

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

‘Servant, but not Slave’:
Ben Jonson at the Jacobean Court

MARTIN BUTLER

University of Leeds

IT SEEMS APPROPRIATE on this occasion to begin by evoking the moment in 1621 when Ben Jonson nearly became a Fellow of the British Academy. Of course in 1621 the Academy as we know it did not yet exist, but towards the end of James I’s reign the historian Edmund Bolton presented a series of proposals to the Crown for the establishment of an ‘Academ Royal’, which is today understood as part of the present institution’s pre-history. As reported to the 1621 parliament, this Academy would have been a showcase for the cultural accomplishments of James’s Britain—as James himself described it, ‘an Academy for bettering the breeding of the youth of our dominions, and also to encourage diverse men of arts, for the honour and profit of us and our kingdom’—and among the eighty-four antiquaries, authors and scientists whose inclusion was subsequently mooted was Ben Jonson. Given the gap between James’s ambitions and his finances, it is perhaps unsurprising that Bolton’s scheme never secured the necessary funding, but it is pleasant to suppose that, had this Jacobean Academy materialised, Jonson might have been one of its founding members.¹

Read at the Academy 12 December 1995. © The British Academy 1996.

¹ Bolton’s proposals were first described by Ethel M. Portal in ‘The Academ Roial of King James I’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1915–16, pp. 189–208. There is an authoritative analysis by R. W. Caudill, ‘Some Literary Evidence of the Development of the English Virtuoso in the Seventeenth Century’, D.Phil. dissertation (Oxford, 1975), pp. 279–86, 397–8; and a recent account of Bolton by D. R. Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England* (Toronto, 1990), pp. 190–99. The full Academy list, with Jonson’s name included, actually

Jonson's inclusion in Bolton's proposals testifies to his success at this stage of his career in establishing a position for himself at the heart of Jacobean élite culture. 1621 was a good year for him: Buckingham gave him £100 for writing *The Gipsies Metamorphosed*, he gained the reversion of the office of Master of the Revels, and gossips rumoured that he had narrowly missed being knighted.² But the proposals remind us that Jonson's profile was by no means solely that of courtier, place-seeker and parvenu. Beside him in the scheme were friends like Robert Cotton and John Selden, men who stood amongst the foremost scholars of the day, and Jonson too may have been listed as much for his intellectual as his poetic achievements. Although he was still writing the annual masques, he had severed his connections with the stage, and was increasingly living the life of a scholar. When in 1623 his library was burned, the lost works listed in his 'Execration upon Vulcan' included translations of Aristotle and Horace, an English grammar, notes on literature and theology, and a history of Henry V based on documents loaned by Selden, Cotton and Carew. It is sometimes forgotten that, as well as pursuing a career at court, Jonson had a material claim to belong to the international world of scholarship, and registered as a presence in what was gradually emerging as the republic of letters.

Now, the ideological co-ordinates of Bolton's Academy were not at all republican. On the contrary, Bolton would have appropriated his fellows' talents emphatically in the service of Jacobean kingship. He suggested that they should study not only 'antiquity' but 'honour', censor translations of foreign books, compile an expurgatory index of English books, and write an authorised British history to 'repress the ignorance and insolencies of Italian Polidores, Hollandish Meterans, [and] rhapsodical Gallo-Belgias'.³ Such a yoking of intellectual radicalism and political conservatism is perhaps to be expected from a historian who was closely attached to Buckingham, but it does bear on Jonson also, since a comparable ideological mix has come of late to seem distinctive and problematic about much of his poetry. A generation ago Jonson was safely regarded as a crusty moralist, and his poems were respected, if not exactly loved, for their apparently detached

dates from 1626; James's remarks are in a letter recommending an earlier version of the scheme to Prince Charles in June 1622 (cited by Caudill from Public Record Office [hereafter PRO] SP14/131/70).

² See D. Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 271.

³ Portal, 'The Academ Roial of King James I', p. 196.

reflections on the good life. But in recent years a series of seismic critical shifts has effectively foregrounded agendas in the poems that seem less moral than social.⁴ In literary studies, the so-called New Historicism has collapsed the gap between poet and society, denying Jonson the luxury of aesthetic distance. At the same time, a new historiography has redrawn our picture of early modern Whitehall, replacing that old decadent court, ripe for the cropping, with a more historically-informed account of the systems of favour and reward by which a kingly state conducted its business. In these frameworks, Jonson figures not so much as a detached observer of the social process as one aspirant among many competing for access to power, whose poems were strategic interventions in the ubiquitous and ongoing struggle for patronage.

Consequently, much recent criticism has become preoccupied with Jonson the place-seeker, and the pragmatic requirements of self-promotion which could be seen as driving his poetry. As Michael McCanles with some justice complains, Jonson is in danger of being turned into 'just the sort of figure he most abhorred, an envious and resentful sycophant'.⁵ One recent study, by Bruce Thomas Boehrer, has called him just that, James's 'chief metrical sycophant', a cravenly subservient absolutist who was 'dazzled by the magnificence of the big bourgeoisie' (meaning the Jacobean aristocracy).⁶ This view is self-evidently one-sided, but it echoes at a distance the far more subtle account by Jonathan Goldberg, for whom Jonson's poems align themselves so instinctively with the court that he should be taken as quite literally

⁴ These new perspectives on Jonson effectively begin with D. E. Wayne's essay 'Poetry and Power in Ben Jonson's *Epigrammes*: The Naming of "Facts" or the Figuring of Social Relations?', *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, 23 (1979), pp. 79–103, an account developed in Wayne's book, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place and the Poetics of History* (London, 1984). Other important contributions have been R. Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System* (Berkeley, 1983); J. Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore, 1983); S. Fish, 'Authors-readers: Jonson's Community of the Same' *Representations*, 7 (1984), pp. 26–58; D. Riggs, *Ben Jonson: a Life*; and R. C. Evans, *Ben Jonson and the Poetics of Patronage* (Lewisburg, 1989). I do not mean to imply that these promote an identical view of Jonson, only that they have all underlined the social politics latent in his poetry. The most distinguished extension of the earlier 'Old Historicist' view is perhaps E. Partridge, 'Jonson's *Epigrammes*: The Named and the Nameless', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 6 (1973), pp. 153–98.

⁵ M. McCanles, *Jonsonian Discriminations: The Humanist Poet and the Praise of True Nobility* (Toronto, 1992), p. vii.

⁶ B. T. Boehrer, 'Renaissance Overeating: The Sad Case of Ben Jonson', *Proceedings of the Modern Languages Association* [hereafter *PMLA*], 105 (1990), pp. 1076, 1078, 1081. There is a critique by G. Schmidgall in *PMLA*, 106 (1991), pp. 317–8.

the 'representative voice' of Jacobean absolutism.⁷ Goldberg emphasises the tensions that score Jonson's writing, but, in a crucial move, he argues that such tensions were produced by James's culture of absolutism, rather than being signs of any conflict with it. Jonson's obsessive oscillation between self-assertion and self-abasement was, he argues, a strategy required by the Machiavellian discourse of Jacobean power, which presented itself as relentlessly absorbing contradiction and containing subversion. And in Stanley Fish's meticulous and compelling analysis of the poems, Jonson's verse is seen as frankly psychological compensation for the rigours of place-seeking, the creation of an imaginary circle centred on the poet which betrays his actual anxiety about being excluded from power. Jonson writes as if he were self-authorising, transcending social obligations, but, says Fish, he proclaims that freedom 'in the very posture of supplication and dependence'.⁸

I shall not argue that Jonson's politics were anything other than monarchical: from any angle he was a devoted supporter of the Crown. But it seems to me that these now prevailing views are in danger of simply collapsing Jonson's politics into the systems of Jacobean patronage, and of overestimating the completeness with which those systems were integrated. These readings tend to assume that the seventeenth-century state was an unchanging monolith, and to deny the possibility of unresolved ideological conflicts amongst Jonson's patrons. With Whitehall presented as a closed and enveloping economy, all dissent from Jacobean norms is folded back within the structures of power, and all resistance always-already contained. But if some literary critics have denied that the court had any margin for dissent, political historians have often emphasised that Stuart England was only an imperfect absolutism, and that the early modern state was relatively heterogeneous.⁹ English monarchs always lacked money and bureaucracy, and governed through the co-operation of unsalaried officials, many of whom held their own views about the obligations of kingship. James's court may have seemed to resemble its continental counterparts, but he was obliged to rule by comparatively consensual methods, and make concessions to the fiction that sovereignty lay with the king-in-parliament:

⁷ Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature*, p. 230 (and see generally pp. 219–20).

