

PETER BYRNE

'The cunning of their ground': The Relevance of *Sejanus* to Renaissance Tragedy

Modelled on contemporary metatheatrical tragedies such as Tamburlaine and Richard III, Sejanus is Jonson's riposte to these rebellious innovations to tragedy illustrating that his peers have failed to resolve substantially the problem of generic decay. Sejanus, modelled on the anarchic heroes of Marlowe and Shakespeare, satirizes these figures, while the play's rigid decorum demonstrates the structural discipline necessary to produce tragedy's moral function. Sejanus enacts Jonson's criticism of the 'corrupt' context of early modern tragedy, its characters and argument the result of a decayed ethos in which the use of performance has corroded both gesture and interpretation into cynicism, and in which true heroism, and true tragedy, are impossible.

And since the comic muse
 Hath proved so ominous to me, I will try
 If tragedy have a more kind aspect.
 Her favours in my next I will pursue,
 Where, if I prove the pleasure of but one,
 So he judicious be, he shall b' alone
 A theatre unto me. Once, I'll 'say
 To strike the ear of time, in those fresh strains
 As shall, beside the cunning of their ground,
 Give cause to some of wonder, some despite,
 And unto more, despair, to imitate their sound.¹

(Jonson, 'To The Reader', *Poetaster*)

Far from the triumph he anticipated, the premiere of Jonson's *Sejanus* was a disaster, as confirmed in his sardonic dedication to Lord Aubigny: 'It is

Peter Byrne (pbyrne2@kent.edu) is an assistant professor in the English department at Kent State University, Trumbull.

a poem that, if I well remember, in Your Lordship's sight suffered no less violence from our people here than the subject of it did from the rage of the people of Rome' (l 212). Subsequent reception of the play has, until recently, echoed this response; while critical circles celebrate *Sejanus* and its companion piece, *Catiline*, Robert Ornstein notes that these plays' popular appeal lags substantially behind: 'Time has not reversed the Jacobean verdict on Jonson's tragedies, nor is it likely that any vagary of taste will ever bring [them] into general favor'.² This division between the plays' merits and the public's neglect of those merits has understandably drawn analytical attention, and critics have frequently blamed that quality upon which Jonson most prided himself: their scholarship. Ornstein continues: 'According to [Jonson], the argument of a tragedy must not only be drawn from history; it must also be historically verifiable — not merely in the main outline, but even in small, insignificant details. It seems not to have disturbed him at all that this passion for accuracy was almost sure to be lost on the nut-cracking audience.'³

Such criticism is sound; Jonson often prioritizes rhetorical exactitude over dramatic tension. Fidelity to his historical sources, to classical theatrical precedent, and to his own sense of dramatic decorum produces tragedies of such structural nicety and polish that there appears little room for individuality of character or emotional satisfaction. In short, the play's popular obscurity appears to be the inevitable consequence of its virtues. But inasmuch as the subsequent *Catiline* not only repeats but also accentuates these qualities, Jonson may have expected (or even desired, if Jonson's promise of 'despair' may be believed) the hostile reaction of his audience. *Sejanus* appears intentionally provocative, despite — or because of — its traditionalism.

Jonson's motives in pursuing this mode of composition thus become a necessary topic of interpretation, which criticism has not always addressed successfully. A consensus claims that Jonson's tragedies reveal a conflict between artifice and intent, with an essentially satiric author writing in a genre that ill-suited his strengths. T.S. Eliot calls *Catiline* a 'dreary Pyrrhic victory of tragedy', claiming 'it is not the Latin erudition that sinks [it], but the application of that erudition to a form which was not the proper vehicle for the mind which had amassed the erudition'.⁴ Likewise Ornstein (who admires the plays) claims 'Jonson was unsuccessful not because his idea of tragedy was rhetorical but because he could not come to terms with his own view of politics. Such interpretation contends that, despite his careful attention to classical decorum, he could not with a divided mind achieve in

tragedy the supreme unity of form and vision that characterizes *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*.⁵ Arthur Marotti concurs but argues that the artifice of *Sejanus* at least is *intentionally* smothering:

Sejanus’ anti-tragic character is shaped largely by Jonson’s overindulgence in self-conscious artifice. Even though there are valid thematic functions served by the play’s artistically self-conscious features, the final effect is a damaging one. Because tragedy must engage its audience’s feelings in order to have its full impact, it is dangerous for any tragedian to make his drama too self-analytical; such analysis can create a distance between play and spectators and diminish audience response to those very actions and characters that should most move them. This is what happens in *Sejanus*.⁶

I concur with Marotti, but the distance he labels as a weakness of the play is an essential part of Jonson’s agenda: to formalize the mimetic and emotional aspects of the theatrical experience to the point of intellectual detachment in order to criticize the enervating effect of generically anarchic composition in the early modern theatre. *Sejanus* enacts Jonson’s disillusionment with contemporary tragedy, its characters and its argument the result of a decayed ethos in which the use of performance has corroded both gesture and interpretation into cynicism, and in which true heroism, and true tragedy, are impossible.

The divided nature of the play — the linguistic and didactic stricture at odds with the passions normally associated with tragic action — has prompted other critics to regard the play as satirical. Anne Barton argues that ‘the world [*Sejanus*] presents, for all its pain and violence, is still the wintry and disordered world of satire’.⁷ But criticism has been less than unanimous in locating the target of this satire. The republican idealism the virtuous characters express, and the imperialist chicanery that props up a vicious autocracy suggest that the play’s argument targets the political structure of power and the theatrical means used to fortify or disguise corruption. We can therefore read *Sejanus* — and critics have read it — as an essentially political satire, which uses the topoi of theatricality to mock the hollow nature of tyrannical authority. But the use of the theatrical to indict the political is a dynamic that can be reversed. Without rejecting the validity of its political satire, we may also read *Sejanus* as a play in which the political is used to critique the theatrical.

