

Ben Jonson

Benjamin Johnson (1572 - 1637) never knew his father, who may have had some kind of position in the Church, for he died before his son's birth. His mother quickly remarried, and he grew up with a step-father who was a master bricklayer (builder) in Westminster. His mother's name is unknown; later, he claimed to be descended from a Scottish family of some standing, the Johnsons of Annandale, saying that his immediate ancestors had fallen on hard times and moved to London. The Johnsons (the change in spelling to Jonson was his own decision in adulthood) lived near Charing Cross, to the west of the City of London. Ben was able to be educated thanks to an anonymous benefactor who paid for him to attend Westminster School for several years, where he studied while **William Camden**, a famous classical scholar and historian, was headmaster. Later he included a poem dedicated to him in the *Epigrams*:

Camden, most reverend head, to whom I owe
All that I am in arts, all that I know
(How nothing's that!), to whom my country owes
The great renown and name wherewith she goes;
Than thee the age sees not that thing more grave,
More high, more holy, that she more would crave.

Camden's great Latin study of Roman Britain, *Britannia* (1586) and the English translation, *Remains of a Greater Work Concerning Britain* (1605) were important in creating the myths that nourished late Elizabethan and Jacobean nationalism, deriving the English monarchy, church, and parliamentary system, from pre-medieval, imperial Roman tradition.

Jonson must have been deeply hurt when the money for his studies was stopped before he was old enough to take the scholarship exams for university entrance. His family clearly hoped he would follow his step-father, and he was registered as an apprentice bricklayer. In 1591, for unknown reasons, he joined the volunteer Protestant army fighting against the Catholic Spaniards in Flanders; later he claimed to have fought in single combat against a Spanish soldier, killing him. He soon returned to London, though, and married in late 1594. This was not usual, since he had not completed his 7-year apprenticeship as a builder, and as a married man he could not continue it.

At about this time, Jonson became part of a company of actors, the Earl of Pembroke's Men, and acted Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* on tour. By 1597 the company known as Pembroke's Men, where Jonson was an actor, was acting at the Swan theatre. He was not very successful as an actor, and in 1597 he turned to play-writing. His Westminster classical education had given him an exalted view of 'art' and he surely felt that Shakespeare, his obvious rival, lacked it. By this time, university graduates had stopped writing for the commercial players, and Jonson stepped in with his first play, *The Case Is Altered*, in early 1597. This is a play strongly influenced by Plautus; the main characters are stiff and lifeless, but the farcical subplot, involving a wicked miser and his lovely step-daughter, is strikingly vigorous.

Every Man in His Humour

Almost at the start of his career, Jonson nearly ruined his chances by collaborating in writing a play, *The Isle of Dogs*, in which it seems the court was ridiculed (the text is lost).

He and other actors were imprisoned for a few months, and Pembroke's Men were absorbed into Henslowe's Admiral's Men, who acted at the Rose Theatre. When he came out of prison, Jonson began to write for them. Yet oddly, his first truly original play, *Every Man in His Humour*, was acted by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare among them, in 1598.

This play was suggested by George Chapman's very popular comedy *Humorous Day's Mirth* of 1597, but Jonson used the psychological theory of 'humours' taken from the Greek medical writer Galen; according to this, eccentric behaviour comes from the excess of one of the 'humours' (bile, phlegm, choler, blood). Jonson took only two of these, choler and blood; choler gives rise to anger, blood to sexual lust. In Elizabethan times, the word 'humour' had also taken on the sense of 'affectation' and several of Jonson's characters only ape the behaviour associated with the humours.

The framework of the play is given by a debate between the unemployed young poet-lover Lorenzo (with his friend Prospero) and Lorenzo's anti-poetic father, old Lorenzo, about the nature and value of poetry. The plot is largely an exhibition of various types of folly arranged by Lorenzo and Prospero in the house of Thorello, whose blood-humour renders him intensely jealous. Thorello and old Lorenzo both believe that young Lorenzo is trying to seduce Thorello's wife; finally he is able to elope with Hesperida, the wife's sister, whom he loves. Around them crowd such characters as Captain Bobadilla, a violent braggart of an ex-soldier, the love-poet Matheo whose poetry is all plagiarized, and Prospero's choleric brother Giuliano. While the foolish 'humorous' characters all manifest extremely odd behaviour, and are dramatically very effective, the self-controlled model characters are completely uninteresting.

