

Review Essay

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New Directions in Jonson Criticism

Ben Jonson has seen a surge of popularity among early modern critics in the last forty years, and the zeal shows no sign of abating. Between the 2012 publication of *The Cambridge Works of Ben Jonson* and a number of excellent monographs on Jonson's work on such diverse topics as the dramatist's classism, his city comedies, and his poetry and poetics, Jonson scholarship is as vital as ever. Among the recent critical work on Jonson are Ian Donaldson's lively *Ben Jonson: A Life*, Victoria Moul's masterful *Jonson, Horace, and the Classical Tradition*, A.D. Cousins and Alison V. Scott's *Ben Jonson and the Politics of Genre*, and Matthew Steggle's *Volpone: A Critical Guide*. These works reveal Jonson criticism's current preoccupation with the author's investment in politics, in literary fame, and in the role art plays in both. While exploring Jonson's concern with fame and politics, Moul, Cousins, and Scott also return to a possibility that has long troubled Jonson scholarship — the suspicion that Jonson, a court poet dependent on the patronage of figures like William Camden, the Sidneys, Sir Robert Cecil, and James I, at times played the role of sycophant, flattering men (like Cecil) whose political actions and religious intolerance he elsewhere condemned.¹ Both books reveal Jonson's wariness of being charged with flattery in his court poetry, masques, and plays, and work through Jonson's process of negotiating his economic dependency and political ideals. Although their methods and focus differ, they reach a similar conclusion: Jonson's political and artistic

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vision depends on a poet who understands the difference between flattery and praise, and between mean satire and judicious advice. Sycophancy is external to good poetry and (what amounts to the same thing) good politics.

Donaldson's *Ben Jonson: A Life* also documents Jonson's political engagement, but the biography, spanning the full canon of Jonson's works, offers a less unified representation of Jonson's political ideals. Or, more accurately, Donaldson records how the ideals central to Jonson's aesthetic work themselves out in the complicated circumstances of the poet's life. Donaldson's biography sheds light on the work, rather than using the works to interpret the man — a trap into which previous generations of criticism have tended to fall. The essays in Steggle's *Volpone: A Critical Guide* similarly challenge received stereotypes of Jonson's work as misogynistic and anti-theatrical — assumptions that, as the stage and critical histories of *Volpone* reveal, we have inherited from the eighteenth century.

Altogether, these four books reveal that Jonson's political and aesthetic ideals are not reducible to one narrative, even when we understand Jonson as a gathered self. Even at their most centred, Jonson's political and aesthetic ideals are not reducible to one narrative. Peter Kirwan's descriptions of the two different Jonsons revealed in *The Cambridge Works of Ben Jonson* and the Twitter profile for the Ben Jonson's Walk project, then, are particularly apt in characterizing the state of recent Jonson criticism.² Cousins and Scott succinctly describe the trend: 'Critical inquiry into the ways in which Jonson adapted his work for different audiences and different readers ... has led some critics to speak of many different Jonsons'.³ The renewed attention to Jonson's works attending *CWBJ* and its side projects initiates and accompanies a reconsideration of the 'centered' Jonsonian author figure that Thomas Greene so seminally outlined in 1970.⁴ Critics like Moul, Cousins and Scott, and even Donaldson retain a relatively conservative position, choosing to construct more nuanced readings of the gathered self beneath Jonson's works; others, like the authors in Steggle's volume, re-read the works with more attention to Jonson's preoccupation with topics that do not gather neatly, including ageing, female subjectivity, academic success, theatrical collaboration, the realities of city life, and the negotiation of comic farce and moral instruction. All four books, however, attempt to make sense of the 'many different Jonsons' we are uncovering in the collected works.

Donaldson's biography is an almost-direct companion to *CWBJ*: one of the general editors, Donaldson acknowledges that the biography itself was 'delayed but ... enhanced' by his work on the project.⁵ A reflection on James

Loxley's discovery of a journal kept by an unknown companion of Jonson on his walk to Scotland offers one of the more obvious enhancements.⁶ Donaldson locates in this journey many of the recurring thematic, academic, and political concerns of Jonson's works. As a result, the first chapter, which covers the years 1618–19, constitutes the only break in the chronological structure of the narrative before Donaldson goes back to consider Jonson's Scottish ancestry. But placing this late event early in the biography enables Donaldson to tackle the origin of many caricatured conceptions of Jonson that have undergirded previous generations of criticism: the *Informations to William Drummond of Hawthornden*, 'the richest single primary source of information about Ben Jonson's life'.⁷ Finally, the chapter observes the extent of Jonson's literary and public fame during his lifetime as crowds of people thronged to meet him at various stops on his journey.⁸ In the wake of the eighteenth century's adoration of Shakespeare, we often forget that Jonson was a literary celebrity during his writing career. But fame is central to Donaldson's biography: he explores why Jonson was so popular. The answer seems to be that Jonson was involved in many of the major literary, social, and political events of the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries.

