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Burt

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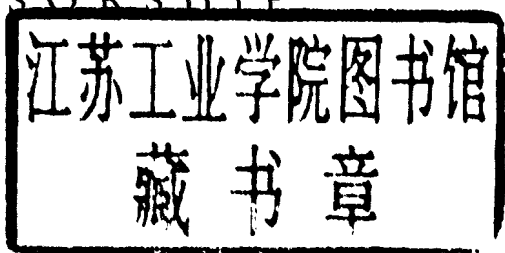
Ben Jonson and the Discourses of Censorship

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BEN JONSON AND
THE DISCOURSES
OF CENSORSHIP

Richard Burt



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In memory of my uncle
Alan M. Hollingsworth

Preface

This book has a twin focus: it provides an account of Ben Jonson and the politics of early Stuart theater, and it provides an account of censorship. Broadly speaking, I concentrate on Jonson and early modern England in order to contest a set of ahistorical assumptions about censorship which inform present accounts of the politics of the theater. As Renaissance critics and historians have debated whether the early Stuarts were barbarians who repressed radical drama or enlightened, sophisticated rulers who licensed dramatic criticism of the state, those on both sides of the debate have increasingly turned to licensing and censorship to prove their respective cases. Although these critics and historians have contested the politics of the theater, they have not contested the meaning of censorship itself, taking it to be repressive or consensual state control intended to inhibit or silence oppositional or radical voices. In my view, to account for Jonson's case, we must historicize censorship. If we adopt the traditional definition we cannot make sense of Jonson's writings, their reception, and the shape of his career. As a dramatist who was both censored by the court and in line to become the court censor, Jonson registers with great resonance and complexity the many paradoxes and contradictions that traversed what I take to be the complicated, uneven development of theater censorship. My focus on Jonson is thus strategic. Through a reading of the exemplary paradoxes of his complex career, a career that

spans an unusually wide spectrum of courts, literary practices, theatrical venues, and codes of judgment, I undertake to displace the moralistic, monolithic, ahistorical definition of censorship which has informed the present debate over the Renaissance theater with a historically specific, epistemological definition.¹ Literary censorship was less a matter of denying liberty of speech than a legitimization or delegitimation of specific discursive practices.²

I should add that my focus on Jonson and early modern England is also determined by my position as a cultural critic in the postmodern present. As I wrote the book, I became increasingly attentive to a proliferation of censorship cases, particularly those concerning academic freedom, political criticism, and the fine arts, and I became increasingly struck both by their complexity and by the difficulty of using the traditional definition of censorship to explain them. An understanding of early modern censorship was important not because it marked the origin and foundation of present forms of censorship but because contemporary debates over Renaissance censorship were empowered by the traditional, ahistorical definition of censorship I was concerned to interrogate. Reconceptualizing censorship in the early modern past, developing a more nuanced understanding of it, could show us how to reconceptualize censorship in the postmodern present. As I suggest at length in the Conclusion, it is not enough to employ the traditional definition. In order to criticize the kinds of censorship practiced in the postmodern present we must understand both how they differ from other practices (in this case, early modern practices) and why it is crucial to differentiate between them.

My critical perspective is Foucauldian and post-Marxist.³ Following Foucault, I historicize censorship in genealogical fashion, differentiating forms of it in the early modern past and in the postmodern present in order to provide a critique of both. In following this procedure I hope to shift our perspective on Jonson and the early Stuart theater significantly, to demonstrate that Jonson and others made sense of censorship through a different set of distinctions from those assumed by modern and postmodern critics of the Renaissance. Censorship, in my account, pervaded early Stuart theatrical culture: it was practiced and nurtured not only by the court but also by playwrights, theatrical entrepreneurs, printers, poets, courtiers, and critics. Thus, the broad questions critics have