In the last act a wise soldier-poet, Doctor Clement, analyzes all that has happened in a trial at which young Lorenzo (who is Jonson's 'alter ego') is able to plead a vision of 'poesy' that must have been Jonson's own: 'Attired in the majesty of art, Set high in spirit with the precious taste Of sweet philosophy.' This elitist view of the poet's craft, of the need for an educated, discerning audience, and the criticism of the common citizens' vulgarity, Jonson had got from the university writers, and from Sidney's *Defense*, as well as George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesy* (1589). It remained his own guiding rule throughout his life and helps explain his complex response to Shakespeare, whose attitudes are so very different.

The reception of *Every Man In His Humour* was not remarkably enthusiastic, even if it was acted several times. Jonson's hostile attitude to his audience and over-theoretical approach to drama meant that the play was more a manifesto than an entertainment. His awareness of the need for a systematic set of rules governing drama makes him the first truly classical dramatist in England, and he repeated the form in all his later plays. Basically, he chose to represent character types, and rejected complex plot structures of the romance kind that made Shakespeare's dramas so popular. Jonson's plays are full of episodes that are an end in themselves, and the close of the play is treated as an obviously artificial and unreal feature arranged by the dramatist so that the audience can go home. Some of Jonson's grotesque characters, such as Thorello and Bobadilla, directly influenced the development of the novel of character, begun by Fielding and culminating in Charles Dickens (who often recited speeches by Bobadilla).

Prison and after

On September 22, 1598, soon after the play had been first acted at the north London Curtain Theatre, Jonson met one of his former companions from Pembroke's Men in a nearby

street. This **Gabriel Spencer** was a violent fellow, who had killed a young man a couple of years before; a fight began for some reason and Jonson killed him. He was able to escape execution by showing that he could translate from a Latin Bible (*benefit of clergy*: a medieval privilege for the educated that could only be claimed for a first crime), but the court confiscated all his property.

Jonson was imprisoned for a few days in Newgate prison, where he seems to have shared a cell with a Catholic priest whose assurance of eternal salvation made such an impression on him that he became a Catholic there and then, hoping to gain an equal assurance. He did not return to the national English Church until about ten years later.

After his trial, Jonson thought of becoming a bricklayer again, but also began to frequent the satiric wits of the Inns of Court, to study the works of the Augustan satirists, and to write a sequel to his previous play, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, that was acted in 1599 and showed how many new classical authors Jonson had mastered. The Induction to the play is a remarkable piece of self-conscious theatre, in which Jonson presents a defence of satire (which the bishops of London and Canterbury had recently forbidden), that continues throughout the play in eleven scenes involving a 'chorus of critics' who comment on the action, and show how similar scenes can be found in Plautus, Terence, and many other reputed writers. This play was even acted before the queen, but its violent attack on the vices of worldly people cannot have pleased her.

After this, Jonson stopped writing for the public stage for some years, and began to fashion his image as a man of letters, looking for powerful patrons, writing elegant comedies for the children's theatre at Blackfriars where the Children of the Chapel Royal acted (Hamlet refers to them). He also published a scholarly quarto edition of *Every Man Out of His Humour* in 1600 that sold very well among educated readers, going through three editions in the year. An edition of *Every Man in His Humour* soon followed. He also began to write poems for powerful patrons: Lucy Countess of Bedford and Sir Philip Sidney's daughter the Countess of Rutland among them. Both of these women's husbands had been close to Essex and were suffering disgrace at the time.

That same autumn, Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels* was acted by the children at Blackfriars before their usual elite, refined audience of courtiers. Jonson was hoping that the play would be performed before the queen, its plot is self-reflective: Criticus, a poor but well-educated poet, laments that he cannot get a job at Cynthia's court because so many bad writers crowd there. He is advised to write a masque, which is performed, and Criticus is at once brought into Cynthia's closest circle.

The play was indeed acted at court, early in 1601, and displeased because in it Jonson attacks the 'pride and ignorance' of the courtiers who were supposed to be acting it and who were in fact its audience.

Some of Jonson's earliest poems, from this period, seem to have been inspired by the work of the musician-poets, like the skillful lament for Narcissus sung by Echo in *Cynthia's Revels*:

Slow, slow, fresh fount, keep time with my salt tears;
Yet slower, yet, O faintly, gentle springs!
List to the heavy part the music bears,
Woe weeps out her division, when she sings.
 Droop herbs and flowers
 Fall grief in showers;
 Our beauties are not ours.
 O, I could still,
Like melting snow upon some craggy hill,

Drop, drop, drop, drop,
Since Nature's pride is now a withered daffodil.