⁸ Fish, 'Authors-readers: Jonson's Community of the Same', pp. 56–7.

⁹ This case can be traced in much historiography, but has been argued most recently by D. L. Smith in *Constitutional Royalism and the Search for Settlement, c.1640–1649* (Cambridge, 1994).

his speeches oscillated between divine right conceptions of monarchy and reassurances that his discretion would always be exercised according to law. In this differently inflected court context, I want to suggest that Jonson's poetry did not merely recirculate a totalising absolutism but sought to manage and shape the heterogeneous forms of Jacobean power. In identifying itself with James's monarchy his verse had also to negotiate the potential faultlines of Stuart kingship, the structural tensions by which the supposedly unified Jacobean state was in fact vexed.

The ideological premise of all Jonson's poetry is the centrality of the monarch to the state: his remarks in the notebook *Discoveries* consistently describe government in autocratic terms. In his most famous formulation (borrowed from the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives), Jonson represents the prince as ideally counselled by a few men of proven intellectual worth: 'Learning needs rest: sovereignty gives it. Sovereignty needs counsel: learning affords it. There is such a con-sociation of offices, between the prince, and whom his favour breeds, that they may help to sustain his power, as he their knowledge'.¹⁰ This mutually supportive symbiosis between knowledge and power, learning and sovereignty envisages a special place at the prince's side for men like Jonson's friends Selden and Cotton, and allows correspondingly small place for wider consultation: *Discoveries* is very negative about popular assemblies, saying that they give monarchs unreliable advice, for parliamentary suffrages go by number rather than by weight.¹¹ The problem with this system is the absence of restraints on monarchs who won't take advice, and *Discoveries* dwells on the circumspection needful in addressing princes, the 'modesty' and 'respect' counsellors have to use. Since princes will not 'suffer themselves to be taught, or reprehended', Jonson writes, it is best not to address them insolently,

¹⁰ *Ben Jonson* (eds C. H. Herford, P. Simpson and E. Simpson, 11 vols, Oxford, 1925–52), 8, p. 565. All subsequent quotations from Jonson refer to this edition. However, I have modernised the spelling, and in punctuating the poems I have followed Ian Donaldson's excellent Oxford Standard Authors edition (1975).

¹¹ *Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 579 (ll.508–12). Jonson's source for this sentiment is Pliny. It might be added that Jonson's only poem addressed to a parliament (Epigram 24) implies a strictly top-down view of its responsibility: parliament's duty is to make good laws by which men's vile manners can be restrained. Compare also *The Underwood* 64, which reflects on the 1629 Parliament.

but as if they 'were already furnished with the parts [they] should have'.¹² Clearly, this is a recipe for evasion — by sugar-coating advice with praise it could all too easily become subservience — and Jonson returns to the problem in his poems 'To John Selden' (*Underwood* 14) and 'To my Muse' (Epigram 65), arguing that when he lavished praise on unworthy objects 'twas with purpose to have made them such'.¹³ Although this acknowledges the problem, it is hard to feel that it really solves it. Still, if Jonson's alternative to princely rule is an anarchy of democratic individualism, pragmatism is his price worth paying, and he does represent the monarch as ethically bound, required to be a father rather than a tyrant. As *Discoveries* notes, 'A good king is a public servant'.¹⁴

Jonson was not enthusiastic about all monarchs alike, and his image of a strong sovereign listening attentively to respectful but responsible intellectuals did not readily translate into the terms of Elizabethan courtiership. He failed to achieve much laureate status in Elizabeth's reign, and his difficulties in finding an appropriate formula for addressing the Queen can be seen in the lyric that represents his only significant poetic contribution to the cult of her sovereignty, the celebrated hymn 'Queen and Huntress' from *Cynthia's Revels* (1600–1):¹⁵

Queen and huntress, chaste and fair,
 Now the sun is laid to sleep,
 Seated in thy silver chair,
 State in wonted manner keep:
 Hesperus entreats thy light,
 Goddess excellently bright.

Earth, let not thy envious shade
 Dare itself to interpose;
 Cynthia's shining orb was made
 Heaven to clear, when day did close:
 Bless us then with wished sight,
 Goddess excellently bright.

Lay thy bow of pearl apart,
 And thy crystal-shining quiver;
 Give unto the flying hart
 Space to breathe, how short soever:

¹² *Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 566.

¹³ 'An Epistle to Master John Selden' (*The Underwood*, 14), l.22 (*Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 159); and compare Epigram 65 (*Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 48).

¹⁴ *Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 601.

¹⁵ *Ben Jonson*, 4, p. 161.

Thou that mak'st a day of night,
Goddess excellently bright.

This hymn is often read as if it were the culminating instance of late-Elizabethan poetic compliment, and it does indeed represent Cynthia as a transcendent deity, serenely transmitting her visionary light to a benighted lower world. Yet while being a panegyric culmination, the poem manipulates the image of the goddess in directions which are significantly more this-worldly. Unlike other versions of the Elizabethan cult in which Elizabeth is depicted as unapproachable and aloof—for example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which alludes to her as a remote and inscrutable vestal, or Chapman's hymns, which make Cynthia into an esoteric and occult deity¹⁶—'Queen and Huntress' invests Jonson's goddess with more actively political expectations. His Cynthia is luminous, but her light is expected to purge and clarify, and as a huntress she is contingently engaged in that pursuit of vice towards which the hymn delicately marshals her.¹⁷

The tensions underlying Jonson's lyric may be registered by considering its structural function in *Cynthia's Revels* as a whole. In the play, 'Queen and Huntress' is sung at the beginning of Act V, and signals the moment of transition between brazen world and golden. Acts I to IV exhibit Cynthia's courtiers in various postures of extravagantly self-regarding folly, but with the goddess's arrival they are exposed, censured and punished, a purgation achieved by the goddess and her wise poet, Criticus, working hand in hand.¹⁸ The hymn therefore not only welcomes Cynthia but predicts the reformation of courtly folly which she will undertake, and ties the discovery of her excellence to the irresistible cleansing which that disclosure brings about. Shifting the play into a higher aesthetic and political gear, it harks forward to the

¹⁶ There is a recent taxonomy of lunar imagery as applied to Queen Elizabeth in H. Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Houndmills, 1995), pp. 174–97.

¹⁷ There is a direct link with the end of *Time Vindicated* (1623), which praises James's hunting in similar emblematic terms: 'Man should not hunt Mankind to death, / But strike the enemies of man; / Kill vices if you can, / They are your wildest beasts. / And when they thickest fall, you make the gods true feasts' (*Ben Jonson*, 7, p. 673).

¹⁸ For a rather different reading, arguing for a more sceptical attitude to Criticus's authority, see J. Loewenstein, *Responsive Readings: Versions of Echo in Pastoral, Epic, and the Jonsonian Masque* (New Haven, 1984), pp. 87–8. I should add that in using the name Criticus, and in describing the positioning of the hymn, I am following the 1601 Quarto which (contrary to the views of E. K. Chambers and the Oxford editors) I believe represents the play as it was performed in 1600/01.

Jacobean masques, with their parallel moments of moral and political epiphany. Nonetheless, since the hymn both announces Cynthia and partially prescribes the reformation which is expected of her, it is positioned uneasily somewhere between an invocation and an admonition; and elsewhere in the play *Criticus* is presented as vulnerable to the scorn of her ignorant but conceited attendants, and badly in need of her protection. Subsequently Jonson never returned to any comparable adulation of Elizabeth, and the attitude that by 1603 he had towards the counsels prevailing at Whitehall may be gauged from the *Particular Entertainment . . . at Althorpe*, the show he wrote to welcome Queen Anne to England. In this, the Fairy Queen, with her charming but rather trivial elves, greets Anne and symbolically abdicates to her, while a satyr pokes fun at the fairies and warns that today's courtiers are going to need more than dancing skills to earn their promotion. James's attendants, says the satyr,

can neither bribe a grace,
Nor encounter my lord's face
With a pliant smile, and flatter,
Though this lately were some matter
To the making of a courtier.¹⁹

Evidently Jonson expected James to be much less susceptible than Elizabeth had been to the blandishments of charming young men.