regularly asked about the theater—Who was for or against censorship? Was this text oppositional or orthodox?—simply do not make sense. Though some dramatists defended “liberty of speech,” that liberty always entailed some form of censorship. Dramatists and patrons did not group themselves in opposition to censorship, or in favor of it. Rather, they debated who should censor and who have liberty, for what ends and on what grounds, and their struggle was registered in a contest over the meanings of the words *liberty* and *censorship* themselves. *License* could mean liberty or licentiousness. Words such as *censure*, *censor*, and *censureship* could admit ambiguous meanings. The words *censor* and *critick* might be conflated or contrasted; *censure* might be used positively or negatively to legitimate or delegitimize certain speakers and certain discourses. The meaning of *censor* itself changed during the Renaissance, passing from its classical sense to its modern sense.⁴

The present book follows what I take to be a characteristically Jonsonian strategy of exaggerating the differences between my definition of censorship and the one I contest in order to avoid the problems we would otherwise inevitably face. In defining censorship as a differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate discourses, I wish to acknowledge at the outset that my critique of a traditional moralistic discourse about censorship necessarily reinscribes rather than absolutely breaks with its central assumptions and terms. Some version of a binary model of censorship, power, or ideology will always be in place in any account of early modern literary censorship. Similarly, my genealogical critique of a moral definition of censorship does not (indeed, cannot) entirely escape moral critical terrain (the genealogical critique being itself a highly moralistic one). My point is that existing binary models (whether explicitly moralistic or not) are complicated to the point of breakdown once censorship is historicized.

Beyond acknowledging that my critique of censorship paradoxically reinscribes what it seeks to displace, I wish to clarify my use of two central critical terms throughout the book, namely, *neurosis* and *censorship* itself. I use *neurotic* to characterize Jonson’s decentered subjectivity, to register a contradiction between Jonson’s desire to censor himself in order to legitimate himself and his equally powerful desire to express the censored material in a different (sometimes in the same) context. By characterizing Jonson as a neurotic I wish

to account for what I would call Jonson's "irregularity" as a consuming censor/critic and producing censor/author, not to denigrate him. I aim to elaborate and complicate recent antihumanist, post-Freudian symptomatic readings of the political unconscious of Jonsonian textuality. In order to recover Jonson from his earlier marginalization, modern and postmodern political critics have in turn (too quickly, in my view) marginalized critics such as Edmund Wilson (1938), who were central to Jonson's marginalization. Consequently, they have often domesticated Jonson, assimilating him to a psychological and cultural norm that leaves out of account those contradictory features that constitute a specifically neurotic Jonsonian subjectivity. Furthermore, in marginalizing Wilson, critics have indirectly adopted a model of repression that relies on an opposition between conscious intentions and unconscious forces and that has also, insofar as it has equated these terms with the censored and uncensored, displaced censorship as an object of study (repression substitutes for censorship). By refusing a stable opposition between unconscious forces and conscious intentions, between what is repressed and what is liberated, the term *neurosis* not only puts censorship on the front burner of political criticism but makes it possible to recognize how Jonson's textual strategies, such as revision and editing, or his own codes of criticism are also diverse forms of censorship.⁵

My adoption of a different, much more encompassing definition of censorship, which includes not only Jonson's textual practices but the institutional foundations of poetic production, licensing, and even literary criticism, may seem to put the term *censorship* in danger of being overwhelmed. Indeed, some readers might wonder why it should be retained at all when I assign it a positive legitimating function and insist that it cannot be decisively separated from criticism. Foucault himself treated censorship as a relic of what he called the repressive hypothesis, left behind by postmodernism. More recently Andrew Ross (1990) has suggested that *regulation* ought to be substituted for *censorship* in discussions of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding controversy.