At this time Jonson had been attacking such writers as the dramatist John Marston. In 1601 Marston wrote *What You Will* for a children's company as a response, modelling the play on *Every Man Out of His Humour*. This developed into the "Poets' Quarrel" into which Thomas Dekker also came, and there are reasons for thinking that Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1601-2, it has the significant subtitle *What You Will*) is a parody of Jonson's ambitions; like Malvolio, Jonson did not like his social position and despised humble writers who might look on him as one of themselves. Jonson decided to adopt Horace as the model for his own poetic career, recalling that Ovid had ended his life in disgrace and exile, and wrote about this in his *Poetaster*, written while Dekker was working on his *Satiromastix*.

Jonson's first daughter Mary died at an unknown date, perhaps in late 1601, aged only six months and he wrote a touching poem about her:

Here lies, to each her parents' ruth,
Mary, the daughter of their youth;
Yet all heaven's gifts being heaven's due,
It makes the father less to rue.

In the next year Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* was re-published with texts added that expand those passages in which parents who have lost children express their grief. There is no certain proof, but critics think the new texts were written by Jonson.

At about the same time, he seems to have separated from his wife and family, perhaps because of his Catholicism, and to have gone to live in the homes of rich patrons. In early 1603 he left London for the country home of Robert Cotton. On March 24 Queen Elizabeth died; King James was proclaimed, and started to march south, but in early May, as James was nearing London, a serious outbreak of the plague began. All the richer people left the city, Jonson with them, but Jonson's family remained there.

Soon after arriving in the country, Jonson dreamed of his eldest son, Benjamin, seeing him as a grown man with a red cross on his brow; it was near his seventh birthday. His old school-master, Camden, who was staying in the same house, tried to show him that dreams were nothing. A little later a letter came announcing the boy's death from the plague:

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy:
Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy Fate, on the just day.

The fact that Jonson gave both this son and a later one his own name (which in the Old Testament is explained as meaning "child of the right hand") shows something of what he looked for (but never found) in the father-son relationship.

Jonson was now very well placed, though. Cotton had been working for king James, and was knighted by him in May. Other close friends were in similar positions of influence. At Christmas 1603, his *Sejanus*, a stiff Roman tragedy, was performed for the king at Hampton Court by Shakespeare and his company. It was not very successful, and when it was acted in the Globe, in 1604, it was hissed from the stage.

Because of the plague, James had postponed his solemn entry into London until the following year. As he passed through the gates and along the city streets, a series of symbolic pageants had been prepared to welcome him. The texts spoken in most of them were written

in the heavy emblematic style that the Elizabethans had inherited from medieval romance; the first and last, though, written by Jonson, were in a new, simpler classical style that certainly pleased James. The new king had written books himself and was open to a style closer to classical French elegance, less mannered than before. Besides, his vision of kingship was much more imperial Roman, less medieval than Elizabeth's, and this Jonson could work with. It was at this moment that he began to write his name as Jonson.

More than Donne's, even, Jonson's life was a battle. Unlike Donne, though, he never aimed higher than to be recognized as a worthy poet. To gain that reputation was not easy for a man of his humble origins and he was always dependent on the help of influential patrons. Yet he did everything he could to create his own public image as a serious professional writer; in editing his early plays he did not follow the quite simple presentation of the Shakespearean quartos, but imitated the scholarly editions of classical texts, with elaborate prefaces and notes.

King James's French queen, too, brought new expectations, a new interest in masques especially. After one year, Jonson replaced Samuel Daniel as the principle maker of court masques, being given the job of preparing the masque for Twelfth Night, 1605, probably thanks to the support of the Countess of Bedford. It was a difficult challenge, for the queen decided that all the ladies would play the role of Africans, wearing black make-up. *The Masque of Blackness* was a triumph for Jonson.

Then once again, Jonson almost destroyed himself. In early 1605, he collaborated with Chapman and Marston on a comedy, *Eastward Ho*. In it, they repeatedly mocked the Scots, the king himself, and his selling of knighthoods for thirty pounds. This was perhaps done in sympathy with the queen, who by this time despised her husband and enjoyed hearing jokes against him. But a Scottish courtier had Jonson and Chapman put in prison without any trial or examination of the evidence. Jonson quickly wrote letters to his most powerful patrons and was lucky to find supporters who got him his freedom.

The Gunpowder Plot of November 1605 represents a turning-point in Jonson's life. The Catholic Guido (Guy) Fawkes, with other Catholic conspirators, had placed huge quantities of gunpowder in the cellars of the Palace of Westminster where the king was due to open Parliament a few days later. If the bomb had exploded, it would have killed not only the king, but all the lords, bishops, and leading citizens of the country. The plot was uncovered on November 5th. During the enquiry, Jonson was found to have been drinking with some of the main conspirators a month before. He cleared himself of suspicion by collaborating completely with the authorities, helping in their inquiries. He seems to have come back to the state church at this time, and to have been reconciled with his wife too.

