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DOI: 10.3366/bjj.2013.0086

Weitere Stücke


BÜCHERSCHAU

Ben Jonson in the Twenty-First Century


Many editions of Shakespeare’s works have been published since the seventeenth century, and quite a few of them are currently in print, vying for our attention: the Wells and Taylor Oxford, the Greenblatt Norton, the Blakemore Evans Riverside, the Bevington Longman, the Bate and Rasmussen RSC, as well as the Arden, Oxford and New Cambridge series, to mention only a few. With Jonson’s works, things have always been very different. Following the folios of the seventeenth century (1616, 1640–1641 and 1692), there has essentially been one edition of his works per century, Peter Whalley’s seven-volume octavo edition of 1756, William Gifford’s nine-volume edition of 1816 (revised and expanded by Francis Cunningham in 1871) and C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson’s Oxford edition, published in eleven volumes from 1925 to 1952. The new Cambridge Jonson, whose seven beautifully produced volumes appeared in 2012 and whose electronic edition went live in the spring of 2014, is a worthy successor to these landmark editions and gives us what is set to be the standard edition of Jonson’s works for much or all of the twenty-first century.

General editors David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson have assembled a team of about sixty scholars who have edited all of Jonson’s known writings: seventeen plays, two dramatic fragments, more than thirty masques and entertainments (among them The Entertainment at Britain’s Burse, found by James Knowles in 1996), the translation of Horace’s Art of Poetry, three poetry collections (Epigrams, The Forest and The Underwood), miscellaneous poems (including the recently identified elegy on Thomas Nashe) and several prose works, the commonplace book Discoveries, The English Grammar, the Informations to William Drummond of Hawthornden (titled “Conversations with Drummond” in earlier editions) and nineteen letters. As is well known, Jonson was a keen reviser of his own work, which is why the Cambridge edition provides two versions of some works, including Every Man in His Humour and The Gypsies Metamorphosed. On the other hand, a number of plays and entertainments to which Jonson is known to have contributed, not a single text is extant. For each of these, the edition provides a short account. All earlier editions of Jonson’s works had adopted a structure that conforms to the generic division of the original folio of 1616 into plays, poems, and entertainments and masques. The Cambridge edition breaks new ground in presenting the works in an order reflecting the chronology of Jonson’s writing (with A Tale of
a Tab now dated 1634, his last completed play, not the first, as Herford and Simpson thought), providing a better sense than we have ever had of the shape, variety and progression of his career.

One of the edition’s major achievements is its combination of scholarly thoroughness and readability. Spelling and punctuation are consistently modernized, making for a reading experience that is as uninhibited as it was for Jonson’s early modern readers. The dramatic texts clearly signal added or expanded stage directions that help the reader understand the implied action. Each text is preceded by a concise introduction (about ten to twenty pages per play, five to seven per poetry collection, and three to five per masque or entertainment), covering essentials about date, source, copy text and interpretation (with longer textual essays and, for the plays, stage histories, available in the electronic edition). Contrary to, say, the Norton and Riverside Shakespeare (provided with marginal glosses) or the Oxford Shakespeare (which only has textual notes, in a companion volume), the Cambridge Jonson also provides on-page commentary and collation throughout, the level of annotation corresponding roughly to that of the Revels or Arden Early Modern Drama series. What the edition notably does not have, and many will regret this, is an index, though the electronic edition allows searches within the entire edition or parts of it.

An important difference to the Herford and Simpson edition is the relative authority the Cambridge Jonson attributes to the early quarto and folio texts. Simpson’s study of the 1616 folio led him to believe that Jonson’s direct involvement in its production was far-reaching, which is why the Oxford editors usually privileged the folio, arguing that its readings generally represent Jonson’s final intentions. In the meantime, important bibliographic work by Mark Bland and David Gants has cast doubt on many of Simpson’s conclusions. Accordingly, the Cambridge editors grant Jess authority to the folio than the printed playtexts has not-continued, their alleged greater proximity to how the plays were performed. This part of the editorial rationale seems to me more doubtful. “One effect of the layout of the 1616 folio”, the editors write in the “General Introduction”, “is to turn the plays into texts primarily for reading and to exaggerate the distance between playhouse and printing house”. “In its choice of copy-texts”, they continue, “the Cambridge Edition aims to present Jonson’s texts in a form as close as possible to that in which they were first staged or published”, and the quartos, they argue, allow to minimize “the gap that Jonson created between the plays as performed and as printed” (vol. 1, p. lxxii). But, as is well known, Jonson, throughout his career, went out of his way to present his plays to readers as literary artefacts, not as playscripts, so it seems odd not to adopt as copy-texts the folio versions because they achieve most fully what Jonson clearly desired. The literariness of Jonson’s printed playtexts has not kept directors and actors from turning many of them—chiefly by means of skilful abridgement and rearrangement—into scripts that work brilliantly on stage, but doing so is the business of theatre practitioners, not of literary editors. The job of the latter is precisely to prepare texts for reading, so there is no good reason for the Cambridge editors to disfavour certain dramatic texts on the grounds that Jonson’s ambition was to do the same.