After all, the cited passage from *Poetaster* suggests an artistic rather than a political target, declaring Jonson's intention to compose a tragedy in response to those who now occupy that creative field — to meet them in 'the cunning of their ground'. A contextual reading of the play supports this interpretation; we may read *Sejanus*, which resembles those popular plays featuring overreachers in the Marlovian and Shakespearean canons, as Jonson's critical response to the theatrical innovations they represent. Although the play's formality is undeniable, it also reveals a lively sense of the authority of performance, and in portraying such performance, it resembles works in which the metatheatrical is more blatant, such as *Tamburlaine* and *Richard III*. Jonson himself guides my focus on these plays in particular. While metatheatrical dominates this period in English drama,⁸ these two plays provide Jonson with a precedent for both his traditionalist requirements and his critical agenda. *Tamburlaine* and *Richard III* are historical in source, tragic in narrative and moral, and metatheatrical in presentation. Like them, *Sejanus* is based in historical fact, and its moral arc reflects the same view of history — as morally illustrative instance — that Marlowe and Shakespeare proffer in their plays. Its metatheatrical elements are subtler but significant. All three works, finally, are variations on a common plot: the political rise to power achieved by a villain-hero who uses transparently theatrical devices to advance an agenda on a world that indicts itself by failing to recognize these devices as theatrical.

This last element — the misuse and misrecognition of theatricality — enables all these plays to engage in a criticism of the theatrical, not simply as a tool for the unscrupulous politician, but as a salutary practice fallen into corruption. Those who insist on reading *Sejanus* as a primarily political critique forget that in order for a theatrical portrait of political corruption to be socially medicinal, the theatre itself must be healthy, and Jonson clearly indicates that he does not believe it to be. While the play overtly evokes *Tamburlaine* and *Richard III*, these plays merely provide familiar plot, character, and performative elements that enable Jonson to cast a wider net of indictment, directed at the metatheatrical nature of early modern tragedy as a whole.

In terms of his *modus operandi*, *Sejanus* is clearly part of the early modern catalogue of figures (by no means limited to Marlowe and Shakespeare) whose authority derives from orchestrating spectacles, settings, and performances that are 'theatrical' in appearance, vocabulary, and idiom, and which create an overlap between the theatrical portrait of power and the portrait of power as inherently theatrical. Such characters enable their playwrights

to criticize the nature of political authority and the status of theatrical presentation. But the portrait of the metatheatrical must compromise the presentational coherence of a dramatic narrative and its argument. While this iconoclasm is of little concern to Shakespeare, and less to Marlowe, it is of paramount importance to Jonson.

By their generically defiant attitudes and actions, such performative characters disrupt the mimetically designated experience of tragedy. As an instance, two related engines sustain Tamburlaine’s meteoric career: his unbroken string of military victories within the plot and his relentless self-portrayal as an embodiment of a generically or theatrically advantageous figure. He variously presents himself as a lordly lover to Zenocrate, as the embodiment of *moira* to Theridimas, as nemesis to Cosroe (and then to Bajazeth and the citizens of Damascus), and always with flourishes and expression that derive from the performative indices of the theatre — costumes, props (such as the treasure he ‘sets’ to impress Zenocrate), and idiomatic speeches that create a fundamental overlap between the qualities of the actor performing the role for a theatrical audience, and the character performing an identical role to his onstage audience. Such behaviour encourages a response to his character that derives from the values of the theatre rather than from those of political reality. Tamburlaine’s persistent expressions of hubris — hyperbolic even by the standards of tragedy — similarly do more than violently self-identify the Scythian as a tragic hero; they invite both his onstage listeners and theatrical audience to regard him with the comfortable anticipation of the generically appropriate punishment for such hubris — a *peripeteia* which of course never arrives, permitting Marlowe to doubly mock the folly of those who receive theatrical indices as politically valid, and those who anticipate meaning on the basis of an antiquated set of generic topoi.

Richard III, like *Sejanus*, is essentially a variation on the career of Tamburlaine (though Shakespeare and Jonson replace Marlowe’s godless cosmos with a universe invested with obscure but undeniable divinity). Richard’s metatheatricity is far more blatant, however. From his self-references to the morality play’s Vice to his re-creation of the mystery play’s *mise-en-scène* in wooing the citizens of London, his actions draw attention to the performative nature of the play, and thus to the artifice of the formal structures that sustain the play: genre, narrative precedence, and the arc of character and fate. We could well include many other such moments and characters from many if not most of the plays of the era. Though these two plays were less than current at the time of *Sejanus*, they are among the earliest and most popular

examples of the kind of tragedy he is critiquing. Jonson's audiences would likely have recognized those plays as the initiators of the trend in 'reformativ' drama that concerns him.

The revolutionary rejection of decorum displayed by Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the other early moderns appears most clearly in their determined use of the metatheatrical. These plays, and the characters within them who pointedly reference performative and generic conventions, expose the universal over-familiarity with and consequential decay of dramatic convention. This agenda is most evident in political dramas, in which the same theatrical devices that theatrical traditionalism has rendered trite deceive 'real' figures. Such unlikely spectacles force an audience to recognize the overlap between facile political deception and equally facile theatrical composition. In short, if we see Richard recreate the familiar circumstances of the mystery cycle to deceive the citizens of London, the play not only prompts and enables us to recognize Richard's political duplicity, but also to recognize the ossification of the theatrical devices by which he achieves such duplicity. By such metatheatrical means, these revolutionary playwrights enact a criticism of the potentially irrelevant restraints of precedent in the creative process.

Such self-critical theatre is possible only if a play successfully renders the audience aware of the overfamiliarity of its idiom; again, Jonson's choice of two immensely popular if somewhat dated works is shrewd. The viewer must recognize generic hallmarks and theatrical stereotypes and respond to them as conventions, rather than engaging with them as rhetorical exhortations. But as this revolutionary theatre becomes a genre unto itself — as the popularity of these plays confirms it did — such an audience becomes increasingly alienated from the theatrical experience and loses its ability to engage with the drama to the emotional and moral degree sufficient to produce catharsis. The methodology of the metatheatre of Marlovian and Shakespearean drama is consequently a deliberate re-creation of the form of tragedy, but one which undermines the rhetorical and artistic significance of that form.