Volpone

During his time in prison Jonson was reading Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, and he also had a copy of Erasmus's translations of Lucian's *Dialogues*. These two works are a main inspiration for *Volpone*, which he wrote in the winter 1605-6. They offer models of a completely new mode of indirect and highly effective satire. Lucianic satire taught Erasmus, and Jonson, the art of the mock encomium in which speakers praise what is not praise-worthy. In Lucian's 9th Dialogue Jonson found the story of rich old Polystratus who, having no children, enjoys himself collecting gifts from people who hope they will inherit his fortune. When he dies they find he has left everything to a pretty boy from Phrygia. Polystratus exposes his trickery and boasts of his activities, without Lucian ever attacking or criticizing him. The reader is left to reflect on the correct level of response to what is in any

case a brazen case of fraud. This story gave Jonson the plot for his next comedy, *Volpone* (1606).

In his earlier plays, Jonson had made characters speak bitterly, expressing direct and dangerous attacks on the social manners of the higher classes. In *Volpone* that never happens. The Prologue boasts that it was written in five weeks (Jonson was usually a slow writer), all by Jonson himself. Then the play is compared with the more vulgar kind of play where there is horseplay and clowning.

The play begins as Volpone (the Fox) and his close servant Mosca (the Fly) celebrate Volpone's morning worship of his gold. After this blasphemous adoration, Mosca flatters Volpone, stressing that his fortune was not made by oppressing the poor. Then in a soliloquy, Volpone exposes his method:

I have no wife, no parent, child, ally,
To give my substance to, but whom I make
Must be my heir; and this makes men observe me.

Shakespeare, in *Richard III* and other plays, had already exploited the fact that, in theatre, all the world loves a villain. Volpone is a shameless villain, quite open about his deceptions, inviting the audience to admire his skills at manipulating human greed. They deceive Voltore (the Vulture), Corbaccio (the Raven), and Corvino (the Crow) in various ways, playing them off against one another and all the time getting more wealth from each of them. During the play, which is well constructed, Volpone and Mosca grow increasingly ambitious, especially after Volpone turns his interest from wealth to Celia, the beautiful wife of Corvino. In the end, they fall victim to their own cleverness and greed and everything comes to light.

In an unrealistic ending, where Jonson tries to please the most puritan among his audience, Mosca is condemned to be a perpetual prisoner in the galleys, where no one survived long. All Volpone's fortune is confiscated to help the sick, and he is to stay in prison until he is "sick and lame indeed". His victims, who all acted out of greed, are also severely punished.

Volpone was acted at Oxford and Cambridge, then was printed in 1607. It was very well received. In 1608 Jonson's wife had a second son, who was also given the name Benjamin.

Epicoene

While he continued to write court masques, Jonson may have been resenting the power of women over him, and in 1609 he completed the misogynist play *Epicoene; or, The Silent Woman* which was acted by the Children of the Queen's Revels early in 1610. Here Morose, a misanthrope who dreams of living in total silence and hates the noise of society, hopes to marry Epicoene (the pronunciation is 'Epi-see-nee'), who seems to be a truly silent woman. By doing this he hopes to punish his nephew, Dauphine, who he believes has brought noisy people around his house. As soon as he marries her, though, she begins to scold him in loud tones, and the house is invaded by a group of men and women led by Truewit, who torment him.

Morose consults learned experts (his tormentors disguised) about the possibility of divorce; he tries to plead sexual impotence, but Epicoene says she does not mind a sexless marriage. At last Dauphine promises to find a solution, if only Morose agrees to sign a

document giving him a good allowance, and making him his heir. As soon as Morose signs, Dauphine removes Epicoene's wig and shows that 'she' is a boy actor trained for the part.

A female cousin of the king's claimed that she was mentioned in the play, and it was not published until the 1616 folio. This play, witty and worldly, was always popular. It was one of the first to be acted when the theatres were re-opened in 1660, and it remained an often-acted play until the mid-18th century.

The Alchemist

Jonson had been frequenting a circle of "wits" in the years before 1609: the dramatists Beaumont and Fletcher, and John Donne, were among the leaders of the group, that met at the Mermaid Tavern to make clever conversation. By 1609, Jonson had begun to write for a new patron, the king's eldest son, Prince Henry. Henry, though only sixteen, lived for other values than his father. He looked back to Elizabethan Protestant ideals, hated Spain that the king favoured, and longed to fight battles while the king pursued peace. While he was writing fervent speeches in favour of the prince's nationalistic ideals for an entertainment designed for Twelfth Night (January 6) 1610, *The Speeches at Prince Henry's Barriers*, Jonson was working on a new, not so idealistic comedy, *The Alchemist*.

