
How Ben Jonson moves from the Stage to the Page: An Introduction

Mallika Ghosh Sarbadhikary

The 1616 Folio of Ben Jonson was called the “Works”. An anonymous critic humourously commented, “Ben’s plays are works when other works are plays” (Riggs 28). It was a new word that conferred a great degree of respectability to the playwright who seemed no less in stature than the classical writers. The Folio sets itself apart from the pamphlets and copies of texts which dominated the market of the time. The motto of the collection was borrowed from Horace and in translation goes thus, “I do not work so that the crowd may admire me: I am contented with a few readers’. Jonson’s scholarship gave birth to plays that were addressed to an erudite community. (Riggs 221) says that the *Works* follow a classical format and we find that the opening page contains the picture of Jonson crowned with laurels. One is left wondering about the use of the word ‘work’ as opposed to the term ‘play’ (HSS, IX, 13). Jonson consciously distanced himself from cheap theatre and the circumstances of production, whether print or performance. Jonson dedicates his plays, poems epigrams and masques to Universities at Oxford and Cambridge, to the Inns of Court, to the King, the nobility and those associated with established institutions in England. When we consider the Folio it is a collection and the ultimate stage of the various processes involved, of reading, writing, performing, seeing, printing and distributing. Eisenstein, in her book on printing speaks of the creation of a community of understanding and therefore, of Difference. In other words Jonson tries to create a persona that

controls the performance and reception of his plays and spectacles. What is increasingly coming under scrutiny is the impact of a growing mercantilism on the development of what Joseph Lowenstein calls the ‘bibliographic ego’ (*Possessive Authorship* 34). In Renaissance England in the arena of cultural trade and publishing various kinds of practices were prevalent¹. Many plays were written in response to commissions but others were written as extensions of acting in particular plays, as commemorations and in expectation of being noticed by the royalty or noblemen. So, in addition to a search for a patron, a playwright was also on the lookout for publishers. Jonson’s career and his footprint in the literary marketplace was more complex. Most authors began their careers by selling their plays to acting companies thereby forfeiting any claim to the modern day sense of copyright. However, some authors were known to be allowed, and even called upon for subsequent revisions to make lines more contemporary or popular. However, this did not confer ownership rights on the author who only owned his unique manuscript. But it did confer some rights to the acting company which had acquired the play. They could try to prevent the play from being performed by other acting companies. They could also exert the “possessiveness” (Loewenstein) to ensure that the manuscript was not copied by other individuals or companies without their permission.

Normally, the next step would be to sell the copy to a scrivener or a printer. However, we can see that in most plays the playwright was never seen as a separate entity but as another member of the acting company. For the author to assert independent existence and identity was outside any standard practice. Prior to the publication of the *Works* Jonson indirectly makes many disruptive statements which are apparently anti-theatrical and deliberately destroys the element of fiction as in the “Articles of Agreement” and the Induction in *Bartholomew Fair*. He tries to strike a deal between the members of

the audience and the author so that the value of the opinion of each spectator is limited to the price paid for the seat in the theatre. Consequent upon the anxiety following two imprisonments for the controversy surrounding *Eastward Ho* and *The Isle of Dogs* Jonson tried to dismiss any recognition or comparison with topical issues and identifiable figures or contemporary events. Though I have been saying that the publication of Works in 1616 is a landmark event but earlier, in 1614 Jonson tries to enter the market as a negotiator and takes responsibility for the published views in the play.

Jonson had earlier made his presence felt as one who was appreciated as a writer of masques. He was paid handsomely for his creative efforts and this relation helped him to directly relate to his spectators and transform his identity from an owner to a negotiator. However, we may work backwards to his writings dating from the 1590s to locate his dissatisfaction and unhappiness with the state of things. He was writing for Peter Henslowe's Admiral's Men in that decade and was sent to jail thrice. Most of this work was excluded from the Folio. He wanted to escape collaborations and incidents like the War of Theatres with Marston and Dekker. Jonson's "anti-theatrical prejudice"² is discussed in detail by Jonas Barish and the dramatist was repeatedly attacked for his mistrust of his spectators and fellow actors. Simultaneously the book trade began to thrive in the 1590s and at the turn of the century *Every Man Out of His Humour* was played before the royal audience. When revenue from such plays began to dwindle the companies were willing to forego their exclusive right to performance in exchange for money. Textual critics are of the opinion that such steps were meant to pre-empt the publication of corrupt texts. We know that prompt copies, actor's lines, audience copies and pirated versions used to be circulated. To stem the tide of a growing number of pirated copies Henslowe, for example, often paid to the stationers' court for exclusive rights to registration for publishing particular manuscripts, a phenomenon

which was the equivalent of modern day copyright.