This deliberate subversion leads to a performatively evacuated experience, and the cynicism of anticipating such hollowness replaces the scepticism the plays want to encourage; the assumption of irony undermines the potential for engagement. *Sejanus* argues Jonson's disapproval of such generically rebellious innovation, inasmuch as it overthrows the classical structures he feels are necessary for a genuinely tragic experience. But his dismissal is far from simplistic, since, more than any other early Stuart author, Jonson is aware of the inevitable inadequacy of the classical mode when carelessly

applied to modern experience.⁹ Like his opponents in this generic debate, Jonson recognizes both the deficiency of his audience and that tragedy is in need of reform.

But for Jonson, metatheatre is a cure worse than the disease, and in *Sejanus* he illustrates this perception, offering an alternative, risking, or perhaps arguing for, the inevitability of theatrical failure. His selection of Aelius Sejanus as his subject is calculated. He chooses this odious figure from Tacitus because in Tacitus's historical works the perspective of the would-be individualist merely reflects its context, such that the individual cannot surmount or subvert the contingencies with which he must deal.

This portrait of the individual within Tiberean Rome in the *Annales* supports the critical assessment of Tacitus as a stylistically tragic historian.¹⁰ The propaganda of Tiberius and Sejanus produces a populace perversely defeated by its own recognition of the emptiness of performative language and gestures: 'The diction of Tiberius, by habit or by nature, was always indirect and obscure, even when he had no wish to conceal his thought; and now, in the effort to bury every trace of his sentiments, it became more intricate, uncertain, and equivocal than ever ... But the [Fathers'] one dread was that they might seem to comprehend him'.¹¹ In Tacitus's account, the godlike Tiberius resembles the inscrutable and contradictory absolute of tragic *theos*, and the plight of the citizen in the Roman state is that of humanity in the tragic universe, where no interpretation, no action can lead to anything but error and doom. Germanicus chooses altruistic nobility and is destroyed; Sejanus chooses selfish villainy and is destroyed. Accusers and their victims, commoners and aristocrats — the rapacious paranoia of the Tiberian state engulfs them all; all humanity is, as in the tragic universe, susceptible to the peripeteia resulting from an erroneous reading of the truth.

Tacitus's account, therefore, prompts its readers to an emotional reaction partially associated with tragedy — just as Jonson's play prompts its audience. As Ellen O'Gorman explains,

The awareness of a hidden truth disrupts the certainty of reading a surface. In addition, the nature of the cruelty in this case, the 'unspeakable' (*intestabilis*) cruelty of the rule, makes revelation a terrifying experience; the only certainty the reader of Tiberius attains is the certainty of doom. Finally, the eruption of Tiberius' inner truth is continually represented as an arbitrary phenomenon, not as a result of a particularly effective interpretation enacted by any Roman. The

reader's lack of control over when the repressive surface breaks to reveal the hidden truth creates a sense of the profound useless of readerly experience.¹²

If the error in tragedy is based on a misreading of the supernatural, the error of the Tacitean populace is a misreading that equates Tiberius and the supernatural — that regards him as an unpredictable, implacable force rather than the servant of the state he claims to embody.

But here we begin to see the problem in labeling Tacitus (and consequently Jonson) as tragic: if failure is no longer tied to character — if mere *tyche* has replaced ethos¹³ as the evidence of fate — then this world is not, in fact, ordered according to tragic principles, but simply resembles one that is, a resemblance Tiberius cynically encourages. In using the tenets that link gesture and intent to encourage a dismissal of the former as a hollow means of asserting his villainous authority, Tiberius systematically robs Rome of its ability to recognize or achieve its older virtues by means of public action. Jonson's infamous fidelity to his source is not simply an ostentatious display of learning; it is only by such fidelity that he can translate the Roman historian's ontological portrait to the early modern stage. The Rome of Tacitus is one in which an automatic presumption of cynicism has robbed all expressions of virtue of significance, and it is precisely this condition that, according to Jonson, corrupts the state of early modern tragedy.

Sensitive readers of *Sejanus* have noted that its darkly comic view of human nature reflects the fuller expression of the Jonsonian perspective in his comic works. Russ McDonald persuasively argues that the play anticipates Jonson's comic masterpieces *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, but his analysis also shows the deep connection between the satirical nature of this play and that of *Richard III*: 'The monstrosity of his deeds cannot obscure the delight Sejanus takes in performing them: such relish appears regularly in his soliloquies, in his interviews with confederates, in his taking of pawns such as Eudemus the physician, and in the wooing of Livia. Technique is as important as achievement to Sejanus'.¹⁴ This 'technique' identifies the character as a version of the metatheatrical heroes of Jonson's predecessors. Like them, he is a self-ironizing figure who manipulates the generic and theatrical assumptions of other characters and of a theatrical audience, in order to advance his own tyrannical agenda.

Sejanus admittedly lacks that aggressively metatheatrical quality that distinguishes Richard; he provides no substantial commentary on the performative or generic aspects of his own existence. But the Rome of the play

is a highly theatrical environment, which invites such commentary from Arruntius and others, and this theatricality is largely the result of Sejanus's efforts. What distinguishes this managerial aspect of Sejanus's character from Richard's is that Richard's choral addresses to the audience make his theatrical orchestrations explicit. We recognize them because he has, in directly addressing us, primed us so to do. Sejanus's theatricality is subtler; he only directs us to it after the fact, and our collusion is thus less self-conscious, and perhaps more sinister.

The first act of the tragedy illustrates this methodology. Jonson divides the stage between observers and observed; between the party of Agrippina, who view and comment on the action throughout, and the active figures of the Tiberian court: the emperor, Sejanus, Drusus, and their satellites. To accompany this perspectival division (between the virtuous and the corrupt, the political 'ins' and the 'outs'), a corresponding physical division is required for the actors onstage; in order to criticize the imperial powers safely, the disgruntled senators must presumably place themselves in a downstage position, where they can congregate, watch, and remain unheard by any but the audience. This segregation and their unified commentary have the effect of turning them into both a chorus and an audience. Only Arruntius, the most irascible of the group, thinks of crossing into the sphere of imperial power, and the others immediately stifle him.