This play is set in London during an outbreak of the plague, when those with money would escape to the country, leaving their houses in the care of servants. In the year 1610, the plague was active in London; the plot shows a team of cunning tricksters who take over an empty house and use it to cheat a variety of foolish dupes who come flocking there. Only this house is supposed to stand exactly on the site of the Blackfriars Theatre, and the action is set in the autumn of 1610, when Jonson hoped the play would be acted there. Moreover, the action on the stage follows precisely the real time, unity of place is respected, so that the audience becomes part of the action, the house of illusions being at the same time the theatre itself.

The structure is that of a morality play, with Face (the world), Dol Common (the flesh) and Subtle (the devil) offering fantasies of satisfaction to the vain dreams of a variety of ordinary people. Subtle claims to be a magician (alchemist), and he exploits the hopes of the clerk Dapper, the tobacco-man Druggier, as well as the knight Epicure Mammon and the deacon Ananias. Over them all hangs the threat of death from the plague, as over the audience who came to the theatre. At the end of the play, Lovewit, the master of the house, suddenly returns. We expect that he will reveal the trickery of these false magicians, but instead he decides to take over their show, marrying a young widow they have attracted to the house. Jonson here varies his strategy, suggesting that profit from falsehood has its advantages in a world of fools.

This play was Jonson's most successful, being acted regularly in the Restoration and 18th century, and into the 19th.

The Middle Years

In contrast, the classical political tragedy *Cataline* he completed in 1611 had a splendid villain in Cataline, but a boringly pedantic hero in Cicero. The play is in fact a study in the value of pragmatism in politics; it never found acceptance in the theatre, but was widely read and much quoted during the 17th century for its political thought.

At this time, king James began to lack money, tensions grew between him and the people. Court masques had to be made less elaborate and it was probably at this time that

Jonson wrote the poem “To Penshurst” with its praise of moderation and simple values. The greatest blow to Jonson and many others came on November 6, 1612, when Prince Henry suddenly died.

Jonson had gone travelling in Europe as tutor to Walter Raleigh’s son Wat, they arrived in Paris in early 1612 and stayed there until 1613. On returning to London, he went to live with a rich patron, Aubigny, leaving his wife alone. His drinking increased, and he was a regular member of a coterie that met once a month at the Mermaid.

By late 1614 Jonson had finished *Bartholomew Fair*, based on an incident that really happened to him in Paris: a tutor drinks too much at a carnival and is made a fool of by his pupil, who makes him a public spectacle. The carnival setting exposes human frailties through multiple plots, involving a large cast. The play has many parodic features inspired by the Bible, including a kitchen similar to Hell run by Ursula, and a presiding mock-heroic figure Adam Overdo, who seems to be a carnival form of Christ. It was acted once in public and once before the king, and never again until the Restoration; it was only printed in 1631.

Jonson’s masques for early 1615 and 1616 were part of a power struggle in court, during which the king’s favourite, the earl of Somerset, was replaced by George Villiers, duke of Buckingham, and Jonson’s patrons rose to great influence. Early in 1616, the king granted Jonson a life pension for his various services; he began to consider himself as the Poet Laureate, although the title itself did not exist.

In early 1616, he was preparing the publication of his collected works, published under the title *The Works of Benjamin Jonson* in an impressive folio volume. The volume contained carefully revised texts of nine plays, a collection of mostly short poems he called *Epigrams*, a few carefully selected poems under the title *The Forest*, and some masques. No living writer, in England at least, had ever produced “Works”, the word was reserved for the great writers of the classical period, and the book was laughed at, yet it established Jonson’s reputation as a writer. He had begun with comedy, moved on to tragedy, and had then turned to the composition of skillful poetry inspired by the best classical models. Final glory, he suggests, came with the masques written for the king and designed to include him.

The 133 *Epigrams* are mainly of two kinds. Many of them are satires mocking some aspect of human folly in general terms, the subject of the poem being an unidentified character such as “Sir Voluptuous Beast” or “Groom Idiot”. In opposition to these as the collection progresses are an increasing number of poems celebrating the praises of named individuals, mostly high courtiers addressed in familiar terms by an admiring poet. This is a common form of satire, pinpointing a folly by praising some rare individual who is free of it.

