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## **‘[Overhearing]’: Printing Parentheses and Reading Power in Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus***

*This essay posits that the earliest printed edition of Sejanus shows how power is not inherent to particular statements or actions, but apprehended, rather, in their relationships to the responses around them. Conventionally, critics find the emperor Tiberius to be in control of events in the play, and textual scholars argue that Jonson shapes the text in order to ensure this interpretation. Here, though, I show how techniques of marking parentheses present different kinds of onlooking and overhearing on the page, and I suggest that these techniques mark a strategy of allowing and sustaining multiple interpretations of Jonson’s Tiberius.*

In summarizing the events of Ben Jonson’s play *Sejanus*, James Loxley presents a simple story:

Sejanus is a self-seeking villain who rises by the favour of the emperor, Tiberius, and is then deserted when his ambition destroys the trust between them — in Sejanus’s request to marry Livia, the widow of the emperor’s son (himself a victim of Sejanus), Tiberius finally locates a threat to his own position.<sup>1</sup>

This take on events does not seem a remarkably controversial reading, and is perfectly in keeping with the full title given the play when it first appeared in quarto in 1605: *Sejanus his Fall*, a bald announcement of the protagonist’s demise. That title reiterates the ‘argument’ Jonson appended to the play, which remarks that when Sejanus ‘labours to marry *Liuia*’ it ‘inkindleth [Tiberius’s] Feares, & there giues him first cause of doubt, or suspect toward *Seianus*’ (A4r). William Sights, in his reading of the play, goes further, finding Sejanus’s eventual fall outright unsurprising:

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I differ considerably from those who believe that Tiberius is seriously threatened by Sejanus or any other political dissident. His word alone is finally heard. Competing texts such as Cordus's annals ... are suppressed, indeed, sought out and burned.<sup>2</sup>

The two summaries differ in their evaluations of Sejanus's means to topple the emperor. Importantly, too, their differences gesture towards the complexity of 'threat' as a literary effect: Slight's, for example, invokes a criterion of degree in judging whether or not Tiberius is ever '*seriously* threatened' (my emphasis), which raises a number of questions to do with the recognizing of threat as well as the posing of it. How, for instance, does a threat appear to manifest? And how does a reader decide a threat is only *apparent* rather than *actually* or 'seriously' manifest? How does the threatened subject make that distinction? And how are we as readers to know whether that threatened subject has recognized a threat at the same time as we have?

Critical orthodoxy regarding *Sejanus* tends to style Jonson's Tiberius as a figure consistently in the know: in introducing his 1990 edition of the play Philip J. Ayres described him as 'the epitome of astute Machiavellian manipulation and cool cunning', while Emma Buckley refers to 'the controlled, Machiavellian Tiberius of Jonson's play' in her recent analysis of the 1605 quarto's marginal notes.<sup>3</sup> At various and frequent localized points throughout the play, though, critics only infer that Tiberius is 'controlled' in his behaviour; his 'cool cunning' does not obviously always govern that behaviour. In 1925 C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson noted 'the expressive oddities of manner, the perplexed and hesitating speech, the habitual silences, the laconic commands' that they thought characteristic of Jonson's Tiberius, a series of quirks also noted by Ayres in his introduction to the play.<sup>4</sup> For Ayres, those foibles are active constituents of Tiberius's 'cool cunning', but he is elusive on how exactly they facilitate the outcomes that he perceives as the emperor's desires:

His hesitant speech rhythms and the parenthetical side-tracks that mark his thought processes are from Tacitus, where they heighten the sense of his complexity and self-doubt, but Jonson probably kept them only because in his play they effectively reinforce our impression of Tiberius as a devious 'engineer'.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay I explore these methods further, and will establish the means by which Jonson organizes Tiberius's speeches so that they can be construed both ways by a reader, as representative of self-doubt, characteristic of an emperor who

only ‘finally locates a threat to his position’, *and* as representative of a devious will at work, that of an ‘engineer’ never ‘seriously threatened’.

### Typographic Strategies and Deliberate Unhelpfulness

In the case of *Sejanus* the literary techniques Jonson used to construct Tiberius are augmented by the very particular ways in which the character presents himself in print. The textual appearance of the 1605 edition of *Sejanus* has attracted no little comment in itself, and indeed M.J. Kidnie goes so far as to remark, when introducing her edition of the play, that

Jonson’s peculiar relationship with the theatre is nowhere more evident than in the quarto text of *Sejanus*, which was presented to the reader less as a blueprint for dramatic performance than as a finished literary masterpiece.<sup>6</sup>

The margins of the quarto are crowded with Latin historical notes, their number and particularity such that, as Herford and Simpson remarked, they would likely have ‘imposed a severe test upon a printer’ (in the case of the 1605 quarto, George Eld).<sup>7</sup> Other textual apparatus include a number of commendatory verses, a note to the readers, and the expository argument to the play. In sum these features are often taken — as they are by Kidnie — to be ‘indicative of the manner in which Jonson engaged with the play when reworking it for print publication’; an engagement which Emma Buckley finds aiming to address ‘the disastrous reception afforded *Sejanus*’ first public performance at the Globe in 1604’ along with ‘the charges brought against [Jonson] of “popery and treason” as a result of the play’.<sup>8</sup> And, in keeping with Kidnie’s view of the book and its being constructed as ‘a finished literary masterpiece’, Buckley describes Jonson’s work with Eld as an effort ‘to create a protective carapace for the play in the form of a buttressing array of Latin notes, complemented by an “Address to the Reader” in order ‘to steer interpretation pre-emptively’ (my emphasis).<sup>9</sup>