By the second act, this 'staging' proves to be something more than coincidence. In his conference with Tiberius, Sejanus reveals that it is he who has propagated the policy of requiring the presence of these dissenters at court, keeping them within reach and at arm's length:

Give 'em more place, more dignities, more style,
Call 'em to court, to Senate ... Thus, with sleight
You shall disarm them first, and they, in night
Of their ambition, not perceive the train
Till, in the engine, they are caught, and slain. (2.262–9)

Their choral position thus represents and reinforces their political impotence; they can only wait and watch while others determine the course of the state.

On the one hand, the perspectival freedom this segregation gives the Agrippinean party would seem to fail miserably at producing a receptively docile audience; though it humbles the group, the men of virtue show themselves too independent for the Sejanian spectacle to sway them. They never

see Tiberius, for instance, as anything other than what he plainly is: a dissembling tyrant. The pretense he maintains of a republican attitude only infuriates the truly Republican senators; their reaction to his protestations of service is invariably contemptuous: 'CORDUS Rarely dissembled! ARRUNTIUS Prince-like, to the life' (1.395). But this freedom is only possible so long as they are completely divorced from the political space; by rendering them a chorus, Sejanus has virtually disembodied them — they can respond verbally, but not actively. As such, it no longer matters whether they see Tiberius as virtuous or false. The perversity of the situation is that his obvious chicanery renders him more politically secure indeed since those who refuse to accept the deception — those who use their perspectival freedom to deride it — mark themselves for death. By allowing such men the choral freedom to complain, and encouraging the generic assumption that their choral position insulates them from the 'action' of the 'drama' they observe, Sejanus has maneuvered his enemies into a position of impotence and vulnerability.¹⁵

By rendering its public life into pure spectacle, Sejanus has transformed Rome into a world where formality and ritual have become systematically ironized and where Tiberius rebuffs formal attempts to flatter him so frequently that both the flattery and its rejection have become a kind of worshipful ritual. So-called trials are nothing of the sort; the evidence is manufactured and the verdict determined beforehand. Men are raised and honored as a sign of their impending denunciation and downfall. As Marotti notes, 'the cumulative effect of the emphasis given this aspect of the play's art is to sensitize the audience so much to rhetorical self-reflexiveness that they begin to see it everywhere'.¹⁶

This sensitization does not equal enlightenment, however; Jonson is careful to show that the automatic assumption of irony in experience is a moral weakness in itself. The best example of this weakness is Arruntius, whom critics often mistakenly assume to be Jonson's spokesperson within the play.¹⁷ Arruntius's sincerity in his vituperative diatribes is unquestionable — he remains in a perpetual state of bilious catharsis. In this attitude, he seems a representative of the audience, not the author; the blurring between the 'community' of the classical chorus and its representation of the 'community' of the audience encourages this association. True to his choric role, Arruntius discerns the 'truth' of the ritual performances of his world but does no more than denounce them. His response, like that of a theatrical audience, is confined to his self-satisfied recognition of the falseness of the spectacle. As Sejanus himself comments, 'He only talks' (2.299). Jonson equates the merely

observational Agrippineans, whom Sejanus's artifice renders passively cynical, and the audience which a tragedy that disruptively evacuates its tropes produces. Both use the transgressive nature of their observed experience as an occasion for self-indulgent vanity, but nothing more. Both feel — and pride themselves for feeling — superior to the villainous Sejanus, but at the same time both depend on that villain for their own gratification.

All of Rome indeed depends on Sejanus for its political activity and social identity; even the emperor requires him to fulfill the political role of enabler and director of public reactions. To understand Sejanus is, for good or ill, to understand Rome, and it is no accident that Jonson concludes Tiberius's public appearance in the first act with the ceremonial installation of Sejanus's bust in the Pompeian theatre. The gesture is not only historically accurate, but by drawing attention to the placement of Sejanus as the dominant figure in a theatre, Jonson reinforces his dramatically critical agenda; the character assumes his place in a theatrical pantheon, his exaltation among the pantheon of other theatrical inhabitants confirming Jonson's reference to Sejanus's status as a theatrical archetype.

A perfect reflection of Sejanus's will appears, then, in the performance and reactions of the Roman populace. The only moment of serious challenge to him in the first act is the blow given by Drusus at its climax — the only moment where circumstances appear to conflict with his will. But Jonson cleverly discourages this response by having Sejanus speak directly to the audience immediately afterwards — the first character in the play so to do:

He that with such wrong moved can bear it through
 With patience and an even mind knows how
 To turn it back. Wrath, covered, carries fate:
 Revenge is lost, if I profess my hate.
 What was my practice late I'll now pursue
 As my fell justice. This hath styled it new. (1.576–81)

Again, Jonson's use of the meta-theatrical is subtle, but apparent. Sejanus shows the fluid inconsistency of character of his Shakespearean and Marlovian counterparts. From Machiavel to revenger, Sejanus slips off one performative persona and replaces it with another more performatively suitable to this latest development. Jonson thus establishes him as the moving spirit of both the ethos of the play and of its version of Rome. Sejanus characterizes himself as a figure detached from that consistency of character and action that conservatively classical drama demands, one who exploits several

performative possibilities rather than expressing his character through a consistent action.