Jonson's concern with his literary fame — and the workings of fame generally — is a theme which crops up in several chapters of the biography, but most obviously in chapter 15: 'Fame 1613–16' (not coincidentally, the years immediately following some of his greatest stage successes and immediately preceding the 1616 folio). Other recurring narrative strands include Jonson's Catholicism and the politics attending his conversion, Jonson's possible sympathies with the Essex faction (a connection which haunted him in the events surrounding the Gunpowder Plot), and Jonson's continued pursuit of an academic reputation. The narrative grounding the entire work, however, is that of the political Jonson: whether in his quasi-official position as court masque writer; his patronage by James, Anne, and other court figures; his imprisonment along with Chapman and Marston for political satire against the Scots and James's sales of knighthoods; his first-hand experience of state-imposed religious oppression; his oblique connections to political factions; or even his retreat from politics into academic friendships and debate, Jonson was always politically engaged.

Donaldson's style is energetic and good-humoured, containing amusing Jonson-related anecdotes, but the book is also carefully historicized. His aim is to construct a narrative that avoids the usual caricatures of Jonson (misogynist, anti-theatricalist, envious quarreler, self-lauding arrogant flatterer)

by mediating between the four major obstacles to writing Jonson's biography: 'Characterizing', Jonson's quasi-autobiographical but mostly fictional descriptions of himself in poems like 'My Picture Left in Scotland' or 'A Celebration of Charis in Ten Lyric Pieces';⁹ 'Remembering', the idealized or melancholic recollections of himself and others through a 'historical prism' in works like the *Informations* and *Timber, or Discoveries*;¹⁰ 'Impersonating', Jonson's stylizing of himself after poets like Horace, which should prompt us to question the degree to which his writing reflects the actual events of his life;¹¹ and 'Surrogates', representations of Jonson in plays like *The New Inn* or *Every Man out of His Humour* who colour our perceptions of Jonson.¹² As a biography, then, Donaldson's book is judiciously considered, weighing these different representations of Jonson with his writing and with historical documents and criticism. He enjoys an occasional and entertaining foray into supposition, such as when Donaldson wonders what Jonson's walking companion meant when he recorded that Jonson 'made fat Harry Ogle his mistress' or, more seriously, when he considers the possibility that the lost *Isle of Dogs* may have had some connection to Essex's failed attack on the Armada during the Azores expedition.¹³ He always returns to sound historical fact, however, while admitting the limits of our knowledge.

As literary criticism, too, Donaldson's book provides careful readings of Jonson's canon with an approach inflected by new historicism and materialism. It addresses misconceptions like Jonson's supposed anti-theatricalism with a generous but realistic examination of supporting and non-supporting evidence: for example, chapter 6, 'Entering the Theatre', comments on the probable wariness with which Jonson began his acting and playwriting career, noting that early modern London was generally dubious about the playhouses located in the disreputable liberties of the city.¹⁴ But we can weigh these early misgivings against Jonson's long relationship with the public stage and his efforts to immortalize both his own work and that of Shakespeare. The biography provides a refreshingly humanized and accessible version of Jonson, and will hopefully help shape future approaches to Jonson-as-author-figure.

Donaldson concludes by suggesting that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen a kind of Jonson renaissance.¹⁵ Steggle's volume supports this optimistic notion. While the collection focuses particularly on *Volpone*, the topics it covers are at the forefront of Jonson scholarship generally. Thus although Steggle introduces the play by noting the ways it differs from Jonson's other city comedies (citing, among other factors, its unusually harsh

ending), it in fact shares a number of thematic concerns and critical problems with Jonson's other dramas that make it of broader interest.¹⁶

Like Donaldson's biography, the volume's individual chapters implicitly challenge received stereotypes: Frances Teague's essay offers an alternative to a version of Celia as the product of misogynistic poetics, while Rick Bowers and Rebecca Yearling both stress the play's lively theatricality, putting paid to the idea that *Volpone* is anti-theatrical. The essays read well together, sometimes working in concord (the critical trends Sam Thompson outlines have their match in Yearling's performance history, while Teague and Stella Achilleos focus on different aspects of the more cynical qualities of the play), sometimes negotiating polar arguments that are equally compelling (Bowers's emphasis on performance for performance's sake sits uneasily with Teague's and Achilleos's assertions that something darker is at work). The juxtaposition of such arguments invites readers to reconsider disparate elements of the play: its humour, comic vitality, morality, and aesthetic concerns. A complete and nuanced reading of the play is the result.

