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### Ben Jonson's Prefatory Criticism: A Review of Recent Scholarship

The reputation of the Renaissance playwright Ben Jonson has enjoyed a remarkable revival among scholars in the past few decades. This is due in part to a surge of interest in authorship and the culture of publication. Jonson's contribution to the early culture of print and publishing is well documented, providing an in-depth view of the beginnings of English print. Never before Jonson did a writer exert so much control over the publication of their text, nor in proclaiming their own, unique voice through the medium of print. In an era when it was considered *déclassé* to actively and openly participate in the publication of one's own work, Jonson reveled in the act. Although the concept of authorship as it is known today did not exist in Jonson's time, he nevertheless actively pursued a reputation not only as a playwright, but also mainly as a published artist unheard of at that point in history. Jonson used publication to establish the persona of the author not only as the originator of the text, but more importantly, as the creator; thus the birth of the authorial voice, claiming not only copyright but the right of interpretation. In his prefatory material, Jonson took a firm hold of his creation and held to it with an iron fist. In my paper, I intend to show how Ben Jonson took advantage of the medium of prefatory material to assert not only his rights but also his own voice.

My first source is *Jonson's Folio and the politics of patronage*,<sup>@</sup> by Martin Butler. The title is fairly self-explanatory; Butler's topic here is publication of Ben

Jonson's 1616 Folio and its connection with the politics of the time. As a historical overview of political squabbles among the aristocracy, resulting in the ascension of Jonson's friend the Earl of Pembroke to the position of Lord Chamberlain, the article is first class. His command of the intricate web of marriages, divorces and deaths leading to the appointment is astonishing. Unfortunately, he does a less than stellar job in tying these events to the publication of the Folio; there are a few muddled attempts to prove that publication hinged desperately on Pembroke's fortunes, but none of these ever fully mature. However, concerning the development of Jonson's authorial voice through the publication of the Folio, Butler offers some very nice insights. Referring to Michel Foucault's seminal *What Is An Author*,<sup>6</sup> Butler points out that the Folio represented a powerful new way to convey the authorial voice. Almost in spite of himself, he also illustrates the fact that the Folio allowed Jonson the luxury of erasing the fragments of other voices and fawning prefaces contained in the Quarto editions and ultimately seal his own voice, making it impervious to outside influence. While the bulk of the article is given over to a magnificent unraveling of court upheavals from 1615 to 1616, the several pages related directly to the Folio and its contribution to Jonson's voice make it a valuable resource.

The next source is also a slight deviation from the medium of prefatory material, but is still a worthy source regarding the topic of Jonson's authorial voice. *Self and Others in Two Poems by Ben Jonson*,<sup>7</sup> by William E. Cain, examines the undercurrents of Jonson's personal voice in the poems *Epistle answering one that asked to be sealed of the tribe of Ben*<sup>8</sup> and *On My Son*.<sup>9</sup> Cain's interest here seems to

be mainly in utilizing these two poems as a diagnostic tool to reveal Jonson's psychological state of mind. The practice of applying psychological measurements to long-deceased literary figures is a dubious one at best; in Cain's hands, it becomes downright laughable at times, mildly interesting at others. At one point, he asserts that Jonson's phrasing within his poems is an indication that he was afraid of losing his own voice in his poetry and was unable to write a poem without eventually making himself its focus. Nevertheless, in the process of defining that voice, Cain makes some very interesting observations. He notes that Jonson was aware that the interpretation of the text was squarely in the hands of the reader; thus he used the prefatory material as a means not only of controlling the interpretation, but also of asserting his own voice. Cain also points out that the skill of the author is no guarantee that the reader will correctly interpret the text; most of the time, he observes, they won't understand the author's intent immediately. Jonson saw this as a perversion of his intentions in writing the text in the first place, and therefore used the preface as a means of asserting his voice. Again, Cain reads a little too much between the lines and draws some conclusions that are rather suspect. However, his assessment of Jonson's perception of the importance of the reader's ability to distort the interpretation of the text is accurate, as are his remarks regarding Jonson's desire to assert his own voice in his work. In the end, Cain's article provides some excellent material on the authorial voice that will ultimately prove quite useful.