The first poem in the collection is an introduction to the poems that follow. In Martial and other classical writers, the epigram had become an exercise in wit, sharply attacking the faults of named individuals. Jonson claims to be too kind-hearted for such unkind activities, although in reality he enjoyed attacking people:

To My Book

It will be looked for, book, when some but see
Thy title, *Epigrams*, and named of me,
Thou should’st be bold, licentious, full of gall,
Wormwood, and sulphur, sharp and toothed withal,
Become a petulant thing, hurl ink and wit
As madmen stones, not caring whom they hit.
Deceive their malice who could wish it so,
And by their wiser temper let men know

Thou art not covetous of least self-fame
Made from the hazard of another's shame--
Much less with lewd, profane, and beastly phrase
To catch the world's loose laughter or vain gaze.
He that departs with his own honesty
For vulgar praise, doth it too dearly buy.

The last couplet, a moral epigram in itself, is so high-minded that it seems unkind to point out that Jonson probably spent much of his life departing with his own honesty, writing what he hoped would be praised. It is his skill in creating a detached, morally superior voice in these epigrams that made him a major forerunner of the Augustans, of Pope especially.

Jonson found difficulty in praising other poets, it seems. In poem 23, in praise of John Donne, he mentions in eight lines his poems and aspects of his life, saying they are all incomparable, but concludes:

All which I meant to praise, and yet I would,
But leave, because I cannot as I should.

He was glad to boast that he had helped Donne by introducing him to one of his main patrons. Lucy, Countess of Bedford, was very powerful at court, and Donne later wrote poems for her. Jonson's poem to her "with Mr. Donne's Satires" suggests that Jonson began the relationship by sending her a manuscript copy of Donne's Satires, after she had asked to see them; for if they had already met, she could have asked Donne directly:

Lucy, you brightness of our sphere, who are
Life of the Muses' day, their morning star!
If works, not th'authors, their own grace should look,
Whose poems would not wish to be your book?
But these, desired by you, the maker's ends
Crown with their own. Rare poems ask rare friends.

This poem is elegant in its compliment, suggesting that anyone who can read satires with pleasure must be morally without reproach.

Jonson perhaps found close personal attachments very threatening, if only because of the fear of loss overshadowing them. Yet Jonson also hated solitude. The well-known poem 101 talks of "inviting a friend for supper"; to understand it, we need to recall that the word "friend" was used to refer to an older person of equal or superior social standing, who might prove helpful in furthering a career. The poem is strangely unclear about what the menu will really be:

Tonight, grave sir, both my poor house and I
Do equally desire your company:
Not that we think us worthy such a guest,
But that your worth will dignify our feast
With those that come; whose grace may make that seem
Something, which else could hope for no esteem.
It is the fair acceptance, Sir, creates
The entertainment perfect: not the cates.

The poem goes on to suggest they will listen to readings from famous Latin poems, not Jonson's, and drink Canary wine:

Of this we will sup free but moderately,
And we will have no Pooly or Parrot by;
Nor shall our cups make any guilty men,
But at our parting we will be as when
We innocently met. No simple word
That shall be uttered at our mirthful board
Shall make us sad next morning; or affright
The liberty that we'll enjoy tonight.

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The ending of the poem is strange; Pooly and Parrot were agents who spied on Catholics, of whom Jonson was probably one at the time he wrote. This suggests a climate of suspicion and conspiracy that casts its shadow over the simple pleasures the poem evokes.

The *Epigrams* end, perhaps not so unexpectedly, with a disgusting poem *On the Famous Voyage* describing a journey through the sewers of London where all the filth comes pouring down from above. The voice speaking the Epigrams is aggressively that of Ben Jonson, the blunt poet moralist who hates depravity and has the insight it takes to recognize the few good and great courtiers who form rare exceptions from the rule.

The 15 poems of *The Forest* speak in a different kind of voice and are arranged in a more formal manner, beginning with "Why I write not of love" and ending with a religious poem "To Heaven". There is a clear structure to the collection. The second poem is the famous "poem of place" "To Penshurst" celebrating the birthplace of Sir Philip Sidney where the poet and the king both find hospitality. It is a very complex poem since Jonson suggests that in Penshurst the poet and the king are somehow equal, when obviously they are not; the praise of Penshurst's modest style is also ambiguous:

Thou art not, Penshurst, built to envious show,
Of touch or marble; nor canst thou boast a row
Of polished pillars, or a roof of gold;
Thou hast no lantern whereof tales are told,
Or stair, or courts; but standst an ancient pile,
And, these grudged at, art revered the while.