At the Jacobean court, Jonson achieved a much securer place. For all James's lack of charisma, his paternalism, pacificism and serious intellectual pretensions made him just the kind of monarch to appeal to Jonson, and Jonson's subsequent poetry is, I believe, entirely without nostalgia for Elizabeth. In a magisterial study, Anne Barton has argued that Jonson's career developed into a gradual 'harking-back to Elizabeth', in which the literary legacy of the previous reign became increasingly important to the work of the Stuart poet.²⁰ My feeling, though, is that however sympathetically Jonson reassessed Elizabethan literature, his recollection of Elizabeth's politics was altogether more disenchanted, and that his contributions to James's political culture took a quite radical attitude to the new monarchy. Unlike other poets who responded to the accession by seeking out continuities with the past, Jonson always represented James's arrival as a total break, an upheaval which freed the future from the dead hand of recent history. In the

¹⁹ *Ben Jonson*, 7, p. 126–7.

²⁰ A. Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge, 1984).

speeches which he wrote in 1604 for James's formal entry into London, he hailed him as an Augustus bringing a Golden Age to a State weary of war, injustice and female government, whose inauguration was legitimated not by lines of dynastic continuity but by his miraculous re-embodiment of a lost imperial ideal. No less radical were the court festivals which Jonson wrote over the next twenty years. His masques repeatedly situated James as a strong, peaceful and masculine ruler, who instantaneously brought order out of disorder and changed darkness into light, and their eulogies were reinforced by constant reference to the change of old England into new Britain. Unlike many contemporaries, for whom the new name was a source of anxiety, Jonson made it a symbolic centrepiece, the most visible sign of the transformed, king-centred State.²¹ His panegyric identified itself wholeheartedly with the Stuart revolution, presenting James as a strong but moderate and responsible ruler who would ensure peace and stability, and protect the State against fanaticism and anarchy.

The affinity between poet and king is well seen in what is perhaps Jonson's most considerable political poem, the 'Panegyre' of 1604.²² Written for the opening of James's first Parliament, it describes the monarch's passage to Westminster Hall and the acclamations that he receives from the people as he passes through the city:

Upon his face all threw their covetous eyes,
 As on a wonder: some amazed stood,
 As if they felt, but had not known their good;
 Others would fain have shown it in their words,
 But when their speech so poor a help affords
 Unto their zeal's expression, they are mute
 And only with red silence him salute.
 Some cry from tops of houses, thinking noise
 The fittest herald to proclaim true joys;
 Others on ground run gazing by his side,
 All as unwearied as unsatisfied;
 And every window grieved it could not move
 Along with him, and the same trouble prove. (ll.34–46)

²¹ I argue this case fully in the essay 'The Stuart Masque and the Invention of Britain', in *The Stuart Court and Europe*, ed. R. Malcolm Smuts (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 65–85.

²² *Ben Jonson*, 7, pp. 113–7. Surprisingly, given its importance, the 'Panegyre' has been very little discussed. There are useful accounts by Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature*, pp. 120–3, and Jean Le Drew Metcalfe, 'Subjecting the King: Ben Jonson's praise of James I', *English Studies in Canada*, 17 (1991), 135–49.

But while shouts fill the streets, the real action in the poem is going on elsewhere, since James is represented as communing privately with Themis, the Homeric goddess of Divine Law, who whispers into his ear all the 'knowing arts' (l.128) he needs for kingship. By emphasising the gap between the people's disorderly enthusiasm and James's secret inner calm, the 'Panegyre' shifts attention away from the public event that it is commemorating, and for all that it celebrates James's first parliamentary consultation it projects a scepticism about popular politics which is very reminiscent of that in *Discoveries*. The people are depicted as grateful but undisciplined, and with Themis at his side James seems not so much advised as inspired. The poem's material politics happen neither in the assembly towards which the monarch travels, nor in the ceremonial's 'vain stirs' (l.75) which Themis tells him to ignore, but in the conversation taking place privately inside the royal breast.

A world of difference separates Jonson's 'Panegyre' from similar poems written for James around this time, such as Samuel Daniel's 'Panegyric Congratulatory' on the accession, presented to him the previous spring during his journey south. Daniel's panegyric welcomes James warmly, but it takes the poet's obligation to counsel the monarch with tedious literalness, and subjects him to a laborious lecture on the Daniellian vision of government. By contrast, Jonson's 'Panegyre' represents James as needing no such warnings, since he has already effortlessly internalised the necessary statecraft. Particularly, Themis's words instruct him in the needful distinctions between good laws and bad, telling him which of his predecessors' statutes he should awaken or let sleep:

She showed him who made wise, who honest acts,
 Who both, who neither: all the cunning tracts
 And thriving statutes she could promptly note;
 The bloody, base, and barbarous she did quote;
 Where laws were made to serve the tyran' will,
 Where sleeping they could save, and waking kill . . . (ll.95-100)

Themis thereby foregrounds the statutory basis of Jacobean absolutism, but also identifies James as the law's interpreter, the voice of equity: the safeguards of good government are presented as lying not in the checks and balances of imperfect representative institutions but in the monarch's self-regulation and prior assurance as to what justice is. And the poem creates a special place in James's counsels for Jonson himself, since he has privileged access to the royal mind and only he and James

can hear Themis's voice. The point is driven home in the epigraph, '*Solus rex et poeta non quotannis nascitur*', a favourite quotation from the Roman historian Florus: '[new consuls are made annually,] only kings and poets are not born every year'.²³ This maxim places poets and kings into their own special category, set politically apart by virtue of an authority that is never dependent on re-election. With poetry empowering monarchy and empowered by it, with kings and poets ranged together against vulgar democracy, the 'Panegyre' promotes a very close alignment between Jonson and James, if not a virtual identity.

Against this framework, we can begin to explore the politics of the better-known collections of poems published in 1616 as *The Epigrams* and *The Forest*. These have sometimes been read as anti-court gatherings. With their depiction of the good as a tiny élite almost overwhelmed by a tide of vice, their praise of withdrawal to the country, and their insistence that goodness and greatness rarely co-ordinate with one another, they seem far removed from the celebratory attitudes of Jonson's more public panegyric. Indeed, in his epistle to Lady Aubigny, Jonson warns 'I am at feud / With sin and vice, though with a throne endued' (*The Forest* 13.9–10).²⁴ Yet by and large these poems hold back from finding much vice in James's throne. *The Epigrams* situate James as the one figure in the collection who is entirely exempt from criticism—the poem 'To the Ghost of Martial' declares that whereas Martial flattered his prince, Jonson's 'cannot flattered be' (Epigram 36.4)²⁵—and they underline his centrality by excluding any poems to his wife or children, thereby situating him squarely above the collection as a whole.²⁶ While James cannot make his people be good, the *Epigrams* need his presence in order to offset potential disturbers of the peace. His implied antagonists are the conspiracy theorists of 'The New Cry' (Epigram 92), who discuss state-affairs in ignorance of their real

²³ This maxim is also quoted or alluded to in Epigrams 4.1, and 79.1; *Every Man in his Humour*, V. v. 38–9; *The New Inn*, epilogue 23–4; and *Discoveries*, 2432–4.

²⁴ *Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 116.

²⁵ *Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 38.

²⁶ It is worth noticing that this remark holds good for the organisation of the Folio as a whole, even in respect of the masques which the Folio headings and title pages acknowledge were written for other members of the royal family. For example, although the *Masque of Queens* carried a dedication to Prince Henry in the quarto and to Queen Anne in the holograph, both of these were omitted when it was reprinted in 1616.

meaning, and the pompous Captain Hungry (Epigram 107), whose table-talk is a farrago of nonsensical foreign news: careless opinion-formers who in James's absence would destabilise society. As the collection unfolds, so other figures who are freighted with moral authority are drawn in, but Jonson assumes a stable and centralised kingly authority as his point of political departure and he implicitly parallels James's political supremacy with the author's poetic supremacy in his own literary community. When in Epigram 4, Jonson describes his Muse as flying 'to the best / Of Kings for grace, of poets for my test',²⁷ he imagines James stamping his verses as current, much as in the 'Tribe of Ben' epistle he sets his own seal on members of his poetic circle.

