

Invading Interpreters and Politic Picklocks: Reading Jonson Historically

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A central problem in the methodology of both the new and 'old' historicism turns on the nature of the link that is assumed to exist between historical description and literary interpretation. The monolithic accounts of Elizabethan systems of belief assembled by so-called old historicists such as E.M.W. Tillyard (it is common these days to complain) seem often quite at variance with the diverse and at times rebellious energies of the literary texts which they are apparently devised to illuminate. Even in the work of a more sophisticated old historicist such as L.C. Knights the supposedly related activities of historical and literary investigation seem often to tug in contrary directions. The divergence is apparent, for example, in the very structure of Knights's influential study of *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, the first half of which offers a stolid, Tawney-derived historical account of economic conditions in England during the late Elizabethan, early Jacobean period (entitled 'The Background'), while the second half ('The Dramatists') advances livelier readings of the work of individual authors. The connections here between foreground and 'background', text and context, 'drama' and 'society', literature and history are quite loosely articulated and theoretically undeveloped.¹ A similar disjunction is often evident in the work of a new historicist such as Stephen Greenblatt, as he turns from a closely-worked meditation upon a particular and highly intriguing historical incident – often quirky in nature, but assumed also to be in some way exemplary – to ponder the particularities of a literary text. The transition is generally athletic and exhilarating in its unexpectedness: a leap from the historical platform across a void to the literary cross-bar, upon which further agile feats are soon

1 L.C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London, 1937). For a more detailed analysis of the methodologies of this book see Don E. Wayne, 'Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson: An Alternative View', in *Renaissance Drama*, xiii, ed. Leonard Barkan (Evanston, 1982), 103-29.

to be performed. This is a thoroughly postmodern manoeuvre, challenging precisely on account of its discontinuity, undertaken as coolly as flipping across the television channels, defying (though not perhaps wholly obliterating) old-fashioned expectations of argumentative sequentiality.²

Can 'history' and 'literature' as interpretative processes ever be more closely aligned, more logically interdependent, less bumpily discontinuous? There is another, even older, kind of historicism which maintains they can be, positing a relationship between history and literature which is as intimate and necessary as that of the key to the lock. The art practised in this school was known in the seventeenth century as *application*: the interpretation of literary texts with detailed reference to the social and political events of the times to which, it is supposed, they cryptically yet provably refer. The work of Ben Jonson, more densely topical and allusive than that of Shakespeare, is particularly seductive to interpretation of this kind. Those who have tried to 'apply' characters and incidents in Jonson's dramatic writing to real-life characters and incidents of his day, however, have not always succeeded in persuading others of the plausibility of their conjectures. In the first part of this paper I want briefly to review both the attractions and the risks of this kind of approach to Jonson's writing: an approach which broadly assumes the existence of a one-to-one relationship between historical events and characters and their dramatic counterparts, and uses history as a tool to burgle the supposedly hidden meaning of the text, to pick the locks of literature. I want then to propose a rather different way in which the relationship of 'history' and 'literature' might be viewed, and Jonson's work be read historically.

I

In *Jonson's Romish Plot* (1967) B.N. De Luna argued that Ben Jonson's tragedy of *Catiline*, performed and published in 1611, was a veiled allegory or (as she termed it) 'classical parallelograph' of recent events in England; and that in Jonson's drama about the Catilinarian conspiracy of 65 B.C. the

2 For an acute critique of the methodologies of the new historicists see Graham Bradshaw, *Misrepresentations* (London, forthcoming, 1993).

discerning Jacobean spectator would have detected a series of detailed allusions to the conspiracy of Guy Fawkes and his followers to blow up the English Houses of Parliament with gunpowder in 1605. De Luna's 'parallelograph' is quite elaborately worked out. She believes that the character of Gabinius Cimber in Jonson's play represents Guy Fawkes, that Catiline represents Fawkes's fellow-conspirator Robert Catesby, that the character of Cicero represents Sir Robert Cecil, that Cato stands for Sir Edward Coke, Quintus Curius for Ben Jonson himself, and so on.³ The book was sceptically reviewed in the learned journals, and privately regarded by many readers as a madcap venture, doomed to take its place eventually on the dustier library shelves alongside such works as *The Great Cryptogram* and *Did the Jesuits Write Shakespeare?*