The volume's intended audience includes instructors and students encountering the play in the classroom or independent study. Chapters by Robert C. Evans and Matthew C. Hansen on 'The State of the Art' and 'Resources for Teaching and Studying *Volpone*', respectively, suit this need admirably. Evans's chapter covers recent critical work on the play '(2001–2009)' ranging from sources and contexts to performance and editions, though unfortunately predates Dutton's edition of the play in *CWBJ*.¹⁷ Hansen also reviews editions suitable for classroom use and proposes ideas to structure lectures, group discussions, and essay topics. He suggests projects beyond the traditional essay, many of which involve thinking about the play in performance in context with historical, textual, and critical resources.

The remaining chapters take up major critical arguments on the play. In a brief reading of his favourite passage (5.3.66–75), Steggle introduces many of these topics: the physicality of *Volpone*'s stage business, the richness of its language, ageing, the overlapping of "literature" and performance, imprisonment, and dark humour.¹⁸ One wishes for greater attention in the volume to the play's commedia dell'arte and beast fable traditions, con artistry, and gender, but these omissions are due mainly to the chapter limits of the 'Critical Guide' series structure.

Teague argues that the play is 'concern[ed] with imprisonment', aligning Celia and Volpone who both find themselves trapped and under surveillance.¹⁹ Two aspects of Teague's essay are particularly intriguing. First,

she notes often-overlooked facets of Celia: she speaks back to her husband, ‘call[ing] his bluff’ in 3.7 — a welcome change from readings dismissing her as moral type.²⁰ She defends Celia’s seemingly naive trust in providence by observing that she has no realistic alternative: ‘human error’ has led to her legal condemnation.²¹ Second, Teague challenges Foucault’s argument that institutional surveillance did not exist until the eighteenth century: ‘*Volpone*’s emphasis on how the characters are watched suggests that surveillance was also a feature of the seventeenth-century world’.²²

Achilleos’s chapter presents age as another kind of imprisonment. Authors like Aristotle, Seneca, and Hippocrates ‘typified senescence as a progressively incurable disease’.²³ This attitude prevails in *Volpone*, which ‘burlesques senescence’ but also ‘explor[es] ... the fears and anxieties related with that condition’.²⁴ Corbaccio receives a diligent rethinking: hardly interchangeable with the other legacy hunters, he represents the early modern loathing of senescence and its refusal to die.²⁵ *Volpone* mocks Corbaccio’s desire to remain alive while describing death with ‘an equal amount of contempt and disgust’, but his memory of playing young Antinous indicates *Volpone*’s awareness that he is no longer the lusty young man he was.²⁶ His desire to control the legacy hunters is akin to Corbaccio’s desire to ‘disrupt’ the ‘intergenerational cycle of reciprocity’ that would otherwise see him dependent on Bonario.²⁷

Bowers considers how funny the play is, locating much of its humour in its capitalizing on the grotesque: its juxtaposition of Lady Would-be and Nano’s comically mis-sized bodies in 2.1 or *Volpone*’s ‘magnificently ... grotesque body’ and insistence on decadence — from his first ‘inedible breakfast’ of gold to his fantasies in the seduction scene.²⁸ Bowers refocuses attention on the play as a performed object and balances out its notoriously dark elements. Critics like Teague, claiming that the play is ‘less comic than most’, might protest that his argument swings too far away from these elements.²⁹ Bowers, for example, dismisses the Epistle (the departure point from which many critics inspect *Volpone*’s morality) as ‘rather exterior to the play’ even if it admits ‘multifarious subjectivities and responses to comedy’.³⁰ Yearling’s chapter navigates these positions. She records that performances have tended either towards the farcical, emphasizing speed, absurdity, and comic sexuality, or towards the cynical, playing *Volpone* himself with ‘menace’.³¹ Theatre critics, however, seem most satisfied with performances that strike a ‘balance between savagery and comedy’.³² We do well to remember this balance.

The story of *Volpone* on stage is one of neglect and reclamation. The eighteenth century lost interest in the play and not until the twentieth did *Volpone*

find its audience. Directors have struggled with the best way to produce it: whether to cut the Would-bes, to emphasize the beast fable, or to modify the ending to deliver a more romantic comedy.³³ Ultimately, however, Yearling's chapter stresses the enduring appeal of the play, both intellectually and as comic entertainment.

Thompson notes that criticism, like performance, has 'reached many extremes'.³⁴ Jonson's own Epistle initiated the contest between 'moral purpose and formal perfection' that dominated criticism of the play in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁵ His departure from neoclassical standards increasingly led eighteenth-century critics to condemn Jonson as less perfect and pleasurable than Shakespeare, an assessment from which he only began to recover in the twentieth century with increasing revivals of the play and Herford, Simpson, and Simpson's landmark edition of the works.³⁶ Thompson adds that the play fits happily with twentieth-century critical methods and theoretical approaches (for example, new historicism and psychoanalysis).³⁷ The chapter poses a number of questions about the play's form and appeal that are well worth thinking about.