These moves bear testimony to the nature of unregulated activity current in the printing and publishing practice of the period. In her book on copyright³ Annabel Patterson draws attention to the ways by which the theatre companies and the guild tried to regulate publication of manuscripts. Then there were issues of sedition laws, censorship by the royal court and some laws applied in an arbitrary manner. The guild and the stationers were constantly having to manage rivalry and dishonest practices among printers. Authors remained at the losing end of the spectrum occasionally receiving some money, more for their providing authentic manuscripts than as a reward for their creativity.

A reading of Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* confirms that Jonson was following the tradition of upholding the ethical and normative value of poetry, something that could be presented in a popular and marketable framework. Jonson had been repeatedly imprisoned for his compositions and was determined to circumvent the rules of censure and regulations by resorting to various strategies, patronage being an obvious one as in the composition of *Cynthia's Revels*. Jonson consciously included elements from public and private theatre to present himself as the poet who had shrugged off the memory of having been policed earlier and who was keen to make a respectable place for himself in the minds of the erudite and powerful. Lowenstein discusses how Jonson looked forward to occupy the space left empty when John Lyly's tenure as Master of Revels was not renewed⁴. *Cynthia's Revels* was written as an eulogy and the element of panegyric arguably interferes with the fictional status of the play. It is interesting to note that when we follow the trajectory of Jonson's career we see that from a dramatist of the public theatre he moves onto become a poet who has won the favour of patrons. The mock duel between Amorphous and Crites is analogous to a battle to establish the principles of courtiership as well

as a movement from the anti-masques to the masques, from chaos to order, from supremacy of the patron to a desire for the independent and intellectual control of the poet. Jonson surreptitiously tries to inch upwards in the hierarchy of those who controlled the literary marketplace of print and performance at the turn of the century. In *Cynthia's Revels* Jonson is intent on establishing the controlling voice of the poet, a far cry from the negotiation in the extra dramatic devices used in *Bartholomew Fair*. However, on closer analysis we realize that it is the dramatist who has reduced the actors to negotiators.

As the play moves from the stage to the page⁵, a phrase I have borrowed for my title, the reduced importance of the players is concomitant with their claim to revenue in the marketplace. But the dramatic poet remains the chief recipient of the earnings though it is often tied to patronage. These have direct relation to the *Poetomachia* with Marston and Dekker and Jonson's quarrel with Inigo Jones which addressed ideas of abstraction, contemporaneity and proprietary control over the stage or page. The telling differentiation between the "plays" and "works" consequent upon the publication of the *Works* in 1616 points to the slow but steady movement towards commercialisation and control of the author over the written word. This birth of the idea of the copyright was enabled by William Stansby who was enterprising enough to gain control over all the printed texts attributed to Jonson. However, the word, 'works' is a throwback to classical antiquity and stresses the universality of artistic creation which transcends considerations of commercial success. Though anxious about the reception of his plays Jonson never betrays his apprehension about their commercial viability. He consciously cultivates the image of an artist who holds himself aloof from petty lure of the lucre. As late as 1709 the Statute of Anne came into force but almost a century earlier Jonson had shown the courage and foresight to try and stop the piracy and corruption of texts.

Jonson is caught between two worlds – between the position of not wanting to commercially promote his compositions (as present in the poem addressed to the Bookseller in the Works) and seeking immunity from arbitrary laws. It is variously called a move for (re) invention) of the book (Newton) or as an “anti-theatrical” one (Barish).

Jonson was perhaps looking for an unchanging text, one that was not vulnerable to political, social, theatrical and cultural contingencies of the time. However, it is difficult to locate the changes from the scripts to quartos and various versions of the plays since most of it was ironed out into the grand and final version in the 1616 Folio. We get an idea of the changes when we study the quartos and Folio editions of Jonson’s plays. Newton suggests that Jonson was a self-conscious dramatist and was acutely aware of the permanence and “completeness” of his compositions. Jonson evolves in the last decade of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth. So Timothy Murray calls him the “author-as-editor” and textual critics are of the opinion that Jonson’s talent and genius remained unchanged despite the changing times⁶.

Friendship with William Camden, John Selden, Robert Cotton – erudite friends and his relationship with the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge were instrumental in shaping his posture of the classicist who looked for a discerning audience but was nevertheless anxious about the reception of his plays. Evidence suggests that the Chamberlain’s Men who had the ownership of *Every Man Out of His Humour* was not at all keen to hand it over to any printer. The play was performed at court during Christmas but Jonson meticulously distances himself from any possible pirated versions of the play. The title page runs thus, “As it was First Composed by the Author B.J. Containing more than hath been Publicly spoken or Acted”. This claim to newer invention seems to provide him with the justification for printing the script as a book. Apart from piracy there was