Jonson's Romish Plot might perhaps have been differently received had the book been published in the early nineties rather than the late sixties, now that the work of Annabel Patterson, Richard Dutton, Janet Clare, Richard Burt, and others has enlarged our understanding of the operation of Renaissance theatrical censorship, and the way in which plays of this period may often consequently be interpreted.⁴ In 1967 De Luna's book looked too speculative and chancy to please traditional scholars, and a complete non-starter to the new critics, challenging as it did the assumed autonomy of the literary text. De Luna regarded Jonson's work not as a self-sufficient, well-wrought artefact but as a kind of transparent screen, fully comprehensible only when looked *through* as well as *at*, pondered in relation to a set of historical events – or, to be precise, two sets of historical events – which had prompted its composition. Her notion of the parallelograph invited the reader's mind to run simultaneously on

3 B.N. De Luna, *Jonson's Romish Plot: A Study of 'Catiline' and its Historical Context* (Oxford, 1967).

4 Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1984); Richard Dutton, *Mastering the Revels: The Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama* (Basingstoke, 1991); Janet Clare, 'Art Made Tongue-Tied by Authority': *Elizabethan and Jacobean Dramatic Censorship* (Manchester 1990); Richard Burt, *Licensed by Authority: Ben Jonson and the Discourses of Censorship* (Ithaca and London, 1993). See also Jerzy Limon, *Dangerous Matter: English Drama and Politics in 1623/24* (Cambridge, 1986).

twin tracks not simply in relation to Rome and England, or to ancient and modern political conspiracies, but – more radically and disturbingly – in relation to text and context, without determining the primacy of the one over the other. This was not at the time a popular line to take.

The pronouncements soon to arrive from Paris about the death of the author and the pleasure of the text did nothing during the immediately subsequent years to make this kind of interpretative position more congenial. Barthes and his colleagues in France, like earlier proponents of the new criticism in England and America, were reacting against precisely that kind of intensive historical scholarship which De Luna's book appeared to represent: scholarship that implied that the text could not be enjoyed without the possession of anterior knowledge which seemed to ramify endlessly away into the circumstantial detail of social, political, and domestic history.

Yet there is nothing intrinsically absurd or disreputable (it seems possible now to insist) about De Luna's general wish to bring biographical and historical knowledge to the understanding of a literary text. If much recent theory has discountenanced this practice, it may be partly in reaction to the methodologies of an earlier generation of scholars who worked quite speculatively in the middle ground between history, biography, and literature, with generally simplistic notions about the nature of literary representation. In the more Conan Doyleish of these studies, literature is regarded as if it were the scene of some large-scale recent crime, littered with clues – fingerprints, bloodstains, dropped wallets, spent bullets – all capable of undergoing forensic examination, and of supporting some Holmesian hunch which might ultimately lead to the apprehension of a culprit, the narration of a real-life story more absorbing than the fictional one which had lightly covered it. 'Many of the old plays written prior to the outbreak of the Civil War', declared one scholar in 1931, 'seem greatly to resemble the modern detective story, because, to understand them, it becomes necessary to follow up the clues – more or less obvious – they give'.⁵

5 W. Landsdown Goldsworthy, *Ben Jonson and the First Folio* (London, 1931), preface.

Here is a typical example of this sort of investigative scholarship, with its chasing up of more or less obvious clues, from a somewhat earlier period. Robert Cartwright's *Shakespeare and Jonson: Dramatic, versus Wit-Combats*, published in 1864, is premised on the assumption that some kind of violent quarrel took place between Shakespeare and Jonson, provoked by Jonson, who persistently ignored Shakespeare's repeated attempts at reconciliation. The evidence for this imagined falling-out was to be found, so Cartwright believed, within the plays which the two dramatists wrote, which indeed appear in his account to be concerned with practically nothing else. Each dramatist, according to Cartwright, wrote obsessively about the other. Jonson depicted Shakespeare as Ovid in *Poetaster*, as Fungoso in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, as Stephen and Wellbred both in *Every Man In His Humour*, as Sir Politic-Would-be and Volpone in *Volpone*, and Sejanus in *Sejanus*, as Sir John Daw in *The Silent Woman*, as Sir Epicure Mammon and also as Dapper in *The Alchemist*, as Littlewit in *Bartholomew Fair*, and Fitzdottrel in *The Devil is an Ass*, as Fly in *The New Inn*, and in other roles besides. Shakespeare meanwhile depicted Jonson as Apemantus in *Timon of Athens*, as Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*, as Oliver in *As You Like It*, as Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*, as Edmund in *King Lear*, as Aufidius in *Coriolanus*, and as Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*. All of these characters of Shakespeare's were Ben Jonson, just as all of Jonson's characters were William Shakespeare: that was their simple representational function, their ultimate ontological and dramatic status. So exciting does the hunt for identification become that Cartwright fails to confront the possibility that Sir Andrew Aguecheek may actually not represent anyone at all, but simply be Sir Andrew Aguecheek.