Bednarz's chapter disputes the misconception that *Volpone* and Jonson himself were anti-theatrical.³⁸ He forwards an alternative reading, reminding us that the early modern definition of 'poet' did not exclude dramatists: 'When Jonson calls himself a "poet" ... he ... distinguish[es] between ... the "poets", such as himself, who were intent on restoring the "ancient forms and manners" of drama; and the "poetasters" and "playwrights" who ignorantly deformed it'.³⁹ The letter also refers to the 'rules of art',⁴⁰ pointing to aspects of the play that are most relevant in performance: the unities of time and place. In swerving from the rules Jonson shows he is valuing successful performance over artistic theory.⁴¹ Bednarz's argument fits well with Yearling's, Hansen's, and Bowers's efforts to underscore the meaning *Volpone* gains when considered as performance. Comprehensively, the volume presents a *Volpone* where the comical is serious and the serious can be read meaningfully through the comic, a balance that Jonson, in his city comedies, excels at striking.

The conception of Jonson's political ideology in Cousins and Scott's collection is inflected — and perhaps somewhat skewed — by its primary focus on poems and masques. Beyond Tom Cain's chapter on *Sejanus* and *Catiline* and Richard Dutton's on *Volpone*, attention to works for the public stage is scant. Exploring less-frequently-covered works is a virtue, but the omission of many of Jonson's comedies raises questions about how unified Jonson's

political vision actually was. Would we have a different picture of his politics if more of the comedies were considered?

The editors open with the Bakhtinian premise that different genres offer different representations of the political, a departure point that promises the exploration of different Jonsonian political visions as well as a close attention to generic constraints and methods.⁴² Most of the chapters in the volume, however, do ultimately reflect a shared vision of Jonson's political aesthetics. Genre itself often seems to be of secondary importance in many of the essays: a number of the authors identify works as representative of a genre but focus more on how the internal details of those paradigms work towards supporting Jonson's political vision. Scott's chapter on the masques, Cain's work on historical tragedies, and Marea Mitchell's chapter on romance, however, are exceptions and explore more explicitly the modes and constraints by which their respective genres work and their relation to the political.

Cousins's 'Feigning the Commonwealth: Jonson's *Epigrams*' introduces the political vision that underlies many of the chapters. Cousins takes up Donaldson's thesis in *Jonson's Magic Houses* that 'Jonson creates in the Epigrams a kind of pantheon of national worthies ... whose virtues are deserving commemoration'.⁴³ He reads his 'commonwealth' through Seneca and Lipsius, from whom Jonson draws the ideals of 'constancy, understanding, and kingship'.⁴⁴ Constancy (the 'gathered self') grounds itself in Stoic understanding or reason; understanding informs an individual's constancy and virtue;⁴⁵ both 'find their common apex' in the crown.⁴⁶ The chapter defines the volume's image of the political Jonson: a figure who embodies these virtues and fosters virtues in others — in his commonwealth, his readers, and even James. The different genres explored in the remaining chapters reveal 'a different series of strategies' for expressing similar ideals.⁴⁷

Many chapters work towards clearing Jonson from the charge of sycophancy. In Cousins's essay Jonson praises James, the earl of Pembroke, and Sir Thomas Roe in order to emulate and associate with good men and create a 'mythographic order of his own fashioning'.⁴⁸ Scott's chapter explores the masques. Rooting Jonson's political stance in Seneca and Cicero, she exonerates Jonson from sycophancy by arguing that he follows classical principles of decorum involving truth and *kairos*, the notion that timeless truths must be adapted 'in responding to a given situation'.⁴⁹ Jonson's masques do not flatter, but find ways of praising constant virtues even in commissioned works. At the heart of Scott's essay is Martin Butler's argument that historicist approaches have led to 'formulaic and transhistorical' understandings

of masque politics.⁵⁰ Both Butler and Leslie Mickel argue that individual masques negotiate power in specific and individual ways even as they work to uphold 'the values of order of the court' as Jonathan Goldberg claims.⁵¹ Scott's case studies examine the relationship of masque and antimasque, a relationship that highlights 'trifles' as 'vital to decorum'; thus the masque 'stages the redemption from triviality through measure'.⁵² The expansion of the argument to suggest that Jonson's masques all work towards the same political and aesthetic goal, however, may raise questions about how much details of specific masques ultimately matter.

