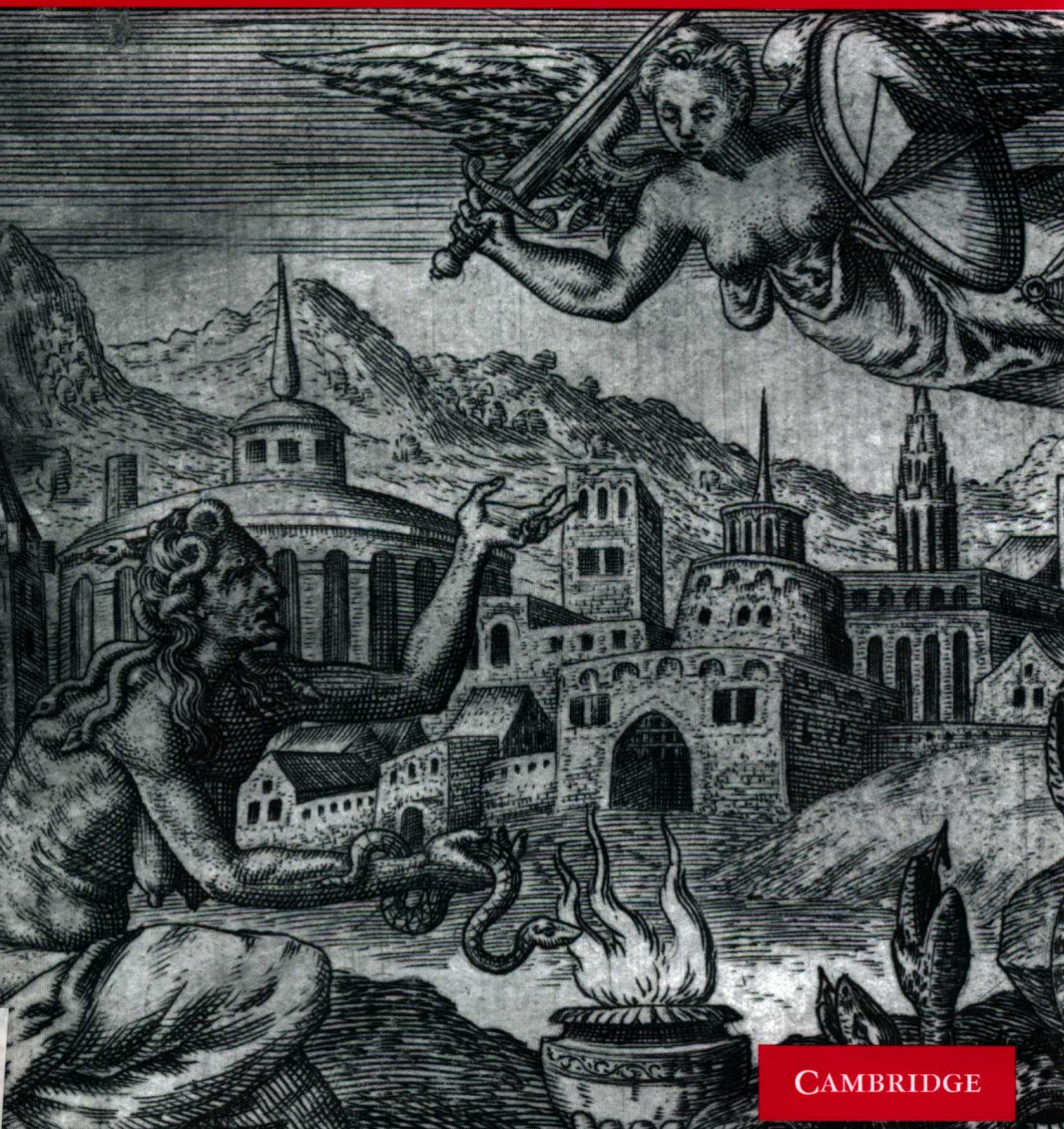


LYNN S. MESKILL

# Ben Jonson and Envy



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# BEN JONSON AND ENVY

LYNN S. MESKILL

*University of Paris-XIII, France*



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## BEN JONSON AND ENVY

In the early modern period, envy was often represented iconographically by the image of the Medusa, with snaky locks and a poisonous gaze. *Ben Jonson and Envy* investigates the importance of envy to Jonson's imagination, showing that he perceived spectators and readers as filled with envy and created strategies to defend his work from their distorting and potentially 'deadly' gaze. Drawing on historical and anthropological studies of evil-eye beliefs, this study focuses on the authorial imperative to charm and baffle ritualistically the eye of the implied spectator or reader, in order to protect his works from defacement. Comparing the exchange between authors and readers to social relations, the book illuminates the way in which the literary may be seen to be informed by popular culture. *Ben Jonson and Envy* tackles a previously overlooked, but vital, aspect of Jonson's poetics.

LYNN S. MESKILL is a Lecturer in English at the University of Paris-XIII. She has published articles on Jonson, Shakespeare and Milton in *English Literary History*, *Cahiers Elisabéthains* and the *Revue de la Société d'Etudes Anglo-Américaines*, among others.

## *Note on the text*

All quotations from Ben Jonson are from the eleven-volume edition of Jonson's works edited by C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson and Evelyn Simpson (1925–52). I have silently modernized u, v, i, j and scribal contractions as well as the titles of some of Jonson's plays and masques according to common practice. All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, second edition (1997), edited by G. Blakemore Evans and Herschel Baker *et al.*

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## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

Ben Jonson has been accused of envy from at least the late seventeenth century, if not before. Tradition has it that John Dryden first interpreted Jonson's comment that Shakespeare had 'smalle *Latine*, and lesse *Greeke*' as 'sparing and invidious'.