There are two conclusions at stake in such accounts of the play. The first holds that a reader can discern clearly what Tiberius wants: the ‘controlled, Machiavelian Tiberius of Jonson’s play’ is taken to preside over events which are discernibly consistent with his will. A second and related conclusion holds that Jonson carefully manufactured such a reading for us, and that a reader can discern clearly what he wants based on a textual analysis of the earliest printed editions of the play. Buckley finds, then, that

even as Jonson postures as a model of scholarly *auctoritas*, using Latin citation to shield himself from the charge of partisan interpretation, his marginal practice fragments, re-orders and even rewrites the classical sources. The result is a highly personal interpretation of Tiberian Rome and a readership firmly under the control of his authorizing direction.<sup>10</sup>

Viewed another way, though, the play's earliest print presentation serves to alert readers to the multiple different possible views that might surround any given incident. Indeed Buckley provides examples of some marginal notes which she terms 'uncharacteristically vague', and she finds that 'what looks like uncharacteristic sloppiness' in such cases can also be seen to appear 'less like laziness and more like deliberate unhelpfulness'.<sup>11</sup> If we take up Holger Syme's suggestion that an 'interest in print as a *medium for performance* can be traced in the typographic strategies Jonson and some of his contemporaries ... devised for their plays', the 'deliberate unhelpfulness' Buckley detected in only a few marginal notes might in fact be a wider compositional strategy governing the play's print presentation *in toto*; an unhelpfulness which requires that a reader imagine the play in performance while, at the same time, frustrating that effort of imagination.<sup>12</sup> Broadly speaking, both Syme and Buckley direct their studies towards the verbal content of the earliest editions' paratextual apparatus (Buckley analyzes the play's marginal notes and compares them with those surrounding Matthew Gwinne's *Nero*, while Syme considers the effects of those notes being replaced with stage directions in the version of the play included in the 1616 *Workes*).<sup>13</sup> Both, too, argue overall that these processes of print presentation are aimed at fixing a reader's understanding of what is going on in the play. Here I argue that the print presentation of the 1605 *Sejanus* acts, rather, to problematize that understanding. In what follows I show that the 'typographic strategies' described in any study of the 1605 quarto must also account for several non-verbal aspects of the play — namely, the carefully ambivalent ways in which particular phrases and particular speakers juxtapose with one another, as seen on paper and as imagined occurring on stage.

### **'to interpret and elucidate the implied action'**

Among the 'principle features of editorial method' laid out by the 2012 *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, the reader learns of a problem encountered in the editing of Jonson's plays:

Since Jonson's texts use stage directions comparatively sparsely, the editors have supplied additional directions where necessary to interpret and elucidate the implied action. However, we have avoided 'novelizing' the action of the plays or attempting to foreclose interpretative possibilities where the action is ambiguous.<sup>14</sup>

The way *Sejanus* has been written particularly challenges those attempts to 'interpret and elucidate the implied action'. A representative sample of Tom Cain's interpolated stage directions indicates the unusual crowdedness of Jonson's stage throughout the play:<sup>15</sup>

*[Silius and Sabinus converse aside as Satrius and Natta  
are joined by Latiaris]* (1.23)

*[Arruntius, Silius, Cordus, and Sabinus stand aside as Drusus  
and Haterius walk around the stage.]* (1.105)

*[Enter Sabinus, Gallus, Lepidus, and Arruntius. They confer privately.]* (3.13)

*[Tiberius and his followers confer privately. The Germanicans  
talk quietly among themselves.]* (3.463)

Critics have noted of the play that — as Jonathan Goldberg puts it — 'all eyes are focused outward, everyone is busy observing others', and indeed these stage directions of Cain's convey the busy, snooping society that Jonson puts on stage, seeking to demonstrate clearly who talks to whom, who observes and who is observed.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, the busyness of this stage resists such editorial clarification, and in such cases it may simply be impossible to 'interpret and elucidate the implied action' without foreclosing the localized, interesting confusions that Jonson seeks.

We can note, to this end, that the demands of *Sejanus* are such that some of the stage directions introduced in modern times begin to assert more than what would be immediately evident when enacted: there are occasions in the Cambridge version of the play, for example, where Cain has had to make an editorial judgment as to how much characters have heard or seen, and how (and if) they respond. Characters do not simply confer; they do so, sometimes, 'privately':

*[They converse among themselves, observed at some distance by Arruntius  
and Lepidus, who comment privately on them.]* (4.410)

*[The clients of Sejanus, who have been whispering among themselves, now speak  
aloud, while Lepidus and Arruntius speak privately to each other.]* (4.479)