I have retained the term for two reasons, both of which derive from my interest in accounting for the continued appeal of censorship as a tool in cultural criticism. First, by expanding the meaning of censorship to include productive as well as repressive regulatory

practices, I aim to expand the critique of these practices as well, drawing attention to forms of censorship that would otherwise have remained invisible. Second, as much as I wish to achieve a fuller understanding of censorship by recognizing the diversity of its forms, I wish to foreground the difficulty and complexity of recognizing them as forms of censorship. That is, my aim is not simply to arrive at an exhaustive definition of early modern censorship but to examine the nuances, complexity, even elusiveness of this contested term. In my view, the very drive to define censorship, to pin down its meaning and determine what does or does not count as censorship, to assess which forms are more significant than others, serves to regulate (one might even say, police) its proper, legitimate use within contemporary cultural criticism.⁶ The very escalation of controversy over the meaning of the term demands attention, as does the similar contest over terms to which *censorship* is often opposed: among others, one could list *criticism*, *diversity*, *debate*, and *dialogue*.

Apart from these reasons, my use of the term *censorship* is determined by the larger theoretical ambition of this book. I use it to contest the two dominant accounts of domination, so to speak, now widely in circulation. In modern accounts, repression is defined negatively as whatever keeps one from speaking. In more sophisticated versions of discourse ethics, a variety of impediments to ethical communication are acknowledged, but censorship is not generally defined as one of them (censorship supposedly having disappeared or existing only elsewhere). By contrast, postmodern accounts (ideology critique and discourse theory) acknowledge that power operates negatively but focus on more indirect discursive forms of domination, which are thought to be all the more effective for not being recognized as domination. While I side with the postmodern account of domination, I nevertheless keep one foot firmly planted in both camps. As a theoretical “payoff,” the book offers a deeper sense of censorship as a problematic, not, as in more predictable postmodern critiques, a more stable notion of oppositional criticism: without giving up the traditional definition of censorship as brute repression, we can begin to see that censorship includes as well a set of paradoxical and often contradictory strategies for the administration of aesthetics and for the regulation of literary criticism.

By expanding the meaning of censorship, I aim to disturb assumptions about the court's monopoly on the benefits and evils of censorship which have informed and empowered recent work on the Renaissance and to complicate the usual response to contemporary right-wing censorial practices and the often knee-jerk, defensive reactions to neoconservative critiques of political criticism as a censorious politically correct practice. My aim is not to neutralize a critique of censorship by deconstructing a distinction between censorship and criticism which is central to many avowedly political critics. Although I am critical of a traditional account of censorship and the arguments about subversive theatrical politics which follow from it, I seek to rethink the dynamics of censorship and call attention to the ways its various forms sustain the purposes of cultural legitimation, not to replace a traditional criticism of censorship with a defense of it. To collapse criticism into censorship would be simply to replace one monolithic model of censorship with another.⁷ Furthermore, in arguing that the importance of various kinds of censors (such as the court and the market) is relative, that it cannot be decided apart from local cases, I nevertheless want to keep their differences clear. State censorship is repressive in ways that market censorship, for example, is not: the threat of torturing an author's body (or of burning his or her books) is not the same as the threat of penury resulting from lack of literary patronage; a death threat is not the same thing as being denied funding by the NEA. Yet if there are differences between forms of censorship, there is not, in my view, a stable binary opposition between criticism and censorship (each regarded as a self-identical, unified term), nor does one form of censorship always take priority over another; rather, the relationship between criticism and censorship is a contradictory one in which criticism can also serve as a form of censorship and censorship can also serve as a form of criticism.⁸

In interrogating the meaning of censorship and calling for a broader reflection on the historical role of criticism as a legitimating and delegitimizing activity, this book speaks both to its primary intended audience of Renaissance critics and to a broad spectrum of critics and historians studying censorship in other periods or disciplines. My sense of early Stuart theater censorship as multiple and paradoxical bears importantly, I think, on a now widely shared assumption that literary criticism and literature are always institu-

tionally constrained and on recent debates within the profession over the implications of that constraint, conducted between critics who wish to politicize literary criticism and critics who wish to salvage through discourse ethics some notion of literary criticism based on consensus, community, and the public sphere.