Evans's work on country house poems returns to the myriad ways we can approach the 'political'.⁵³ He elects to consider two major critical positions regarding Jonson's 'To Penshurst'. One side posits that the poem represents an almost apolitical ideal. The opposing side, initiated by Raymond Williams, contends that its celebration of 'charity' is flawed: the poem fails to reflect real social relations in the country.⁵⁴ Evans refutes Williams by comparing 'Penshurst' with 'To Sir Robert Wroth'. Unlike 'Penshurst', 'Wroth' is 'bluntly satirical' proving that Jonson is not a mere sycophant.⁵⁵ The two poems are variations on the same political vision: 'in one poem he ... teach[es] mainly by praising virtue and ... in the other poem he ... instructs mainly by condemning vice' — a valid argument, though it need not exclude Williams's reading.⁵⁶ As Evans himself observes, 'Penshurst' contains traces of criticism: surely Jonson's poem can question the plausibility of the 'Eden[ic]' world it celebrates even as it negates those interrogations.⁵⁷

Roe's chapter returns to the 'many different Jonsons' populating Jonson criticism. Many critics see Jonson as a political theorist constructing a world 'beyond the grubby and corrupting reach of contemporary forces'; others regard him as a sycophant, flattering his patrons.⁵⁸ Roe's chapter admirably negotiates these positions. He isolates moments where Jonson must praise people he would rather not: for example, *The Speeches at Prince Henry's Barriers* celebrates a militarism of which Jonson disapproved.⁵⁹ But Jonson actively worked to avoid the charge of flattery, following *Prince Henry's Barriers* with 'Wroth' (which commends peace) and reminding patrons that his poetry functions as moral repayment for monetary gifts. Jonson's 'versatility' enabled him to navigate the positions of dependent sycophantic poet and mutual spiritual friend.⁶⁰

Cain's discussion of 'Jonson's Humanist Tragedies' again defends Jonson as committed political idealist. While Jonson's sources for his tragedies are classical, 'humanist' historians like Camden and Robert Cotton influenced

his methods.⁶¹ Jonson writes ‘humanist’ tragedies, appropriating historical events as analogues for contemporary circumstances.⁶² *Sejanus* and *Catiline* dramatize periods of tyranny, and mark Jonson’s increasing championing of ‘freedom of speech and limitation of the absolute powers of the monarch’.⁶³ *Catiline* ultimately celebrates the virtuous Cicero over the state power itself, and both tragedies identify bad leaders and their flattering advisors as a source of national poison.⁶⁴

The remaining chapters are less preoccupied with Jonson’s classically inflected political vision; Mitchell, Dutton, and Eugene D. Hill instead frame his works as responses to the political and literary events of James’s reign. Mitchell argues that Jonson responded to an increased space for women during the reign of James and Anne. ‘Charis’ asserts that ‘a woman can be as indiscriminating about sexual partners as any man’ and that masculinity is often ‘sexual performance’ merely.⁶⁵ The *Urania* expresses disappointment that ‘inconstant and infatuated men ... fail to match the standards and practices of their female counterparts’, finally arguing that women cannot be held responsible for chastity when men are not.⁶⁶ ‘[B]oth works militat[e] against a fixed or uniform perspective’.⁶⁷ While one wishes Mitchell had space to examine the relationship between comedy and lyric verse or compare epistles to lyrics, her essay refreshingly contrasts with the masculinist perspective of the political Jonson dominating the volume and is a sound contribution to both Jonson and feminist criticism.

Dutton returns to his influential reading of *Volpone* as political satire in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot, reviewing previous arguments before examining the metempsychosis drama in 1.2 alongside Donne’s ‘Metempsychosis, or the Progress of the Soul’.⁶⁸ Both works take ‘issue’ with ‘the perverse exploitation of religion by Cecil in pursuit of wealth and power’.⁶⁹ While Jonson may not have deliberately wanted to offend Cecil, on whom he relied for legal and economic support, the interchange between Mosca and Volpone following the drama — of which Mosca claims he is the ‘dramatist’ — and Mosca’s attempts to turn on Volpone in act 5, perhaps suggest Jonson’s dissatisfaction with his patron and a desire to punish him.⁷⁰ Dutton’s argument provides a satisfying conclusion to his work on *Volpone*, presenting a politically engaged Jonson who is less idealized than in previous chapters. This Jonson partly finds his political motivation in personal suffering and revenge fantasies.

Hill’s brief chapter intervenes in an ongoing critical argument about whether the *Discoveries* is ‘literary imitation’ or ‘literary plagiarism’.⁷¹ Hill

considers the quotation on the *Discoveries's* title page, drawn from Persius ('live in your own house, and recognise how poorly it is furnished'), arguing that we must read it through Isaac Casaubon's early modern translation to understand that Jonson is inviting us to read the *Discoveries* as 'an assemblage of applicable commonplaces for political writing'.⁷² Hill leaves this work to future scholars. The idea is compelling, positioning Jonson as a (very unconventional) political theorist; we must wait to see if anyone acts on Hill's invitation.