The knowing reader recalls that the Sidneys were far from wealthy. Moreover, the house Penshurst was mostly built in the Middle Ages for another family. The Sidneys found its venerable age useful to make people forget that their family was not of ancient noble origin. Jonson praises Nature for providing the fine food served in the hall:

The blushing apricot and woolly peach
Hang on thy walls, that every child may reach.
And though thy walls be of the country stone,
They are reared with no man's ruin, no man's groan;
There's none that dwell about them wish them down;

This may not have been true, since the estate had recently been expanded by a process of enclosure that local people had opposed in vain. Jonson chooses to ignore an aspect of the historical reality he claims to be dealing with, and paints an idealized picture of grateful tenants flocking in with gifts:

But all come in, the farmer and the clown,
 And no one empty-handed, to salute
 Thy lord and lady, though they have no suit. (request) 50
 Some bring a capon, some a rural cake,
 Some nuts, some apples; some that think they make
 The better cheeses bring them, or else send
 By their ripe daughters, whom they would commend
 This way to husbands, and whose baskets bear
 An emblem of themselves in plum or pear.

This leads to an evocation of the poet retiring to a comfortable bedroom after a good meal. Suddenly he recalls an occasion when the king and his son, hunting in the region, arrived without warning and were admirably received. He is as welcome as the king, he suggests. He praises the Christian piety practiced especially by the women of the Sidney family, and ends by stressing the value of having a lord who lives on his lands, a political issue in itself.

Moving in from the end, the 14th poem is addressed to “Sir William Sidney, on his Birthday”. The son of Sir Robert Sidney was not particularly noted for any positive qualities. The implied contrast with Sir Philip Sidney suggests that Ben Jonson has inherited some of the great poet’s rights. The third and thirteenth poems are advice on wise living addressed to noble recipients, Sir Robert Wroth and Katherine, Lady Aubigny.

The fourth poem “To the World” is a dramatic monologue spoken by “a gentlewoman, virtuous and noble”. Jonson has withdrawn from his poems which here speak with other voices. The 12th is another poem of wise advice from the poet, addressed to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland. This poem ends with an elaborate review of the poet’s work: “high and noble matter, such as flies / From brains entranced and filled with ecstasies; / Moods which the godlike Sidney oft did prove...” (lines 89-91).

Poems 5 and 6 are songs “to Celia” from *Volpone*, where the speaker is not Ben Jonson and the poems express passionate feelings of erotic love far removed from the values of wisdom. Poems 7 “That Women are But Men’s Shadows” and 8 “To Sickness” are hostile to women. Poem 9 is the famous “Song: to Celia” beginning “Drink to me only with thine eyes” which is beautifully crafted, Platonic, but not at all spoken by Jonson’s voice.

The variety of persons speaking in *The Forest* suggests the complexity of the poet’s roles; the mingling of male and female *personae* and addressees also suggests complex relationships. Jonson writes all the poems, but does not “speak” them all. At the heart of the collection is the 10th, “And must I sing? What subject shall I choose?” where the poet confronts this central challenge. It is followed by the 11th “Epode” which constitutes the reply to the question. It is a stately poem of calm wisdom, beginning “Not to know vice at all, and keep true state, / Is virtue, and not Fate”.

While Jonson wanted to be honoured as the author of tragedies and poems, he still needed to write comedies in order to earn money. In this same year of 1616 Jonson began to write *The Devil is an Ass* in which he exploits features familiar from his previous successful comedies, in a form of self-parody. Again, he follows the morality play structure, the play begins in Hell; a foolish devil, Pug, asks to spend a day in London but Satan warns him that now vice and virtue cannot be distinguished there, and the humans are more devilish than he.

Pug tries to tempt Frances Fitzdotterel, the wife of the man he is serving, and gets beaten. Yet she is willing to accept the wooing of a gallant, Wittipol, who sings for her and flatters her sensibilities. In the climax, Wittipol has acquired all power over the body, the affections,

and the belongings of Frances, but he then declares that he will not take advantage of her, for “I can love *goodness* in you, more Than I did *Beauty*”. Yet the end is still morally ambivalent, with a group of scoundrels going unpunished. The play was marred by Jonson’s mocking reference to some business interests of a royal favourite. As a result, the play remained unpublished and unacted for many years, and Jonson stopped writing for the public theatre.

Instead, Jonson put all his energy into the production of the Twelfth Night masques and other entertainments. In early 1618, prince Charles was named Prince of Wales, and Jonson wrote the masque *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* for him. Charles seemed opposed to the rather fun-loving court of his father, and Jonson’s text criticizes the court’s interest in food and drink. Hercules is shown triumphing over drunken Comus and Anger-worshipping pygmies. Then a hillside opens, showing Charles and his companions, and Daedalus, who is poet, educator, and priest, leads Charles down into the court. The texts are very long and there is little spectacle. The king was bored and demanded lively dances. The masque was a failure, perhaps because the message was too clear. Jonson rewrote much of it, to please the court, introducing a first section (antimasque) of Welsh rustics.