My next source focuses more closely on Ben Jonson and his desire to be recognized as a published artist. Bruce Thomas Boehrer addresses some interesting

issues in his 1993 essay, *A Poet of Labor: Authorship and Property in the Work of Ben Jonson*.<sup>6</sup> Boehrer's intention is to detail the steps taken by Ben Jonson to separate himself from the crowd, to gain notoriety as a published *Artist*<sup>6</sup> and not simply as another ragged playwright. He is attempting to catalogue the evolution of Jonson's ideas regarding literature and publication, as well as the obstacles he faced in developing those principles. Overall, Boehrer makes a very nice argument. He draws heavily from Jonson's own remarks concerning language and literature, most taken from *Timber: or Discoveries*. Contained in this work are Jonson's statements regarding his notion of authorship, as well as his intentions of furthering the field in his own work. Boehrer has ample material to work with and he uses it well here, forming a solid essay. One interesting point he touches upon regards the spelling of Jonson's name. Most people, especially those of Scandinavian descent, would be quick to point out that to spell *A Johnson*<sup>6</sup> without the *Ah*<sup>6</sup> (*A Jonson*<sup>6</sup>) is somewhat out of the ordinary. Boehrer opens his essay by pointing out that this was precisely what Ben Jonson intended; by altering the spelling of his name, he forced it to stand out, thereby helping to forge his identity as a unique artist. The connection between this and my own topic is relatively simple; it enhances my position that Jonson was inherently aware of his own voice and took very calculated steps to ensure its proper development.

My fourth source is *The Elizabethan Jonson in Print*,<sup>6</sup> by Richmond Barbour. Interestingly enough, he is the author of my next source as well. This lends further authority to his credibility as a source writer; it quickly becomes obvious that the issue of Ben Jonson and authorship is one he is very familiar with. The thrust of his

argument in this first article is essentially that Ben Jonson was the founding father of the belief in a writer owning and controlling a text in addition to creating it. This is detailed through an examination of his switch from theatrical texts to texts obviously intended strictly B or at least mainly B for publication. One of the keystones of Barbour's argument is the infamous, hotly debated and lavishly appointed 1616 Folio, a dramatic step up from the modest Quarto editions preceding it. Overall, the essay works quite nicely, laying out and wrapping up the argument without following a lot of tangents or introducing extraneous material. Since the prefatory material in the Folio (in comparison with the same material in the Quarto editions) offers unique insight on Jonson's voice, Barbour's semi-focus on the publication of the Folio as a turning point is especially relevant.

Finally, my last source is *Jonson and the Motives of Print*, again by Richmond Barbour. His purpose in writing this particular essay is to examine why Jonson spent so much time striving to define himself through printed media. His answer is that Jonson was driven by inner sources to pursue the notion of an author as someone not simply creating, but in a sense, becoming a part of the text, and achieving notoriety for it. Barbour argues that Jonson was possessed of a deep-seated need to be recognized for his achievements, a feat he could not accomplish simply by writing and producing drama. In order for Jonson to fulfill his needs, it became necessary for him to pursue print objectives. He also makes note of the low opinion held at Jonson's time of published poets, pointing out that the publication of the 1616 Folio raised Jonson above that level. There are only a few references to the dedications and prefaces specifically,

but these are generally quite useful connections. It is my belief that he undermines the impact of the modesty topos and the stigma of print on the mindset of the Elizabethan writer, as part of his argument concerning the prefaces and dedication seems to be that Jonson's self-deprecating comments are a sign of low self-esteem. Nevertheless, there is plenty of usable material here. Barbour also ties Jonson to Foucault by suggesting that Jonson was acting B in part B to fulfill his version of Foucault's question "what does it matter who is speaking?" This addresses Jonson's desire to establish his own authorial voice, effectively answering Foucault by stating the importance of the author as the creator and originator of the text, and therefore the only truly authorized interpreter.

I must admit that aside from the Barbour articles, there is very little in the way of a factual background represented here regarding Ben Jonson's prefatory material and its contributions to the development of his authorial voice. Much of this is due to the fact that the topic is virtually untouched by scholars, and therefore open to examination B and interpretation. Nevertheless, the sources I have detailed here will provide valuable information and insight into the individual elements of my argument. Ben Jonson wrote his prefatory material with the intent that it would help further the establishment of his voice; using these sources, I hope to be able to underscore the truth of his intent.

Works Cited

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