<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Rowe's statement that Jonson 'could not but look with an evil Eye upon any one that see'd in Competition with him' is typical of the way a number of eighteenth-century Shakespeare editors painted Jonson as ungenerous, ungrateful and even malevolent.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Rowe places Jonson's 'evil Eye' in direct contrast to Shakespeare's generous one in narrating the story of how Shakespeare read an early play of Jonson's: 'Shakespeare *luckily cast his Eye upon it*, and found something so well in it as to engage him first to read it through, and afterwards to recommend Mr. *Johnson* and his Writings to the Publick' (my emphasis).<sup>3</sup> In telling the tale of how Shakespeare helped the young Jonson get his start in the theatre, Rowe deftly holds up Shakespeare's charitable reading eye against Jonson's envious one. In a fascinating section entitled 'Proofs of Ben Jonson's Malignity, from the Commentators on Shakespeare' in the introduction to his edition of Jonson's *Works*, William Gifford presents

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Pope refers to this tradition when he writes: 'I cannot for my part find any thing *invidious* or *sparing* in those verses, but wonder Mr. Dryden was of that opinion' (my emphasis). Edmond Malone (ed.), 'Mr. Pope's Preface', *Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare in Ten Volumes* (London, 1790), vol. 1, p. 89. John Freehafer has suggested that it was not Dryden, but Leonard Digges who first spotted a slur in Jonson's judgement concerning Shakespeare's knowledge of the classical languages. John Freehafer, 'Leonard Digges, Ben Johnson [*sic*], and the Beginning of Shakespeare Idolatry', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 21 (Winter 1970), 63–75; p. 66. Jonson's description of Shakespeare's Latin and Greek is to be found in his elegy to Shakespeare: 'To the memory of my beloved, the AUTHOR MR. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: And what he hath left us', which first appeared in 1623 in the Shakespeare First Folio. *Ungathered Verse* (xxvi), Herford and Simpson, vol. viii, p. 391 (line 31). All references to Jonson's works will refer to 'Herford and Simpson' and include the volume, page and, when appropriate, line number.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Rowe, 'Some Account of the Life, *Etc.* of Mr. *William Shakespear*' in *The Works of Mr. William Shakespeare in Six Volumes* (London, 1709), vol. 1, p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