But if Jonson elevates the throne, by doing so he clears a space for significant political contrasts lower down. Stanley Fish points out that Jonson's good men all end up sounding alike, and certainly there's a considerable similarity about them,²⁸ but if we analyse who the people were that Jonson foregrounds, it is striking how much his élite is calibrated so as to avoid seeming directly to reproduce Whitehall's hierarchies. Noticeably, there are no epigrams to the favourites, Montgomery, Hay, and Somerset, and of James's closest advisors, only one poem goes to Suffolk and none at all to Northampton.²⁹ The chief minister, Salisbury, has three epigrams, but these are followed by the poem complaining that a lord whom Jonson had praised turned out to be worthless, the juxtaposition strongly insinuating that the understanding reader should not take Salisbury's portrayal simply at face value.³⁰ By contrast, poems bulk large to men whose relationship with the centre

²⁷ Epigram 4.9–10 (*Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 28).

²⁸ Fish, 'Authors-readers: Jonson's Community of the Same', pp. 38–9, 45–8.

²⁹ According to Drummond, Northampton was responsible for Jonson's prosecution over *Sejanus* and Jonson regarded him as an enemy (*Ben Jonson*, 1, p. 141). Jonson did write one poem to Somerset (*Ungathered Verse*, 18), but suppressed it after the 1615 scandal. Jonson was to write an entertainment for Lord Hay in 1617 (*Lovers Made Men*), but he was responsible neither for the masque for Hay's wedding (1607) nor for Hay's Essex House masque of January 1621 (recently rediscovered by Tim Raylor and forthcoming in *English Manuscript Studies*).

³⁰ On this evident structural irony, see R. Wiltenburg, '“What need hast thou of me? or of my Muse?”: Jonson and Cecil, Politician and Poet', in *“The Muses Common-Weale”*: *Poetry and Politics in the Seventeenth Century*, eds C. J. Summers and T.-L. Peabworth (Columbia, Mo., 1988), pp. 34–47. Jonson expressed a very negative view of Salisbury in his conversations with Drummond (*Ben Jonson*, 1, p. 141). On the general circulation of hostile representations of Salisbury, see P. Croft, 'The Reputation of Robert Cecil: Libels, Political Opinion and Popular Awareness in the Early Seventeenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 1 (1991), 43–69.

was conflicted, or who, when the *Epigrams* were collected (probably in 1612),³¹ stood only at the edges of power.³² Quite a few epigrams are addressed to survivors of the circle of the disgraced Earl of Essex. Although restored to favour by James, the Essexians lacked real influence, and while not sharing their forward politics, Jonson did appreciate their Tacitean view of the state. One of these men, Sir Henry Neville (Epigram 109), led the attempt to manage the 1614 Parliament.³³ Another ambitious place-seeker was Sir Thomas Overbury (Epigram 113), his name made prominent in the Folio after his murder by Frances Howard.³⁴ The poem to the Earl of Pembroke (Epigram 102) has a conspicuous place, and he was a more entrenched figure, who was in James's favour from the outset. Still, he did not reach the Privy Council until 1611, and he was from early on perceived as no ready ally to the conservative ruling group, his dealings with the Howards being distinctly antagonistic.³⁵ And in both *The Epigrams* and *The Forest* special

³¹ The question of the date at which Jonson made the collections is discussed in the appendix to this lecture.

³² My argument here runs close to that of B. Worden's essay 'Ben Jonson Among the Historians', in *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, eds K. Sharpe and P. Lake (Houndmills, 1994), p. 87.

³³ On Neville, see P. W. Hasler, *The House of Commons 1558–1603* (3 vols, London, 1981), 3, pp. 122–3; C. Roberts, *Schemes and Undertakings* (Columbus, Oh., 1985); and A. Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines* (New Haven, 1993), pp. 182, 199–200. Other former Essexians in *The Epigrams* and *The Forest* include Sir Robert Sidney and (via three poems addressed to his wife) the Earl of Rutland; Lord Monteagle (who had been imprisoned and fined in 1601, but had come into high favour through his discovery of the Gunpowder Plot); the friends 'Shelton' and 'Heydon' who are named in 'The Famous Voyage' (Epigram 133; discussed in my as yet unpublished essay 'Jonson's Brave Wights'); and some of the military men such as Sir John Roe, Sir John Radcliffe, Sir Henry Goodyere and Sir Henry Cary, who also emanated from the Essex network (though Roe was not in fact one of Essex's knights, and Goodyere was from 1603 a Gentleman of the Privy Chamber). Sir Henry Savile (Epigram 95) had also found himself under question after the Essex affair. As the references to Essex in *Cynthia's Revels* suggest, Jonson's attitude to the Essex group was far from simple. For some general commentary, see *Poetaster*, ed. T. G. S. Cain (Manchester, 1995), pp. 40–7; and J. H. M. Salmon, 'Seneca and Tacitus in Jacobean England', in *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, ed. L. L. Peck (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 169–88. For James's treatment of the Essexians, see N. Cuddy, 'The Revival of the Entourage: the Bedchamber of James I, 1603–1625', in *The English Court: From the Wars of the Roses to the English Civil War*, ed. D. Starkey (London, 1987), pp. 173–225, and 'Anglo-Scottish Union and the Court of James I, 1603–1625', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 39 (1989), 107–24.

³⁴ The most illuminating discussion of the Overbury affair is D. Lindley, *The Trials of Frances Howard* (London, 1994).

³⁵ Pembroke quarrelled with Somerset over the Mastership of the Horse in 1612, was reconciled by Neville, then decisively fell out again in 1614; he was a leader of the anti-

place is given to the Sidneys, a dynasty eclipsed at court by the Howard revival. Although Sir Robert Sidney was Anne's chamberlain and spent lavishly at Whitehall, he too had been involved with Essex, and access to the higher offices he wanted was blocked by Northampton. His notebooks, with their sombre thoughts on liberty and sovereignty, suggest that his views were coloured by aristocratic anxieties inherited from his dead brother Philip. His career passed off quietly, but the family legacy was played out in later generations. In the 1640s his son withdrew from public life rather than choose between parliament and king, and two of his grandsons sat on Cromwell's Council of State. One of these, Algernon, was executed in 1683 for republican conspiracy.³⁶

By the time the Folio reached print, the scandals which brought down Somerset had drastically altered the face of the court, and in dedicating the *Epigrams* and *Catiline* to Pembroke Jonson proudly drew attention to his new appointment as Chamberlain (which almost certainly happened while the volume was in the press).³⁷ But the Folio's ideological alignment with Whitehall might have seemed more indirect had its publication not been overtaken by these events. For example, the 1611 quarto of *Catiline* had coupled Pembroke's dedication with an address to 'the reader extraordinary', describing such a reader as 'the better man, though places in court go otherwise': in 1616 this was tactfully dropped.³⁸ Of course, praise and blame for individual courtiers did not in itself call the system into question, and Jonson's favoured

Somerset cabal promoting the new favourite Villiers in 1614–15. See PRO SP14/70, fo. 46; T. Birch, *The Court and Times of James I* (2 vols, London, 1849), 2: 210; Historical Manuscripts Commission Report 45 (Buccleuch MSS), 1: 131; 60 (Mar and Kellie), supplement, p. 51; and Brian O'Farrell, *Politician, Patron, Poet: William Herbert, Third Earl of Pembroke 1580–1630*, Ph.D. thesis (UCLA 1966). Another Pembroke connection in the *Epigrams* is his close parliamentary ally Sir Benjamin Rudyerd (Epigram 121).

³⁶ There are full accounts by B. Worden, 'Classical Republicanism and the Puritan Revolution', in *History and Imagination*, eds H. Lloyd-Jones, V. Pearl and B. Worden (London, 1981), pp. 185–7; M. V. Hay, *The Life of Robert Sidney, Earl of Leicester (1563–1626)* (Washington, D.C., 1984); and J. Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the English Republic, 1623–1677* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 55–8. Northampton's enmity to Robert Sidney continued beyond the grave, since at his death (in 1614) he commanded that none of the offices which he left behind should be allowed to fall into Sidney's hands. I should like to acknowledge how much conversations with the late Margot Heinemann have shaped my thinking about Jonson and the Sidneys.