Previous editors of the play have demurred from providing this much information in the stage directions at the equivalent points in their editions, but most still show an effort to demarcate and distinguish separate groups of speakers. The 1981 *Complete Plays of Ben Jonson* edited by G.A. Wilkes described itself in a neutral tone as ‘a modernized ... version of the text of Volumes III–VI of the Oxford Jonson (edited by Herford and Simpson, 1925–52)’. Strikingly, however, part of its modernizing process involves intervening to put brackets around the lines ascribed to Lepidus and Arruntius here, something that the Herford and Simpson edition didn’t do in its conservative treatment of the 1616 folio text.<sup>17</sup> Jonas Barish affirms in a stage direction that ‘[*Arruntius and Lepidus stand aside*]’ at this point in the Yale edition of 1966, and in his Revels edition Philip Ayres works throughout the scene to draw groups of speakers distinct from one another, specifying the direction of an address on a number of occasions:

ARRUNTIVS [*To Lepidus.*] List, (4.412)

ARRUNTIVS [*Aside.*] That the dear smoke would choke him,  
That would I more.

LEPIDVS [*Aside.*] Peace, good Arruntius. (4.434–5)

In such instances we might adduce whether characters have heard or have not heard a particular remark based on their response to it — as, for example, when Cotta intrudes on a conversation in act 3 ([*Overhearing*], according to Cain (215); an action left undescribed by all other modern editors). At other points in the play, though, Jonson eludes such certainty. When Macro tries three times to get Sejanus’s attention in act 5, for example, Cain’s clarifying stage direction is interestingly qualified:

MACRO Sejanus, Sejanus!

[*Sejanus appears not to hear.*]

Stand forth, Sejanus!

SEJANVS Am I called? (5.649–50)

Cain’s ‘appears’ highlights the limits of the reader’s certainty, and functions as an elegant solution to an acute editorial conundrum: here Cain finds it ‘necessary to interpret and elucidate the implied action’, but to assert that Sejanus has definitively heard Macro (or that he hasn’t) would foreclose a number of ‘interpretative possibilities’. Like many editors Cain has input stage directions so as to clarify the dramatic situation for the reader; so successfully, in fact, that this stage direction has to explicitly affirm a localized state of uncertainty, a state which pervades the play in its entirety when read in the quarto edition.

Indeed the play's print presentation in the 1605 quarto does remarkably little to clarify such situations. In making her case that 'the printer's copy underlying the quarto came not from the playhouse but from Jonson's study', M.J. Kidnie notes 'the entire lack of scene breaks and stage directions, the large number of missing cues for characters' entrances and exits, ... and non-specific massed entrances'; the quarto text is, overall, notably devoid of the explicit dramaturgical descriptions to which modern readers are now accustomed.<sup>18</sup> At several key junctures in the play this presentational approach enables Jonson to test the reader's faculties of theatrical interpretation, where the page does not assert how present a given character is in a given situation, nor how actively they are involved in it. Such moments of uncertainty accumulate to effect the contentions noted at the beginning of this essay: questioning, at end, the extent to which events in the play are ultimately under Tiberius's control.

We encounter one such example when Opsius and Rufus send Latiaris as a spy to coax traitorous sentiments from his erstwhile friend Sabinus. Here, the premise of a person's loyalty to the emperor is shown to be very uncertain indeed: presented in isolation, Sabinus's arrest makes for baffling reading:

LAT[IARIS]. *Caesar* sleeps,  
And nods at this?

SAB[INVS] Would he might euer sleepe,  
Bogg'd in his filthy Lusts.

OPS[IVS] Treason to *Caesar*.

RVF[VS] Lay hands vpon the Traytor, *Latiaris*,  
Or take the name thy selfe.

LAT I am for *Caesar*.

SAB Am I then catch'd?

RVF How thinke you sir? you are.

(IIr)

Given the presentation of this passage in the quarto, a reader has to go to some effort to work out that Latiaris is not being accused of treason himself. Rufus and Opsius have been watching the conversation between Latiaris and Rufus, but on joining them, textually, at least, a reader cannot readily comprehend what Rufus is talking about and who he is speaking to. Is he telling Latiaris to lay hands upon the traitor? Or is he saying that Latiaris is the traitor, and that, therefore, Sabinus and Opsius should detain him? Eventually the verbal *melée* is organized into a dialogue and so one of these readings takes precedence; a query, from Sabinus, 'Am I then catch'd?', meeting a direct response, Rufus's 'you are', meaning Sabinus,

not Latiaris, is the traitor in question. Even here, though, the interposition of yet another contingency defers Rufus's answer: 'How thinke you sir?'; even here, we cannot know quite to whom Latiaris speaks. Does he tell Sabinus triumphantly ('I am for Caesar!'), or say it plaintively to Rufus and Opsius? Latiaris's outburst, 'I am for Caesar', may try to clarify what is unclear about the situation, but presented in the text without a direction, it sustains a frisson of confusion for readers.

'Lay hands vpon the Traytor, *Latiaris*, / Or take the name thy selfe.' These words are not just an isolated point of grammatical ambiguity. Opsius and Rufus have watched on at a remove, and so their levels of participation in the scene they look at are not clear. Their object to begin with, certainly, is to trick Sabinus into speaking treason, to reveal his alliance with Sejanus, to reveal that he too wishes to see the emperor deposed, and they withdraw to watch:

RVF ... Pray *Ioue*, he will be free to *Latiaris*.