Though B.N. De Luna's revelations are less startling than Robert Cartwright's, her procedures seem based at times on disconcertingly similar assumptions about the nature of dramatic representation. Her investigations have an occasionally obsessive air, and at times she presses the evidence further than it can reasonably be taken. Yet her book presents much evidence that, in a general sense, is still compelling, while her larger thesis,

twenty-five years on, cannot lightly be dismissed. What then is to be made of such a work?

Jonson himself would strongly have disliked its manner of approach, but then Jonson's dislike for such readings of his work itself repays analysis. 'Application, is now, growne a trade with many', he wrote caustically in the Epistle Dedicatory to *Volpone*,

and there are, that professe to have a key for the decyphering of every thing: but let wise and noble persons take heed how they be too credulous, or give leave to these invading interpreters, to bee over-familiar with their fames, who cunningly, and often, utter their owne virulent malice, under other mens simplest meanings.⁶

From early plays such as *Cynthia's Revels* through to late work such as *The Magnetic Lady*, Jonson consistently attacked what he called 'that solemne vice of interpretation, that deforms the figure of many a fair *Scene*, by drawing it awry' (*The Magnetic Lady*, Chorus after Act II, 34-5). In the Articles of Agreement that are formally drawn up between the author and the audience in the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson inserted a crucial clause:

it is finally agreed, by the foresaid hearers, and *spectators*, that they neyther in themselves conceale, nor suffer by them to be concealed any *State-decipherer*, or politique *Picklocke* of the *Scene*, so solemnly ridiculous, as to search out, who was meant by the *Ginger-bread-woman*, who by the *Hobby-horse-man*, who by the *Costard-monger*, nay, who by their *Wares*. Or that will pretend to affirme (on his owne *inspired ignorance*) what *Mirror of Magistrates* is meant by the *Justice*, what *great-Lady* by the *Pigge-woman*, what *conceal'd States-man*, by the *Seller of Mouse-trappes*, and so of the rest. But that such person, or persons so found, be left discovered to the mercy of the *Author*, as a forfeiture to the *Stage*, and your laughter, aforesaid. (135-48)

6 All quotations from *Ben Jonson*, ed. C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols (Oxford, 1925-52); i/j and u/v spellings regularized.

Does Jonson protest over-much? It's worth remembering that several of his closest friends (John Selden, Hugh Holland, Sir Henry Goodyere, John Donne) had suspected that the character of Lantern Leatherhead in *Bartholomew Fair* – originally called, it would seem, 'Inigo Lantern' – was a satirical portrait of Inigo Jones. The character of Justice Adam Overdo in the same play has been shown to be closely based on that of a former Lord Mayor of London, Thomas Middleton, and to incorporate characteristics of two contemporary pamphleteers, Richard Johnson and George Whetstone. The cutpurse scene in Act III of the play recalls the exploits of a real-life cutpurse named John Selman who had been executed just two years before the play's original performance. The relationship between the incorrigible Bartholomew Cokes and his irascible 'governor' Humphrey Wasp has been plausibly compared with that of the high-spirited son of Sir Walter Raleigh and his tutor in France – none other than Jonson himself.⁷ Jonson's plays constantly shadow and invoke real-life characters and events in this manner, and it does not seem logically implausible or methodologically inconsistent that major political characters, events, and controversies of the day should also therefore be glanced at in his drama.⁸ In the privacy of Hawthornden in 1618-19 Jonson freely admitted to William Drummond that he and Marston had represented each other's characters on stage during the so-called War of the Theatres.⁹ Jonson's frequent pose of wounded innocence, of bitter incredulity that 'invading interpreters' should trace connections between the events and people of his plays and those