³⁷ See M. Butler, 'Jonson's Folio and the Politics of Patronage', *Criticism*, 35 (1993), 379–81.

³⁸ *Ben Jonson*, 5, p. 432.

friends were not at all a courtly 'opposition' but men who participated fully in court life and were eager for office.³⁹ Although Jonson praises Pembroke for keeping 'one true posture, though beseiged with ill / Of what ambition, faction, pride can raise' (Epigram 102.14–15),⁴⁰ Pembroke was actually far more involved in the pursuit of power than the poem about him acknowledged. Equally, the satirical epigrams on bad courtiers such as Court-Worm and My Lord Ignorant do not signal an attack on Whitehall as such but are a device brought into being by Jonson's strategies of conditional praise. Reproducing a manoeuvre made familiar in the masques, in which heroes are legitimated through the delegitimation of opposing figures in the antimasques, the Epigrams display their bad examples in order that the excellence of good courtiers like Pembroke can be established. Not so much satirising the court as recalling it to a standard of value to which it ought constantly to aspire, they imagine a world of 'strife'⁴¹ and incorrigibly vicious courtiers so that the better few, when in the Epigrams they eventually arrive, may be marked out as different.

Nonetheless, by embodying this value in 'outs' as well as 'ins', Jonson imagines a code of obligation which cuts against the unregulated pursuit of courtly reward, and implies an ideal economy in which aristocrats ought to act as responsible servants to the Crown's political needs. If the main political danger in the Epigrams is excessive democracy, the second is excessive aristocratic self-will, and the anti-social attitudes which that creates. The embodiment of this tendency is Don Surly, in Epigram 28:⁴²

Don Surly, to aspire the glorious name
 Of a great man, and to be thought the same,
 Makes serious use of all great trade he knows.
 He speaks to men with a rhinocerote's nose,
 Which he thinks great; and so reads verses, too;
 And that is done as he saw great men do.
 He has tympanies of business in his face,
 And can forget men's names with a great grace.
 He will both argue and discourse in oaths,

³⁹ This point is strongly made by D. Norbrook in *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London, 1984), pp. 184–5. Although I am trying to effect some modifications to Norbrook's case, it will be readily seen that the whole of this lecture is immensely indebted to his brilliant discussion.

⁴⁰ *Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 66.

⁴¹ Epigram 102, 1.5 (*Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 66).

⁴² *Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 35–6.

Both which are great; and laugh at ill-made clothes —
 That's greater yet — to cry his own up neat.
 He doth, at meals, alone, his pheasant eat,
 Which is main greatness. And at his still board
 He drinks to no man; that's too, like a lord.
 He keeps another's wife, which is a spice
 Of solemn greatness. And he dares at dice
 Blaspheme God, greatly; or some poor hind beat
 That breathes in his dog's way; and this is great.
 Nay more, for greatness' sake, he will be one
 May hear my epigrams, but like of none.
 Surly, use other arts; these only can
 Style thee a most great fool, but no great man.

It's not entirely clear whether Surly is a bad aristocrat or a would-be aristocrat emulating what he thinks is proper carriage. Either way, he reduces greatness to merely externalised markers, a puppet-like behaviourism of manners and dress. Jonson's special scorn is reserved for Surly's pompousness and the contempt with which he treats others. Mistakenly supposing that isolation sets off greatness, Surly lives a life that is profoundly solipsistic, and he is condemned by this most convivial of poets to the ultimate Jonsonian hell, dining on his own. By contrast, Epigram 101, 'Inviting a Friend to Supper', promises a feast the collegiality of which overrides barriers of social distinction. The opening lines of Jonson's invitation draw attention to the difference in 'gravity' between host and guest — 'Tonight, grave sir, both my poor house and I / Do equally desire your company' (ll.1–2)⁴³ — but by the end every mark of social difference has been left behind in the 'liberty' (1.42) which all Jonson's worthy friends will enjoy alike. Inevitably this liberty is not open to all, as is shown by the further contrast with Captain Hungry in Epigram 107. Jonson feeds Hungry but refuses him any social condescension, and evidently he would not have been welcome at the other supper. Still, if plebeian trouble-makers are denied admission, so too are self-aggrandising figures like Don Surly. Jonson expects that good aristocrats will be properly communicative to deserving men such as himself.

The poem which most elaborately develops this ideal political economy is 'To Penshurst' (*The Forest* 2), with its exemplary images

⁴³ *Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 64. The Oxford editors interpreted this epigram's implied addressee to be some such 'grave sir' as Camden (*Ben Jonson*, 11, p. 20), but the poem is eloquently interpreted as an argument about social difference by T. M. Greene in *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (1982), pp. 278–82.

of the King favouring the Sidney family, and the Sidneys fulfilling their social function as bridges between the monarch and the wider community. This poem is sometimes read as implicit advice to the Sidneys to keep a low profile and avoid excess spending, as at the time of writing the family finances were indeed being badly eroded by the need to follow the court.⁴⁴ But this interpretation somewhat misses the mark, since although 'To Penshurst' praises the country life, it is not exactly against the court, nor even is it against spending as such. Rather, it praises the generous hospitality maintained by the Sidneys at Penshurst and associates it with qualities of sociability and altruism, whereas the blame for bad spending is laid at the door of aristocrats whose consumption lacks equivalent social motive. Although Jonson's language avoids scoring specific points, it must have been hard for contemporaries not to make some passing connections between his poem's dispraise of selfish aristocratic display and the reputation that had come to be attached to the Earl of Salisbury. If, as seems likely, the poem was written in the summer of 1612,⁴⁵ it came immediately in the wake of Salisbury's death, and it contains at least one submerged allusion to him: its remark that at Penshurst guests eat the same food as their host, unlike tables where the guests sit with the lord 'yet dine away' (l.66), echoes a complaint which Jonson later (and of course privately) made to William Drummond about his own experience of Salisbury's defective hospitality.⁴⁶ Further, the mention of Penshurst's household gods (l.79) harks back to the show that Jonson had written when Salisbury's palace at Theobalds was given to the King, the scene for which depicted the household gods at Theobalds.⁴⁷ Although the architectural contrast between Penshurst and other estates 'built to envious show' (l.1) fitted any number of Jacobean prodigy houses, Salisbury had more than any other official invested his gains in astonishing mansions, what Lawrence Stone has called a 'fantastic orgy of building' in London and the provinces, culminating in the £40,000 he lavished on Hatfield House before his death.⁴⁸ As Treasurer, Master of the Court of Wards and

⁴⁴ The seminal account is J. Rathmell's essay 'Jonson, Lord Lisle, and Penshurst', *English Literary Renaissance*, 1 (1971), 250–60.

⁴⁵ The reference to Prince Henry in l.77 puts the poem before November 1612 (when Henry died), and John Rathmell suggests that the 'walls . . . of the country stone' (l.45) allude to the estate building being undertaken from May 1612. Salisbury died on 12 May 1612.

⁴⁶ *Ben Jonson*, 1, p. 141.

⁴⁷ *Ben Jonson*, 7, p. 155.

⁴⁸ L. Stone, *Family and Fortune: Studies in Aristocratic Finance in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Oxford, 1973), p. 32; and see, generally, pp. 31–2, 62–113.

Secretary of State, he had been in a position to exploit three offices that offered unrivalled opportunities for profit, and lived in a style that manifested it. Against such prodigious spending-power, the Sidneys were small beer indeed.

The project of 'To Penshurst' is to find values in the Sidney lifestyle which offer a more productive model than this for the relationship between aristocrats, the monarch and the realm. The Sidneys are presented as stewards of their domain, landlords whose ownership is justified by the life of exemplary discipline which they lead. They are neither self-aggrandising courtiers nor an oppositional 'country' party, but channels of influence between centre and periphery, who instill into their locality attitudes of obligation which render it tractable to Stuart power. A great deal of ink has been spilled accusing Jonson of mystifying social relations at Penshurst, as if the poem somehow sought to conceal the structures of power which, notwithstanding, it quite conspicuously describes.⁴⁹ But on the contrary, 'To Penshurst' overtly represents the estate as existing for the Sidneys' benevolent exploitation — its produce is shown as being cultivated in order that it may be eaten — and the structure of its second half pointedly underlines the importance of hierarchy in Sidney affairs. The visitors who are described as coming to the Penshurst estate pass through the poem in order of rank, from the local farmers, then guests from further afield, then the King himself, while the poet is welcomed like a veritable monarch, who eats Penshurst's food 'As if thou then wert mine, or I reigned here' (l.74). Penshurst is neither a status-free Utopia nor an oppositional counter-community set against the court, but a perfect court in the country, a reproduction in little of what the good state ought to be.

