

Bart van Es's recent *Shakespeare in Company* (Oxford, 2013) a determination to demonstrate Shakespeare's radical difference even as it establishes that difference by overlooking the boundaries between Shakespeare and the contemporaries with whom he collaborated.

Notes

- 1 Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser, 'The popularity of playbooks revisited', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56.1 (2005), 6.

Lynn S. Meskill. *Ben Jonson and Envy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp 229.

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Ben Jonson and Envy offers a sustained look at the emotion that has from the eighteenth century been perennially attributed to Jonson. Despite the ubiquitous critical belief in Jonson's personal invidiousness, Lynn Meskill rightly claims that there has been no thorough consideration of how envy functions within his writings. *Ben Jonson and Envy* is an important attempt to remedy this lacuna. Crucially, Meskill sees Jonson's personal envy and its presence in his works as inextricably related. Her central claim is that rather than a Bloomian 'anxiety of influence', Jonson was controlled by an "anxiety of reception" (borrowing Lucy Newlyn's phrase) that arose from his belief that an 'audience's *vision* is naturally *depraved*' and inevitably 'dominated by invidiousness' (5–7). This perceived envy became in turn 'a generative force': Jonson consistently wrote 'not just *against*, but in *response* to a judging spectator or reader', resulting in texts 'generated by and through a series of engagements with the spectator's and ... reader's imagined queries and objections' (8). Throughout, Meskill inflects her primarily cultural-materialist approach with a subtle Freudian paradigm, aligning herself with what she calls the '*sin-ister* approach' of Edmund Wilson's and William Kerrigan's Freudian readings of Jonson. With them, she aims to expose the 'darker aspect' of Jonson

and provide 'a necessary antidote to the image of a morally upright poet and playwright' (4–5).

Meskill's introduction and second chapter, 'An Anatomy of Envy', are closely intertwined. She bookends a wide-ranging social history of envy with an explanation of its relevance to Jonson's writing, surveying anthropological, sociological, theological, and emblematic sources to describe social beliefs about envy, the 'evil eye', and the notion of looking 'askance' or 'squinting' at an envied object (22, 26). Jonson assumed that most readers approached his plays and texts with these beliefs, 'voluntarily or involuntarily, *look[ing] at things awry*' in an act of 'ocular malevolence' (22). The introduction concludes with an astute reading of the first sixteen lines of Jonson's 'To the Memory of my Beloved' in which Meskill argues that one of Jonson's chief aims in writing the poem is to defend himself against the charge that he envied Shakespeare. Elsewhere, in his attempt to protect himself from his reader's envy, Jonson consistently 'turns his gaze upon his own text in anticipation of the gaze of the reader and proceeds to defend the text against his own envy' (74). This writerly envy functions, like Plato's *pharmakon*, as both remedy and poison, resulting in a 'cleavage in the authorial task, between creation and judgement' that for Meskill defines Jonson's oeuvre but is most visible in the print versions of his masques.

Chapter 3 uses the metaphor of 'Defacement' to describe exactly what Jonson in his anxiety of reception feared: '*defacement* is the fear the writer has of his work (and thus his reputation) being misread, misapprehended and even perverted by the reader' (39). Jonson perceived all three actions to be motivated ultimately by the reader's envy, which 'begrudged the author his due by dismembering the text's meaning' (78). Meskill argues that this fear of defacement motivated Jonson's meticulous oversight of the 1616 folio and his disparate writings on slander (though she fails to address recent scepticism about the degree of Jonson's oversight of the folio). The remainder of the chapter offers a reading of *Poetaster* as the staging of Jonson's 'obsession with the threat of the envious reader' (98). Meskill finds not only that the character Horace, but Ovid and Virgil (who are both interrupted by others in the process of writing or reciting their poetry) are all representative of Jonson.

Jonson's method of protecting his writings and reputation from envious defacement, Meskill claims, is to flee to a metaphorical 'sanctuary', the title of chapter 4. He finds this sanctuary most broadly in "the all-daring Power of Poetry" (111, citing *The Masque of Queens*), and Meskill identifies a wide range of examples of this tactic. She reads 'To Penshurst' as a 'representation of the

poetic desire to find a safe haven for literary creation ... from the envious gaze of judging posterity' (165). In *Bartholomew Fair*, Justice Overdo functions as an internal judge whose critique of the fair's enormities defends Jonson against potential denunciations of his base subject matter, even as Overdo's bumbling prevents spectators from taking those judgements too seriously; 'the play reads ... itself before the reader does' (128). Meskill's 'sinister approach' comes to the fore here as she concludes that Jonson's literary themes and dramatic plots 'may be viewed as allegories for the creative activity of the writer' who, like a controlling father, 'envies his creation its due inheritance' by refusing to let his literary children speak for themselves (133).