Bevington, Butler and Donaldson have served as general editors of the Cambridge Jonson while also bearing primary responsibility for several contributions of their own. The final result bears their marks in a number of ways. Bevington, perhaps the most prolific editor of early modern drama alive, has contributed the two versions of Every Man In His Humour, Epicene and an introductory essay about “Actors, Companies, and Playhouses”, and the edition’s stage-centred approach to editing mentioned above reflects his practice elsewhere. Butler, who is among the world’s leading experts on the court masque, has contributed not only editions of about a dozen of Jonson’s masques and entertainments but also an introductory essay about “The Court Masque”, a long list identifying all known “Masquers and Tilters” and, in the electronic edition, a “Stage History of the Court Masques” and a comprehensive “Masque Archive”. Donaldson, author of an acclaimed OUP biography of Jonson (2011), has edited the letters and Informations to Drummond, contributed a “Life of Ben Jonson” and, for the electronic edition, compiled a detailed “Chronology of Jonson’s Life and Work”.

While Jonson’s plays, masques, and biographical records thus receive privileged treatment thanks to the general editors, an important part of his works is given less visibility: the poetry. Jonson’s poetic output was considerable, its achievement formidable and its historical importance undeniable, yet it is notable that no introductory essay is devoted to it, to Cavalier poetry or to Jonson’s place in early modern poetry, and the place the poetry occupies in the “General Introduction” is marginal. The poems have been entrusted to the editorial care of Colin Burrow, arguably the unsung hero of the Cambridge Jonson. The mere “Index of Titles and First Lines of the Poems” occupies twenty-eight pages (vol. 1, pp. xxviii–xliv), and with the exception of a single poem, “A Panegyrie on the Happy Entrance of James ... to his First High Session of Parliament” (edited by Butler), all of them have been richly annotated and expertly edited by Burrow.

As a result of Burrow’s Herculean labours, our understanding of Jonson’s poetry and the textual culture within which it circulated will be permanently affected. Herford and Simpson showed little interest in the manuscript versions of his poems and consulted relatively few of them. Burrow, by contrast, has examined more than 600 manuscripts with versions of Jonson’s poems. Few of these manuscripts are in Jonson’s own hand, but they suffice to demonstrate that Jonson used manuscript circulation of his own poems “as a means of access to an elite circle” (“The Poems: Textual Essay”, electronic edition). Most of the other manuscript poems provide no evidence about authorial revision but bear witness to how Jonson’s poems circulated in scribal culture. In the case of The Underwood, however, which appeared in print three years after Jonson’s death, and was set up from a manuscript whose exact relationship to Jonson is unclear, Burrow has identified readings in extant manuscripts whose authority he considers superior to that in the printed text of 1640. What thus emerges is evidence of Jonson’s “continuing partial adherence also to a culture of manuscript circulation and presentation” (vol. 1, p. lxxv) and the insight that his presence in early modern scribal culture can no longer be ignored.

The print edition of the Cambridge Jonson is a massive achievement, but the electronic edition (general electronic editor: David Gants) breaks even more new ground. Not all components of the online Jonson have been completed by the time this review goes to press, but many have. The potential of the electronic medium to revolutionize literary editing has long been clear, but
the results in Shakespeare editing – where one would expect the ground-breaking work to take place – have so far been disappointing. Early editions on disks (floppy disks, followed by CD-ROMs such as the Voyager Macbeth) were rapidly superseded by the World Wide Web, where several early subscription sites, like the ArdenOnline site, failed due to a lack of customers. The ubiquitous, freely-available Moby Shakespeare (based on the Globe text from the 1860s) is hopelessly out of date, and the Internet Shakespeare Editions, founded at the end of the last century, have so far produced only eight peer-reviewed texts (seven plays and Venus and Adonis). Today’s standard Shakespeare editions thus remain firmly embedded in the world of print. The Cambridge Jonson not only constitutes a spectacular advance over electronic editing in Shakespeare studies but also adopts a model which may well become influential: a core edition in print, enriched by an electronic edition which contains everything available in the print edition along with supplementary archives and databases, with the option of using either edition – print or electronic – independently or in interaction with the other.