In Jonson's depiction, then, the Sidneys appear admirable because of the absorption of their aristocratic individualism into the corporate structures of a smoothly-functioning estate. At Penshurst, everything has purpose within the controlling hierarchies — even the walks are 'for health as well as sport' (l.9) — and the estate is bound into a corporate deference fostered by the family's aristocratic bearing, the 'mysteries of manners, arms and arts' (l.98) which they embody. Down in the pastures the lower land 'bends' (l.22) deferentially to the centre, while

⁴⁹ On this topic, see the important series of discussions by A. Fowler: *Conceitful Thought* (Edinburgh, 1975); 'Country House Poems: The Politics of a Genre', *The Seventeenth Century*, 1 (1986), pp. 1–14; *The Country House Poem* (Edinburgh, 1994).

at table the waiter serves without anxiety, knowing the reserves of food that lie below (ll.67–70). The passage depicting the estate's creatures offering themselves as produce is a playful exaggeration of just such service:

The painted partridge lies in every field,
 And for thy mess is willing to be killed.
 And if the high-swoll'n Medway fail thy dish,
 Thou hast thy ponds that pay thee tribute fish:
 Fat, aged carps, that run into thy net;
 And pikes, now weary their own kind to eat,
 As loath the second draught or cast to stay,
 Officiously, at first, themselves betray;
 Bright eels, that emulate them, and leap on land
 Before the fisher, or into his hand. (ll.29–38)

The creatures are presented as not only sacrificing themselves but doing so eagerly, competing for the honour of being the lord's most devoted servant. Jonson's hyperbole suggests that there are circumstances in which such subordination is not entirely admirable: his politicised language — 'tribute', 'officiously', 'emulate' — implies a reflection on power relations beyond Penshurst, the competitiveness and self-promoting servility that service is seen to be under less altruistic masters. By comparison, relations with the tenants are dignified and reciprocal. Unlike the clientage system at Whitehall, where gifts are the currency of favour and business only gets done through bribes, the tenants at Penshurst bring offerings to their landlords even when 'they have no suit' (l.50). And by addressing the poem directly to Penshurst, and only indirectly to its owner, Jonson makes it sound as though everything is done for a corporate ethos, the pronouns implying that the estate itself is the object of all this goodwill. The Sidneys seem less owners than deputies, servants to the royal master who arrives at the poem's culmination, their good stewardship channelling his authority outwards to the realm at large. Whereas grand palaces (like Hatfield?) make power 'grudged at', Penshurst exemplifies a harmony of purpose between monarch, deputy and realm, and consequently is 'reverenced the while' (l.6).

When in the 1616 Folio Jonson reprinted *Cynthia's Revels*, with its satire on late-Elizabethan Whitehall, he substantially revised it so as to

underline the now-closer relationship between poet and monarch, and added a dedication to the court under James, contrasting the present courtiers with those of the last reign, and warning them that they had to be a mirror for the whole kingdom: to this he signed himself off, politely but provocatively, as 'thy servant, but not slave'.⁵⁰ I am suggesting that the political relationships between king, poet and court implied in the 1616 dedication for *Cynthia's Revels* were being worked out across *The Epigrams* and *The Forest* as a whole. On one side, Jonson seems to assume the need for a strong and centralised monarchy: he presents James's rule as autocratic yet just, imperious yet still responsible. On the other side, James's aristocracy is praised insofar as it fulfils this king-centred ideal, and dispraised for failures of pride, selfish ostentation and vain pursuit of title: while the Sidneys' relations with the centre may have been more vexed than the poems addressed to them admit, Jonson fashions the family into idealised public servants who are both instrumental and exemplary to the Jacobean state. And although the King is only passingly invoked in the two collections themselves, the positioning of the poems within the whole Folio volume reinforces their mediatory function in Jonson's encompassing poetic kingdom. The Folio situates the poems as a bridge between the satirical drama written for the stage and the political ceremonials staged for Jacobean Christmas festivities, so that they act as preludes to Jonson's public and more elaborately ritualised representations of James as the founder of a new British monarchy. Not only do the masques enunciate the themes of union, peace and stability which as political context the poems require, they give consolidated expression to an aesthetic economy built on a sustained and reciprocal alliance between poetry and power.

In 1616 Jonson's public poetry might have been seen as closely aligned with the ideological co-ordinates of Jacobean monarchy, and serviceable to its political needs. Yet during the two remaining decades of the poet's life, the political economy of Stuart Britain was to come under intense pressure, with significant consequences for the practice of Jonsonian panegyric. James's rule was premised on the maintenance of a broad ideological consensus and on the overriding value of peace, but after 1620 the crisis which rapidly developed on the Continent threatened to overwhelm his eirenic commitments, and he kept out of the escalating European war only at the cost of polarising opinion at home. In 1625, Charles did take England into war, but the administrative

⁵⁰ *Ben Jonson*, 4, p. 33.

traumas which resulted nearly wrecked his rule at the outset, and the decade ended with deadlock between Crown and Parliament and a legacy of anxiety about the arbitrary tendencies of Caroline kingship. The consequences for Jonson can be simply described. He continued to act as court panegyrist, writing masques which propounded the desirability of peace and vigorously praised the wisdom of James's cautious diplomacy and far-seeing sovereign authority. Yet during the 1620s a series of his friends and associates appeared on the opposite side of the emerging rift with the Crown. Pembroke functioned increasingly as Buckingham's main political rival from within Whitehall; Selden was twice imprisoned following his repeated participation in parliamentary attacks on royal policy; in 1626 Sir Francis Stewart, the dedicatee of *Epicoene*, helped the Commons' attempt to impeach the Duke;⁵¹ in 1628 another friend, Zouch Townley, fled the country when his verses praising Buckingham's assassin were found at Cotton's library;⁵² and the library itself was closed after the 1629 Parliament on suspicion that it had become a source for the dissemination of dangerous literature and seditious ideas.

In the Folio's arrangement of *The Epigrams*, Jonson's virtuous men occupy a space that seems outside politics and free from ideological contention. Like the performers in the court masques, they are a band of brothers between whom no disagreements appear to exist, since potential antagonisms in the horizontal plane have all been absorbed by their common commitment to vertical loyalties. But such images were harder to sustain in the more polarised circumstances of Jonson's later life, and the sense of lost bearings which has been found in some of the later verse may be traced not so much to his supposed poetic dotage, as to a climate of dissolving consensus in the nation at large which profoundly impacted on the established co-ordinates of his early Jacobean poetry. If 'Inviting a Friend to Supper' had envisaged sociable meetings at which aristocrats and intellectuals talked innocently about Virgil and Tacitus, by 1630 that imagined space had become badly eroded. Tacitus alone gave off dangerous signals: indeed, both in parliamentary debates and in libels circulating beyond Westminster, Buckingham had been lampooned as a Sejanus.⁵³ At the same time, it was becoming harder for

⁵¹ See M. Butler, 'Sir Francis Stewart: Jonson's Overlooked Patron', *Ben Jonson Journal*, 2 (1996) (forthcoming).

⁵² *Ben Jonson*, 1, p. 242-4.

⁵³ See the examples quoted by J. Forster, *Sir John Eliot: A Biography*, 2 vols (London, 1864), 1, pp. 548, 552, and by R. Cust, 'News and Politics in Early Seventeenth Century England', *Past and Present*, 111 (1986), pp. 65-6.

court panegyric to make the disposings of the royal will seem indisputably authoritative, and in Jonson's later masques James had repeatedly to be depicted as vindicating his sovereign power in the face of challenges presented to it by newsmongers, political meddlers, and rebelliously disruptive plebeians. The masques may still have represented James as triumphantly schooling his people for opinions that were foolishly seditious and warmongering, but their cost was the damage which such representations did to assumptions about his kingly transcendence. Effectively, the fables mounted by these masques conceded that Jacobean rule was no longer seen as being simply beyond contest.

