The Elizabethan Theatre IV

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Papers given at the Fourth International
Conference on Elizabethan Theatre held at the
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Edited and with an introduction by
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The index was compiled by David Cavanagh.

G. R. H.

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Introduction

The three previous international conferences on Elizabethan Theatre, held at the University of Waterloo in 1968, 1969 and 1970, all tended to focus their attention, to a greater or lesser degree but with a truly remarkable tenacity, on the Elizabethan theatre in the strict sense of that term. Though they always included some papers dealing with plays as dramatic literature, their main and abiding preoccupation was with the physical structures in which, and on which, those plays were performed. New ideas put forward at one conference were developed, modified or controverted at the next. A tradition of continuing debate was coming into being in the only way that a tradition can, naturally and spontaneously. It is a good tradition, bearing out Bacon's contention that while knowledge "is in aphorisms and observations, it is in growth"; and there is every indication that it will be resumed when the fifth Conference takes place in 1973. But a conference on Elizabethan Theatre meeting in 1972 could not be oblivious of the fact that 1572 saw the birth of the greatest of Shakespeare's contemporaries in the art of writing for the stage. The time had clearly come to honour and celebrate the achievement of Ben Jonson.

The decision to make Jonson's work the central concern of the fourth Conference brought its own consequences with it. Jonson has indeed much to tell us, especially in his very explicit stage directions, about the way in which his plays were produced, and about the places where they were put on. No one who has once read it is ever likely to forget his scornful yet wholly convincing description of the Hope Theatre as it was in 1614: a place "as durty as *Smithfield*, and as stinking every whit."¹ But it was un-

¹*Bartholomew Fair*, Ind., 159–60. Unless otherwise stated, the text used for all quotations from and references to Jonson's writings, both here and throughout this volume, is that of Herford and Simpson's *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1925–1952). In accordance with modern practice i/j and u/v spellings have been normalized.

thinkable that the Conference should restrict its considerations to the staging of his plays. Jonson lives and still matters to us because he was a writer of genius and a great personality who stamped himself indelibly on the consciousness of his own time and profoundly affected the course that not only the drama but also literature in general was to take in England during the seventeenth century and later. The only way to do him anything like justice – in so far as that could ever be possible in a mere four days – was, therefore, to attempt some assessment, however limited and random it might prove, of his entire *œuvre*. This aim, in turn, made it necessary to move beyond the theatre to the court where the masques were staged and, eventually, leaving dramatic representations behind altogether, to take some account of that rich body of non-dramatic poetry which, quite apart from its own intrinsic worth, is such an invaluable and indispensable commentary on and complement to the plays.

Of the eight papers given at the Conference, six were devoted to Jonson. Their publication now – not, be it noted, in the precise order in which they were read – seems to invite some comment on the direction that the revival of interest in him and in his writings is taking at the present time. That revival began, of course, with T. S. Eliot's essay on him, first published in 1919 and prompted by the appearance of G. Gregory Smith's volume on Jonson in the English Men of Letters Series. Looking back, Eliot remarked, with every justification, that no critic since Dryden had "succeeded in making [Jonson] appear pleasurable or even interesting"; and then, after paying tribute to the useful factual information that Gregory Smith's book contained, he went on to say of it: "it only fails to remodel the image of Jonson which is settled in our minds."² Eliot was asking for a great deal – more, perhaps, than he was entitled to ask for. The remodelling he desiderated is the unmistakable sign of an author's continued vitality. Every age since Shakespeare's has remade him in its own image. Indeed, as T. J. B. Spencer points out in the paper printed below, Jonson himself was already busy fabricating a decidedly Jonsonian Shakespeare as early as 1623. The fact that nothing of this kind had happened to Jonson since the publication of William Gifford's edition of his *Works* in 1816 meant simply that

²T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London, 1932), p. 147.

Jonson had failed to speak to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most remarkably, he had failed to speak to Matthew Arnold. On the face of it, Jonson as classicist, moralist, critic and poet would seem to be, of all English writers, the one with whom Arnold should have felt the closest affinity. In fact, however, Arnold scarcely mentions him. His verse did not and could not satisfy the expectations of ears attuned to the music of romantic poetry, nor was it amenable to the "touchstone" test.

