Boehrer

THE

FURY

OF

Men's

Gullets

The Fury of Men's Gullets

Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal

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Textual Note

All textual references to Ben Jonson's works are drawn from C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, eds., *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–1952), 11 vols.

Contents

Introduction: Jonson and Alimentary Theory

BEN JONSON KNEW THE FATE of failed books as well as anyone. At the start of his *Epigrams* (1612–1613), he advises his bookseller to send remaindered copies of his verse to the London grocers' district, where they will be popular as wrapping paper: "If . . . [my book] will not sell, / Send it to *Bucklersbury*, there 'twill, well" (*Epigrams* 3.11–12). In *The Staple of News* (1626), on the other hand, Jonson envisions a different but parallel end for the author's labor. There he describes the Spanish ambassador, Count Gondomar, conjuring up a peculiar employment for Middleton's famous satire of him, *A Game at Chess*:

> LIC[KFINGER]. What news of *Gundomar*?
> THO[MAS BARBER]. A second *Fistula*,
> Or an *excoriation* (at the least)
> For putting the poore *English-play*, was writ of him,
> To such a sordid vse, as (is said) he did,
> Of cleansing his *posterior's*.
>
> (3.2.207–211)

Again and again, Jonson conceives of books as having this sort of alimentary character, subject to processes of selection, preparation, ingestion, digestion, and excretion that mimic—and ultimately merge with—the literal functions of the digestive tract. This view of literature is not unique to Jonson, but in Jonson's hands it becomes a particularly flexible instrument of professional and social self-construction. To this extent, he is one of its outstanding modern exponents.

In fact, Jonson knew that books could literally be of culinary value. When he describes his ideal supper in Epigram 101, he promises his prospective guests that they will not have to endure bad poetry, but his promise is a slyly qualified one:

> Ile professe no verses to repeate:
> To this, if ought appeare, which I know not of,
> That will the pastrie, not my paper, show of.
> (*Epigrams* 101.24–26)

As Roger Gognard has pointed out, the bad poetry threatens to appear anyway, lining the bottoms of Jonson's pie-pans (3–4),[1] and as Sara van den Berg has remarked of this passage, Jonson may "subordinate his verse to pastry," but "no pastry can appear apart from the paper of this poem" (62). Despite—or more precisely, *through*—his suppression of verse's character as dinner entertainment, the poet self-consciously allows the repressed material to return to the table in another form.

I like to think of these lines as having a further valence. In an age during which few dramatists bothered to oversee the publication of their work, Jonson was notorious for intervening in the business of his printers (Riggs 220–224; Donovan 24; Herford, Simpson, and Simpson 9:45). He can hardly have failed to notice the signature odor of the Renaissance printing-house, which was the pervasive stench of urine (Gaskell 37). At least once—often twice—a day, the printers unbound the leather balls that they used to ink their presses, and, in order to keep the leather supple, they soaked it in open bowls of their own stale. The ink balls, thus permeated with the printers' urine, must have introduced some minute chemical residue of the digestive tract into the ink absorbed by the paper of Jonson's books. That paper, in turn, would have been exactly what returned to Jonson's party as the nonstick lining of his pastry tins. The poet's imaginary supper is an event where verse demands to appear at the table, and where piss insists upon mingling with food, despite the severest of official restrictions.

In *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), again, Jonson makes clear and deliberate use of this same alimentary circularity. When Justice Overdo arrives at the play's fair ground in order to chastise the local criminals, he halts proceedings with a grandiose temperance speech:

> Thirst not after that frothy liquor, Ale: for, who knowes,
> when hee openeth the stopple, what may be in the bottle?
> hath not a Snaile, a Spider, yea, a Neuft bin found
> there? . . . Neither doe thou lust after that tawney weede,
> tabacco . . . whose complexion is like the Indians that vents

> it! . . . And who can tell, if, before the gathering, and making vp thereof, the *Alligarta* hath not piss'd thereon?
>
> (2.6.11–27)