This shifting approach to self-expression and self-portrait is confirmed almost immediately by his Senecan soliloquy in act 2:

A race of wicked acts
 Shall flow out of my anger, and o'erspread
 The world's wide face, which no posterity
 Shall e'er approve, nor yet keep silent...
 On then, my soul, and start not in thy course.
 Though heav'n drop sulphur, and hell belch out fire,
 Laugh at the idle terrors. Tell proud Jove,
 Between his power and thine there is no odds.
 'Twas only fear first in the world made gods. (2.143–62)

Though such hyperbole would not be out of place in the mouth of a mystery cycle figure like Herod, the speech is largely an inspired revision of that delivered by Atreus in Seneca's *Thyestes*: 'Age, anime, fac quod nulla posteritas probet, / sed nulla taceat' [About, my soul, to that which none after shall approve, but at which none may be silent].¹⁸ Both speakers oppose the gods in their vengeance; Sejanus vows to defy, Atreus to surpass the supernatural in his revenge: 'Fiat hoc, fiat nefas / quod, di, temetis' [Let it be, that crime, at which, you gods, you are afraid] (265–6). Jonson here may be using the moment much as Seneca does; the fact that the fury and the ghost of Tantalus unknowingly inspire Atreus undermines his vow of supernatural defiance; we may read Sejanus not as an independent spirit but rather as a tool of the Tacitean world order of increasing corruption.

At the same time, Atreus's response to this inspiration is to exceed the will of the divine — to perform an act that supersedes the cruelty the gods intend. The implication for Seneca is that not even the gods can control the outcome of their actions, and that humanity has within it a spirit independent of circumstance, free to react at will. Like Atreus, Sejanus may be a reflection of worldly corruption — but here he appears to exceed that role, turning his quest from political to ontological ends. He will defeat not only Drusus but also time itself, and if it is fear which inspires the false fancy of gods, then by becoming the progenitor of the ultimate act of terror, he will become indirectly deified. Despite the perversity and squalor of his aims, Jonson presents Sejanus in an almost classical pose of heroism: a figure who extends the boundaries of human capacity and experience, ignoring the claims of

community in achieving his own kind of hideous supremacy. His villainy may be the obverse of *arête* (the greatness of nobility representing the height from which the true hero falls), but it demands an equal degree of greatness. To become worse than the world already is, seems a staggering achievement in Tacitean Rome. But it is not admirable.

Here the parallel with Jonson's criticism of his peers becomes clear; their corruption of the tragic idiom seeks to achieve an artistry unconfined by ossified tropes of language and action, but instead only destroys any possibility of tragic meaning whatsoever — tragedy cannot exist without genre, genre cannot exist without artistic limitations and requirements. *Sejanus* and its hero offer Jonson's counterpoint in the critical debate about the over-evaluation of generic composition and its relevance to the function of tragedy. Like the Shakespearean and Marlovian heroes of this dramatized debate, Sejanus manipulates the system of performative idiom, but in doing so, he encourages a cynicism that destroys the values upon which that system is based; for Jonson, systemic cynicism, once initiated, cannot be channeled into systemic reform.

Sejanus's relationship with Tiberius reveals the infectious nature of this idiomatic cynicism, when Tiberius discloses that, after a lengthy demurrals to Sejanus's recommendation in act 2 for further purges of the aristocracy, he has agreed all along. Although it is unlikely that either Sejanus or we are much surprised by the emperor's metamorphosis from his lieutenant's student in villainy to his manipulative partner in crime, the moment leaves us in doubt as to who is in command of whom, particularly given Tiberius's choice of words:

Thy thoughts are ours, in all, and we but proved
Their voice, in our designs, which by assenting
Hath more confirmed us than if heart'ning Jove
Had, from his hundred statues, bid us strike.

(2.280–3, italics mine)

While Tiberius admits that Sejanus's confirmation is comparable to that of the Almighty, he does so after conversationally absorbing his subordinate into his perspective. Sejanus's thoughts are not his own; he is merely the expression of Tiberius's deeper intent. Despite the fact that Sejanus's imaginative efforts move the plot and structure the play, the emperor now appears the true source of authority in both.

This impression, however, is fleeting: Jonson seems to take a mischievous pleasure in forcing his audience to shift its dramatic orientation. For no sooner has Tiberius departed than Sejanus claims credit for the emperor's character:

The way to put
 A prince in blood is to present the shapes
 Of dangers greater than they are, like late
 Or early shadows, and, sometimes, to feign
 Where there are none, only to make him fear;
 His fear will make him cruel; and once entered,
 He doth not easily learn to stop, or spare
 Where he may doubt. This have I made my rule,
 To thrust Tiberius into tyranny,
 And make him toil to turn aside those blocks
 Which I, alone, could not remove with safety. (2.383–93)

Once again, Sejanus appears to encompass the Roman action and attitude we have seen so far. He correctly assesses the illusory danger from Agrippina's supporters, who never once, even in privacy, betray the slightest desire to rebel or disobey. Tiberius's decision, then, to condemn them, is ultimately self-destructive, since by killing the good, obedient men in Rome, he will be left the master only of treacherous villains. Likewise, Tiberius's earlier expressions of tyrannical cruelty are, by Sejanus's account, likewise not truly his own, but the product of his lieutenant's prodding and guidance. Whether Tiberius's character is truly a product of Sejanus's orchestration or whether Sejanus has simply fueled a pre-existing disposition towards tyranny, there can be no question that Tiberius is precisely the kind of emperor that Sejanus wants him to be. In short, by controlling both ruler and populace, Sejanus has transformed Rome into a dramatized reflection of his nihilistic will.

But within a tragic ethos, this transformation can be — indeed, must be — a self-destructive achievement. If Sejanus has shaped Rome to reflect his vision, he must himself fall within the scope of that vision. From this moment of perspectival supremacy, Jonson proceeds to limit his hero-villain's direct influence in the two acts that follow. While the senatorial trials that take up most of act 3 are certainly of Sejanus's making, he is a calculatedly silent observer for most of them: 'Nor I nor Caesar may appear therein' (3.2). Following his second, crucial collusion with Tiberius, he drops out of the action entirely in act 4. True, this absence reveals the success of his agenda;

no one can deny that everyone continues to act according to the principles and roles he has engendered. Sejanus’s absence also shows, however, that the system he has created can function quite well without its creator. Though absent, his methods of treachery and entrapment continue unabated; informers draw Sabinus in as neatly as ever.