- 7 On Lantern Leatherhead and Inigo Jones, see Herford and Simpson, ii 146-8, x 213; David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp.193ff.; R.C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford, 1970), p.197. On Overdo, Middleton, et al., see David McPherson, 'The Origins of Overdo', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 37 (1976), 221-33; on Selman, see Herford and Simpson, x. 200; on Raleigh and Jonson, see *Conversations with Drummond*, 295-305, and Herford and Simpson, ii 141-2.
- 8 James Tulip, 'Comedy as Equivocation: An Approach to the Reference of *Volpone*', *Southern Review*, 5 (1972), 91-101, and Richard Dutton, *Ben Jonson: To the First Folio* (Cambridge, 1983), ch.6, have independently suggested that in the character of Sir Politic Would-be in *Volpone* Jonson may be glancing at Sir Robert Cecil.
- 9 *Conversations with Drummond*, 284-6.

of the world in which he lived, does not sit easily with his actual dramatic practice, and needs itself to be subjected to more measured interpretation.

Jonson had every reason to be sensitive on these matters, for he had been repeatedly brought before the civil authorities for suspected libellous or treasonable references in his plays. He had been committed to the Marshalsea prison for his part in the now-lost play, *The Isle of Dogs*, which he had written with Thomas Nashe; he had been summoned before the Lord Chief Justice to answer questions about *Poetaster*, and before the Privy Council on charges concerning *Sejanus*. He was imprisoned along with Marston and Chapman on account of their jointly-written comedy *Eastward Ho!* which had made fun of royal policies and Scottish accents, and he was to have further skirmishes with the law over *The Devil is an Ass* and *The Magnetic Lady*. In *Poetaster* Jonson complains of the practice of 'sinister application' which has led to trouble of this sort, and of the 'false lapwing cries' of informers and misinterpreters of his work. But Jonson's many protestations on this theme must themselves be understood as lapwing cries, deliberate attempts to divert attention from what he is actually up to.¹⁰

Yet the question of interpretation isn't easy. While Jonson repeatedly protests that he 'flies from all particularities in persons', that he taxes 'vices generally', he may well be speaking the truth: there were not merely prudential reasons for avoiding mere topicality and mere one-to-one literalism in his writing, but good artistic reasons too, strengthened by classical precedent.¹¹ Jonson nevertheless during his twelve years living as a Catholic under strict Protestant surveillance had also become very familiar with the Jesuitical practice of equivocation, and

10 *Poetaster*, V.iii.124, IV.vii.50.

11 Thus Martial declares it his aim 'to spare the person, to denounce the vice' (*parcere personis, dicere de vitiis*), X.xxxiii.10. Cf. Jonson, *Discoveries*, lines 2304ff.; Dedication of *Epigrams* to William, Earl of Pembroke; and in particular the discussion between Probee, Damplay, and the Boy in the Chorus following Act II of *The Magnetic Lady*. See further Edward B. Partridge, 'Jonson's *Epigrammes*: The Named and the Nameless', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vi (1973), 153-98.

with numerous rhetorical strategies of self-defence. Though he protested his love of honesty, though he was always keen to maintain the terms on which the interpretation of his work should proceed, his own statements about the tendencies of his work cannot always be accepted at their face value.

II

If Jonson's untrustworthiness in these matters creates one sort of problem for would-be interpreters of his work, another and perhaps more intriguing problem arises at times in relation to chronology. A number of passages in Ben Jonson's work look very much as if they are meant to refer to contemporary figures and events, but a calculation of the relevant dates appears to make such an interpretation impossible. The difficulties that arise here may shed some light on what is amiss with the simple one-to-one representational model of historical explication just discussed.

Here is an example of the kind of problem I have in mind. In Jonson's comedy *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman*, Morose – a man who can't stand noise, and doesn't care for women – chooses to marry a woman whom he believes to be both silent and submissive, though as soon as the ceremony is completed he discovers that he is quite mistaken, as his bride proves both shrill and demanding. During last stages of the comedy Morose despairingly attempts to secure a divorce from the woman he has just misguidedly married – who turns out in the concluding moments of the play to be no woman at all, but a boy in disguise. In an extended scene in the final act of the play the barber Cutbeard, dressed as a canon lawyer, and Captain Otter, dressed as a divine, learnedly discuss the possibilities of Morose's obtaining a divorce, larding their discussion with numerous Latin tags. Labouring through eleven possible grounds for divorce, they arrive at last at the twelfth and final cause, *si forte coire nequibus* ('if it chances that you are unable to make love').