Perhaps as a result of all this, Jonson left London and walked to Scotland, imitating something Camden had done forty years before. He planned to write a poem celebrating Scotland. He met many people, and was welcomed with great honours in Edinburgh. In the winter of 1618-19, Jonson spent several weeks with the Scottish writer William Drummond of Hawthornden and Drummond has left a famous series of notes of the things Jonson told him; Drummond was an educated man, but out of touch with London; Jonson seems to have told him a lot of rather sharp gossip. Some of the most famous passages in these notes:

That Shakespeare wanted (*lacked*) art.

That Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging.

He esteemeth Donne the first poet in the world, in some things.

He hath consumed a whole night in lying looking to his great toe, about which he hath seen Tartars and Turks, Romans and Carthaginians, fight in his imagination.

He mentions several poets who died in poverty, and has almost nothing to say about the theatre. A great many of the remarks he makes about his contemporaries are hostile.

After returning to London, Jonson went to live, and perhaps to teach, at Gresham College. The move away from the court and its values had begun, but Jonson never found a satisfactory alternative, so that from 1620 it is possible to speak of a decline in his career. James was weakening, his queen had died in 1619, money was in short supply, and the plan to marry Charles to a Spanish princess was not popular in England. The events leading to the Civil War were beginning.

Jonson was obliged to write an entertainment in honour of the king’s lover, Buckingham, *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621) that was a tremendous success, but his pension was not paid because the king had no money and in later masques Jonson refers to this problem openly. In 1623 he had to face another problem; Shakespeare’s former colleagues of The King’s Men had decided to publish his collected plays in a folio edition, and Jonson was among those asked to write a poem in tribute to the man he had always been in competition with as a dramatist. The result was the poem “To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare, and What He Hath Left Us” that became the first critical analysis of Shakespeare’s art, although Jonson may not have meant it to be taken so seriously.

for the rest of his life. This weakness may help explain the bitter tone of the opening stanza of the “Ode to Himself” he wrote to mark this failure, and published with the text of the play in 1631:

Come, leave the loathed stage,
And the more loathsome age,
Where pride and impudence, in faction knit,
Usurp the chair of wit,
Indicting and arraigning every day
Something they call a play.
Let their fastidious, vain
Commission of the brain
Run on and rage, sweat, censure, and condemn:
They were not made for thee, less thou for them.

Several writers replied to this poem, friends who regretted the tone, and enemies who mocked it. In the same year a young man who had been part of Jonson’s circle of friends, Sir Henry Morison, died. His friend, Sir Lucius Cary, was almost mad with grief, and wrote a number of poems claiming that Morison would have been the greatest English poet and a wonderful military leader. In order to offer him some comfort, Jonson wrote a Pindaric Ode, one of his most ambitious poems, the **pindaric ode**: “To the Immortal Memory and Friendship of That Noble Pair, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison.” In order to raise the tone to the heroic, Jonson took many ideas about the value of a short life (an idea that appealed to him) from Seneca’s 93rd Epistle. The strict Pindaric form is complex, with stanzas in groups of three, corresponding to choral dance movements.

The poem begins with thoughts on the horrors of human life, and the way many people live for a long time but do no good. Then comes the question of Morrison’s short life, resolved by the declaration that “His life was of humanity the sphere.” At the centre of the poem comes this stanza, one of the best things Jonson ever wrote:

It is not growing like a tree
In bulk, doth make man better be,
Or standing long an oak, three hundred year,
To fall a log at last, dry, bald, and sere:
A lily of a day
Is fairer far in May
Although it fall and die that night;
It was the plant and flower of light.
In small proportions we just beauties see,
And in short measures life may perfect be.

Jonson enjoyed lasting friendship with a number of the thinkers of the age, and he was never reduced to complete poverty. He continued to write for king Charles, although by now the king was very unpopular in society at large. The king gave him a bigger pension, but there was no money, so it was not paid. In 1631 Jonson tried to prepare a second folio, with his remaining comedies. It never appeared, but the printed pages became part of the two-volume folio edition of his works published by Sir Kenelm Digby in 1640-41, after his death, that also contained the poems of *The Underwood*.

He wrote two more comedies, *The Magnetic Lady* (1632) and *A Tale of a Tub* (1633). This last is set in the rural festivities marking St. Valentine’s Day. He spent his last years

more or less paralyzed, living close to Westminster Abbey, where he was buried in August 1637, under a stone inscribed, 'O Rare Benn: Jonson.'

Further Reading

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