On a more personal level, moreover, we see the same mental processes that he has bred in others continue, now with dangerous consequence to Sejanus himself. Despite his quick withdrawal of his ambitious suit to Tiberius, the emperor now regards him with a familiar suspicion. As Sejanus has represented others to Tiberius, so now Tiberius envisions him in the same threatening terms. As Sejanus used Tiberius to eliminate his opponents, so now Tiberius will use Macro to eliminate Sejanus, at which point historically versed viewers will know that Macro will kill the emperor, replacing him with Caligula, who will then kill Macro. Worse men, worse events succeed Sejanus and his crimes, and none seem capable of learning from the mistakes of their predecessors — the play most closely approaches pure satire through this bloody, imbecilic dynamic. If *Sejanus* is a tragedy, its lessons are poorly learned by its onstage observers, and Jonson clearly suggests that his own audience cannot fare better if they engage it on such a poorly instructed level.

The inscrutability of his hero amplifies this challenge to his audience. Unlike his counterparts in early modern tragedy, the play offers Sejanus as a subject of observation rather than understanding, as Anne Barton has noted: ‘Sejanus ... never reveals any inner being with whom it is possible to sympathize ... He is a bogeyman as hollow as his own statue in the theater of Pompey.’¹⁹ Who he is in public and who he is in private are one and the same; his only consistent pretense is that he is who he is in service to Tiberius. But even this dissimilitude is not much of a deception, since Sejanus and the rest of the city believe that Tiberius is largely his creature. Like the emperor, who consistently fails to persuade his audience of his republican sentiments, Sejanus never displays much interest in doing more than mastering the *form* of performance, indifferent to its affective or persuasive qualities. This fact aligns him with Jonson as a playwright, who emphasizes this agenda in composing the play.

The motive for Jonson’s method lies in what we have noticed about Arruntius’s responsive defects and the degree to which those defects are reflections of a theatrical audience numbed by self-satisfied sophistication to the ‘true’ nature of tragedy. In acts 3 and 4, Jonson suggests that the indifference of Tiberius and his lieutenant to their public reception derives largely from the

bleak fact that it does not matter what that reception may be. We are witness in act 3 to perhaps the most overtly theatrical moments of the play — the consecutive trials of Silius and Cordus — and while both they and their comrades in the gallery offer a variety of responses to the spurious proceedings, all of them prove equally passive. Silius commits an ostentatious suicide, Cordus offers an eloquent and futile self-defense and leaves the stage for good²⁰ — both moments are theatrically impressive and utterly ineffectual. Without intending to, the Agrippineans have embraced the perverse values of Sejanus, which prefer appearance to substance, gesture over action. Arruntius hails the inconsequential gestures of his fallen comrades but he is unchanged by what he witnesses. Rather, he continues in precisely the same course as before; even the bloody chaos that engulfs Rome at the play's climax does nothing to alter his perspective.

If Arruntius, then, is a figure for Jonson's audience, their failures become apparent in his reactions. For Jonson, their theatrical engagement appears to end where it ought to begin; emotional excitement ought to be, especially to a classical mind like Jonson's, the impetus to a deeper moral and intellectual engagement with the material. By making such emotional engagement difficult, and by drawing attention to both performative evacuation and its debilitating consequences within the play, Jonson has produced a masterful indictment of his audience. (That they responded to the piece with such violence may argue more discrimination on their part than he cared to admit.)

But if Jonson is arguing for a renewal of the 'true' tragic spirit — that is, a return to tragedy as a profoundly moral, political, even ontological argument — we must reconcile that argument with the apparent irrelevance of choice and error to the outcome of his characters' fates. The fact of universal doom regardless of character is the primary generic difficulty with Jonson's play — the Tacitean polis seems to deny the possibility of hamartia. Classically speaking, tragedy is the product of fate and error, of an absolute world order and of a choice that sets a protagonist in opposition to that order. Even in the dramas of Seneca (which clearly influence Jonson more than the Greek tragic mode), where doom and villainy are seemingly predestined to triumph, the shadow of stoicism offers a relatively preferable response to this state, one which allows victory of character. While there can be no question that the world of *Sejanus* contains an absolute order, however, more perversely questionable is whether one can err against this order.

If one *can*, then it must be Sejanus who does. In the final act, Jonson gives his central figure not one but two moments of surprising dramatic

expostulation. The first opens the act; not knowing that the forces are already in motion that will destroy him, Sejanus returns from his hiatus, defiantly hubristic:

Swell, swell my joys: and faint not to declare
Yourselves as ample as your causes are.
I did not live till now, this my first hour:
Wherein I see my thoughts reached by my power.
But this, and gripe my wishes. Great, and high,
The world knows only two, that's Rome, and I...
Is there not something more than to be Caesar?
Must we rest there? It irks, t' have come so far,
To be so near a stay ...

... great fires die

That want their matter to withstand them. So,
It is our grief, and will be our loss, to know
Our power shall want opposites, unless
The gods, by mixing in the cause, would bless
Our fortune with their conquest. That were worth
Sejanus' strife: durst fates but bring it forth.

(5.1–24)

Here Jonson offers us a particularly astute justification for his rejection of generic and performative revisionism as a viable solution to the contemporary problem of tragedy. Having superseded the order that confined him, Sejanus envisions the inadequacy of his success. Like those playwrights who would destroy the limits of traditional order in favour of their individualistic innovation, Sejanus creates an imaginative consummation of this desire but finds it ruins the appreciative means by which that achievement will be significant. Jonson gives his hero the foresight and the acuity to recognize that the consummation of his desires will mean, in essence, his own eradication since all he has been is a means of satisfying those desires. His vision of the world has been one of transformation based on a fundamental opposition to his original place in its order. Sejanus's speech portrays a dispersal of categorical identity, in which his ambition swells beyond the social and political and towards the ontological — he literally feels himself pushing at the outer bounds of the physical universe, the stars that mark its boundaries giving way before him. Experience, existence are contained entirely within his bodily compass. His vision is notable for its crude materialism — even in wishing

for the intrusion of the supernatural, Sejanus never evinces a belief in any spiritual or metaphysical existence.