Otter I, that is *impedimentum gravissimum*. It doth utterly annull, and annihilate, that. If you have *manifestam frigiditatem*, you are well, sir.

(V.iii.171-3)

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Seeing this as a path of escape from his troubles, Morose makes a momentous announcement to his wife and the assembled company of women.

Morose I am no man, ladies.

All How!

Morose Utterly un-abled in nature, by reason of frigidity, to perform the duties, or any the least office of a husband ...

Epicoene Tut, a device, a device, this, it smells rankly, ladies. A mere comment of his owne.

Truewit Why, if you suspect that, ladies, you may have him search'd.

Daw As the custome is, by a jurie of physitions ...

Morose O me, must I under-goe that!

Mistress Otter No, let women search him, madame: we can do it our selves.

(V.iv.44-60)

In his annotation to the play, Jonson's nineteenth-century editor William Gifford commented as follows on the exchange between Cutbeard and Captain Otter.

It is scarcely possible to read this humorous discussion without adverting to one of a serious kind, which took place on the divorce of the Lord Essex. If it were not ascertained beyond a doubt that the *Silent Woman* appeared on the stage in 1609, four years at least prior to the date of that most infamous transaction, it would be difficult to persuade the reader that a strong burlesque of it was not here intended. The bishops Neal and Andrews [who were involved in the Essex divorce proceedings] are the very counterparts of Otter and Cutbeard; nor does Morose himself display more anxiety for the fortunate termination of his extraordinary suit than the credulous and ever-meddling James exhibited on that occasion for the success of his unworthy favourite.¹²

In 1606 Frances Howard, the thirteen-year-old daughter of the Earl of Suffolk, was married to the Earl of Essex, who was then aged fifteen. Ben Jonson wrote a masque, *Hymenaei*, to celebrate the occasion. It was agreed that the marriage would not be consummated until the couple were of age. Straight after the

12 *The Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. William Gifford, 9 vols. (London, 1816), note to *Epicoene*, V.i.

marriage Essex was sent off on foreign travels and did not return until 1609. He was coolly received by his bride, who had by this time fallen in love with James's latest favourite, Robert Carr. In 1613 she sued for divorce from Essex on the grounds that he was impotent and unable to consummate the marriage. The case was tried before two commissioners appointed by James, and when they divided evenly he appointed two more commissioners who could be depended upon to provide the desired result. Frances Howard was examined by a panel of four ladies and two midwives who finally attested to her virginity, though there was a widespread rumour at the time that another young gentlewoman had been substituted for the Countess of Essex when these tests were made. Thomas Overbury, who had advised Robert Carr not to proceed with this whole affair, was removed to the Tower by the contrivance of Carr, and subsequently poisoned, by the contrivance of Frances Howard. Robert Carr and Frances Howard were married in December 1613, and Jonson – a friend of Overbury, but almost certainly unaware of the precise cause of his recent death – wrote *A Challenge at Tilt* and *An Irish Masque* to be performed on this occasion, along with a poem of congratulation addressed to Robert Carr, now newly created Earl of Somerset.¹³

Can the scene between Otter and Cutbeard in *Epicoene* have anything to do with this extraordinary affair? For a start, the dates, as Gifford recognized, simply do not fit. *Epicoene* was performed in December 1609 or January 1610. The earliest extant text, however, is that of the 1616 folio, and one scholar has gone so far as to argue that the play was reworked some time between 1613 and 1616 in order to incorporate what he calls 'hilarious parodies of the grim history of Frances Howard, Countess of Essex, Countess of Somerset'.¹⁴ This seems to me a quite implausible thesis. Jonson himself clearly declares that

13 William McElwee, *The Murder of Sir Thomas Overbury* (New York, 1952), Beatrice White, *Cast of Ravens* (London, 1965), David Lindley, 'Embarrassing Ben: The Masques for Frances Howard', in *Renaissance Historicism*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney and Dan S. Collins (Amherst, 1987), pp.248-64; Jonson, *Ungathered Verse*, 18.

14 Thomas Kranidas, 'Possible Revisions or Additions in Jonson's *Epicoene*', *Anglia*, lxxxiii (1965), 451-3.

the play has not been revised, and does not contain personal allusions.