Eliot ultimately succeeded in doing what Gregory Smith had never sought to do rather than failed to do, because he was in tune with the changing temper of the times. He had every reason to be, for both in his critical writings and in his poetry he was actively engaged in promoting a fresh attitude towards the literature of the past and consciously attempting to create a new kind of sensibility. But he did not succeed immediately or single-handedly. When Jonson finally did re-surface as a living force in the thirties, like some miraculous whale that had spent centuries in the depths of neglect and indifference, the image we had of him was by no means that which Eliot's essay suggests. It owed something to the essay, but it owed as much, if not more, to a work of a very different kind, R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926). Eliot and Tawney seem improbable bedfellows; yet it was Eliot's concern for verbal texture, coupled with Tawney's interest in the social changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that lay behind L. C. Knights's *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (1937). Here at last was an image of the playwright to which those of us who were then in our formative years could indeed respond, for what Knights had done was to set Jonson firmly in our England by relating his work closely to the world out of which it came. The voice we heard speaking to us from the Jacobean Age was that of a great artist using his command of the resources of the English language to protest, in the name of a traditional morality, against the inhumanities of the acquisitive society that was just coming into existence at the time when he was writing. Living, as we were doing, in a time of depression and conflict when the capitalist system seemed to be staggering to a disastrous end, we hailed Jonson as the poet-moralist who had diagnosed the ills of our society when it was still in its infancy. Moreover, in a world where so many of the younger poets wrote out of the conviction

that poetry could only justify itself if it helped to change society, Jonson had all the appearance of an ally.

In the pages that follow, that image of Jonson, so dominant in the late thirties and forties, is not to be found, though it still continues to affect our thinking about him and our reactions to what he wrote. It has received the tribute that later times so often pay to pioneering studies: the enduring elements in it have been so thoroughly absorbed into the critical consciousness of the age that they are now largely taken for granted. Over the last twenty years or so students of Jonson have seen their main task as one of rediscovery and consolidation. The emphasis has been very decidedly on his art, which we are now beginning to understand and to appreciate, as we never did before, as a result of the work (to mention only two) of E. B. Partridge in *The Broken Compass* (1958) and Jonas A. Barish in *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (1960). These critics, and others like them, have been engaged in giving depth, shadowing and solidity to that image of the poet-playwright which Eliot sketched so incisively more than fifty years ago. Seen in retrospect, his essay now appears to be quite as much a program of work to be done as an evaluation of its subject's peculiar qualities and achievements.

Eliot placed Jonson's poetry as poetry "of the surface," and then went on to say:

Poetry of the surface cannot be understood without study; for to deal with the surface of life, as Jonson dealt with it, is to deal so deliberately that we too must be deliberate, in order to understand.³

The kind of study Eliot had in mind is well exemplified by two of the papers that follow. T. J. B. Spencer asks us to reconsider the significance of those familiar lines on Shakespeare prefixed to the First Folio, which seem so pellucid in expression and so warm in admiration that many of us have long taken them at their face value as a heart-felt eulogy. Deploying a Jonsonian knowledge of the Ancients with a lighter touch than Jonson generally used, Spencer leaves us with the conviction that the lines are more conventional than we had thought, and with the suspicion, to put it no higher, that they may well be less

³*Ibid.*, p. 148.

laudatory than we had taken them to be. S. P. Zitner examines an even shorter poem – “Her Triumph” in the Charis sequence – addressing himself to the problem of how and in what sense this celebration of female beauty can be the revenge on the lady that Jonson, in the previous poem in the sequence, promised that it would be. His solution to the puzzle is arrived at primarily through a close reading of the text, but it also owes much to his consideration of the context in which two stanzas from the poem appear in *The Devil is an Ass*.