But despite this crudity of thought, Sejanus reveals the intellectual complexity of emotional and aesthetic foresight. That is, he anticipates the inadequacy of consummation. Demanding whether the mere title of Caesar represents the utmost of achievements, Sejanus recognizes that without opposition he will cease to be what he has always been: the cohesive expression of a single passion. The realization is enough to prompt the atheist to turn believer, if only to continue his existence. The self-descriptive vision of swelling, of wholly external movement, is cruelly apt; Sejanus defines himself by what he displaces, not by what he intrinsically is. If Sejanus is Jonson's version, and criticism, of the innovative tragedy of his peers, then the parallel between his hero and these authors is devastating; like them, Sejanus has subverted and largely destroyed an old, perhaps stagnant order, but he has not offered much in the way of replacement, as K.W. Evans observes, 'There is about Sejanus an essential emptiness, as of a grotesque Hercules, a contemptible Tamburlaine. Both Sejanus and Marlowe's base-born overreachers oppose the aristocracy of birth, but Sejanus lacks the aristocracy of merit to put in its place'.²¹ But the magnificence of Tamburlaine and the wit of Richard largely disguise their similar emptiness; Jonson appears to ensure with *his* hero that no such amelioration disguises this fundamental characteristic.

For Jonson, unfettered scepticism, whether political or theatrical, is an essentially negative perspective; it derives its identity from what it is not, from what it seeks to undo, rather than from what it creates. Sejanus, then, is not a failure of a type carried off with more success elsewhere; he is an exposure of the inherent flaws both of the type and of the kind of plays it produces. The emptiness of Sejanus and *Sejanus* is deliberate, and constitutes a passionate argument against the popular tragedies of the time. By rendering Sejanus unheroic, and at the same time easily comparable to and identifiable with the heroes of other such problematic 'tragedies', Jonson exposes the contemporary corruption of the tragic mode, while the failure of Sejanus as an innovative figure argues for the similar failure of Jonson's contemporaries to produce a viable solution with this theatrical mode. Like its hero, the 'tragic' nature of this play is deliberately inadequate.

Such intentional inadequacy explains the complimentary soliloquies that follow upon the disastrous result of the ritual consultation of Fortune. Initially, and for perhaps the only time in the play, Sejanus shows both heroism and nobility — or at least, a kind of villainous stoicism:

Fortune, I see thy worst. Let doubtful states
 And things uncertain hang upon thy will;
 Me surest death will render certain still ...
 If you will, destinies, that, after all,
 I faint now, ere I touch my period;
 You are but cruel; and I already've have done
 Things great enough. (5.236–66)

His earlier speech mocked tragic heroism, given that it both assumed worldly, material success, and promised ontological frustration in such achievement. Here, however, the heroic portrait appears less subversive. The intrusion of the supernatural, the signs of which Sejanus has contemptuously and rather reasonably dismissed hitherto, suddenly becomes undeniable and prompts him to articulate, finally, a perspective of the universe appropriate to tragedy. Though the things of which he is proud are monstrous, they are also great; one cannot claim to have moved the world more than has Sejanus. Realizing now the inadequacy of materialism in the face of the metaphysics of fate, Sejanus calmly and fearlessly defies the forces that appear poised to destroy him. His argument — and it has some validity — is that within a wholly material experience, man's ability to control his destiny must likewise be limited to the material. If fate is, by definition, obscure and unchangeable, then no material action, great or small, good or evil, can alter or even predict it. In defying such a universe, in reinvesting human experience with meaning, despite the attempts of the supernatural to quash such significance, the human subject approaches the level of heroism required by tragedy. That Jonson chooses a villain to make this claim argues for the play's satiric nature, but it does not change its humanist and its nearly tragic dimensions.

But having shown us this possibility of tragedy, Jonson retreats from any such generic fulfillment. Immediately afterwards, Sejanus hears the false news that Tiberius has nominated him for the tribunitian power (and thus made him heir apparent). His reaction is a complete reversal and rejection of his prior humility and heroism, revealing him to be entirely at the dispositional mercy of contingency:

How vain and vile a passion is this fear!
 What base, uncomely things it makes men do...
 By you, that fools call gods,
 Hang all the sky with your prodigious signs,
 Fill earth with monsters, drop the Scorpion down,

Out of the zodiac, or the fiercer Lion,
 Shake off the loosened globe from her long hinge,
 Roll all the world in darkness, and let loose
 Th'enragèd winds to turn up groves and towns!
 When I do fear again, let me be struck
 With forkèd fire, and unpitied die:
 Who fears, is worthy of calamity. (5.382–99)

This Marlovian return to his hubristic self does more than simply give the comic lie to Sejanus's earlier stoicism; it also reinforces the argument of the irrelevance of the hero's character to the drama's outcome. In the space of a few minutes, Jonson has shown both of the possible orchestrations of the denouement; by offering us both the moment of humility and the moment of hubris, he has given us his hero in the two emotional extremes that may precipitate *peripeteia*. Either Sejanus will march into his defeat with foreknowledge and defiance (like Richard) or he will be taken in triumph (like Tamburlaine). In neither instance will choice or action affect the outcome.

