her eyes: a comparison which is to return later in the sequence (v. 17-19). These ironies do not neutralize the tribute, but they do affect the nature of its authority. The Neoplatonic viewpoint is just one of several that is offered throughout the sequence. Charis is kindly, Charis is cruel; she is a goddess riding majestically by, she is (in the poet's later observation) a woman tattling and idling in her boudoir:

You shall neither eat, nor sleep,
 No, nor forth your window peep
 With your emissary eye
 To fetch in the forms go by,
 And pronounce which band or lace
 Better fits him than his face;
 Nay, I will not let you sit
 'Fore your idol glass a whit,
 To say over every purl
 There or to reform a curl;
 Or with secretary Cis
 To consult if fucus this
 Be as good as was the last . . .
 (viii. 15-27)

The vision of female vanity here is quite different from that offered in 'An Epistle to a Friend, to Persuade Him to the Wars' not simply in its tone (affectionately teasing, where that was angrily

20 A. C. Swinburne, *A Study of Ben Jonson* (London, 1880), p. 104; Trimpi, pp. 219-20; Peterson, p. 227.

vituperative) but also in its manner of composition. It is merely one of several ways in which the adorable, vexatious Charis is regarded by her lover, whom we in turn can view from several different angles and in several different lights. 'The truth' of their relationship is revealed not through a reliable and continuous narrative dictated by the lover-poet, but in tantalizing and contrary glimpses afforded from lyric to lyric throughout the sequence.

Not only does our view of Charis and of her lover change as the sequence proceeds; so too does our view of the verses which the lover writes and the tale he tells. The lyrics which at first seemed designed to celebrate Charis and to tell her story begin to take on another function, acting as precipitating agents *within* that story, and affecting its course. It is through 'either prose, or song' that the poet is permitted at the end of the third lyric to take his 'revenge' upon Charis (iii. 223-4): his writing is seen as a potential weapon, that he may hurl at Charis as she has hurled her arrow-looks at him.²¹ Yet the ensuing lyric is his tender and impassioned hymn to Charis: what it celebrates is '*Her Triumph*', and not his. Critics have hunted ingeniously to see the poet's 'revenge' fulfilled elsewhere in the sequence, but this is to miss the magical effect that is achieved by the transition from the third lyric to the fourth, as the poet's weapon changes to a bouquet in mid-flight, and his intended satire, confronting the beauty of Charis, turns to praise.²² There is a similar little surprise in the transition from the fourth lyric to the fifth, where Cupid discovers the poet writing verses to Charis.

Sure, said he, if I have brain,
This, here sung, can be no other
By description but my mother!
(v. 10-12)

What is 'here sung' is not '*Her Triumph*' or indeed any lyric we are to encounter in the sequence; the poetic images that Cupid declares 'your verse discloses' (v. 21) are never fully shown to us: a fact which has puzzled editors and prompted them to search elsewhere for the

- 21 For instances of this equation of writing and fighting elsewhere in Jonson's work, see Ian Donaldson, 'Jonson and Anger', in *English Satire and the Satiric Tradition*, ed. Claude Rawson assisted by Jenny Mezciems (Oxford, 1984), pp. 56-71.
- 22 Zitner (pp. 135-6) notes that the third stanza of '*Her Triumph*' compares Charis with qualities whose beauty is transitory, and argues that the poet's 'revenge' lies in 'his insistence that Charis is as vulnerable to time as the old lover she rejects'. Weinberger (as discussed later in the present essay) sees the final lyric as 'revengeful' (p. 324).

missing verses.²³ The humorous point lies precisely, however, in such small confusions, as love generates in the poet more verses than are strictly needed to relate 'the story' of Charis: verses which sometimes lead to further unlooked-for developments in the relationship which the sequence is attempting to describe. Reading these verses about milk and roses, kisses and blisses, Cupid assumes that the poet is in love with Venus herself. The mistake becomes the subject of a 'discourse' which becomes the fifth lyric which in turn is presented to Charis. Such poems are thus converted to gifts and tokens within the courtship itself, whose progress they in turn affect. The sixth lyric praises the comeliness of Charis, and reflects (and bargains) upon its own skill in so doing, 'claiming a second kiss by desert':