OPS He's alli'd to him, and doth trust him well.

RVF And hee'll requite his trust?

OPS To doe an Office

So gratefull to the state, I know no man

But would straine neerer bands, then kindred.

RVF List,

I heare them come.

OPS Shift to our Holes, with silence.

(H3v)

The 1605 text does not signal to the reader how much Rufus and Opsius hear of the exchange that follows, nor how exactly they react to it. Given that both are here discussing how trustworthy Latiaris is — and that discussion is interrupted — the subsequent instruction 'Lay hands upon the Traytor, *Latiaris*' becomes especially problematic. What have Rufus and Opsius heard? Is it possible that Latiaris's line 'Caesar nods, and sleepes at this?' has itself been considered treasonous? Throughout this sequence the meaning of every utterance is dependent on those others contextualizing it, and, with a multiplicity of different possible combinations, this network of verbalized contexts is shifting constantly. While trying to understand the Rome that Jonson depicts, where so many characters are always potentially traitors or always potentially spies, the local, logistical problems we encounter in reading resemble the suspicions and anxieties encountered by the characters themselves (To whom is a character speaking? For whom is a character speaking?) This very particular kind of difficulty makes readers find Tiberius so perplexing;



and, like many of the characters around Tiberius, readers tend to construe their own perplexity as a manifestation of his power.

**‘The master Prince / Of all the world, *Seianus*,’**

When Jonathan Goldberg says of the play that ‘all eyes are focused outward, everyone is busy observing others’, it draws our attention to the ways in which the value of what someone says, or does, and even, eventually, what someone *is*, ends up corrupted or at least complicated by the acts of observation around them. Tiberius is especially scrutinized in this way: we see him most frequently in expressly public contexts. Goldberg offers Tiberius’s early response to a kneeling courtier as an example of this public mode (‘We do not endure these flatteries; let him stand’), arguing that this demonstration reveals something rather more complex than inherent power. The meaning of his instruction is not fixed, and its consequences are not presented as inevitable at point of utterance.

An action has occurred, corresponding, no doubt, to the desires of those who espouse republican hopes, or still dream republican dreams. Yet the action, which, reduced to Tiberius’s words and the response of the kneeler to them, bears an apparent meaning, is not permitted to rest in that meaning.<sup>19</sup>

‘The man’, Goldberg notes, ‘commanded by Caesar, presumably rises’.<sup>20</sup> That command’s value, though, finds validation in its responding action, formulated by ‘Tiberius’s words *and*’ (my emphasis) ‘the response of the kneeler to them’. Goldberg points out that this is not a value ‘permitted to rest’ here, for Jonson adulterizes this dialogic relationship of act and response, exposing that act to other present spectators. As is the case when we are uncertain how much Opsius and Rufus were involved in the scene they witnessed from their hiding places, we also struggle here to settle who each phrase is for, and so, forced to refer to its context to understand it, must admit that we do not know which context to refer to. Here Tiberius may be a benign emperor, inviting his kneeling subject to stand; he may be publicly demonstrating the obedience of his subject to his will, obtaining an unquestioning performance corresponding to an instruction; he may be showing off a commitment to a new egalitarian order, or he may be bluffing it, performing it as a sop to appease the onlooking grumblers.

At such junctures a given character might be an active interlocutor or a passive witness to a given statement, and elsewhere Jonson toggles between the two in a still more teasing way. Earlier in the play Tiberius enters, asking for ‘the

now court-god' — 'is yet *Seianus* come?' (D3r) — and Sejanus presents himself, affirming 'H'is here, dreåd *Cæsar*'. Tiberius's retinue is dispatched:

TIB Let all depart that chamber, and the next:  
 Sit downe my Comfort. When the mafter Prince  
 Of all the world, *Seianus*, faith, *he feares*;  
 Is it not fatall?

SEI Yes, to thofe are fear'd. (D3r)

Nobody else present, this situation doesn't pose the reader the same practical problem of resolving whom Tiberius is talking to. In placing Sejanus's name in a parenthetical position in Tiberius's sentence, though, Jonson tips something of a wink to the reader. We know of Sejanus's ambitions, and Jonson's syntax ghosts forth 'the master Prince / Of all the world, Sejanus' in such a way that our awareness of those ambitions acknowledge what might be an in-joke shared between author and reader. Furthermore, Tiberius might be in on the joke too, he, too, aware of Sejanus's ambitions — but here a reader can't be certain, and so the scene progresses presenting a Tiberius who is inscrutable to the reader, with the reader particularly aware of this inscrutability.

By nesting phrases parenthetically within one another and so exploring the connections between grammatical ambiguity and wider, dramaturgical ambiguities to do with the direction of particular addresses, Jonson draws his reader's attention to characters' acts of interpretation as they happen on the imagined stage. When various readings are possible, Jonson shows us too how characters come to choose one in particular. Here, for example, after some twenty-five lines in which the two have spoken generally about the ins and outs of maintaining political power, Tiberius eventually gets round to the subject of why he wanted to talk to Sejanus:

TIB Knowes yet, *Seianus*, whom we point at?

SEI I, Or elfe my thought, my fenfe, or both do erre:  
 Tis *Agrippina*?