Overdo's rhetorical slide from ale to tobacco is similar to the more familiar movement from drink to food. Tobacco is well known among European writers as a substitute for food and drink;[2] European explorers of the New World noted that tobacco was both smoked and chewed by the indigenous peoples they encountered (Brooks 15); and the customary Jacobean verb for smoking—a verb that, according to Frances Teague, is used by later authors in allusion to *Bartholomew Fair* (55–56)—was "to drink." The alligator piss on Overdo's tobacco, like the newt in his beer bottle (the small animal itself inevitably depositing its excrements into the ale), serves as another reminder of how difficult it can be to keep alimentary processes separate, to impose a system of external conceptual distinctions on the body's necessarily interlinked metabolic processes. Likewise, just as the categories of ingestion and excretion interpenetrate, so Jonson's literary activities are pervaded with an unmistakable digestive character. As urine mingles with food, food amalgamates with poetry; the poet's ink bears the imprint of the alimentary canal whereas his pies preserve the marks of the printing press. This is a consistent and distinctive pattern in Jonson's work.

Jonson and Alimentary Transformation

This book aims to understand Jonson's enduring fascination with alimentary matters. To that end, it also deals with what one could call the sociohistorical significance of food. I assume, in other words, that Jonson's preoccupation with the digestive tract must be considered in light of what alimentation could mean for writers and readers in early seventeenth-century England. The historically specific range of meanings within which early modern alimentation could appear is, of course, never fully recuperable, and to that extent any work that aims at a completely historicized analysis of this subject matter is always already and must remain, by the largest possible definition of its project, a failure. On a more immediate and modest level, the present work can at least hope to provide a reasonably comprehensive account of the primary textual materials relevant to its agenda, and I hope it will be judged in light of its ability to perform this

more limited task. In any event, the present study makes itself up from the artifacts of an irrecoverable past, which it can itself only approximate or at best supplant. No other procedural choice is available.

In the process of examining the historical particularities of Jonson's alimentary discourse, I have chosen to draw heavily on the theoretical work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari, although not the most fashionable of recent theoretical writers, offer a uniquely useful avenue of approach to Jonson's discourse of alimentation precisely because the characteristics of their work often place them at odds with current academic trends. Their writing focuses at great length on a retheorization of the body—a retheorization that emphasizes fluidity, exploration, and transformability, while working very hard to break down the notions of anatomical categoricity that have influenced much recent writing on ideas of the body. Deleuzian theory also tends to render the interplay between classical and popular cultural canons particularly kinetic and ambiguous. Still further, the work of Deleuze and Guattari proceeds largely by processes of historical analysis and commentary, embracing everything from felting to recent cinema, and therefore arguably complementing the historicist bent of the present study. In short, Deleuze and Guattari offer a theoretical perspective that is particularly well adapted to a study of cultural transitions and metamorphoses, uncertainties and opportunities. If, as Alexander Leggatt has observed, "the public Jonson . . . is not a single character but a complex variety of roles, seemingly inconsistent at times but ultimately interconnected" (215), the study of Jonson may well be enhanced by a theoretical approach that emphasizes multiplicity and transformability over univocality and consistency. Such a body of theory may help us to appreciate the uncanny flexibility that pervades Jonson's language and writing.

In fact, the literary and cultural artifacts that provide the subject of this book are distinguished by their deep involvement in ongoing processes of social, and even physical, metamorphosis. Making themselves out of the residual materials of a past from which, by definition, they differ, they too impose their difference on the past, estranging it from itself and remaking it in the service of present needs. That process of estrangement arguably furnishes the raw substance of social change, and in early modern Europe such change encompasses many of the material terms of modern existence, from the most portentous to the most trivial. Thus when Christopher Hill surveys the cultural legacy of the seventeenth century, he nicely elides the global and the domestic, matters of state and matters of the table:

The England of 1603 was a second-class power; the Great Britain of 1714 was the greatest world power. . . . Englishmen's diet was transformed in this century by the introduction of root crops, which made it possible to have meat in winter. Potatoes and many new vegetables were added to it, as were tea, coffee, chocolate, sugar, and tobacco. . . . The modern arrangement of meals—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—dates from the seventeenth century. . . . By the end of the century pottery and glass had replaced pewter and wood at table. (2–3)

And so forth. Nor are the broad processes of such cultural transformation alien to the material of individual biography, although in individual cases the transformation takes a predictably less schematic form. One reason to study Ben Jonson is that his personal history interacts clearly, and in many cases decisively, with the larger cultural trends Hill and other historians seek to describe. To this extent, Jonson becomes an important test case for the signifying capacities of his society as a whole.

In keeping with this view of matters, the poet's life-records reflect an intense, ongoing campaign of self-refashioning, and Jonson's sustained effort to remake himself arguably both derives from and contributes to larger processes of social transformation. When conversing with William Drummond at the top of his career, he looks back on his childhood and early employment history with a fascinating selectivity of vision:

His Grandfather came from Carlisle & he thought from Anandale to it, he served King Henry 8 & was a Gentleman. . . . He himself was Posthumous born a moneth after his fathers decease, brought up poorly, putt to school by a friend (his master Cambden) after taken from it, and put to ane other Craft (I thinke was to be a Wright or Bricklayer) which he could not endure, then went he to ye low Countries but returning soone he betook himself to his wonted studies. (Drummond 234–243)

David Lee Miller has put memorable emphasis on the equivocal phrase "Posthumous born," which locates Jonson's own identity in a belatedness—a born-deadness—central to Lacanian concepts of ego construction (234–241). As Jonson describes his childhood to Drummond, a necessary rhetorical fissure opens within the idea of the poet himself, between Jonson the subject of the childhood narrative and Jonson the narrator; the distance between these two selves is then patched over with virtuoso narrative improvisations. Jonson makes a point not to remember the exact character of his first job, which "he could not endure"; yet in almost the same breath he identifies himself by tracing his ancestry a hundred years back to a "Gentleman" of Henry VIII; he describes scholarship as his "wonted" activity, that to which he was accustomed, the manner to which he was born;

and in doing so he characterizes his military service in the low countries as a moment of vagrancy from an already established career path. The poet reconstructs his past in order to make himself into a single, rhetorically stable, self-consistent person: the *doctus poeta* of James I's court. Yet the energy with which he effects this retroactive self-reconstruction helps reveal it as only one among various available interpretive strategies, some of which (e.g., the poet's proud occasional identification with the military profession) receive greater emphasis at other moments. Moreover, the same self-transformational energy that goes into the conversations with Drummond arguably helps turn Jonson into one of England's first modern literary professionals.

The present work must begin by noting that Jonson's much celebrated self-transformation occurs very largely in alimentary terms. David Riggs has recently emphasized the character of the poet's childhood home on Hartshorn Lane, Westminster, in a neighborhood whose "distinctive feature" was "the sewage ditch that ran along the premises of [his stepfather's] cottage" (10). As Riggs observes, "during Jonson's lifetime, Hartshorn Lane would become one of the major sewage canals in the greater London area" (10); moreover, the poet's stepfather, following a common practice of early modern Londoners, constructed a "little garden"—almost certainly a kitchen garden—over the sewage ditch that abutted his cottage (10). The alimentary circularity that invests *Bartholomew Fair* and Epigram 101 thus emerges from Jonson's childhood as a pattern not merely of aesthetic but also of biographical determination, coextensive with the childhood circumstances against which the poet rebelled so bitterly. Inserted into the metaphorical anus of greater London, Jonson begins his life by eating self-consciously recycled excrement.

