
ERNE, Lukas Christian
The principal reservation one might have about the volume as a whole involves the nascent subject’s need for a more sharply defined discourse. Ivic and Williams express in their useful introduction how the essays aim ‘to challenge and expand the present critical vocabulary with which we understand early Modern English culture and its literature’ (p. 14). But while the contributors all acknowledge distinctions between many forms of ‘forgetting’ (oblivion, denial, suppression, distraction, and so forth), the subtle discriminations do not always conspicuously obtain within the individual papers. As the problem compounds across subdivisions, the topic comes to seem somewhat nebulous and difficult to engage. We may question, for instance, the precise applicability of Elizabeth Mazzola’s work on slavery in Spenser’s legend of courtesy—though stimulating in its own right—to the subject under consideration. While a greater internal discipline is perhaps most wanted at this preliminary turn, the freshness and intelligence of these readings surely confirm the vitality of ‘forgetting’ in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, and the critical energy evident throughout the performances recommends the edition highly.

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Christopher Martin

---


The reputation of Ben Jonson has been suffering from comparison with Shakespeare ever since Milton opposed the latter, ‘Fancy’s child, | Warbling his native woodnotes wild’, to the former and his ‘learned sock’. In more recent times, we have constructed an opposition between a literary Jonson, writing dramatic texts for readers rather than just spectators, to a theatrical Shakespeare who allegedly wrote only for the stage, a view that does not bear close scrutiny. The diametrical opposition has benefited neither Shakespeare nor Jonson, so the attempt of *Jonsonians: Living Traditions* to refine our image of Jonson’s legacy and to query our perception of what and who is ‘Jonsonian’ is to be welcomed.

The collection consists of thirteen essays plus an introduction, written by a total of nine contributors, two of whom have produced half the volume: there are three essays (plus the introduction) by Brian Woolland and three by Richard A. Cave (who, I assume, is identical with ‘Richard Allen Cave’, as the author of one of these three is called). The introduction provides a useful guide to the collection, but unnecessarily evaluates the various contributions: one essay ‘energetically proposes’ (p. 3), another one offers ‘a particularly fruitful discussion’, and others are ‘wide-ranging’ and ‘witty and informative’ (p. 5), judgements which are best left to the readers.

The thirteen essays are divided into three parts, Part i on ‘Jonsonian Theatre’, Part ii on ‘Sons and Daughters of Ben’, and Part iii on ‘Jonsonians in the Modern Period’. The four essays in Part i explore in a variety of ways how certain Jonson plays, *Poetaster, Sejanus his Fall, Bartholomew Fair, The New Inn,* and *The Magnetic Lady,* ‘might themselves be considered Jonsonian’ (p. 3). Julie Sanders’s essay constitutes one of the collection’s highlights, notable not only for its endeavour ‘to establish what is particular about Jonson’s Caroline dramatic canon’ (p. 51) but also for its attention to how modern performance and modern dramatists can produce meaning in instructive ways. Other essays in this part seem rather too anxious to make Jonson ‘relevant’ to our modern day and age, however. *Sejanus* is ‘relevant today’ as its ‘central concern [. . .] is how we, an audience, respond to the contingency of corruption’ (p. 40); as for *Bartholomew Fair*, ‘Fairs haven’t changed very much during the intervening centuries so it is still relevant’ (p. 43).
The three essays in Part II investigate the relationship of Jonson's plays to those of a number of his seventeenth-century successors: Nathan Field and Richard Brome, 'The Playwriting Sons of Ben' (p. 69), according to the title of Cave's essay, Aphra Behn, 'an honorary Son [sic] of Ben' (p. 93), in the words of Carolyn D. Williams; and a number of other Restoration 'Daughters of Ben' (p. 107)—Elizabeth Polwhele, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Pix, and Susanna Centlivre—as explored by Alison Findlay. Part III 'explores the relationship of Jonson’s theatre to twentieth- and twenty-first-century traditions of performance' (p. 6) by juxtaposing Jonson and a number of modern playwrights: John Arden, Joe Orton, Peter Barnes, Caryl Churchill, and Alan Ayckbourn. Some of the resulting 'collisions' (p. 8) are not devoid of interest (e.g. pp. 125–26), but on other occasions the parallels constructed between Jonson and whatever is treated as 'Jonsonian' in other playwrights seem too loose to be meaningful (e.g. pp. 145, 161, 181, 187, 189, 192, 199, 205–06). Finally, rather too many typographical errors have slipped into the text, and entire words are missing on pages 101 and 171.

UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA

Opening Scripture: Bible Reading and Interpretive Authority in Puritan New England.

Of course the New England Puritans read the Bible and regarded it as authoritative. But how, exactly? And how did their preachers, lay people, and politicians mediate that authority? Lisa Gordis approaches these questions with subtlety and scholarship. A lot of this material is familiar and much discussed—John Cotton, Thomas Shepard, Thomas Hooker, and Roger Williams each get a chapter, along with a chapter on lay reading of the Bible, and a final section on the Antinomian controversy. The authority of Perry Miller’s analysis is duly quoted, and everyone’s guide to Puritan preaching, William Perkins’s Art of Prophecying, is analysed once more. But if anything has happened since Miller, Bercovitch, and Ziff laid down the (grand) ideological and theological narrative of New England, it is a suspicion of such narratives, and a recognition that ‘authority’ is an elusive, widely distributed entity. What Gordis does in this book is not so much replace this narrative as complicate it.

Rather than track the book chapter by chapter, I propose to pick out some of the main themes. The first is transparency, the desire of Puritan preachers to allow the Scriptures to speak directly to people through their preaching; and the parallel belief that the Scriptures themselves are clear, so that the ordinary reader can understand the process of salvation by themselves. Now, modern theories of reading pretty much dismiss the idea that any text can be transparent, and Gordis is aware of this; but she understands the desire, and the ambition, in preachers such as John Cotton and Thomas Hooker before exposing the tangles they get into. She is particularly acute on how they decided when to depart from a literal reading of a particular passage.

The second theme, which this shades into, is dissent. If the text is clear, and the readers or preachers avowedly spiritual, how can disagreement be managed? The best chapters to explore this are those on Roger Williams and on the Antinomian controversy. The paradox of Williams is that he was, on the one hand, an advocate of religious toleration, but was a divisive and disruptive figure in the New England community. He did not readily seek consensus, on doctrine, church government, or the interpretation of Scripture. Gordis neatly undermines our tendency to paint him as a liberal, on the basis of The Bloudy Tenent: ‘He had neither affection nor even patience for the wicked; he simply found the problem of their presence intractable’ (p. 131). Gordis’s approach