TIB She; and her proud race. (D3r-v)

Sejanus offers an answer, and by doing so affirms Tiberius's use of the name as addressing him rather than describing him. It would be a speculative reading indeed to posit that Tiberius breaks off to muse to himself while Sejanus is still present ('I wonder if Sejanus knows I'm pointing at him?'); nevertheless, the syntax used solicits interpretative effort from the listener. 'Sejanus' rather than 'you' renders Sejanus third-person to the conversation, and the parenthetical construction

of the sentence allows its meaning to be constructed according to a variety of different combinations. Here again, the listener's response sustains a multiplicity of possible readings: 'I', though a fairly stock abbreviation for 'aye', hardly resolves the matter, and it's similarly unhelpful to balance the starting premise — do you know what I am talking about? — on further contingency: 'Yes — or else I'm wrong'. The presentation of this exchange on the page emphasizes that Sejanus is offering a particular interpretation out of others possible, and that, by offering his reading, he forecloses those other interpretative possibilities.

On several more occasions Tiberius's speeches are framed in this way, so that his listeners are offered two different possible ways of interpreting them; where, on the one hand, phrases might be read as occurring in parenthesis, or, on the other, as occurring consecutively, in process, the later altering the earlier. When Tiberius rejects the Senate's plans for a temple built to his honour, for instance, he does so like this, conceding the following:

Returne the Lords this voice, we are their Creature:  
 And it is fit, a good, and hone<sup>r</sup>t Prince,  
 Whom they, out of their bounty, have in<sup>r</sup>trusted  
 With <sup>r</sup>o dilate, and ab<sup>r</sup>olute a power,  
 Should owe the office of it, to their <sup>r</sup>euice[.] (C2v–C3r)

In the 1605 quarto the placement of commas in the passage signals especially the possibility of parenthetical construction. While Tiberius talks here, ostensibly, so innocuously about his subservience to the senate, the precise location of 'so dilate, and absolute a power' as that under discussion has been left unresolved, a power — depending on whether the clause is read as strictly parenthetical or not — either bestowed upon Tiberius by the act of instruction, or accompanying the instruction given to him and belonging to the Senate. Such commas agitate conjunctions, when they would, uninterrupted, clarify the relationship between the parts of his sentence. If such marks flag a tic peculiarly characteristic of the way Tiberius talks (what Herford and Simpson called his 'perplexed and hesitating speech', and Ayres his 'hesitant speech rhythms'), then this tic has some fairly serious syntactical consequences riding on it.

Some rough and ready figures go some way to quantify the argument that these syntactical peculiarities and the ways in which they are highlighted by (someone's) punctuation are most present and most apparent to the reader in Tiberius's speeches. The scene already considered in which Tiberius and Sejanus speak alone is a demonstration of how differently the two operate. The conversation between the two, uninterrupted and unseen by any other character, where

everyone else attendant is sent from ‘that room, and the next’, would seem to show Sejanus demonstrating a clear control over Tiberius. Verbally, at least, Sejanus overbears the emperor by a sizeable margin, speaking some 2071 words following the departure of everyone else from the stage and before Tiberius’s own exit. Tiberius, in comparison, speaks only 303 words in this time. Much of this scene seems to present Sejanus suggesting, or arguing, and Tiberius eventually agreeing with what Sejanus says. Tiberius normally organizes his few words into questions or small objections, which he abandons and never extends and never reiterates. Though a good many critics may affirm that Tiberius, a Machiavellian and ‘devious engineer’, is in control of events, here, typically, he doesn’t give express voice to his desires and intentions. While arguably ‘his word alone is finally heard’ come the play’s conclusion (as Slights puts it), in instances like this Tiberius’s word is — comparatively — barely heard at all.

In scenes like this, though, the punctuation marks in the quarto text have the effect of drawing a reader’s attention to other dynamics at work around the purely verbal. Tiberius, speaking far fewer words than Sejanus, has proportionately far more commas speckling his speeches, forty-five to Sejanus’s 129 in all. Sejanus’s tendency in this scene to talk at length, and to expand his arguments fully, offers a marked difference in the way each positions himself in speaking to the other. The ratio of commas to words is a crude measure, but it confirms the sense that Tiberius and Sejanus speak in strikingly different ways: in this scene, a comma occurs in Tiberius’s speeches for every fifteen words and in Sejanus’s speeches for every fifty-one. Even in small snatches of dialogue there are discernible differences:

TIB We will command  
 Their ranke thoughts downe, and with a  $\Uparrow$ tricter hand  
 Than we haue yet put forth, their traines mu $\Uparrow$ t bate,  
 Their titles, fea $\Uparrow$ ts and factions.

SEJ Or your State,  
 But how Sr. will you worke? (D4r)

Sejanus finds Tiberius elusive on his methods, asking ‘how Sr. will you worke?’ No wonder: Tiberius has contrived his description to elude any active verb in its second clause. The ‘ranke thoughts’ will be commanded down, but following that the configuration of ‘a stricter hand’ to ‘their traines’, and ‘their titles, feasts and factions’, is incomprehensible. The relationship between all these objects is left splayed limply on a dative ‘with’; whether the trains must be bated, or else must bate, is unclear, and, thanks to this ‘with’, the reasons for either are similarly left unstated. The elusiveness is partly one of terminology, granted, but between the

comma following ‘downe’ and that following ‘forth’ a see-saw of weighting is put tipping, where one or other must serve to distinguish one clause from another. Here, the precise relationship between Tiberius’s ‘command’ and what his followers ‘must’ do is lost between possible constructions — a state of affairs that can be said to be more generally applicable to the mode in which Tiberius operates throughout the play.

