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Evidence and Effects of Ben Jonson's Reading

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for Ruth and my parents

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Preface

Among his many other distinctions, Ben Jonson may be the only great English poet who was directly responsible for two deaths. The first killing occurred when Jonson, still a young man, was serving as a volunteer with English forces in the Netherlands. Years later he would tell his friend William Drummond how, during "his servuce in the Low Countries, he had in the face of both the Campes Killed ane Enimie and taken opima spoila from him."[1] Jonson, that is to say, stripped his vanquished foe of his weapons—an almost Homeric gesture of exaltation in victory. The pugnaciousness later evident in much of his writing was thus also apparent early in his life, and his physical courage and combativeness would display themselves again a few years later. By then he had returned to England, had married, and had begun to establish himself as an actor and playwright. In September 1598 one of his most important plays, *Every Man in His Humour,* was acted at The Curtain theater with Shakespeare in a leading role. Jonson had already begun to make a name and career that would later prove highly distinctive.

Within days, however, he was in trouble with the law. He stood accused of killing a fellow actor, Gabriel Spencer, who, he claimed, had challenged him to fight in an open field. Indicted before a jury, Jonson pleaded guilty that he had,

> with a certain sword of iron and steel called a Rapiour, of the price of three shillings, which he then and there had and held drawn in his right hand, feloniously and wilfully beat and struck the same Gabriel, giving then and there to the same Gabriel Spencer with the aforesaid sword a mortal wound of the depth of six inches and of the breadth of one inch, in and upon the right side of the same Gabriel, of which mortal blow the same Gabriel Spencer at Shordiche aforesaid, in the aforesaid county, in the aforesaid Fields, then and there died instantly.[2]

Jonson himself would later explain that his "adversarie . . . had hurt him in the arm" and that Spencer's "sword was 10 Inches Longer than his," but the jurors nonetheless concluded that the

playwright had "feloniously and wilfully killed and slew the aforesaid Gabriel Spencer, against the peace of the said Lady the Queen." Jonson was imprisoned and was "almost at the Gallowes," but he escaped death because of a simple fact: he could read a Bible verse in Latin.

The official record reports how Jonson "*confesses the indictment, asks for the book, reads like a clerk, is marked with the letter T, and is delivered according to the statute.*" The statute in question dated from the middle ages and had originally been designed to protect priests from prosecution in the civil courts. By the time Jonson took advantage of this one-time opportunity to plead "benefit of clergy," that opportunity "had become a loophole for educated male felons."[3] The "T" branded in Jonson's thumb stood for Tyburn prison, where he would have been hanged had he been unable to translate the Latin "neck verse." Fittingly enough, Jonson the eventual poet laureate had now himself become a written text, painfully inscribed in the flesh, and anyone who later glimpsed the scarred "T" burnt into his skin would have been able to decipher its significance. Presumably he bore the brand for the rest of his life—a constant reminder to him and to others of his brush with death and of the highly crucial importance his culture often placed on the ability to read.

Never again, perhaps, would the importance of that ability be demonstrated so dramatically in Jonson's life, but reading never had been, and never would be, an unimportant facet of his existence. It was partly thanks to his skill as a reader that Jonson, as a young boy from a family of modest means, had been given the chance to attend the prestigious Westminster School, where he had had his first real taste of the life of the mind, and where the seeds of his later grand ambitions must first have taken root. It was partly thanks to his skill as a reader that Jonson at Westminster so impressed his first important patron, William Camden, the school's headmaster and later one of his most significant intellectual contacts. It was partly thanks to his skill as a reader, and consequently as an author and struggling apprentice playwright, that Jonson was able to support himself and his young family by relying on the fecundity of his brain rather than on the strength of his hands, and it was largely thanks to his skill as a reader that he soon began to carve out for himself a distinctive niche as one of the most learned and sophisticated of English writers. His literary sophistication would soon help him win, for instance, a central place at the court of James I, perhaps one of the most genuinely learned of all the British monarchs. Thus the ability to read not

only once saved Jonson's life, but it also, more significantly, allowed him to live the kind of existence that reading itself had largely helped him to conceive.

This, then, is a book about Jonson's reading—which is to say that it is also a book about one of the most important aspects of Jonson's life. More is known about Jonson's biographical activities (where he went; what he did; whom he met; what he said) than about those of most of his great contemporaries, and so it seems fitting that more evidence about his reading should also have survived. Modern catalogues list hundreds of existing books known to have once been owned by Jonson, and many of these books contain markings by the poet that provide extremely interesting evidence of what, literally and precisely, passed through his mind. Source studies have already suggested the impact his reading may have had on the composition of his own works, including his surviving notebook of *Discoveries,* which records and transmutes much of his reading and his reactions to it. However, the marked copies of his surviving books provide a unique and largely untapped source of information about what was quite literally going into (and even on in) Jonson's mind. The poet's marked books allow us to speculate with some confidence about the interior, mental life of one of the most important and influential writers of the English Renaissance.

The value of this study will, I suspect, lie less in my own speculations than in the hard evidence the book provides. I have tried to interpret the significance of Jonson's markings in what I hope and think are plausible ways, but in the final analysis what matters most is the markings themselves. During my work on this project I have developed a system of abbreviations that has allowed me to indicate Jonson's marks with some precision and thoroughness. This book, then, attempts not simply to describe my own interpretations of Jonson's markings but, more importantly, to *report* every passage he marked so that other scholars can speculate for themselves and reach their own conclusions about about the marks' significance.