Cousins, Scott, Hill, and Roe all read Jonson through his classical sources. Unsurprisingly, their chapters share much in common with Moul's book, the first 'monograph ... devoted to Jonson's appropriations of Horace'.⁷³ Moul stages 'textual "encounters"' between Jonson, Horace, and other classical and early modern poets; these encounters are 'active ... conversations' involving 'appropriation and rivalry rather than mere resemblance'.⁷⁴ Moul argues that when we do pay attention to his Horatianism, we tend to think of Jonson alluding to, or worse, plagiarizing. But Moul stresses that Jonson was not merely borrowing from Horace's work, but taking up the problems that preoccupy Horace and reworking them to suit the political contexts in which he wrote. Jonson, moreover, never reads solely through Horace: at one moment Horatian grace interrupts Martialian satire (chapter 2), at another Juvenalian satire poses a challenge to Horatian grace (chapter 3). Sometimes Jonson uses a specifically 'Pindaric' Horace (chapter 1); at others Jonson sets out to 'out-Horace' Horace. Familiarity with classical poetry allows access to a more thorough knowledge of Jonson's poetic strategies and his political aims and challenges.

Acquiring enough familiarity with classical literature to really understand how Jonson uses his sources is for most scholars a major stumbling block. Moul's classical background proves helpful here, enabling her to provide detailed readings of several of Jonson's poems — ranging from oft-discussed works like the *Epigrams* to a wide selection of his ungathered verse (UV) — and to pair her interpretations with the source poems, providing both the Latin original and an English translation. The juxtaposition enables line-by-line commentary and the highlighting of subtle tonal and thematic changes in Jonson's work. The results are illuminating interpretations of poems that would not be transparently readable to scholars lacking Moul's background.

The central narrative of her book is similar to that in Roe's chapter (above). Jonson constantly negotiates writing in a patronage economy while

maintaining ‘*libertas*’, a Horatian emphasis on free speaking that allows the poet to repay and stand on equal ground with his patron.⁷⁵ ‘Horatian *Libertas* in Jonson’s *Epigrams* and *Epistles*’ is the subject of chapter 2. Moul considers Jonson’s encounters with Horace and Martial, through readings of ‘Inviting a Friend to Supper’, ‘To My Book’, and the ‘Epistle to Edward Sackville’ (among others). Many critics have commented on the echoes of Martial’s epigram 10.48 in ‘Inviting a Friend’, notably Greene who observed that, although Jonson borrowed from Martial, his own poem is different in ‘tone’ and ‘texture’.⁷⁶ The difference between the poems lies, Moul argues, in the Horatian source of Martial’s poem, Epistle 1.5. A reading of Horace’s poem next to Jonson’s and Martial’s reveals Jonson’s epigram is more like Horace’s than Martial’s.⁷⁷ Jonson does, however, adapt portions of Martial into his Horatian poem — hence the mixture of ‘humour and seriousness’ in ‘Inviting a Friend’.⁷⁸ Jonson’s Horatianizing of Martial reveals his desire to ‘balanc[e] praise ... and blame ... almost equally’ (whereas Martial tends to blame and Horace to praise).⁷⁹ The favouring of Horace allows Jonson to emphasize the difference between ‘*libertas* and satiric ‘licence’.⁸⁰ Because the poet has the ‘grace’, restraint, and sincerity to know the difference, he can maintain equality with men like Edward Sackville whom he praises and advises, without becoming indebted to his patron’s gifts.⁸¹

Libertas guards the poet against devolution into a sycophant or poetaster and protects good politics and art. In chapter 4 Moul reads *Poetaster* and takes up the question of literary ‘translation’. Crispinus attacks Horace’s literary translations, a word Crispinus interprets as ‘plagiarism’.⁸² But ‘translation’ is central to not only ‘the attack upon Horace’ but also ‘Virgil’s vindication’ of him and the definition of “translation” ... not as plagiary but as art’.⁸³ Moul focuses her analysis on an oft-‘condemned’ scene in the play, 3.5, and points to it as a ‘dramatisation of Horace, *Satires* II.i’.⁸⁴ *Poetaster* develops a Horatian theme: ‘that words — poetry — cannot be used to ... write imperial epic’.⁸⁵ In *Poetaster* the poet must reject Caesar’s expectations and use his poetic judgment to write in favour of peace and Caesar’s real virtues (a pertinent theme given Jonson’s preference for peace over martial valour).⁸⁶ The poet’s discretion again frees him from any charges of flattery from envious poetasters. The Horace of Jonson’s play echoes *Satires* 2.1 in order to criticize the play’s Caesar.⁸⁷ Although Horace’s lines undermine his authority, Caesar also appears virtuous in speaking some of Horace’s best lines: ‘It is Horace who questions Caesar’s glory, but it is also Horace who creates it’.⁸⁸ Jonson’s allusions to *Satires* 2.1, then, develop a latent theme in

Horace — the ability of the poet to correct, give virtue to, and immortalize political power. Jonson models what makes a good poet by developing the Horatian mode onto the contemporary stage, and in doing so he speaks relevantly to the current political milieu.