The poem which most fully registers the erosion of past certainties is the 'Epistle Answering unto One that Asked to be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben' (*Underwood* 47).⁵⁴ This was written in the autumn of 1623 while Prince Charles was still on his way home from Madrid after his ill-starred mission to bring back a Spanish bride. Jonson had not been invited to help prepare the welcome that had been planned for the Infanta, and the poem voices a personalised complaint about his neglect, so that here, for once, the contrast between the poet's circle of a few select friends and a public world where relationships are sordid and mercenary seems genuinely motivated by resentment. Contemptuously describing the dancers in even his own masques as 'Christmas clay / And animated porcelain' (ll.52–3), Jonson consoles himself with a fantasy of superiority which is easily understood in Stanley Fish's terms, as private compensation for having been excluded. But unexpectedly, the poem's central section presents a review of current politics and, particularly, of the possibility that England might now side with France in a war against Spain, which connects Jonson's personal discomfiture with misgivings of a more political kind:

What is't to me whether the French design
 Be, or be not, to get the Valtelline?
 Or the States' ships sent forth belike to meet
 Some hopes of Spain in their West Indian fleet?
 Whether the dispensation yet be sent,
 Or that the match from Spain was ever meant?
 I wish all well, and pray high heaven conspire
 My prince's safety and my king's desire;
 But if, for honour, we must draw the sword,
 And force back that which will not be restored,

⁵⁴ *Ben Jonson*, 8, pp. 218–20.

I have a body yet that spirit draws
To live, or fall a carcass in the cause. (ll.31–42)

This is often read as Jonson's statement of indifference towards politics ('What is't to me . . . ?'), or as covert criticism of James's long appeasement of Spain by a poet willing to embrace more resolute action.⁵⁵ In fact, the policy considerations which Jonson so loftily disregards—control of the strategically-important Valtelline pass, speculation that Spain's treasure fleet might be captured, and suspicions that the Spanish marriage proposals had all along been just a diversionary tactic—were those dear to the hearts of the war party, whose aim was always to foment a general European combination against Spain.⁵⁶ But a land campaign for the recovery of the Palatinate (that territory which, with the collapse of the marriage, 'will not be restored' through diplomacy), was a war for an altogether narrower objective. If Jonson's lines picture him drawing his sword, it was because this specific and rather more limited aim had now become the will of Prince Charles, who was returning brideless from Madrid, disenchanted with the negotiations and convinced that his 'honour' had been impugned.⁵⁷

This passage, then, seems unhappily caught between Jonson's investment in James's old peace policy, which was now self-evidently faltering, and the need to find ways of accommodating the war towards which Charles seemed likely to move without appearing simply to capitulate to the general European bloodbath that Jacobean diplomacy had always sought to avert. But the importance of these lines lies less in the minutiae of the specific strategies to which they allude, significant though they are, than in their admission that the singularity of royal power had been called into question, and that in this crisis it was no longer clear that James's will would prevail. With James's peace stalled, and a rift opening with Prince Charles, it must have seemed as though the political certainties which underpinned the earlier poetry were under severe pressure, if not on the verge of collapse. So while the

⁵⁵ For the indifference interpretation, see Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life*, p. 286; for covert criticism, see R. C. Evans, '“Men that are Safe and Sure”: Jonson's “Tribe of Ben” Epistle in its patronage context', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 21 (1985), 235–54.

⁵⁶ The relationship of this passage to the rapidly shifting politics of 1623 is discussed in much greater detail in M. Butler, 'The Dates of Three Poems by Ben Jonson', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 55 (1992), 284–7.

⁵⁷ The best narrative of the domestic response to the collapse of James's foreign policy is T. Cogswell's *The Blessed Revolution: English Politics and the Coming of War, 1621–1624* (Cambridge, 1989).

poem as a whole voices Jonson's response to fears of being marginalised, it also lacks that countervailing public reassurance, so central to the earlier verse, that his poetic authority was ultimately guaranteed by a framework of stable royal power. On the contrary, the wits from whom, in the first part of the 'Epistle', the threat to the poet seems to come are not only shallow and immoral jeerers whose views are beneath contempt, but political meddlers reminiscent of Captain Hungry and the pocket statesmen of 'The New Cry', dangerous and opinionated voices of a kind that were increasingly clamorous in the 1620s. If in those earlier texts, such noise-makers were overtly or implicitly contained by the stabilities of a world at peace, in this poem peace appears to be in the balance and 'wild anarchy' (l.10) to have invaded all but that privileged space with which Jonson tries to associate himself. What seems most conspicuously absent from the 'Epistle' is any conviction that the Crown would rise confidently and serenely above the current crisis. On the contrary, the poem's disconcerting perception that the monarchy's political voice had suddenly become divided leaves Jonson's affirmations sounding fragile and disoriented. The poem that most anxiously asserts the pre-eminence of Jonson's private space does so at the precise historical moment at which James's public authority seemed itself to be coming into question.

In his last years, Jonson lived a shadowy half-life near the Caroline court and only fitfully experienced reliable patronage from the Crown.⁵⁸ He seems to have enjoyed a number of links to the circle of Edward Hyde and Lucius Cary, men who though strong supporters of monarchy were critics of Charles's arbitrary exactions and were deeply attached to a vision of Church and State governed according to stable principles of law. In the early months of the Long Parliament they would emerge as the leading moderate reformers, and were eventually to compose the nucleus of the constitutional royalists. He also had good patrons in two men who were more closely tied to the Crown. One recipient of a series of poems was Charles's Treasurer, Richard Weston, who was well known for his advocacy of peace, fiscal retrenchment and prerogative finance. After Buckingham's death, it was Weston on whom the leaders of the 1629 Parliament turned their fire and, not surprisingly, he was thereafter one of the firmest proponents of Charles's personal rule.

⁵⁸ In this paragraph I am summarising the more detailed account given in M. Butler, 'Late Jonson', in *The Politics of Tragicomedie: Shakespeare and After*, eds G. McMullan and J. Hope (London, 1992), pp. 168–71.

Jonson's other major patron was the Earl of Newcastle, who gave the ageing poet support of both a material and aesthetic kind. One of Charles's most cultured but also most conservative aristocrats, Newcastle was out of step with fashionable Whitehall, but he believed fervently in the values of order, ceremony and title and was eventually to general the royal army: he is perhaps one model for Lovel, the idealised Caroline aristocrat, in *The New Inn*.⁵⁹ In the context of these friendships, Jonson preserved that image of himself as the favoured laureate poet whose masques should have been celebrations of Stuart power. In practice, though, his pension was often in arrears and the alignment of political and poetic authority which his verse assumed was no longer so confident.

When in 1629 *The New Inn* had a disastrous public reception at the Blackfriars, Jonson's response, as ventriloquised in the 'Ode to Himself', was to spurn his critics as an unworthy jury and turn for his justification to a better, more royal audience. From now on, the ode claimed, the Jonsonian lyre would only 'sing / The glories of [my] king', 'tuning forth the acts of his sweet reign, / And raising Charles his chariot 'bove his wain'.⁶⁰ But in the event Jonson had few opportunities of tuning forth the acts of Charles's sweet reign, since he wrote only one more pair of masques before his catastrophic quarrel with Inigo Jones, and thereafter the commissions went to other poets, denying him his usual forum for sustained public performances. As a consequence, for all the ode's political resolve, Jonson's work for Charles beyond the two masques lacks the prestigious invocations of Stuart monarchy which are so crucial a component of his Jacobean career, and is confined to frequent but fugitive congratulatory verses on royal births and anniversaries. These short poems seem dutiful rather than distinguished, and despite their praise of the dynasty, they are remarkable for the difficulty they have in finding ways of making Charles's power sound persuasive. They insist on the King's piety and glory, and his status as an example to his people, but they are equally preoccupied with the inner political divisions which persist, in spite of the outward peace.⁶¹

⁵⁹ There are recent treatments of Jonson's relations with Newcastle in R. C. Evans, *Jonson and the Contexts of his Time* (Lewisburg, 1994), pp. 35–44, and N. Rowe, 'My Best Patron': William Cavendish and Jonson's Caroline Drama', *The Seventeenth Century*, 9 (1994), 197–212.