readers with choice examples of Jonson's 'supposed hostility to Shakespeare' handed down from one Shakespeare editor and commentator to another. Gifford writes that 'of all calumniators [of Jonson] Mr. Malone is the most headlong', but he seems to take particular delight in quoting Charles Macklin's virulent description of Jonson: 'He was splenetic, sour, over-run with envy, – the tyrant of the theatre – perpetually uttering slights and malignities against the lowly Shakespeare, whose fame was grown too great for his envy to bear.'<sup>4</sup> There were, however, other early critics, like Gifford, who understood that Jonson's 'envy' was, in part, an editorial invention and a useful cornerstone in the literary sanctification of Shakespeare. In *Specimens of the English Poets*, Thomas Campbell refers to 'the established article of literary faith that [Jonson's] personal character was a compound of spleen, surliness and ingratitude'. He argues that Shakespeare's fame was constructed even out of Jonson's supposed envy:

The fame of Shakespeare himself became an heirloom of traditionary calumnies against the memory of Jonson; the fancied relics of his envy were regarded as so many pious donations at the shrine of the greater poet, whose admirers thought they could not dig too deeply for trophies of his glory among the ruins of his imaginary rival's reputation.<sup>5</sup>

Campbell shows the extent to which the construction of a cult of Shakespeare went hand in hand with a Jonson envious of his rival. Every unsavoury anecdote or veiled allusion served as a 'pious donation' to the 'shrine' of Shakespeare's fame. Out of the ashes of Jonson's reputation, Shakespeare's phoenix rises. As early as 1819, Campbell offers a corrective to any simplified opposition of Shakespeare to Jonson, yet, almost two centuries later, the myths of envy, as well as the archaeological hunt for more 'relics', are as widespread as ever.

This powerfully evocative myth of Jonson's envy of Shakespeare is most probably the reason why scholars have not examined in any detail Jonson's frequent references to envy and its cognates. Envy has been so visibly associated with Jonson's personal envy that it has been nearly impossible to disassociate the tradition of the envious man from any examination of the persistent thematic issues derived from envy in Jonson's works. In other words, the *topos* of envy has been so *visible* as a critical term to describe Jonson's personal animosities and malicious nature that envy within the

<sup>4</sup> William Gifford, *The Works of Ben Jonson, With Notes Critical and Explanatory and a Biographical Memoir in Nine Volumes*, ed. F. Cunningham (London: Bickers and Son, 1875), vol. 1, pp. cciv, ccxiii.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Campbell, *Specimens of the English Poets*, 7 vols. (London: John Murray, 1819), vol. III, pp. 142–3.

works themselves has been rendered *invisible*. While the biographical subject and the presence of envy in his texts are not unrelated phenomena, there needs to be a clearer division between envy as a biographical characteristic ascribed to Ben Jonson and textual manifestations of a preoccupation with envy. The life and temperament of the author might indeed produce the works of Ben Jonson, but they are by no means sufficient to explain them.

#### A MODEL OF CREATION

This image of a Jonson envious of Shakespeare exists side by side with two other images, both in their way quite contradictory to that of the splenetic rival. The first is the legendary *persona* of the convivial playwright, the frequenter of taverns and drinker of sack, whom contemporaries and later critics alike referred to amiably as 'Ben'. This image is in part due to Jonson's own efforts at immortalizing and publicizing himself as well as to the way he was remembered in poems appended to his works and those in the collection, *Jonsonus Virbius*, commemorating his death. At the same time, Jonson has also been perceived as a neo-Stoic, virtuous and 'centred' moralist.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, he modelled himself upon the classical authors as guides to literary decorum and moral probity. He was almost certainly influenced by Sidney's argument in *An Apologie for Poetrie* (1595) that poetry in its larger sense of 'fiction' was necessarily linked to the teaching and understanding of virtue.<sup>7</sup> Yet, to read Jonson as writing primarily for the reformation of public and court morals has perhaps prevented our appreciating fully his self-interested programme as a writer.<sup>8</sup> Jonson may indeed have wished

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Greene, 'Ben Jonson and the Centered Self', *SEL* 10 (1970), 325–48.