The poet's childhood circumstances also lead to a further observation. Scholars have often focused on the long, concerted spiral of upward social mobility that characterizes Jonson's career; as far as I know, however, no one has concentrated on the digestive troping of this mobility. In fact, Jonson's career can be described as a kind of inverted figurative peristalsis. The life that begins so inauspiciously atop a Westminster sewage conduit in time attaches itself to the preeminent aesthetic and culinary monument of early Stuart culture: the royal banqueting house at Whitehall. In the process, Jonson crafts himself into a regular fixture of Jacobean and Caroline royal culinary entertainment. The masques he composes with Inigo Jones, Alphonso Ferrabosco, and others are regularly described as composite productions, but only recently, in the work of scholars like Patricia

Fumerton,[3] has this insight been extended to encompass culinary presentation and behavior at the table.

In fact, I suspect that the masque's status as an element of culinary ritual helps to explain certain features of both Jonson's literary artistry and of his career as a whole. In the former instance, Jonson's work repeatedly conflates or contrasts the office of poet with that of chef; examples of this gesture include (but are by no means limited to) the prologue to *Epicoene* (1609), the prologue to *The New Inn* (1629), and the antimasque to *Neptune's Triumph for the Return of Albion* (1624). In terms of the larger structure of Jonson's career, the same juxtaposition or conflation occurs repeatedly: there are the dining-club-cum-literary-society Jonson and his followers established at the Devil and Saint Dunstan Tavern; the public feasting and drinking during Jonson's Scottish journey; the pension of canary wine Jonson received late in life from the Crown (Herford, Simpson, and Simpson 1:247); and the poet's infamous girth, which increased with (and through) his reputation, transforming him from a "leane . . . hollow-cheekt Scrag" (Dekker, *Satiromastix* 5.2.263) into a living literary monument with a "mountaine belly and . . . rockie face" (*Underwood* 9.17). Again and again, in a manner that is at once jovial and a bit invidious, Jonson seeks to incorporate the office of chef into the body of his work, while his work, in turn, runs the risk of being translated into a subsidiary element of culinary presentation. This tension not only makes sense in terms of Jonson's proprietorial attitude toward his masque productions; it also conforms to the larger emphasis on individual creativity and ownership of literary property that is a distinctive feature of the poet's overall career.

The following chapters must therefore deal not only with the alimentary troping of Jonson's work, but with the alimentary troping of his life as well. Any such project will be rendered more difficult by the great potential indecorum of its subject matter, for any scholarly study that focuses on Jonson's treatment of alimentation necessarily complicates efforts to present the poet as an austere classicist or rigorous reformer of morals. To this extent, the present work risks charges of character assassination; certainly one of the earliest efforts to come to grips with Jonson's use of alimentary motifs—Edmund Wilson's famous essay on Jonsonian anality—has incurred such charges (see, e.g., Pearlman 365–366). Yet a supreme irony of Jonson's fixation on digestive matters is that it derives in large part from the very classicism that it would seem to disturb. As Robert Watson has noted, Jonson's classicism has the effect of "subverting the usual bounda-

ries between works and between genres" even as it aligns Jonson himself with "traditional values" (13); the poet's use of classical alimentary and convivial themes provides a case in point. Thus I hope that the present study might provide a useful adjunct to the important recent work on Jonsonian classicism by scholars like Katharine Maus, Richard Peterson, Thomas Greene, and Douglas Duncan. In the process, this book might be able to shed some light on the way in which Jonson's alimentary references provide material for personal and cultural transformation—for negotiating the distance between a classical past and a postmodern future. With such an aim in mind, the remainder of this introduction is devoted to two issues: first, to examining the major theoretical models that have been established in the postmodern present to account for the significance of alimentation; and second, to introducing one extended instance of the alimentary complexities that Jonson's work exploits—complexities that derive, in large part, from the poet's treatment of the classical past.

Theory and the Belly

Twentieth-century writers have used three major theoretical models to analyze the presence of alimentary motifs in early modern English drama: the Freudian, the Bakhtinian, and what I call the anthropological. From each standpoint, Jonson's work has earned considerable local scrutiny.

