
POETRY

BEN JONSON

Selected and introduced by Anthony Hecht

That maker and breaker of literary reputations, T. S. Eliot, began an essay on Ben Jonson (1572–1637) this way: “The reputation of Jonson has been of the most deadly kind that can be compelled upon the memory of a great poet. To be universally accepted; to be damned by the praise that quenches all desire to read the book; to be afflicted by the imputation of the virtues which excite the least pleasure; and to be read only by historians and antiquaries—this is the most perfect conspiracy of approval. . . . No critic has made him seem pleasurable or even interesting.”

After an opening like that, surely we expect to lean back and see justice belatedly done. But that’s not quite what we get. Eliot, the restorer of life to John Donne, the literary assassin of Shelley, has nothing to say of Jonson as a poet but speaks of him only as a playwright (though he does pay complimentary attention to Jonson’s dramatic verse). And Eliot goes on to point out that Jonson has been unfavorably compared not only with Shakespeare but with Christopher Marlowe, John Webster, Francis Beaumont, and John Fletcher.

Eliot’s essay did little if anything to alter public indifference to Jonson, either as playwright or poet, and his failure simply confirmed the supposed soundness of that indifference. Jonson continued to be regarded by those who bothered to read him as a man of highly specialized sensibilities: learned, haughty, condescending, impersonal, classical, envious, and aloof. In brief, forbidding and unpleasant. “’Twas an ingenious remarque of my Lady Hoskins, that B. J. never writes of Love, or if he does, does it not naturally,” reports the 17th-century writer John Aubrey. What poet can hope to engage readers when handicapped by deficiencies in so central a poetic subject?

But Jonson deserves better of us. He is not as copious or versatile as Shakespeare, but at least one of his songs, “Queene and Huntresse,” is as lovely as any song of Shakespeare’s, and his musicianship (by which I mean his management of meter, rhyme, and stanza) is Shakespeare’s equal. His “Charme” (“The owle is abroad, the bat, and the toad”) could fit seamlessly into an incantation of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, while some of his epigrams are wonderfully funny.

Teaching Jonson’s poems to undergraduates over the years has shown me what it is in his work that keeps the general readership at bay. Students come to him knowing only “Drink to me only with thine eyes,” and have been chilled by the artificial ingenuity, the remote formality, of that song. Renaissance English diction and spelling make the poems seem alien, stilted exercises devoid of humanity, so that when Jonson is being funny, as in “The

Dreame," they completely miss the whole tone and tenor of the poem.

Or scorne, or pittie on me take,
I must a true Relation make,
I am undone to night;
Love in a subtile Dreame disguis'd,
Hath both my heart and me surpriz'd,
Whom never yet he durst attempt t'awake;
Nor will he tell me for whose sake
He did me the Delight,
Or spite
But leaves me to inquire,
In all my wild desire,
Of sleepe againe, who was his Aid,
And sleepe so guiltie and afraid,
As since he dares not come within my sight.

Well, you can see what daunts those students, who are not enamored of allegorical figures. In this poem, both "Love" and "Sleep" are personified. Obscurely those students sense that some sort of plot is going on, but though "surpriz'd" and "guiltie and afraid" are intriguing, it's hard to care much about events involving ghostly personifications. But when it is pointed out to a class that this poem is about being awakened by what parents used to call "a nocturnal emission," and what boys referred to as "a wet dream," the whole poem suddenly falls into place. It becomes personal, even confessional in a good-humored and unpretentious way. Jonson becomes more human.

And yet his art is also always cunning. In his celebrated epitaph for the child actor Salathiel Pavy, the poem is set down upon the page so as visibly to alternate between long and short lines. The short lines are uniform in length, each closing with a feminine ending; but the long ones, closing as they do with masculine endings, are not uniform. Their metrical deviation, however, is not random or casual. They alternate between seven and eight syllables, the odd-numbered long lines containing seven syllables, the even-numbered ones, eight. The shorter of these long lines elide their opening syllables (the absent syllable is removed from the front, not the end, of the line), thereby providing a subtle and measured syncopation, all the while rhyming *a b a b* in quatrain form throughout. It might be argued that such syncopation reflects the asymmetrical imbalance belonging to the subject of a child who so successfully plays the roles of old men that the Fates themselves are deceived and summon him prematurely to his appointed end.