My central aim has thus been quite simply to provide *new primary evidence* about Jonson's reading—evidence that supplements and is comparable, in some ways, to the data already available in the *Discoveries.* That work has always been considered a prime source of useful information because it gives unequalled insight into what Jonson was reading, what was on his mind. In a more modest way, I hope that my descriptions of the marked passages in some of his books can provide similarly useful information.

His marks offer fairly hard evidence of what actually passed through his thoughts, and while interpreting the marks will always be somewhat speculative, there seems some value in reporting them so that interpretations can be made. The real worth of this project lies less in the particular interpretations I myself have offered than in simply reporting the marked passages to other scholars, who may see many different kinds of significance in them—significance perhaps unsuspected by me. My chief goal, throughout the book, is simply to report Jonson's marks as accurately as I can, even at the expense (sometimes) of rapid narrative flow. I conceive of this book as being as much a reference work as anything else.

The marked books I have selected for discussion are a deliberately mixed lot, and the methods used in discussing them are similarly and intentionally diverse. I have tried to choose works representing differing periods, genres, styles, and thematic concerns. Doing so will, I hope, suggest the impressive range of Jonson's interests as well as the continuities that seem to underlie them. Chapter 1 offers an introduction that surveys the topic of Jonson's reading and that ends by focusing on his response to a surviving copy of the Bible, perhaps the central text of his Christian culture. Chapter 2 then examines his lively reactions to the philosophical writings of Seneca, whose Stoic wisdom had such an impact on Jonson's own life and writings. Chapter 3 discusses the poet's response to another late classical writer, Apuleius, who seems to have been far more intriguing to Jonson than previous scholarship would suggest. Chapter 4 then turns to Jonson's markings in his copy of Chaucer, one of his most significant English and medieval forebears. This chapter is supplemented by photographic reproductions of the actual marked pages of Jonson's Chaucer; these photographs should help give readers a very precise idea of the appearance and methods of some of Jonson's typical styles of marking.

Chapter 5 surveys Jonson's reactions to an important "dramatic" work in Latin prose by Sir Thomas More, one of the most seminal figures of the early English Renaissance. More, along with the Renaissance Christian Stoic Justus Lipsius, is also featured in chapter 6, which examines issues of praise and blame—issues that have always been recognized as central to Jonson's thinking and writing. Finally, chapter 7 focuses on Jonson's responses to Clement Edmondes's responses to the autobiographical writings of Julius Caesar. This highly reflexive topic seemed an appropriate one on which to end: a Christian English writer reacting to a

Christian English writer reacting to a pagan classical writer reacting to events he helped shape with both sword and pen. Scores of other books marked by Jonson remain to be examined, but this sampling should give some sense of the breadth, depth, and intensity of his responses to several of the most important written texts of his culture.

Perhaps not surprisingly, such a sampling of Jonson's responses to significant works and writers suggests certain broad continuities in his interests. Many of the same themes and concerns that seem to have been central to his own writing seem also to have been central to his reading, and I have tried to suggest these continuities by providing an extensive Topical Index. Jonson seems to have been endlessly interested in certain recurring preoccupations, and the purpose of the Topical Index is to provide a quick overview of the matters that seem to have most interested him and of where those topics can be located. Literally hundreds of common themes are shared by the marked passages in the handful of books examined here, and the Topical Index can help provide a quick overview of Jonson's interest in a wide range of subjects. Similarly, the Index proper offers a key to the various persons—real or imagined—mentioned in the passages Jonson singled out. I hope that these appendices will help make this book even more useful to other students of Jonson's life, times, and mind.

Acknowledgments

My greatest debt, obviously, is to my parents. My father was himself a great reader, and some of my best memories are of him reading to me as a boy. When he was suddenly no longer there, my mother continued to provide the encouragement and love that sustained my own interest in books. I well remember a shopping expedition, when a twelve-year-old whose parent thought he needed a new suit came home instead with a set of encyclopedias. Since my mother died as this book was being completed, it is especially to her that I wish to express the kind of thanks that cannot finally be expressed.

My wife, my extended family, my friends, my colleagues, and my students have all been involved, in one way or another, in the making of this book. Several students in particular need to be mentioned: Kurt Niland, Mike Crocker, Jullianna Ooi, Hubble Sowards, Neil Probst, Kevin Bowden, Gary Goodson, Joe Csicsila, and Lynn Bryan. Rarely have students taught their teacher so much. Among the many good friends I might thank, I should especially mention Jim Barfoot, Jeff Hyams, Ron Romanoff, Anne Little, Barbara Wiedemann, David Walker, David Brumble, and, above all, my best friend, Ruth Evans. I am particularly grateful for the encouragement provided by my colleagues John Stroupe and Clifford Davidson, who nurtured this project at crucial stages. For many years now, Professor Anthony Low has been exceptionally generous with his time and encouragement.

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Finally, my work on this project will always be associated, in my mind, with happy days spent hunched over old books in libraries throughout Britain and the U.S. Let the library at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and its wonderful staff, stand for all these. The dedication to this book is meant to express my love and thanks, in particular, to the librarian who has always meant more than words can say.

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