Freud

Edmund Wilson's "Morose Ben Jonson" made the definitive early psychoanalytic statement about Jonson's life and work, arguing that "Jonson seems an obvious example of a psychological type which has been described by Freud and designated by a technical name, *anal erotic*" (217). As Wilson understands it, this character type is marked by a preoccupation with "orderliness . . . ; parsimony; . . . [and] obstinacy" (218). It is subtended by an extreme emotional aloofness, even impoverishment (220), and it manifests itself in adult behavior through a fixation on various symbolic substitutes for fecal matter—most particularly money. Jonson exhibits this anal fixation, according to Wilson, through his repeated use of motifs of hoarding (218–219); through his treatment of fecal release as an act of aggression (228); and through his personality, which was viewed by

at least some of his contemporaries as distinctively grudging and ungenerous (220–221). The result is a Freudian interpretation that sees Jonson's work as impaired by its author's psychological morbidity and that disparagingly contrasts Jonson's "glaring defects" (215)—in perhaps predictable fashion—with the free, gentle, and generous accomplishments of Shakespeare. In short, Wilson refers to anal eroticism as a "psychological type," but his description of the type and his application of it to Jonson's case clearly indicate that he regards it as an emotional infirmity.

More recently, Wilson's reading of Jonson has incurred some telling censure. E. Pearlman has put the counter-case most cogently:

> [Wilson's] picture of Jonson, though unattractive and harsh, is not entirely untrue. . . .But Wilson's version of Ben Jonson is neither a complete nor a fecund truth. If the retentive character is defined by stinginess, to what do we attribute the extraordinary abundance—plays, poems, masques, translations, a grammar, criticism—of Jonson's creativity? And what accounts for a play like *Bartholomew Fair*, which not only celebrates the anus, but is a paean to every orifice, every bodily fluid, every quiddity of man's [sic] animal nature. . . . Clearly, Jonson possessed, and was perhaps even handicapped by, a retentive streak. But it is mean to let a part of a complex individuality stand for the whole. Wilson's analysis is a partial truth, a psychological synecdoche. (366)

Pearlman's remarks are admirable for at least two reasons: they nicely distinguish the characteristics of Jonson's work that Wilson has trouble explaining, and yet they acknowledge the limited validity of Wilson's reading. Pearlman's is a revisionist Jonson, but a selectively revisionist one, in whom the theory of anality still plays an important, albeit restricted, role.

More recently still, David Riggs has revived the psychoanalytic approach to Jonson's work, correlating anal motifs with patterns of oedipal aggression. The fecal references of *The Case Is Altered* (1597), for instance, thus metamorphose into a version of "archetypal family romance" (30) in which the wicked stepfather Jacques de Prie buries his personal treasure in a dung heap. Hence, Riggs concludes, "The scenes in which Jacques builds his cache . . . appear . . . to be the work of a man who suffers from [anal-erotic neurosis]. Since Jonson never proceeded through the stage at which the child learns to cope with intergenerational conflict, when he fantasized about stepfathers, he instinctively regressed to the anal stage and soiled his foster parent with excrement" (31). But Riggs, like Pearlman, carefully circumscribes this reading by calling attention to its limitations: "it is inadequate," he continues, "to conclude that Jonson 'was' an anal-erotic personality. . . . The author of *The Case Is Altered* had infantile wishes, but

he also had found a creative way of gratifying those wishes" (31). In effect, like his garden-planting stepfather, "Jonson had discovered how to turn manure into a valuable commodity" (31), and for Riggs this discovery saves the poet from charges of anal eroticism.