For he knowes, Poet never credit gain'd
 By writing truths, but things (like truths) well fain'd.
 If any, yet, will (with particular slight
 Of application) wrest what he doth write;
 And that he meant or him, or her, will say:
 They make a libell, which he made a play.
 (Second prologue, 9-14)¹⁵

This prologue, as a side-note reveals, was 'Occasion'd by some persons impertinent exception' to the comedy, which had already run into trouble with the authorities on account of a passage which was thought to refer slightly to James I's cousin, Lady Arbella Stuart.¹⁶ Perhaps the denials of the prologue, then, can be dismissed as mere foxing on Jonson's part, to cover his incriminating tracks. But it is scarcely credible that Jonson would then have dared or wished to insert further highly dangerous references into the published text of a play which had already caused him problems enough, especially when that text was to form part of the 1616 folio, to which Jonson attached such high value. The scholar who advances the theory about a late revision of *Epicoene* never confronts this larger issue, nor does he observe how deeply the notion of impotence is woven into the play as a whole, nor does he speculate how the play might originally have concluded before these alleged revisions occurred. His single aim is to establish a one-to-one correspondence, a precise parodic allusion.

What one can safely say is that by the time *Epicoene* was published in 1616 the scene between Otter and Cutbeard would in all likelihood have reminded readers of the recent Essex divorce case, taking on at this moment a novel layer of contemporary significance. Annabel Paterson has argued in a similar way that by the mid-1620s Jonson's tragedy *Sejanus*, first performed in 1603, must have *looked as if* it were referring

15 'There is not a line, or syllable in it changed from the simplicity of the first Copy', Jonson declares in his dedication of *Epicoene* to Sir Francis Stuart.

16 Herford and Simpson, v. 144-7.

to the fall of James's favourite George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, who was not however impeached until 1626; and that Jonson's poem on Raleigh's *History of the World*, written in 1614, must likewise have acquired a new and deeper meaning when read in the knowledge of Raleigh's execution four years later. Such topicality is acquired, so to speak, retrospectively, through the simple passage of time.¹⁷

This is a familiar process, of which I can give a contemporary example. Visiting China in 1990 when the memory of the events in Tiananmen Square was still fresh, I was taken to see a performance of Lao She's play *Teahouse* at the Beijing People's Art Theatre. The play is officially approved as a politically orthodox classic of the 1950s in which the author, as the programme note straight-facedly declared, 'condemns and buries three crucial periods in China's recent history, and transpires his hopes and loves for the new society of which he as an active and ardent participant'. The piece had developed a new and contrary significance, however, as a result of the recent events in Beijing, as the audience was quick to recognize. It follows the fortunes of a group of teahouse proprietors and habitués from 1898 and the last days of the Ching dynasty ('they can't last much longer' – loud applause) through to the Kuomintang years (where the same spies are operating: 'we serve whoever is in authority': laughter) to the post-World War 2 period, when students appear on stage wounded after street clashes with the military. At this extraordinary moment in performance, the theatre exploded with cheers and whistles. Despite official pronouncements to the contrary, the audience of 1990 knew very well what this play was really about.¹⁸

For plays to be capable of undergoing topical reactivation of this kind, there must (I suggest) be some significant general similarity of historical circumstance between the time of original

17 Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, pp.57-66, 134-52.

18 In a similar way Voltaire's tragedy of *Brutus*, not perceived as greatly relevant to the times when first presented in 1730, caused great excitement when revived in Paris by the Comédie Française on 17 November 1790, recent events in the city having invested its theme with a startlingly topicality. See Robert L. Herbert, *David, Voltaire, 'Brutus', and the French Revolution* (London, 1972).

composition and that of subsequent performance, such that some new event or series of events can trigger a new moment of recognition and identification. The continuities may at times relate to social structures and practice. The fact that impotence and failure to consummate a marriage formed one of the major, and very limited available, grounds for divorce in early modern England is probably of greater usefulness to an understanding of the final act of *Epicoene*, for example, than the particular details of the Essex divorce scandal.¹⁹