Some of the book has already seen print. Parts of the Introduction were published in “‘Tis Writ by Me’: Massinger’s *The Roman Actor* and the Politics of Reception in the Renaissance Theatre,” *Theatre Journal* (Fall 1988): 332–46, and parts of the second and third chapters were published as “‘Licensed by Authority’: Ben Jonson and the Politics of Early Stuart Theater,” *English Literary History* (Fall 1987): 529–60. I am grateful to the Johns Hopkins University Press for permission to publish revisions of the material.

In helping me to develop the argument and focus of this book, Leonard Tennenhouse provided invaluable support and direction. Timothy Murray and Christopher Pye, the readers for Cornell University Press, gave the manuscript especially detailed, thoughtful, and illuminating readings. I am also deeply indebted to Stephen Greenblatt, whose dazzling undergraduate and graduate courses on Renaissance literature and Marxism and literature, and whose direction of my dissertation on Shakespearean comedy, made it possible to write this book. I have been fortunate to exchange work with and to receive extremely useful readings from John Archer, Lee Beier, Mark Breitenberg, Lynda Boose, Martin Butler, Stephen Clingman, Stuart Culver, Jonathan Dollimore, Ian Donaldson, Richard Dutton, Lee Edwards, Philip Finkelpearl, Jonathan Goldberg, Judith Haber, Alexandra Halasz, Don Hedrick, Jim Holstun, Lindsay Kaplan, Wally Kerrigan, Randall Knopper, Joseph Loewenstein, Cristina Malcolmson, Leah Marcus, Katharine Maus, Ron McDonald, Louis Montrose, David Norbrook, Stephen Orgel, Dennis Porter, Alan Sinfield, Michael Schoenfeldt, Peter Stallybrass, Lawrence Venuti, Jeffrey Wallen, and Rob Wilson. Richard Dutton first got me thinking about Jonson and literary criticism. In addition to correcting an embarrassing number of errors, Martin Butler helped sharpen my focus on Jonson’s later career.

Critics with whom I am often in serious disagreement have been extremely generous in responding to my criticisms of their work. Conversations about my views on censorship with John Archer,

Hussein Ibish, Amy Kaplan, Tim Murray, Mary Russo, Jeff Wallen, and George Yudice have been invaluable. I have also benefited from presenting parts of the book to my department, to the Five College Faculty Seminar on the Renaissance, the Columbia Seminar on the Renaissance, and at annual meetings of the Modern Language Association, the Shakespeare Association of America, the Renaissance Society of America, and various international conferences held in England and Scotland. I thank the American Council of Learned Societies and the graduate school of the University of Massachusetts for travel grants that got me to these conferences. I am grateful also to the Institute for the Advanced Study of the Humanities for making me a fellow and for providing me with the opportunity to teach a faculty seminar on censorship, political criticism, and the public sphere. My thanks to Jacqueline Le Blanc and Roger Stritmatter for proofreading the manuscript. I record here the debts I owe three friends, Rochelle Slamovich, Charles K. Smith, and Murray Cohen. Finally, I acknowledge with pleasure that this book would not have been completed without the sustaining love of my baby daughter, Nora, herself a terrific taster of books.

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Abbreviations

- H & S *Ben Jonson*. Edited by C. H. Herford, Evelyn Simpson, and Percy Simpson. 11 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–52.
- ES *The Elizabethan Stage*. Edited by E. K. Chambers. 4 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923–31.
- JCS *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*. Edited by G. E. Bentley. 7 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941–68.

Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of Jonson's plays are to *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, ed. G. A. Wilkes, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); all citations of *Discoveries* are to *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems*, ed. Robert Hunter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); all citations of the poems are to *Ben Jonson: Poems*, ed. Ian Donaldson (London: Oxford University Press, 1975); all citations of the masques are to *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques*, ed. Stephen Orgel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969). All citations of Shakespeare's plays are to *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 3d ed. (Glendale, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1980). Citations of James Shirley, *The Bird in a Cage*, are to *James Shirley's "The Bird in a Cage": A Critical Edition*, ed. Frances Senescu (New York: Garland, 1980).