The riches of the electronic edition are impressive. For a start, it features each text and its introduction as they appear in the print edition. Individual commentary and/or collation notes can be made to appear at the click of a mouse, as can the full commentary without the primary text. In addition, for each printed text and many manuscripts, high-quality digital images of the early material witnesses are available as well as, in most cases, old-spelling texts. Viewing options allow each of these, the fully edited text, the old-spelling text, the commentary and the digital images, to be displayed separately or next to each other so that it is possible, for instance, to have on one's screen an edited text next to an image of the early modern printed book or manuscript from which it was set up, an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the material text or the editorial process.

Whereas the introductions to each text are kept relatively short in the print edition, the electronic edition contains a more detailed textual essay for each work and stage histories for the plays and the masques. The electronic edition also adds contextual material about many other aspects of Jonson and his works (although, again, nothing specifically about the poetry). It includes informative essays on “Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century Adaptations of the Plays of Ben Jonson” (by Nick Tanner), “Images of Ben Jonson” (by Karen Heard), “Jonson’s Money” (by Christopher Burlinson) and “The Riddle of Jonson’s Chronology Revisited” (by Martin Butler); an archive of “Life Records” with transcriptions of documents relating to Jonson’s life; a comprehensive archive of “Masque Records” (with almost five hundred documents, including in French, Italian, Spanish and Dutch, with English translations); a “Performance Archive” listing details of over 1,300 stage performances of plays and masques; the “Chronology of Ben Jonson’s Life and Work” with an “interactive timeline of Jonson’s life and times”; a comprehensive bibliography of books and essays relating to Jonson (of over 7,000 items), which also appears at the end of the last volume of the print edition; and, my personal favourite, a comprehensive “Music Edition”, by John Cunningham, of all known music associated with Jonson’s plays, masques, entertainments and poems from before 1700, with a superb introduction and well over 100 music scores and audio files.

As if this were not enough, further material in the electronic edition is announced as forthcoming, including an edition of the recently-discovered record of Jonson’s walk to Edinburgh in 1617, called Foot Voyage into Scotland, a catalogue of extant books from Jonson’s library, a database of “Literary Records” concerning Jonson’s reputation and afterlife, and an account of writings dubiously attributed to Jonson. Even without these additions, the electronic edition of Jonson’s works is already a treasure trove for any student of early modern English literature. As an added bonus, the material is attractively presented, easy navigable and fully searchable.

That said, the electronic edition is not cheap. To the basic price of £995 (plus VAT) needs to be added a yearly hosting fee of £300 (waived for institutions that already subscribe to electronic products by CUP) and a far more unspecified content update fee from 2018. These costs may be a deterrent for many institutions, which is a pity, for the Cambridge Jonson deserves to be widely available. It is simply the best collected edition of any English Renaissance writer currently available, an outstanding achievement against which any new edition of Shakespeare’s works (and several are in preparation) will inevitably be judged.

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The Stylistics of Physiology


Shortly before meeting his death, Clarence is compelled to confess who murdered the prince. His brief answer – “My brother’s love, the devil, and my rage” (R3, 1.4.226) – neatly encapsulates the range of behavioral motivation pushing the early modern theatrical character to action: fidelity to social affiliation (my brother’s love), moral-supernatural soliciting (the devil) and personal passion (my rage). Passion, moreover, as Sir Toby suggests, was conceived in physiological terms: “Does not our life consist of the four elements?” (T2N, 2.3.10). Indeed, that was the prevailing belief, whereas the suitability of reading early modern dramatic characters as studiedly underpinned by, to use Walter Benjamin’s phrase, “the stylistics of physiology” (“Picturing Proust”, One-Way Street, 2009, p. 141).

In 1951 Lawrence Babb similarly spoke of “psychological physiology”, a phrase not lost on Michael Schofield and Gail Kern Paster, two critics who have prompted a decisive return to the body in early modern studies. The recuperative, at times flauntingly vindictive, energy of this return animates the three books under review. Vengeance is broadly taken on Descartes, who decreed the nefarious split between mind and body, banishing the latter from the domains of epistemology. The resulting dualist dispensation, alive through Kant in our neo-cognitive present, had the negative effect of retrospectively contaminating the complexity of pre-Carte-