The nature of fortune and fate, synonymous in this play, means that decay and downfall are inevitable — that is, they are not the result of character, but ontology. We see this certainty in the unrelenting destruction of every major figure, good or bad, active or passive, wise or foolish. Sejanus and Tiberius are villains, and in some sense magnificent ones, but neither will be spared. Arruntius, Silius and their comrades are virtuous, but no form of virtue in this play is adequate to withstand collapse. The play even deflates the humble stoicism of Cordus, which Seneca might have proffered as a reactive model, by its association with the passive submission to wickedness that the 'good men' display. Failure's inevitability, then, undermines the capacity for error that defines true tragedy, and we are left to choose between those who are greatly wrong and those who are simply suicidal. Neither type can slow or alter the course of fate, and the chaos that erupts in Rome at Sejanus's downfall is merely a repetition of this process. The people of Rome who once grovelled at Sejanus's feet (and thus ratified his cynical exploitation of their weakness) tear his body to pieces in an orgy of violence that threatens the city (and thus ratify his cynicism regarding their bestial nature). Both reactions are appalling, and, to conclude this shocking portrait of the polis, Jonson adds the report that their sudden violence has given way to improbable repentance:

Part are so stupid, or so flexible,
 As they believe him innocent. All grieve,
 And some, whose hands yet reek with his warm blood,
 And grip the part which they did tear of him,
 Wish him collected, and created new. (5.893–7)

Sejanus has become the Dionysus of the dithyramb, dismembered by the community that now longs to reassemble and revive him. Given Sejanus's ultimately petty nature, however, we cannot read this resemblance as anything other than a final irony, revealing the inadequacy of the tragic form in a world that cannot appreciate the true meaning of tragedy. Rocco Coronato compares the conclusion to 'a carnival with no resurrection', and 'the senseless, "stupid" festivity that constantly seeks repetition, in the vain hope that even what has been torn into pieces can be "created new"'.²²

Such empty repetition is all the play can offer, given its critical re-creation of the shallowness of contemporary tragedy. Sejanus has only *seemed* to be the tragic hero, making the gestures but never achieving that figure's substance. Like Richard and Tamburlaine, he has built his reign on deceptive appearance, but Jonson includes such performatively self-referencing heroes in the catalogue of vapid forms which his villain masters. The chaotic core to his character, the willingness to accept *tyche* as the sole arbiter of greatness, is a sharp rebuke to the nature of progressively disruptive tragedy. To worship Sejanus is to worship Fortune, and to worship Fortune is, as the play reveals, to worship nothing. It is only by that educated, self-restrictive classicism Jonson so prized that the stage can produce a truly sound and meaningful state, or tragedy. *Sejanus*, then, is not a true tragedy. But it is infused with an enthusiasm, and respect for tragedy that many of the looser plays of its time are not. Clearly intended as a corrective rather than as a model, it seems to have suffered from succeeding too well. Jonson's bitterness at the popular reaction to the play must have been tinged with satisfaction that the failure of his tragedy with the general public validated his portrait of a corrupted genre and its audience.

Notes

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- 1 Ben Jonson, 'Apologetical Dialogue', *Poetaster*, David Bevington, Martin Butler, Ian Donaldson, et al. (eds), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, 7 vols

- (Cambridge, 2012), 209–19. All references to Jonson’s writings will be to this edition, identified parenthetically by act and line number, or by page number where appropriate.
- 2 Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison, 1960), 84. I should add, however, that the play may be beginning to show signs of life as a popular offering, as the RSC mounted a well-received production in 2005.
 - 3 Joseph Allen Bryant, Jr., ‘The Significance of Ben Jonson’s First Requirement for Tragedy: “Truth of Argument”’, *Studies in Philology* 40 (1942), 203.
 - 4 T.S. Eliot, *Elizabethan Essays* (London, 1934), 69.
 - 5 Ornstein, *Moral Vision*, 86.
 - 6 Arthur Marotti, ‘The Self-Reflexive Art of Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus*’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 12.2 (1970), 197.
 - 7 Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge, 1984), 94. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511518836>
 - 8 We might immediately list *The Jew of Malta* and *Hamlet* as equally metatheatrical works without ever leaving the Marlovian/Shakespearean canon, and Kyd, Marston, and Middleton are profoundly metatheatrical in their compositions.
 - 9 We might note that those who, in Jonson’s dramas, argue for the perpetual applicability of timeless values are never vindicated in this belief.
 - 10 See, for example, Francesca Santo L’Hoir’s *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus’ Annales* (Ann Arbor, 2006), 97–101.
 - 11 Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, John Jackson, et al. (eds), *Tacitus* 5 vols (Cambridge, 1937), 3.267.
 - 12 Ellen O’Gorman, *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus* (Cambridge, 2000), 80. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511482335>
 - 13 *Tyche* refers to the experience of events as happenstance — coincidental occurrences unrelated to cause, effect, or control. It differs from fate in that it remains essentially meaningless upon reflection — random luck, in short. Ethos, the knowable character of man, is of course the basis for much of tragedy, in combination with daimon, the unknowable. The source for these definitions and all use of Greek terminology throughout derives largely from Werner Jaeger’s *Paideia* (Oxford, 1939), Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York, 1988), as well as the canonical terminology of Aristotle.
 - 14 Russ McDonald, ‘Jonsonian Comedy and the Value of *Sejanus*’, *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 21 (1981), 290. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/450150> See also David Farley-Hills, ‘Jonson and the Neo-Classical Rules in *Sejanus* and *Volpone*’, *Review of English Studies, New Series* 46.182 (1995), 158. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/res/XLVI.182.153>

- 15 I say Sejanus has done this, because the play substantially encourages us to view him, rather than Tiberius, as the primary genius of Rome. But the issue is deliberately cloudy and creates much of the tension in the play.
- 16 Marotti, 'Self-Reflexive Art', 207.
- 17 See Philip J. Ayers's Introduction to *Sejanus his Fall* (Manchester, 1990), 25.
- 18 Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Thyestes*, John G. Fitch, ed. *Tragedies* 2 vols (Cambridge, 2004), 2.192–3. Further references will be to this edition, identified by volume and line number. Daniel Boughner has previously noted this source for Jonson.
- 19 Barton, *Ben Jonson*, 97.
- 20 Historically, Cordus committed suicide soon after this incident, a fact that Jonson does not seem to feel necessary to include given the obvious implications of public accusation within the Tiberian state.
- 21 K.W. Evans, 'Sejanus and the Ideal Prince Tradition', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 11 (1971), 260. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/450063>
- 22 Rocco Coronato, *Jonson versus Bakhtin: Carnival and the Grotesque* (Amsterdam, 2003), 64.