### ‘a masterpiece of riddles’

As instructive as the punctuation of early modern printed texts might prove to be, our conclusions about it must accommodate the caveats that we cannot know for sure who put a particular punctuation mark in the extant text, nor, for sure, the extent of deliberation that governed its placement. Granted, Jonson’s own extensive musings on punctuation — published later in *On English Grammar* — could endorse the view that he was the party most likely responsible for most (or all) of the commas that interest us here. Indeed Sara Van Den Berg goes so far as to argue the following:

Anyone who edits Jonson’s work edits an editor. To investigate his punctuation is to investigate not only his specific practices but, even more importantly, his theory of the text.<sup>21</sup>

More pertinent still to the present discussion, the copy of the 1605 quarto *Sejanus* currently held in the British Library (Ashley 3464) appears to contain an amendment to the punctuation made in Jonson’s own hand: a comma is inserted on E4 verso, in the same ink as that used on the title page for a holograph dedication to Jonson’s friend Sir Robert Townshend (inserted comma in bold):

TIB Approach you noble Nero, noble Drusus,  
 These Princes, Fathers, when their Parent died,  
 I gaue vnto their Vncle, (E4v)

This is a striking and an unusual instance where an author’s hand has intervened overtly in the pointing of the extant printed text (if, indeed, it is Jonson’s hand). What it tells us is limited on two counts, though: first, this single authorial intervention cannot be taken as evidence of a sustained attention to and endorsement of all other punctuation marks used in the text. Second, in this instance, the comma penned in serves to resolve what would otherwise be a logical nonsense

(how could Tiberius have given multiple fathers to the uncle of Nero and Drusus once their father had died?).

Furthermore, what interest we accord the punctuation marks in the printed *Sejanus* can't be expected to yield any direct insight into the delivery of Jonson's lines in the earliest performances of the play. As Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern point out,

Pointing (punctuation) was not generally one of the ways in which words were pre-selected for the actor ... though all remaining parts are lightly punctuated (as are all remaining manuscript plays) punctuation varies markedly from script to script (in a far greater way than words do).<sup>22</sup>

That said, the examples considered so far have shown how parenthetical constructions and the pointing of them may conduce to an overall strategy of 'deliberate unhelpfulness' which, at various junctures, arises from a reader's imagining co-present and contending staging possibilities while interpreting the text in front of them. Although these commas cannot be said to stand as records of any actual performance, we have seen in this play that their effects require, nevertheless, that we relax the distinction made by M.J. Kidnie who argues that the 1605 *Sejanus* 'was presented to the reader less as a blueprint for dramatic performance than as a finished literary masterpiece'.

Placing the two media in such a conceptually exclusive and adversarial relationship, Kidnie's description of the printed *Sejanus* rules out the ways in which some of the text's features engage (implicitly) with particular aspects of the play's dramaturgy. This is most clear when we reflect upon passages in the quarto which have distinct, discrete dialogues clearly marked, unlike those instances considered so far where it has been left unclear who is talking to whom. On the very first page of the play's beginning, for example, it seems Sabinus breaks away from a conversation with Silius to talk instead with Latiaris:

SIL[IUS] But yonder leane  
A paire that doe.

(SAB[INUS] Good Co<sup>rr</sup>en Latiaris.)

SIL *Satrius Secundus*, and *Pinnarius Natta*,  
The great *Seianus* Clients;

(B1r)

Similar presentational techniques recur in later texts of Jonson's plays printed in other shops — see, for instance, Matheo and Stephano's bracketed discussion on C4 recto of *Every Man in his Humour* in the 1616 *Workes*, or the brace used to

organize the jumble of voices when the characters ‘*speake all together: and Waspe beats the Iustice*’ on E4 recto of *Bartholomew Fair* in the 1641 *Workes*. We might still hesitate to affirm that the absence of brackets in comparable instances in *Sejanus* is out-and-out *deliberately* unhelpful, but it seems clear that Jonson, Eld, and his men would have had methods agreed among them to clarify such situations, and that they were enacting a choice of sorts when they maintained these particular dramaturgical uncertainties — even if that choice was enacted without much thought, and in passing.