The continuities may (again) be political: a certain kind of regime, a certain variety of repression, a certain method of surveillance prompting, initially, a fictional response, and later a real-life episode which (not surprisingly) resembles it. The Gunpowder Plot was scarcely a unique event within Jonson's lifetime: almost every year of the final decade of Elizabeth's reign and of the first decade of James's reign had brought to light a political conspiracy of one kind or another, and the Catilinarian conspiracy could serve as an archetype for almost any of them. Jonson could scarcely have failed to observe the general similarities that existed between the Gunpowder plot and that of Catiline and his followers, but that does not imply that he meant to depict the Gunpowder plot with any kind of precision in the tragedy of *Catiline*. Until quite recently it was believed that Jonson's *Sejanus* ran into trouble with the authorities because the fall of Sejanus was seen to reflect upon the fall of Elizabeth's favourite, the Earl of Essex. Philip Ayres has however very plausibly argued that Jonson's troubles with the Privy Council had nothing whatever to do with Essex, whose fall by 1603 was already ancient history; but that the story of Sejanus might instead have been linked with the trial earlier in 1603 of Sir Walter Raleigh, who had been accused and found guilty of conspiring, in the cause of Spain, to murder James I, and of

19 Lawrence Stone, *The Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987* (Oxford and New York, 1992), p.191; *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London, 1977), p.37, and p.691, n.49 (on the long-standing custom of female juries testing the virginity of wives in cases of alleged non-consummation).

taking Spanish bribes.²⁰ By the 1620s, as already noted, that archetype could be applied equally well to the fall of Buckingham, and indeed the parallel between Buckingham and Sejanus was invoked by Sir John Eliot during the impeachment proceedings in the House of Commons.²¹ These were (in short) the *kind* of times in which Ben Jonson lived, and the *kind* of events which recurred within them, lending his plays on occasions a greater measure of adventitious topicality than he might, or could possibly, ever have intended.

III

To read through the canon of Jonson's writing, pondering each work as the product of a particular historical moment and a particular moment in Jonson's personal career, is to be struck by certain features in the writing which might arguably be regarded in some broad sense as 'biographical', though often in the attenuated, problematic, unsynchronized, and generalized manner I have just described. The quarto version of *Every Man In His Humour*, for example, performed in 1598, would seem to reflect in a humorous, tangential way the experiences of a young man who had seen military service in the Low Countries. Musco disguises himself as an old soldier who boasts about former campaigns, offering to show his scars in return for money, and to sell his rapier. Jonson was to ridicule this type of bogus veteran again in *Poetaster*, and to defend himself against the sensitive charge of libelling the military by reminding his readers that he too had once belonged to that 'great profession', 'And did

20 Philip Ayres, 'Jonson, Northampton, and the "Treason" in *Sejanus*', *Modern Philology*, lxxx (1983), 356-63, and introduction to his Revels edition of *Sejanus His Fall* (Manchester, 1990), pp.16-22. Ayres's contention that Essex's rebellion 'was not a burning issue' when *Sejanus* was first performed is however questionable: in 1604 Daniel's tragedy *Philotas* was judged by the Privy Council 'to be a reflection of the dangerous matter of the dead Earl of Essex'. 'Shortly they will play me in what forms they list upon the stage', Essex himself had predicted to Elizabeth four years earlier. See C.J. Sisson, *Lost Plays of Shakespeare's Age* (Cambridge, 1936), p.3, Richard Dutton, *Mastering the Revels*, chapter 7, and (on problems arising from dating the original performance of *Sejanus* early in 1603), pp.11-12.

21 Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, pp.64-5.

not shame it with my actions, then'.²² The bragging captain Bobadilla in *Every Man In His Humour* devises an imaginative scheme to save money and lives by challenging the enemy, in the company of nineteen other like-minded swordsmen, to a series of single combats which, in a mere two hundred days, would swiftly demolish all of the adversary's forces. Twenty years later, gossiping at Hawthornden, Jonson was to report to William Drummond that 'In his servuce in the Low Countries, he had in the face of both the Campes Killed ane Enimie & taken opima spolia from him'.²³ Bobadilla's fantasy of slaughtering an entire enemy one by one in single combat appears to recall in a distant, refracted, burlesque (yet wholly unprovable) way Jonson's own moment of personal triumph by single combat in the Low Countries just a few years earlier.