Each of the foregoing treatments of Jonsonian anality is admirable in its own right, and the present work is deeply indebted to them all. But because none of them devotes much attention to Freud's own writings on the subject of anality, all three works incline toward an unnecessarily narrow—and unnecessarily pejorative—understanding of anal eroticism.[4] In fact, the early statements made by Freud and his followers on the subject of anality are by no means entirely disparaging or restrictive. When Freud introduces the topic in 1908, he presents anal eroticism not as a psychological ailment, but as "a certain set of character-traits" ("Character" 169) whose bearing on particular varieties of neurosis deserves exploration. He then defines the central characteristics of anal eroticism in a way that needs to be quoted at length:

> The people I am about to describe are . . . especially *orderly*, *parsimonious* and *obstinate*. Each of these words actually covers a small group or series of interrelated character-traits. "Orderly" covers the notion of bodily cleanliness, as well as of conscientiousness in carrying out small duties and trustworthiness. . . . Parsimony may appear in the exaggerated form of avarice; and obstinacy can go over into defiance, to which rage and revengefulness are easily joined. . . . It is easy to gather from these people's early childhood history that they took a comparatively long time to overcome their infantile *incontinentia alvi*. . . . [Hence] we infer that such people are born with a sexual constitution in which the erotogenicity of the anal zone is exceptionally strong. But . . . the anal zone had lost its erotogenic significance in the course of development; and it is to be suspected that the regularity with which this triad of properties is present in their character may be brought into relation with the disappearance of anal erotism. ("Character" 169–170)

The first thing to be noted in this account of anal eroticism is the extreme variety of attitudes and behaviors it incorporates under the rubrics of order, parsimony, and obstinacy. Whereas Wilson invoked these three terms to define the anal-erotic personality *tout court*, for Freud they function as a tentative means of organizing a wide range of potentially contradictory character traits. Moreover, the focus on morbidity so evident in Wilson's account of the anal Jonson takes less clear shape in Freud. The English word *orderly* is largely neutral in its moral and clinical connotations, and if placed properly within the Teutonic cultural context, the German equivalent *ordentlich* actually emerges as a term of high praise. *Parsimony*, too, tries to stake out a kind of semiotic middle ground; it can

be either a grim form of thrift or avarice with a happy face, depending on how one chooses to view it. As for obstinacy, one need only recall the proverbial declension "I am firm; thou art obstinate; he is pigheaded" to note how precariously this term mediates between competing extremes of laudable and reprehensible behavior. In short, Freud at least attempts to construct the anal-erotic personality as bearing the virtues of its defects and the defects of its virtues. Wilson, Pearlman, and Riggs all have greater or lesser trouble accepting this characterization of matters. Thus Wilson's account of Jonson is largely condemnatory, whereas Riggs and Pearlman proceed as if Jonson's praiseworthy qualities placed him by definition beyond the purview of anal eroticism.

In addition, Freud's account of the anal-erotic character offers a remarkably capacious explanation of how anal eroticism is assimilated into the subject's adult personality. The principal mechanism in this process is apparently social condemnation, which encourages the subject to repress the erotogenicity of the anal zone; however, the forms adopted by such repression are necessarily various and ongoing, involving reaction formation, a wide range of possible sublimations, and the continued existence of unsublimated drives, all in more or less variable admixtures. Thus, although the origins of anal repression may be located in the infantile processes of toilet training, to characterize anality as a purely "infantile" mode of experience (Riggs 31), and to describe anal behavior exclusively as a function of psychological "regression" (Riggs 31), is not entirely fair. On the contrary, Freud ends his earliest discussion of anality by musing on the relative force of repressed and unrepressed anal eroticism in the formation of adult character:

> If there is any basis in fact for the relation posited here between anal erotism and this triad of character-traits, one may expect to find no very marked degree of "anal character" in people who have retained the anal zone's erotogenic character in adult life, as happens, for instance, with certain homosexuals. ("Character" 175)

From a late twentieth-century perspective, Freud's eagerness to speculate on the "anal character" of homosexuals may seem offensive, at the very least. But at moments like this Freud is clearly committed to the complementary propositions that anal eroticism exerts an ongoing influence on adult behavior through a whole series of possible accommodations to social repression, and that the study of anal eroticism thus functions primarily as a study of character formation and only secondarily as a classification of neurosis.

This early document on anal eroticism provoked an immediate and