Guess of these which is the true:
 And if such a verse as this
 May not claim another kiss.
 (vi. 34-6)

The seventh and eighth lyrics are each in their different ways acts of persuasion, urging Charis once more to a kiss, then to her declaration. The function of the verse throughout the sequence is thus constantly mobile: it is not in any simple sense that of 'celebration' or of satire or of narrative or of unalloyed lyric, but shifts unpredictably from one mode to another. The lyrics constitute a story that is told to us; they are also part of an amorous game that is played within that story. This multiplicity of poetic function, like the multiplicity of poetic viewpoint, lend the sequence a teasing complexity and self-reflexiveness more often encountered in Jonson's dramatic than in his non-dramatic work.

In the ninth lyric of the sequence the object of adoration is at last permitted to speak in her own voice.

Of your trouble, Ben, to ease me,
 I will tell what man would please me.
 I would have him, if I could,
 Noble, or of greater blood;
 Titles, I confess, do take me,
 And a woman God did make me;
 French to boot, at least in fashion,
 And his manners of that nation.
 (ix. 1-8)

23 See for example *Poems of Ben Jonson*, ed. G. B. Johnston (London, 1954), p. 332. *Underwood* 19 is sometimes guessed to be the 'missing' lyric.

The character of Charis is delicately suggested through the tripping metre and feminine rhymes, with their significant trailing stress: 'ease me', 'please me': that Charis consents to ease herself but not Ben of his 'trouble' bodes ill for the poet. Charis's sketch of the perfect lover is archly calculated (as others have noticed) to list those very qualities — of youth, of grace, of beauty, of noble birth — that her present suitor lacks. Her vision of this ideal lover is (ironically) curiously like the poet's vision of the ideal Charis: the skin smooth as snow, as down, as wool; the hair a nest for Cupid; the eyebrows bent like Cupid's bow; the eyes like those of Venus and Minerva. Ben's own poetic figures return here to plague him. The 'fashion' that the lady fancies is that of the court, not the finer artistry upon which the poet has prided himself and based his courtship; yet she has a mischievous eye for the tropes and metaphors which he has scattered throughout the lyrics written in her praise. Charis moves from the physical qualities she seeks in her man to the moral qualities:

Valiant he should be as fire,
 Showing danger more than ire.
 Bounteous as the clouds to earth,
 And as honest as his birth.
 All his actions to be such,
 As to do no thing too much.
 Nor o'er praise, nor yet condemn,
 Nor out-value, nor contemn,
 Nor do wrongs, nor wrongs receive;
 Nor tie knots, nor knots unweave;
 And from baseness to be free,
 As he durst love truth and me.
 Such a man, with every part,
 I could give my very heart;
 But of one, if short he came,
 I can rest me where I am.

(ix. 41-56)

The sentiments are flawless, yet the unstrenuous rhymes ('be such'/ 'too much', 'condemn'/ 'contemn') and even imperturbability of metre lend the catalogue an air of faintly languid facility. The declaration which set out to 'ease me' and 'please me' leads insouciantly to 'truth and me', and comes to its final point of rest 'where I am'. It is difficult to see how these lines can mean anything other than what they appear to mean: that until the perfect lover materializes, Charis will keep herself to herself, giving no public pledge either to Ben or to any of the numerous other suitors who pursue her (viii. 5-10).