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Contents

Preface	ix
Abbreviations	xvii
INTRODUCTION. Ben Jonson and the Discourses of Censorship	i
CHAPTER 1. Branding the Body, Burning the Book: Censorship, Criticism, and the Consumption of Jonson's Corpus	26
CHAPTER 2. Licensing Authorities: Jonson, Shakespeare, and the Politics of Theatrical Professionalism	78
CHAPTER 3. Th'Only Catos of This Critick Age: Late Jonson and the Reformation of Caroline Tastes	115
CONCLUSION. From the Brand to the Brand Name: Censorship and Political Criticism in the Early Modern Past and the Postmodern Present	150
Notes	169
Works Cited	195
Index	217

*Ben Jonson and the
Discourses of Censorship*

Writing about theater censorship in the Renaissance, critics have often relied on images of the cropped ears of William Prynne and severed hand of John Stubbes, of book burnings, imprisoned authors, and shattered printing presses. These images have a particular resonance given the recent death threat against Salman Rushdie and the public burnings of his novel *The Satanic Verses*, and the resurgence of a broad range of attempts to censor the fine arts and mass culture makes it all the more important that we understand the meaning of these images of Renaissance censorship.¹ Yet their very seriousness has often led critics to regard censorship in monolithic, narrow terms, defining it exclusively as a negative exercise of power centered in the court. In her influential account of Renaissance censorship, for example, Annabel Patterson maintains that court censorship was the "only kind that really counted" (1984, 17). Although political critics have historicized Renaissance literature by examining censorship as a (in some cases, as *the*) constituent historical determinant of literature, they have not historicized censorship itself. Their univocal (if often complex and highly nuanced) definition of censorship has tended to reduce both poetic liberty and censorship to abstract, consistent, univocal, and ahistorical values.²

The readings of plays by a writer such as Ben Jonson and the accounts of the theater as a social institution enabled by this es-

entially anachronistic and ahistorical court-centered definition of censorship have thus far been played out in terms of the all too familiar debate over whether the theater subverted power or defused resistance by containing it. In one account, authors under capitalism always resist a repressive censorship and are always on the side of liberty and freedom. Ambiguity, equivocation, irony, disavowal, and other forms of semantic polysemy and indeterminacy are always to be read as evidence of a conscious or unconscious revolutionary critique of the court.³ Others have argued in an opposing account that critique is always already contained: the court licensed reformist, even rebellious critiques of the court, giving poets (whose loyalty was unquestioned) the liberty to criticize the court's policies or alert the court to corrupting agents and forces. Against an earlier Whig view of the early Stuart court as uniform, repressive, and decadent, seeking escapist entertainment in the elite theaters of a coterie, revisionist and New Historicist critics have emphasized the diversity of the court and the sophistication and seriousness of its theatrical tastes. Court censorship, according to these critics, was remarkably tolerant and lenient.⁴

Despite their differences, both accounts share the same court-centered definition of censorship. The court and dramatists can be judged by the same moral criteria: if court censorship is regarded as repressive, dramatists are ranked according to whether they collaborated or resisted; if, by contrast, the court is regarded as having licensed an enlightened critique, dramatists are shown to have engaged in morally serious, sophisticated criticism. In contrast to these critics, I wish to historicize early Stuart theater censorship in order to make available a fuller understanding of its contradictions and the multiplicity of its forms and agents. Historicizing censorship will involve a critique of four interlocking assumptions that accompany the definition of censorship presently adopted by political critics. First, censorship is thought to have been confined to the court. Second, authors and critics are always assumed to have desired to evade court censorship, never to have been its agents. Progressive authors, it is said, smuggled secret meanings into their texts, which critics could in turn decipher.⁵ Third, mutilation or torture of the author's body is a measure of the repressiveness of a given form of censorship. Finally, and perhaps most crucial, critics have assumed that there was an alternative to censorship, that authors and printers would have preferred to write and print without it.