Lingering on some instances of these punctuation choices in *Sejanus* has shown how a given phrase within a speech might, too, be appraised as more or less definitively parenthetical to it. Just as brackets signalled snatches of dialogue as separate from and simultaneous to the scenes in which they occur, an author, editor, or printer may also mark phrases with brackets as clearly separate from a sentence rather than possibly involved with it. Bracket marks themselves may have had a wide range of functions in this period, wider still even than today; John Lennard, for example, concludes of early modern brackets that their ‘valency’, and

whether that which they distinguish is subordinate, neutrally isolated, or emphatic, is determined by the pressures of use, definition, and convention on the context in which they are employed[.]<sup>23</sup>

But Lennard, following Erasmus and terming these marks ‘*lunulae*’, does find, even while stressing how various their effects can be, a single effect that arises from these marks when they occur:

The repetitive insistence of grammarians and lexicographers that parenthetical clauses are subordinate makes the idea of emphatic *lunulae* strange to the modern reader; but *lunulae* only distinguish.<sup>24</sup>

However they may have come to be in a text, the distinguishing effect that they offer is (if not outright peculiar to them) particularly emphasized by brackets. We may remain reluctant to endow the choice between commas and brackets with a weight of a concerted interpretative process, or to attribute that choice to a particular agency (authorial or otherwise); however, our reading of this play as a whole is clearly affected when we note that the choice between commas or brackets around a phrase may both reflect and contribute to the judgment of how certainly parenthetical that phrase is to its surroundings.

A sustained attention to these details of the text's presentation is especially encouraged by the sustained attention paid to a text within the play itself: the letter that Tiberius sends to the senate to speak on his behalf in act 5. Jonathan Goldberg views the letter as a 'masterpiece of riddles', for over the course of its reading it seems to hold two outcomes possible before settling for one: Sejanus's arrest.

Tiberius's words swerve back and forth, totally unpredictable. Like the poet, he nothing affirmeth. Like the actor, he stages a possibility; in his power anything is possible.<sup>25</sup>

Jonson constructs the effect of ongoing uncertainty through the changing responses of the letter's audience:

SENATORS How! How! [...] Oh! Good, good! [...] This's strange! [...] Oh, he  
has restored all! List! [...] Away. / Sit farther. (5.562; 570; 586; 591; 604)

In one simple but important respect, of course, Goldberg is wrong to say that Tiberius's words 'swerve back and forth': they have already been written and are, thus, finite and fixed in their place. Jonson stresses this by considering the document's status as a material object for a moment before having it read:

REGULUS Here are his letters, signèd with his signet.  
What pleaseth now the fathers to be done?

SENATORS Read, read 'em, open, publicly, read 'em. (5.530–2)

While reading the letter and the volatile changing responses to it, then, we are required to think about how the finished text has been configured in such a way as to inspire interpretations which can 'swerve back and forth'. Jonson emphasizes the document's finishedness, then, but the reactions of the senators demonstrate how that finished document sustains a radical ambivalence of meaning.

This take on how the letter works can also be applied to the processes by which we read its analogue, the quarto text — and, in particular, the idiom in which Tiberius appears very often to speak throughout it. Tiberius has composed the letter, according to Goldberg,

knowing the actor's dictum about the virtue of an *if*; ... as he proceeds, Tiberius's words are sheer hypothesis, antithetical statements played off against each other as if they were not contradictory.<sup>26</sup>



We can recognize this effect when reading the quarto's Tiberius in full, too, through the textual mechanics which have concerned us so far. Prior to discerning statements as possibly antithetical to one another, a reader needs to recognize them as possibly parenthetical to one another, as more or less separate.

A more clearly parenthetical structure, then, can offer a clearer interpretation conducive to antithetical relationship or reaction. Consider here, for example, when Sejanus, supplanted as the emperor's favourite by Macro, faces arrest:

SEI Am I call'd?

MAC I, thou,

Thou in ¶olent monster, art bid ¶and.

SEI Why, *Macro*,

It hath bene otherwi¶e, betweene you, and I?

This court, that knowes vs both, hath ¶eene a difference,

And can (if it be plea¶d to ¶peake) confirme,

Whose in ¶olence is mo¶t.

(M3r)

The court, despite the clear address and invitation, does not speak. Earlier in the play Sejanus conceived of power as something predicated on opposition, becoming established in the continual encounter and overcoming of contradiction ('Windes loo¶e their strength, when they do empty fly, / Vn met of woods or buildings' [K1v]). Here, in the clarity with which his address is transparently a directed address and, thus, so clearly ineffectual, Sejanus's power is demonstrably limited.

When modern editors set out to 'interpret and elucidate the implied action' of a play like *Sejanus*, they must necessarily (despite their best attempts otherwise) 'foreclose interpretative possibilities where the action is ambiguous', if only because the ambiguity of the action as represented in the quarto text is quite so sustained. Editorial efforts towards clarification will necessarily dispel the accumulative culture of uncertainty which governs the representation of the court in *Sejanus*. Not only that, editorial undertakings to regularize punctuation practice (as well as modernizing it) will tend to gloss over the points of difference that we have noted between different situations and different speakers. And, even where we might doubt the extent to which the different punctuation choices extant in the quarto text mark a deliberately expressive policy of pointing, the choices made in framing a particular phrase or parcel of dialogue (with commas, or with brackets) flag up for us instances of different *kinds* of parenthesis. At the very least, then, the marks stand as the earliest instances of localized readings of the text, enacted by those people responsible for putting that text together.