As in Cousins and Scott's volume, good politics and good art go hand-in-hand for Jonson; their coalition produces good fame: the poet's own and his ability to immortalize others. This theme recurs throughout Moul's book, but is most explicit in the chapter 'Horatian Lyric Presence and the Dialogue with Pindar', which focuses on five poems: the 'Epistle. To Elizabeth the Countess of Rutland' (*Forest* 12), the ode to Sir William Sidney (*Forest* 14), the ode to James, earl of Desmond (UV 25), the 'Ode Allegorike' to Hugh Holland (UV 6), and the famous Cary-Morrison ode (*Underwoods* 7). Jonson draws on Horace when he is 'at his most vatic — that is, when he is most like Pindar':⁸⁹ in poems like *Odes* 4.8 and 4.9 where Horace stresses the poet's ability to grant immortality.⁹⁰ The Jonson poems suggest that poetry acts as a return — and even bettering — of monetary gifts from one's patron, and that poetry does not flatter made-up virtues or worldly victories but, as in the ode to Sidney, 'urge[s] triumphant virtue rather than ... celebrating a recent achievement'.⁹¹ The poem to the earl of Desmond and the Cary-Morrison ode most illustrate the poet's glory: that he can 'redefin[e] what might be termed a victory'.⁹² Jonson's Pindaric-Horatian odes celebrate not only the poem's subjects but also Jonson, who in writing transformative verse rises 'to the glorious fulfilment of lyric power'.⁹³ Jonson's interest in fame clearly marked much of his writing career (as Donaldson suggests).

Many chapters imply Jonson's struggle to construct patronage relations in which *libertas* can flourish. Material corruption, envy, and charges of flattery and plagiarism are constantly at the edges of the poet's awareness. Moul's exploration of Jonson's use of Juvenal centrally examines these threats, considering how Jonson negotiates between ideal and reality by balancing Juvenalian and Horatian satire. The chapter's touchstone is a reading of Asper in *Every Man out of His Humour*, who could claim the right to 'attack named individuals' but stops short of doing so, just as Horace and Juvenal do.⁹⁴ Instead, the worthy poet displays qualities of discrimination and 'grace', choosing to praise the worthy (monarchs or patrons) whose virtue gives them power to overturn the satiric world.⁹⁵ The chapter, however, also points to the fragility of Horatian grace when in 'Penshurst', 'Wroth', and 'To the World' allusions to Juvenal's satires and Horace's caustic *Epode* 2 and *Satires* 2.7 interrupt ideal Horatian worlds.⁹⁶ Moul's reading of 'Penshurst'

generally agrees with Evans's that the poems sincerely praise the Sidney family, although the echoes from Juvenalian and Horatian satire remind us that the Sidneys offer only momentary respite from a world in which envy and corruption are normal.⁹⁷

The four books discussed in this review draw a picture of a political Jonson who is constantly concerned with his role in the court and in changing court factions, who is deeply engaged with the fate of England as it shapes its national identity, who is always concerned with the aesthetics of his works, and who is particularly aware and anxious about the gap between ideal and lived relations between readers/audiences, authors, and patrons — always wanting to establish mutually beneficial relationships grounded in classical virtues, but constantly threatened by the need for economic and social resources. Jonson's masques, poems, satires, and tragedies, fascinatingly, seem to be the most overtly political of his works — though this impression may be the consequence of a move in Moul's monograph and Cousins and Scott's volume (as well as Donaldson's biography) to provide coverage of Jonson's oeuvre, and to fill critical lacunae. All three works provide valuable additions to areas, like the tragedies, which traditionally have received less critical attention than the poems and comedies. Yet one wonders how those old favourites, the city comedies, fit into these political readings of the Jonson canon. Donaldson's chapters on the city comedies and the essays in Steggle's volume suggest that these plays are politically engaged, though perhaps they are differently engaged than the poems, masques, and tragedies. The essays in *Volpone: A Critical Guide* indicate that comedies like *Volpone* offer a complex environment in which different kinds of (ageing, female, grotesque, persecuted, victimized, and criminal) bodies might intersect with notions of the political. In future we will perhaps see how notions of the 'political Jonson' expand as the same questions and explorations Moul, Donaldson, and the authors in Cousins and Scott's volume try out on the poems and masques are extended to the city comedies and their representation of the London in which Jonson wrote.

Notes

- 1 This charge is the inverse of the accusation of anti-theatricality critics also frequently level at Jonson.