Bobadilla, however, is no hero; though much preoccupied with schemes of this sort and the exercise of a bed-staff, he is alarmed when challenged by Giuliana and asked to draw his weapon, protesting pathetically that he has been bound to keep the peace, and later explaining to his companions that '(by heaven) sure I was strooke with a Plannet then, for I had no power to touch my weapon' (V.ii.125-6). In *Every Man In His Humour* Jonson creates a charmed world in which hurts are constantly threatened yet never finally inflicted; in which weapons stick in their scabbards, and cannot be drawn; or are flourished, as by Doctor Clement over Musco in the final act of the play, yet never descend.

Clement ... so, come on sir varlet, I must cut of your legges sirha; nay stand up, ile use you kindly; I must cut of your legges I say.

Musco Oh good sir I beseech you, nay good maister doctor, oh good sir.

Clement I must do it; there is no remedie;
I must cut of your legges sirha.

22 *Poetaster*, Apologetical Dialogue, 136-7; *Epigrams*, 108.6-7.

23 *Conversations with Drummond*, 244-6. On the (by that date, quite rare) custom of single combatants fighting on behalf of their contesting armies, see V.G. Kiernan, *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1988), pp.58-9.

I must cut of your eares, you rascall I must do it;
I must cut of your nose, I must cut of your head.

(V.iii.103-11)

No part of the body is cut, no blood is ever spilt, for this is a comedy which 'sport[s] with humane follies, not with crimes', never crossing – as a comedy such as *Volpone* was later to do – into the world of graver transgressions and harsher penalties.²⁴

Speaking many years later to William Drummond about the ill-fated comedy *Eastward Ho!*, Jonson recalled that its authors, Chapman, Marston, and he, had all been imprisoned, and 'the report was that they should then had their ears cutt & noses', but these threats were never fulfilled. It would be tempting to see this episode reflected in the final scene of *Every Man In His Humour*, but it occurred eight years after the originally staging of that play: once again the dates do not fit, and one is obliged to think in terms of the general, not the particular, resemblances between life and art. However exceptional the threats may seem to modern readers, physical mutilation was a common juridical penalty of the day, as Jonson knew all too well.²⁵

The events in Jonson's life in the period immediately following *Every Man In His Humour* were to provide a tragic counterpoint to the comedy's happier theme. *Every Man In His Humour* was first performed in the autumn of 1598 by the Lord Chamberlain's Men at the Curtain Theatre. The first known reference to the play comes in a letter from Tobie Mathew to Dudley Carleton of 20 September 1598. Two days later, on 22 September 1598, Ben Jonson was indicted on a charge of manslaughter for killing a fellow actor named Gabriel Spencer, who was buried on 24 September 1598. The scuffle occurred in a duel, as Jonson later explained to Drummond: 'being appealed to the fields he had Killed his adversarie, which had hurt him in the arme & whose sword was 10 Inches Longer than his, for the which he was Emprisoned and almost at the Gallowes'. Jonson was to escape being hanged through pleading benefit of clergy,

²⁴ *Every Man In his Humour* (folio), prologue, 24.

²⁵ *Conversations with Drummond*, 2273-7.

but was branded on the thumb for this offence, and bore the mark and the memory of the episode to his grave.²⁶

The contrasts here are eloquent. Inside the Curtain Theatre, Bobadilla dodges a duel and saves his skin, while in the fields beyond the theatre his creator accepts a challenge and kills his adversary. In Jonson's comedy, a long sword sweeps innocuously through the air, and is sheathed harmlessly in its scabbard; in the world in which Jonson actually lived, his own short sword strikes home to kill an adversary (an actor trained, no doubt, in swordplay). Justice is dispensed – skittishly, severely – at the end of either episode. Yet any precise connections here are entirely fortuitous. The dates once again – this time, by a couple of days – make it unthinkable that the comedy in any exact way reflects an incident in Jonson's life. It is the more general connections which are none the less striking, between the *kind* of world depicted in the comedy and the *kind* of world in which Jonson lived. 'History' does not act upon 'literature' here in a singular, shaping, cause-and-effect way. Art and life instead interfold and overlap, in a more intimate and intricate manner than much recent theory (and some recent historicist practice) would allow, yet altogether less simply than an older generation of literary detectives believed.

26 Herford and Simpson, i. 181-9, 219-20, ix.168; *Conversations with Drummond*, 246-9; G.E. Bentley, *The Profession of Dramatist in Shakespeare's Time, 1590-1642* (Princeton, 1986), pp.48-9.