These marks of configuration point up some of the means by which the 1605 quarto shows that 'Tiberius's words are sheer hypothesis' (as Goldberg puts it). Our attention to these marks thus complicates Emma Buckley's argument that Jonson oversaw the printing of the text so as to corral 'a readership firmly under the control of his authorizing direction', and did so on a number of counts.<sup>27</sup> In focusing on the content of the quarto's marginal notes, Buckley sees the achievement of a 'mutually reinforcing interplay of text and marginal context'; by considering here the quarto's negotiations of punctuation and parenthesis, however, we might be more inclined to see the quarto as an attempt, primarily, to explore that 'interplay of text and marginal context' in itself, rather than seeking simply to reinforce a single reading of any given situation.<sup>28</sup> William Slights, as we have seen, measured Tiberius's power by observing that 'his word alone is finally heard. Competing texts such as Cordus's annals ... are suppressed, indeed, sought out and burned'.<sup>29</sup> Even if that is the case, the presentation of that power in its textual forms — in the letter to the senate, and in the 1605 quarto — stresses its uncertain nature.

Attending to these marks also serves to query how the text manifests Jonson's own power. Where most editors consider details like punctuation to take their place in the copy outside the 'authorizing direction' of the early modern playwright, Jonson often emerges as a special, tyrannical exception ('Anyone who edits Jonson's works edits an editor', as Sara Van Den Berg put it). But in the case of the 1605 *Sejanus*, the punctuation marks on the page point up the subtle distinctions of different parentheses, and, if Jonson put them there, he actively invited the reader to puzzle out the various dramaturgical possibilities allowed by the text. The reader, then, can cull out temporary spaces in which to choose one dominant possible interpretation of a given scenario in their own ongoing reading of it (and that interpretation is either supplanted or endorsed by the subsequent responses of the characters in the play). Alternatively, if Jonson was *not* responsible for the quarto's punctuation, we can reflect how the combination of his dramaturgy and Latinate, often tangled syntax particularly and serially challenged the other agents of the text's production to choose between commas and brackets while setting their copy. Either way, Jonson abjures significant aspects of what Buckley calls his 'authorizing direction' over the text and the possible readings of it. When we think about the rendering of Jonson's plays in print, it is important to reflect on the ways in which these renderings frustrate print's potential to assert permanence and fixity. As long ago as 1981 Jonas Barish offered Jonson as an example of an anti-theatrical playwright, fed up with the 'imperfections and vicissitudes of live performance'. His highly influential version of Jonson was a

figure driven by a 'desire to commit his "works" — significantly so named — to a more lasting medium', a 'stabler medium', resorting eventually to 'lifting the play out of the public arena into the still silence of the page'.<sup>30</sup> But in scrutinizing the 1605 *Sejanus* we must admit that the pages before us are hardly still and hardly silent; they present a series of utterances circled round with shifting contexts and shifting responses, inviting us as readers to consider those concentric circles of witness and interpretation, and to reflect upon our own position in the outermost.

## Notes

- 1 James Loxley, *Ben Jonson* (Abingdon, 2002), 58.
- 2 William Slights, *Ben Jonson and the Art of Secrecy* (Toronto, 1994), 47.
- 3 Philip Ayres (ed.), *Sejanus* (Manchester, 1990), 11; Emma Buckley, 'Drama in the Margins — Academic Text and Political Context in Matthew Gwinne's *Nero: Nova Tragedia* (1603) and Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* (1603/5)', *Renaissance Studies* 30.4 (2016), 604, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/rest.12244>.
- 4 C.H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson (eds), *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols (Oxford, 1925), 2.26.
- 5 Ayres, *Sejanus*, 11.
- 6 M.J. Kidnie (ed.), *Sejanus* (Oxford, 2000), xxxiv.
- 7 Herford and Simpson, *Jonson*, 4.330.
- 8 Kidnie, *Sejanus*, xxxv; Buckley, 'Drama in the Margins', 605.
- 9 Buckley, 'Drama in the Margins', 605.
- 10 *Ibid*, 611.
- 11 *Ibid*.
- 12 Holger Schott Syme, 'Unediting the Margin: Jonson, Marston, and the Theatrical Page', *English Literary Renaissance* 38.1 (2008), 143–4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.2008.00120.x>.
- 13 *Ibid*, 160–1.
- 14 'Principle Features of Editorial Method', *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*, [https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/about/general\\_intro/editorial\\_method](https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/about/general_intro/editorial_method).
- 15 Taken from Tom Cain (ed.), 'Sejanus', David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson (eds), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, 7 vols (Cambridge, 2012), 195–391. Except where stated otherwise, all modernized quotations from the play are taken from this edition. All quotations which retain old spelling and pointing are taken from *Sejanus* (London, 1605; STC: 14782); given my attention throughout to the details of this text's presentation, I have transcribed these excerpts diplomatically.
- 16 Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore, 1983), 177.
- 17 Front Matter, *The Review of English Studies* 32, 126 (1981), 5.
- 18 Kidnie, *Sejanus*, xxxv.
- 19 Goldberg, *Politics of Literature*, 178.
- 20 *Ibid*.

- 21 Sara Van den Berg, 'Marking his Place: Ben Jonson's Punctuation', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 1.3 (1995), 2.2.
- 22 Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford, 2007), 318.
- 23 John Lennard, *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parenthesis in English Printed Verse* (Oxford, 1991), 5.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Goldberg, *Politics of Literature*, 184.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Buckley, 'Drama in the Margins', 611.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, 47.
- 30 Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, 1981), 138–9.