To be sure, Jonson writes much stately and occasional verse. But he can be engaging in many moods—in his wrath as well as his humor, and the two are closely linked. In general, he is far more various than is commonly recognized. No small part of this variety lies in the fact that his poems are by no means all spoken (or sung) *in propria persona*. Quite apart from his plays, he is a lively inventor of characters of both sexes.

From Epigrammes

VI
To Alchymists

If all you boast of your great art be true;
Sure, willing povertie lives most in you.

XIII
To Doctor Empirick

When men a dangerous disease did scape,
Of old, they gave a cock to Æsculape;
Let me give two: that doubly am got free,
From my diseases danger, and from thee.

CXX
*Epitaph on S.P. [Salathiel Pavy] a child of
Q. El. [Queen Elizabeth's] Chappel*

Weepe with me all you that read
This little storie:
And know, for whom a teare you shed,
Death's selfe is sorry.
'Twas a child, that so did thrive
In grace, and feature,
As Heaven and Nature seem'd to strive
Which own'd the creature.
Yeeres he numbred scarce thirteene
When Fates turn'd cruell,
Yet three fill'd Zodiackes had he beene
The stages jewell;
And did act (what now we mone)
Old men so duely,
As, sooth, the Parcae thought him one,
He plai'd so truely.
So, by error, to his fate
They all consented;
But viewing him since (alas, too late)
They have repented.
And have sought (to give new birth)
In bathes to steepe him;
But, being so much too good for earth,
Heaven vowes to keepe him.

From The Forrest

V
Song. To Celia

Come my Celia, let us prove,
While we may, the sports of love;
Time will not be ours, for ever:
He, at length, our good will sever.
Spend not then his guifts in vaine.
Sunnes, that set, may rise againe:
But if once we loose this light,
'Tis, with us, perpetuall night.
Why should we deferre our joyes?
Fame, and rumor are but toys.
Cannot we delude the eyes
Of a few poore houshold spyes?
Or his easier eares beguile,
So removed by our wile?
'Tis no sinne, loves fruit to steale,
But the sweet theft to reveale:
To be taken, to be seene,
These have crimes accounted beene.

From The Under-Wood

II
*A Celebration of Charis in
Ten Lyrick Peeces*

1. HIS EXCUSE FOR LOVING

Let it not your wonder move,
Lesse your laughter: that I love.
Though I now write fiftie yeares,
I have had, and have my Peeres;
Poets, though devine are men:
Some have lov'd as old agen.
And it is not alwayes face,
Clothes, or Fortune gives the grace;
Or the feature, or the youth:
But the Language, and the Truth,
With the Ardor, and the Passion,
Gives the Lover weight, and fashion.
If you then will read the Storie,
First, prepare you to be sorie,
That you never knew till now,
Either whom to love, or how:
But be glad, as soone with me,
When you know, that this is she,

Of whose Beautie it was sung,
She shall make the old man young,
Keepe the middle age at stay,
And let nothing high decay,
Till she be the reason why,
All the world for love may die.

VII
A Nymphs Passion

I love, and he loves me againe,
Yet dare I not tell who;
For if the Nymphs should know my Swaine,
I feare they'd love him too;
Yet if it be not knowne,
The pleasure is as good as none,
For that's a narrow joy is but our owne.

I'le tell, that if they be not glad,
They yet may evnie me:
But then if I grow jealous madde,
And of them pittied be,
It were a plague 'bove scorne,
And yet it cannot be forborne,
Unlesse my heart would as my thought be torne.

He is if they can find him, faire,
And fresh and fragrant too,
As Summers sky, or purged Ayre,
And lookes as Lillies doe,
That are this morning blowne,
Yet, yet I doubt he is not knowne,
And feare much more, that more of him beshowne.

But he hath eyes so round, and bright,
As make away my doubt,
Where Love may all his Torches light,
Though hate had put them out;
But then t'increase my feares,
What Nymph so e're his voyce but heares
Will be my Rivall, though she have but eares.