Chapter 5, 'Monument', describes Jonson's attempts to evade the envy and slander of contemporary readers, while chapter 6, 'Being Posthumous', considers the 1616 folio as Jonson's monument to himself for posterity. Highlighting his many uses of the Gorgon myth, Meskill asserts that Jonson's 'vigilant gaze upon his own work' in preparing the folio 'leads to his turning ... metaphorically ... his own work into stone' monuments (40). Meskill carefully documents how Jonson systematically converts play and masque scripts — the literary ephemera of his day — into immortal 'works' by means of elaborate textual apparatuses and invocations of classical precedent. *The Masque of Queens* and *Catiline* provide her examples, and her analysis of Jonson's self-conscious use of print is especially impressive. In this process of adaptation, though, 'Jonson may be said ... to *cut his own throat*', stopping up 'the imaginative ... flow of words which inevitably opens the writer up to the danger of being misread' and substituting 'a monumental, petrified text/tablet in its place' (163). The result, described in the sixth chapter, is that Jonson obligates himself in his later plays to write 'so to speak, "from beyond the grave"' that he had made for himself in the folio; indeed, he is left to 'cannibaliz[e]' his early works to assemble the 'authorial *bricolage*' that is the late plays (187). *The Staple of News* is her only example which, in its conflict between father, son, and uncle, she reads as staging the 'strife' between Jonson's 'past self, entombed in the 1616 folio, and his new self, the post-1616 writer' (189). This ultimately dismissive commentary on the late works makes chapter 6 the most difficult to accept: no one would label Shakespeare's late plays as 'parasitic' because they return to themes and tropes he used in the 1590s (193). Moreover, Meskill's assertion is based on substantial interpretation of only one play and leaves out Jonson's later poetry and masques almost entirely.

The central weakness of the last chapter already emerges in the previous two: the author's unselfconscious pairing of cultural-materialist and Freudian paradigms. Though usually worn lightly, the combination makes it difficult for her to consider Jonson's literary and moral claims, whether made early or late in his career, as anything more than culturally induced neuroses. The very ideals he works so carefully to protect in his writing along with the concern for permanence he shares with countless great poets receive no consideration per se, but are simply reduced to an unwitting front for subconscious and controlling psychological neuroses. Yet could not Jonson's caution regarding his texts be equally the conviction of an experienced and deeply learned reader, that one's personal character and method of reading crucially determine the meaning one finds in a text? If so, then surely Jonson's concern for good readers who read rightly is not merely an irrational obsession and deserves consideration on its own terms.

Several organizational and stylistic weaknesses also detract from the book. Chapters 1 (Introduction) and 2 contain significant overlap. At the other end, the sixth chapter's discussion of Jonson's later work simply and abruptly ends the book: there is no summation of its overall argument, no consideration of what questions it has raised, and only the briefest of epilogues that better concludes the chapter than the book. While her writing is usually free from obfuscating jargon, it is regularly clumsy in style: I count six occurrences of the word 'of' in one sentence, for example (9), and phrasing such as 'In the *Masque of Queenes*, as we shall see, Jonson, may be said, perversely, like Morose, to *cut his own throat*' is not uncommon (163). Additionally, her overuse of italics for emphasis (evident in much of my quoted material) is an irritating habit that becomes confusing alongside the frequent italics in quotations from Herford and Simpson.

With that said, Meskill's book rightly identifies a crucial theme in Jonson's work. Her thesis about the 'generative' nature of envy for Jonson is complex and consistently convincing. She makes important contributions to the study of print — both its demands on the author and effects on the reader — and to the prominence of Jonson's literary guardedness. She has read widely in Jonson's canon and gives substantial consideration to a number of understudied poems, plays, and masques. This book admirably initiates and invites discussion on the nature and effect of Ben Jonson's envy.