'Truth and me': in her closing words, Charis effortlessly elides the two. Her phrase returns us to the opening lyric, in which the poet declares his love not only for Charis but also for those several qualities — language, truth, ardour, passion — that make him a poet; qualities that he believes may win him Charis, against all odds. His poetry does not in the long run achieve this result. The 'truth' it urges, though passionately felt, seems (like the 'truth' of which Charis lightly speaks) merely one component in a larger and more various dramatic truth which the sequence as a whole has revealed to us. That truth concerns not merely the nature of love, but also the nature of poetry: what it can do, and what it cannot do. Jonson's own great trust in the power of poetry is evident not only in the passage from the Epistle Dedicatory to the two Universities prefixed to *Volpone* that has already been quoted, but throughout his writings as a whole.²⁴ Yet some of Jonson's most touching poems turn upon the realization that such power has its limits: that his poetry, for all its grace and dignity, cannot bring to life a dead son, cannot perpetually 'Keep the middle age at stay', cannot ultimately secure him the lady whom he loves. This wry knowledge is an important part of the final 'truth' of 'A Celebration of Charis', as it is of 'My Picture Left in Scotland' (*The Underwood*, 9).²⁵

'Charis' is the singular form of *charites*, the Graces, and the notion of grace appropriately recurs throughout the sequence.²⁶ Traditionally, the three Graces are benevolent; iconographically, they are represented naked and holding hands: two of the figures always advance towards us, while one presents her back. Their hands are joined to show the 'perpetual and never-ceasing intercourse of kindness and benevolence among friends'; the disposition of their figures suggests that for every grace going from us, two graces will always come our way.²⁷ The final balance of the accounts in 'A Celebration of Charis' cannot be simply drawn up; the notion of winning and losing is lightly played over throughout the sequence, but it is on a note of apparent loss that the story of Charis ends. Ben seems to be pursuing a Grace who is walking away.

24 See for example *Discoveries*, 2398ff.

25 Jonson may possibly be varying a lament found in Ovid: that the poet's lady accepts his verses, but not his person (*Amores*, 3.8, 3.11a; *Heroides*, xv. 33ff.). Jonson's treatment of the notion, however, is very much his own.

26 See i.8, iv.17-20, v.51-4, vi.19-26.

27 J. Lempriere, *A Classical Dictionary* (Halifax, 1865), 'Charites'; Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London, 1958), *passim*.

The final lyric of the sequence has been described by one critic as

revengeful in its display of the fury of an old lover scorned. Showing 'ire more than danger', Ben concludes the 'Celebration' of Charis by hurling a final, carnal statement in the face of his vain, apparently worthless, pseudo-Platonic mistress by way of putting her in her place in a manner reminiscent of Hamlet's turning on Ophelia . . .²⁸

This view seems mistaken in almost every respect: most seriously, in its confusion of the real-life author who creates, organizes, and controls 'A Celebration of Charis' with the infatuated and at times humorously incompetent 'Ben' who is depicted as a dramatic character within it. As has already been noted, it is not 'Ben' who concludes the sequence at all, for he is bilked of the last word by a witty lady of the court circle, losing control of his narrative as he has seemingly lost Charis herself. If we are to relate this fictional 'Ben' in any way to the actual Ben Jonson, it would be to note how very uncharacteristic of Jonson himself is this final surrender of authorial control. Though Jonson spoke often of the way in which an author, in submitting his work to the public, 'departed with his right',²⁹ he was never in fact keen to surrender authorial power, constantly reaching out through his prologues and epilogues, his dedications and his title-pages, his addresses to the reader and his apologetical dialogues, anxious to utter the last, definitive word, to steer his narrative to its final haven, so to align his reader that the true beauties and proportions of his work could justly be observed. In 'A Celebration of Charis', Jonson the actual author is (needless to say) in perfect control to the last; but the narrative situation which he humorously and thoughtfully imagines is one in which 'Ben', the feigned author, a projection of himself, is finally pushed gently but firmly right out of the story he is attempting to tell. It is a witty yet sobering reflection on the limits of the poet's power, not only in the events and wishes of his life, but also in the execution of his art.

28 Weinberger, p. 324.

29 *Epigrams*, 131.2; *Catiline*, 'To the Reader in Ordinary', 3; *Bartholomew Fair*, Induction, 87 (Herford and Simpson edn).