- 2 Peter Kirwan, 'Situating Ben Jonson: The Cambridge Edition of the Works', *Early Theatre* 17.1 (2014), 159-61. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12745/et.17.1.8>.
- 3 A.D. Cousins and Alison V. Scott, 'Introduction', A.D. Cousins and Alison V. Scott (eds), *Ben Jonson and the Politics of Genre* (Cambridge, 2009), 5. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511575648>.
- 4 Thomas M. Greene, 'Ben Jonson and the Centered Self', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 10.2 (1970), 325-48. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/449921>.
- 5 Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford, 2011), vii.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid, 24, 47, 49.
- 8 Ibid, 39, 41-2.
- 9 Ibid, 11-12.
- 10 Ibid, 13-15, 15.
- 11 Ibid, 15-18.
- 12 Ibid, 18-20.
- 13 Ibid, 43, 118-20.
- 14 Ibid, 100.
- 15 Ibid, 439-41.
- 16 Matthew Steggle (ed.), *Volpone: A Critical Guide* (London, 2011), 2.
- 17 Evans, 'State of the Art', *ibid*, 72-3.
- 18 Steggle, 'Introduction', *ibid*, 6.
- 19 Frances Teague, 'New Directions: Ben Jonson and Imprisonment', *ibid*, 131.
- 20 *Ibid*, 135.
- 21 *Ibid*, 140.
- 22 *Ibid*.
- 23 Stella Achilleos, 'New Directions: Age and Ageing in *Volpone*', *ibid*, 152.
- 24 *Ibid*, 146.
- 25 *Ibid*, 148.
- 26 *Ibid*, 151, 161-2.
- 27 *Ibid*, 156.
- 28 *Ibid*, 107, 109.
- 29 Teague, 'Ben Jonson and Imprisonment', 138.
- 30 *Ibid*, 122-3.
- 31 Rebecca Yearling, '*Volpone* on the Stage', *ibid*, 38.
- 32 *Ibid*, 42.
- 33 *Ibid*, 45, 49.
- 34 Thompson, 'Critical Backstory', *ibid*, 8.
- 35 *Ibid*.

- 36 Ibid, 16.
- 37 Ibid, 19.
- 38 James Bednarz, 'New Directions: Jonson's Literary Theatre: *Volpone* in Performance and Print (1606–1607)', *ibid*, 83.
- 39 Ibid, 91–2.
- 40 Ibid, 93.
- 41 Ibid, 94, 97.
- 42 Cousins and Scott, 'Introduction', *Ben Jonson and the Politics of Genre*, 1.
- 43 A.D. Cousins, 'Feigning the Commonwealth: Jonson's *Epigrams*', *ibid*, 15.
- 44 Ibid, 14.
- 45 Ibid, 14.
- 46 Ibid, 32.
- 47 Cousins and Scott, 'Introduction', 6.
- 48 Cousins, 'Feigning the Commonwealth', 34.
- 49 Alison V. Scott, 'The Jonsonian Masque and the Politics of Decorum', *ibid*, 43.
- 50 Scott, 'The Jonsonian Masque', *ibid*, 43.
- 51 Ibid, 45.
- 52 Ibid, 52.
- 53 Robert C. Evans, 'The Politics (and Pairing) of Jonson's Country House Poems', *ibid*, 73.
- 54 Ibid, 75.
- 55 Ibid, 82.
- 56 Ibid, 86.
- 57 Ibid, 76.
- 58 Roe, 'The Politics of the Epistle', *ibid*, 91.
- 59 Ibid, 100.
- 60 Ibid, 112.
- 61 Tom Cain, 'Jonson's Humanist Tragedies', *ibid*, 164.
- 62 Ibid, 166.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Ibid, 184, 180.
- 65 Ibid, 122, 123.
- 66 Ibid, 126.
- 67 Ibid, 129.
- 68 Richard Dutton, 'Jonson's Metempsychosis Revisited: Patronage and Religious Controversy', *ibid*, 145.
- 69 Ibid, 150.
- 70 Ibid, 154.

- 71 Eugene D. Hill, 'A Generic Prompt in Jonson's *Timber, or Discoveries*', *ibid.*, 190–1. The distinction comes from Ian Donaldson, who observes that Jonson was himself concerned with this differentiation.
- 72 *Ibid.*, 192, 195.
- 73 Victoria Moul, *Jonson, Horace and the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, 2010), 2. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511711978>.
- 74 *Ibid.*, 212.
- 75 *Ibid.*, 81, 93.
- 76 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 77 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 78 *Ibid.*, 62.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 81 *Ibid.*, 90, 81.
- 82 *Ibid.*, 138.
- 83 *Ibid.*
- 84 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 85 *Ibid.*, 150.
- 86 *Ibid.*, 153.
- 87 *Ibid.*, 170.
- 88 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 89 *Ibid.*, 53.
- 90 *Ibid.*, 18–20.
- 91 *Ibid.*, 19, 23, 28.
- 92 *Ibid.*, 40
- 93 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 94 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 95 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 96 In 'Penshurst' Jonson's delight in not being envied by servants is marred by the lines' echoing of Juvenal's *Satire 5* where envious servants ruin his dinner.
- 97 Moul, Jonson, *Horace and the Classical Tradition*, 130–1.