⁶⁰ *Ben Jonson*, 6, p. 494.

⁶¹ *Ben Jonson*, 8, pp. 236–7.

How happy were the subject, if he knew,
 Most pious king, but his own good in you!
 How many times, "Live long, Charles!" would he say,
 If he but weighed the blessings of this day.

These lines, from the epigram on the fourth anniversary of the accession, make Charles sound not so much imperious as beleaguered, and they admit almost inadvertently that Stuart majesty had been diminished. The only solution is for the poet to instil respect for the monarch into his subjects, but as the poem goes on perplexedly to admit, if the people refuse to see the efficacy of Charles's rule there is nothing more poets can do to inculcate it:

O times! O manners! sufeit bred of ease,
 The truly epidemical disease!
 'Tis not alone the merchant, but the clown
 Is bankrupt turned; the cassock, cloak and gown
 Are lost upon account! and none will know
 How much to heaven for thee, great Charles, they owe!

Not surprisingly, the more strongly Jonson needs to protest that the goodness of Caroline government is self-evident, the more unconvincing these protests sound: the claim to royal legitimation which the poem makes is belied by the fact that, if it was felt to be incontestable, the poem would not have to be written. This is a contradiction which continues to reverberate through all the public poems written after 1628 and which severely damages Jonson's ability to project images of a transcendent royal authority. It is symptomatic of how far the ideological co-ordinates of his Jacobean poetry were being undermined by the more polarised politics of the later reign.

In one of the last of his panegyrics, the 1633 epigram on the christening of the royal infant James, Jonson once again urged Charles's people to recognise 'how much they are beloved of God in thee', but by going on to add 'Would they would understand it!' he seemed to acknowledge the unlikelihood of this kind of rhetoric taking hold any longer. Instead, this epigram pointedly harked back to less divided times, to the reign of the new prince's namesake and to the British certainties which it had been one project of Jonson's earlier verse to associate with him.⁶²

Grow up, sweet babe, as blessed in thy name,
 As in renewing thy good grandsire's fame;

⁶² *ibid.* p. 268.

Methought Great Britain in her sea before
 Sat safe enough, but now secured more.
 At land she triumphs in the triple shade
 Her rose and lily, intertwined, have made.

It's tempting to speculate that from the vantage point of a monarchy that was less receptive to humanistic ideas of poetic counsel and that could no longer be represented as automatically validated by its kingly transcendence, Jonson may have looked back with some nostalgia to James's reign, and to the relatively confident belief which he had then enjoyed, and sought to project, in a productive symbiosis between king and poet. There is relatively little evidence from Jonson's Caroline writings for a conscious reassessment of the age of James, but perhaps he was indeed seeking to reinvolve the assurances of earlier times when he reserved for the title-page of his finest play, *Bartholomew Fair*—written in 1614 but not printed until 1631—the brief but resonant dedication: 'to King JAMES, of most blessed memory, by the author, Ben Jonson'.⁶³

Appendix: The Dating of the *Epigrams*

Although as a group the *Epigrams* first appeared in print in the 1616 Folio, there is evidence which suggests that Jonson had plans to publish them separately rather earlier. On 15 May 1612 the printer John Stepneth made an entry in the Stationers' Register for 'A Booke called, Ben Johnson his Epigrams', and this seems strongly to indicate that by this date Jonson may already have assembled his collection. In the event, Stepneth died shortly afterwards and the volume probably did not appear, though in one of William Drummond's manuscript notes 'Ben Jhonsons epigrams' are listed amongst the 'bookes red be me anno 1612'.⁶⁴ This may be evidence that the book actually was published and Drummond did possess a copy of it. Alternatively, he might have had access to the *Epigrams* in a manuscript collection: certainly if the book was printed, no copies have as yet been found. Strikingly, when the *Epigrams* appeared in the Folio, they bore the title-page designation 'EPIGRAMMES. I. BOOKE', which suggests that Jonson kept in mind the possibility of collecting a second volume of epigrams for separate

⁶³ *Ben Jonson*, 6, p. 9.

⁶⁴ *Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 16.

publication later. Two further points in favour of the hypothesis of 1612 collection are the facts that the potentially satirical treatment of Salisbury's epigrams (discussed above) would have been very indelicate before the Treasurer's death, and that by far the bulk of the Epigrams that can be dated seem to have been written by 1612.

The two obstacles to this deduction are Epigrams 67 ('To Thomas, Earl of Suffolk') and 133 ('On the Famous Voyage'), both of which, it can be argued, possibly allude to events of c.1613–14. However the evidence, which has recently been fully reviewed by Ian Donaldson,⁶⁵ is by no means straightforward.

Epigram 67

Ian Donaldson notes the suggestion in Peter Whalley's 1756 edition that the concluding lines of Suffolk's epigram might refer to his appointment in 1614 as Lord Treasurer. Yet the lines, describing Suffolk as 'confirmed [in] thy king's choice' (l.11), are not at all specific, and could without difficulty have been applied to him at any time from 1603 onwards, when he was appointed Lord Chamberlain. In favour of a date considerably before 1614 is the fact that Jonson's relationship with Suffolk seems to have been at its strongest early in the reign. Suffolk was one of the noblemen to whom Jonson appealed for help when he was imprisoned in 1605 over *Eastward Ho!*, and shortly afterwards he received the prestigious commission for the masque to mark the wedding between Suffolk's daughter, Frances Howard, and the Earl of Essex (*Hymenaei*, danced in January 1606). As a frequent author of court masques, Jonson would have had to negotiate directly with Suffolk during James's first decade, since as Lord Chamberlain he had overall responsibility for the running of these occasions. Arguably, Suffolk's 1614 appointment as Treasurer would actually have reduced Jonson's opportunities for contact with him.

Epigram 133

The Oxford editors dated 'The Famous Voyage' c.1610, but Ian Donaldson notes a suggestion that the penultimate couplet alludes to building works at Clerkenwell (to the north-east of the city) connected

⁶⁵ See Ian Donaldson's edition of the Oxford Authors *Ben Jonson* (Oxford, 1985), p. 646.

with Sir Hugh Myddleton's New River scheme, which opened in 1613.⁶⁶

In memory of which most liquid deed,
The city hath since raised a pyramid.

This suggestion is very plausible, as the New River was one of Jacobean London's most important engineering projects, the creation of a new freshwater supply attracting considerable notice as a 'liquid deed'. Yet the very specificity of a 'pyramid' works against the identification, since as the surviving contemporary picture of the Clerkenwell water-house demonstrates, the building itself did not correspond with Jonson's lines, being square-set and not at all pyramidal.⁶⁷ In all other respects the internal evidence suggests a date around 1610. The epigram cannot have been written before 1607, as it mentions the parliamentary fart which occurred in that year's session (1.108). An upward date of 1610 is made likely by Jonson's only other mention of this incident, his allusion in *The Alchemist* (II. ii. 63) to Sir John Hoskyns's widely-circulated satirical verses upon it.⁶⁸ A 1610 date would also fit with the epigram's repeated allusions to the plague, since in that year the plague visitation was unusually severe. On balance, then it seems safest to reaffirm the date of c. 1610, which is not significantly undermined by the 'pyramid'.

Note. I am very grateful to Ian Donaldson for a precise and thorough commentary on the penultimate version of this lecture; and to my colleagues David Fairer and David Lindley, and to my wife Jane, for their real material help during its long gestation.

⁶⁶ *Ben Jonson*, 8, p. 89.

⁶⁷ See J. W. Gough, *Sir Hugh Myddleton, Entrepreneur and Engineer* (Oxford, 1964), illustration facing p. 58.

⁶⁸ Hoskyns's verses were unprinted in Jonson's lifetime but circulated in manuscript, and were added to as subsequent parliaments came along. The fart itself seems to have happened on 11 March 1607, and most of the MPs mentioned in the best text of the satire sat in the 1607 Parliament. See B. W. Whitlock, *John Hoskyns, Serjeant-at-Law* (Washington, D.C. 1982), pp. 283–8.