<sup>7</sup> Sir Phillip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie* (London, 1595). See the following passages for the association of poetry with virtue: 'But even in the most excellent determination of goodnes, what Philosophers counsel can so redily direct a prince, as the fayned *Cyrus* in *Xenophon*? Or a vertuous man in all fortunes, as *Aeneas* in *Virgil*?', sig. D4; 'I think it may be manifest, that the Poet with that same hand of delight, doth draw the mind more effectually, then any other Arte dooth, and so a conclusion not unfildie ensueth: that as vertue is the most excellent resting place for all worldlie learning to make his end of: so Poetrie, beeing the most familiar to teach it, and most princelie to move towards it, in the most excellent work, is the most excellent workman', sig. F2; '... the ever-praise-worthy Poesie, is full of vertue-breeding delightfulness', sig. L2'.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Butler notes Jonson's self-interested calculations concerning his own posterity with regard to his role as courtly panegyrist: 'Jonson [in his 'Epistle to Master John Selden'] professes to feel untouched by the revelation that his poems sometimes praised men more than they deserved, but he was demonstrably disinclined to allow his own writings to testify against him in this way, since when he compiled the collected edition of his works he excluded at least two panegyrics lauding men who had fallen from favour since the poems were written, the Earl of Somerset and Sir Edward Coke.' Martin Butler, 'Ben Jonson and the Limits of Courtly Panegyric' in Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake (eds.), *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 91–115; p. 96.

to see himself as embodying the role of the *didaskalos*, the ancient term for playwright in ancient Greece; but his canny self-representation in prologues, for instance, should not deter us from excavating other motives and other pressures which may have influenced and shaped his art.<sup>9</sup> Jonson's virulent response to attacks on *The New Inn* (1629), for instance, would seem to reveal a keen interest in the reception of his works in the public mart not to mention it being at odds with the 'centred' self, philosophically writing poems in imitation of Horace.<sup>10</sup> Within the limits of the masque genre he was certainly bound to praise the courtiers participating in masques and the politics of their royal patrons. Yet, the image of the writer as proselytizer of virtue and reformer of court manners is problematic in light not only of the sheer fantasticalness of many of the anti-masques or most of the characters in *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), but also, as Bruce Boehrer has argued, the writer's fascination with the scatological and the crude.<sup>11</sup> And, as with Rabelais, the carnivalesque aspect of much of Jonson's work may be seen as the reverse of the sombre, almost misanthropic face that emerges in a play like *Volpone* (1606).

It is this darker aspect of Jonson that both Edmund Wilson and William Kerrigan brought more fully to light, providing a necessary antidote to the image of a morally upright poet and playwright.<sup>12</sup> Wilson's attempt to understand the psychological sources of Jonson's literary production from a Freudian standpoint led him to identify Jonson as an obsessive 'anal-erotic'. Though not perhaps his most remarkable piece of criticism, Wilson's essay owes its notoriety to his temerity in opposing the pervasive image of Jonson as a virtuous and ethical writer. Harold Bloom comments approvingly on Kerrigan's essay: '[D]issenting from our modern portrait of Jonson as sane and virtuous, [he] returns us to the reality of the poet's abiding melancholy.'<sup>13</sup> Both Wilson and Kerrigan took what

<sup>9</sup> Graham Ley, *A Short Introduction to the Ancient Greek Theater*, rev. edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> See Jonson's 'An Ode. To himself', *Underwood* (xxiii), Herford and Simpson, vol. VIII, p. 174. 'Come leave the lothed stage, / and the more lothsome age' (lines 1–2). Dates in parentheses of Jonson's plays and masques in the text will refer to the date of *performance*, which in certain cases coincides with the date of first publication. I will refer to publication dates when the discussion involves the *printed* text specifically.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *The Fury of Men's Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Wilson, 'Morose Ben Jonson', *The Triple Thinkers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp. 213–32; William Kerrigan, 'Ben Jonson Full of Shame and Scorn', *Ben Jonson: Studies in the Literary Imagination* 6 (April 1973), 199–218.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Interpretations: Ben Jonson* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), p. 2. One could argue that this approach reinvokes, under another name, the