I'le tell no more and yet I love,
And he loves me; yet no
One un-becoming thought doth move
From either heart, I know;
But so exempt from blame,
As it would be to each a fame:
If Love, or feare, would let me tell his name.

XXIII
An Ode. To himselfe

Where do'st thou carelesse Lie
Buried in ease and sloth?
Knowledge, that sleepes, doth die;
And this Securitie,
It is the common Moath,
That eats on wits, and Arts, and oft destroyes
them both.

Are all th'Aonian springs
Dri'd up? lyes Thespia wast?
Doth Clarius Harp want strings,
That not a Nymph now sings!
Or droop they as disgrac't,
To see their Seats and Bowers by chattring
Pies defac't?

If hence thy silence be,
As 'tis too just a cause;
Let this thought quicken thee,
Minds that are great and free,
Should not on fortune pause,
'Tis crowne enough to vertue still, her owne
applause.

What though the greedie Frie
Be taken with false Baytes
Of worded Balladrie,
And thinke it Poesie?
They die with their conceits,
And only pitious scorne, upon their folly
waites.

Then take in hand thy Lyre,
Strike in thy proper straine,
With Japhets lyne, aspire
Sols Chariot for new fire,
To give the world againe:
Who aided him, will thee, the issue of Joves
braine.

And since our Daintie age
Cannot endure reproofe,
Make not thy selfe a Page,
To that strumpet the Stage,
But sing high and aloofe,
Safe from the wolves black jaw, and the dull
Asses hoofe.

LXXI
*To the Right Honourable, the Lord High
Treasurer of England. An Epistle
Mendicant. 1631*

MY LORD:

Poore wretched states, prest by extremities,
Are faine to seeke for succours, and supplies
Of Princes aides, or good mens Charities.

Disease, the Enemy, and his Engineeres,
Wants, with the rest of his conceal'd compeeres,
Have cast a trench about mee, now five yeares.

And made those strong approaches, by False
braies,
Reducts, Halfe-moones, Horne-workes, and such
close wayes,
The Muse not peepes out, one of hundred dayes;

But lyes block'd up, and straightned, narrow'd in,
Fix'd to the bed, and boords, unlike to win
Health, or scarce breath, as she had never bin.

Unlesse some saving-Honour of the Crowne,
Dare thinke it, to relieve, no lesse renowne,
A Bed-rid Wit, then a besieged Towne.

Miscellaneous

IV
*Hymn to Diana
from Cynthia's Revells*

Queene, and Huntresse, chaste, and faire,
Now the Sunne is laid to sleepe,
Seated, in thy silver chaire,
State in wonted manner keepe:
Hesperus intreats thy light,
Goddesse, excellently bright.

Earth, let not thy envious shade
Dare it selfe to interpose;
Cynthia's shining orbe was made
Heaven to cleere, when day did close:
Blesse us then with wished sight,
Goddesse, excellently bright.

Lay thy bow of pearle apart,
And thy cristall-shining quiver;
Give unto the flying hart
Space to breathe, how short soever:
Thou that mak'st a day of night,
Goddesse, excellently bright.

XXXII
Song

from *The Gypsies Metamorphos'd*

The faery beame upon you,
The starres to glister on you:
A Moone of light,
In the noone of night,
Till the Fire-drake hath o're gon you.

The wheele of fortune guide you,
The Boy with the bow beside you
Runne aye in the way,
Till the bird of day,
And the luckier lot betide you.

XVII
Charme

from *The Masque of Queenes*

The owle is abroad, the bat, and the toad,
And so is the cat-a-mountayne,
The ant, and the mole sit both in a hole,
And frog peepes out o'the fountayne;
The dogs, they doe bay, and the timbrels play,
The spindle is now a turning;
The moone it is red, and the starres are fled,
But all the skie is a burning:
The ditch is made, and our nayles the spade,
With pictures full, of waxe, and of wooll;
Their livers I sticke, with needles quicke;
There lacks but the bloud, to make up the floud.
Quickly, Dame, then, bring your part in,
Spurre, spurre, upon little Martin,
Merrily, merrily, make him saile,
A worme in his mouth, and a thorne in's taile,
Fire above, and fire below,
With a whip i'your hand, to make him goe.