At this point yet another of the demands Eliot makes on the student of Jonson is being met: “intelligent saturation in his work as a whole”; and in that whole Eliot recognized the masques, so badly neglected at the time when he was writing, as “an important part.”⁴ They are neglected no longer. Eugene M. Waith puts forward a fascinating hypothesis, both about what Jonson was trying to do in *The Devil is an Ass* and in *The Staple of News*, and about why he did not altogether succeed in the attempt, by making an illuminating connection between the two plays and two of the masques, *The Vision of Delight* and *Time Vindicated*. All four works are, he thinks, concerned with the relationship between the actual and the ideal. But, he goes on to suggest, the conventions and the machinery of the masque lent themselves more readily to the working out of this theme in satisfactory dramatic terms than did the conventions and acting conditions of the public theatre. William Blissett, too, resorts to the masques in his consideration of certain aspects of *Bartholomew Fair*. Taking up the problem of how Jonson managed to make this play of low life, with its comic exposure and dismissal of “the wise magistrate,” acceptable to King James and his court, he goes for assistance to *Love Restored* and *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*, a procedure which leads him to the conclusion that at the court performance the entire play could well have been seen as a gigantic antimasque to which the audience of King and courtiers served, by their mere presence, as the masque proper.

In the course of his paper Waith pays particular attention to the way in which the plays he deals with were staged; so does Blissett. Jonson the man of the theatre, the showman ready to exploit every trick of the trade, is very much a part of the com-

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 148 and 160.

plex image of the artist that is now being built up. But the percipient Eliot was also alive to this side of Jonson's genius, stressing "the theatrical qualities" of his dramatic *œuvre* and describing it as "a titanic show."⁵ Furthermore, he was in no doubt that the plays, properly performed, were capable of giving enjoyment in abundant measure. It is precisely this quality in them that Samuel Schoenbaum brings out and delights in, aerating learning with a Rabelaisian gusto in his presentation of Jonson the entertainer who, much as he may have slighted laughter in his critical pronouncements, certainly knew how to incite it in a theatre audience.

Informing all the papers discussed so far there is a sense of the essential unity that exists within the apparent diversity of Jonson's massive output. Whence does this unity arise? E. B. Partridge provides as good an answer to this difficult yet necessary question as we are ever likely to get. Ranging with consummate ease over Jonson's life as well as his writings, he notices, as many have noticed before him, that in some rather special way there is an intimate and inextricable connection between what Jonson wrote and what Jonson did and was. Then, singling out Jonson's "faith in things," his deep respect for the facts both of history and of nature, as his most marked characteristic, he shows how Jonson, nevertheless, imposes his own personality on these facts. He was able to do this, Partridge thinks, because he had deliberately chosen to take up a dramatic and heroic attitude to life, to cast himself in the role of "the first great professional man of letters England had produced," with the result that the greatest of all his creations was himself. Perhaps we have here an explanation of why Jonson and Shakespeare impress themselves on us as polar opposites. If Shakespeare's capacity to keep his own personality out of the experience he is exploring and defining is best described in Keats's famous phrase as "negative capability," then we need some such term as "positive capability" to describe Jonson's characteristic mode of vision and manner of going to work.

So all is well with Jonson at last; he is receiving, however belatedly, the interest, the understanding and the recognition that he so amply deserves. But is he? Schoenbaum returns an

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 160.

emphatic no. It is not enough for a great dramatist to be appreciated in the study. His plays cry out for production; but, with a few notable exceptions, our theatres remain deaf to that cry.

The two remaining papers are not about Jonson. They illustrate, in diametrically opposed ways, how much we still have to learn about Elizabethan drama. J. M. Nosworthy bravely takes another look at *Hamlet*, the most written about of all plays, and, by fixing his attention on the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship and viewing it as a whole, succeeds in saying something fresh and worthwhile about the play as a whole. J. W. Lever, as he himself remarked, found himself in the happy position of being reasonably secure in the belief that he knew more about his topic than anyone in his audience. Having just completed an edition of the manuscript play *The Wasp* for the Malone Society, he had every reason to be, though the discussion that followed the paper revealed that one member of that audience had, in fact, read the play and read it with considerable care. Lever's full, scholarly and consistently entertaining introduction to this play and of this play left the Conference eagerly looking forward to the appearance of his edition in print. This was a preview that whetted the appetite.

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