might be called a *sinister* approach to Jonson. The present book may be said to inscribe itself in such an approach. I will be arguing that *envy* and *envious* are words the writer uses to describe the way the spectator will *look at* and the reader will *read* his work. Scholars of Jonson have referred to the way the writer anticipates his reception and the means he uses to control it in what Gérard Genette has termed the paratext.<sup>14</sup> I would like to show that the source of this anxiety for Jonson lies in a very specific authorial image of the spectator and reader.<sup>15</sup> The writer's perception is that the audience's *vision* is naturally *depraved*, so that they *see* obliquely and thus necessarily distort, pervert and deform the meaning of the text.

This image of the misreader may very well reflect the way Jonson read or misread those writers who preceded him. It would seem, at first glance, that Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence', which posits an often troubled relationship between strong writers and the (father) ghosts of the literary past, may be useful in understanding certain aspects of Jonson's anxious relationship with previous literary giants and their monuments. According to Bloom:

Poetic Influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets, – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which poetry as such could not exist.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, there are a number of problems with the Bloomian model with regard to Jonson. First, the usefulness of this model for the early modern period remains a vexed question. Thomas Greene, for instance, does not see it as adequately describing the relationship between the humanist poet and the classics of antiquity: 'The humanist poet is not a neurotic son crippled by a Freudian family romance, which is to say he is not in Harold Bloom's terms Romantic. He is rather like the son in a classical comedy who displaces his

envious Jonson depicted by Rowe, Dryden and Malone. But I will be referring to the 'abiding melancholy' *manifested in the texts*, not in the poet himself. The key is to separate, again, the man from the texts and a biographically focused study from a textual one.

<sup>14</sup> Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Certain terms, such as 'anxiety', borrowed from the realm of psychoanalysis, but which have become appropriated by literary criticism to describe textual phenomena, will be used in this book.

<sup>16</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 30.



father at the moment of reconciliation.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, while Greene argues for the inappropriateness of Bloom's 'Romantic' model for an early modern author, Thomas Cartelli sees Bloom's omission of Jonson from the ranks of strong, anxious poets as an odd oversight: 'Harold Bloom contends that Jonson had "no anxiety as to imitation" (p. 27) and thus fails to register a most interesting case-study in the politics of influence. Indeed, Jonson's chronic imitation of his Roman masters conceivably served as a defensive buffer against the competing influence of his contemporaries upon his work, and constituted a complex strategy by which he might maintain distinction in his ongoing battle for recognition.'<sup>18</sup> Yet, the problem with Bloom's model lies deeper than this argument suggests since the anxiety with which recent Jonson scholars are particularly concerned is with what Lucy Newlyn has called the 'anxiety of reception'.<sup>19</sup> Newlyn sees the weakness in Bloom's model in its singular orientation toward the relationship poets have to the 'past', but, she points out:

[A]nxieties experienced by writers centre as much on the future as on the past – not just because an author's status, authority, and posthumous life are dependent on readers, but because writing exists in dialogue with others whose sympathies it hopes to engage.<sup>20</sup>

Newlyn's account has the virtue of attempting to see both sides of readerly reception: reception by the writer of past authors as reader as well as the anxiety experienced by the writer with regard to his or her own future reception by readers. Newlyn thus suggests a model in which the relationship writers have with their future is indicated by their relationship, as readers, to the past:

writers are peculiarly alive to their own status as readers, and as often as not this leads to an awareness of their revisionary relationship to the materials that they read. Such awareness brings with it, as an inevitable cost, the apprehension that all writing – including their own – is contingent, provisional, open to reconstruction. Potentially, then, the writing-reading subject is divided in its response to the release of subjectivity which occurs in acts of interpretation. Writers who are *robustly revisionary* in relation to past authors can be prescriptive when it comes to imagining their own reception; and this equivocation with respect to interpretative

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Cartelli, 'Bartholomew Fair as Urban Arcadia, Jonson Responds to Shakespeare', *Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 14 (1983), 151–72; p. 160.

<sup>19</sup> Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.