controversy surrounding the resale of an already sold manuscript. The performance ran into trouble when Queen Elizabeth was impersonated in the Globe after the banning of Satire in 1599 and Chamberlain's Men objected to successive prints of the quarto edition. Jonson appears to step away from his insistent role in the publication of the quarto edition but this desire is thinly veiled. Rather it betrays an anxiety about the reception of the text and the defamation of the author. Jonson swings between the success and monetary profit of what he presents before his spectators and the reputation he was trying to build before his readers. The spokesperson for Jonson tries to woo the audience but berates "Ignorance". After the end of the play there was another conclusion in the first performance but this was deleted subsequently. However, in the Folio there are two endings of the play, *Every Man Out of His Humour* – one for the court and another for the Globe theatre. Jonas Barish points out that Jonson seems to insinuate that the printed text would prevail over any temporal performance. Thus the world of illusion is subversively interrupted by portraits and choric commentary, dramatic theory and references to the form and content of the play. In doing so Jonson tries to establish the written page as unchanging compared to the fluidity and improvisations necessitated by the stage. This is not only a way to deny authority of the players but also to make himself visible in the book market of the time.

The establishment of a canon expressed a writerly self-consciousness and the use of printing house technology gives a physical unity and congruence to theatre scripts, poems and other writings and the promotion of the poet from an anonymous theatre company employee to a creative artist with agency and authorised selfhood- these were themes that were beginning to gain ground around that time. It was soon followed by Folio editions of Shakespeare, Donne and Milton. In the Folio Jonson fashions himself as a stable author who has agency over his work, an

autonomous creator who is able to paint the picture of one who lays a definitive claim to social and professional reputation. Ben Jonson's *Folio* marked an important date in presenting an organized effort to exploit the technicalities of print in the English publication history. The directions given to performers are removed and the texts look less like scripts and more like reading texts. Jonson personally oversaw the type composition and printing of his volume with unparalleled meticulousness and perseverance. The "works" of Ben Jonson is thus the first example of "possessive"⁷ authorship of a proprietary interest that draws attention to the growing consumerism of the times. It is seen by others as legitimization of the text by the author, the controlling presence which gives greater authority to oversee the minutest aspects of production of the book. Jonson therefore seizes on the turn of events to empower himself and gain ascendancy in the minds of his theatre goers and readers. From 1612 onwards many events point to the planning of Jonson that ultimately culminated in the publication of the *Folio* in 1616. Textual critics are of the opinion that William Stansby was working on the composition from the autumn of 1615. This was also a period of great political turmoil and factionalism. There were the Howards, Robert Carr who later became the Earl of Somerset, the Queen, the Scots who were close to James, Pembroke, Southampton, Edgerton and numerous lords with their Protestant agenda. The upheavals at court affected the literary community in various ways. Chapman fell out of favour, Donne decided to return to the Church and many poets knowingly or unknowingly got embroiled in the political turmoil. Jonson however managed to steer clear of controversy at that point of time. The Pembroke family repeatedly rates mention directly or indirectly as in *The Forest*, in the *Epigrams*, in the dedication to *The Alchemist and in Catiline*.

It is interesting to note that in the panegyrics composed in praise of James and his reign are placed at the end of the *Folio* through the

masques *Mercury Vindicated and The Golden Age Restored*. In *Mercury Vindicated* Jonson refers to the royal power which can create a utopia and reform his court. In *The Golden Age Restored* we see Jove reaching down to strike down the Iron Age and its followers and eulogize Jacobean justice. In a typical hyperbolic manner the masques apotheosizes James and his court and governance. When Jonson began compiling for the Folio he was not prepared for the onslaught of sudden political changes that happened between 1612 and 1616. He tries to feign that his works are untouched by the ebb and flow of political fortunes. However though, he tries to be diplomatic about previous patrons now fallen to disgrace or is silent about earlier relationships⁸. By contrast, in the dedication to *Epicoene* Jonson reiterates that there are no changes in the text, an insistence that perhaps stemmed from his nervousness surrounding the change in fortunes of Essex.

The main text of Jonson's plays were largely untouched by the winds of political change but the prefatory parts were often reconsidered or recast or carefully constructed so that Jonson remained in the safe zone. The intelligent contrivance of Jonson was to place the dedications in a timeless spectrum so that they seemed to be beyond the vagaries of current political fortunes. Jonson preferred to treat the nobles as friends rather than patrons and addressed universities, courts and Inns of Court as institutions with which he had long standing relationships. Thus the poet appeared to be having free flowing relationships with individuals and organizations. However, the vocabulary of obligation does peep through in the dedication of *Poetaster* to Richard Martin and *Epicoene* to Francis Stewart and also to Camden, Pembroke Lady Wroth and Lord Aubigny, the dedicatee of *Sejanus* with whom Jonson was staying while he was overseeing the publication of the *Folio*. The dedication of the plays seems to be stressing the realm of personal loyalties but at heart there is a greater public stake at play. By cataloguing important names Jonson situates

himself within a network of obligations but also tries to ensure a certain degree of independence and immunity. Some names may not be of faithful devotees but most belong to the close knit royal circle like Aubigny and Stewart had Scottish antecedents and this was reflective of the new inclinations of the patron. The Folio begins with dedications to Scots and ends with a masque depicting the Union of the two kingdoms. Jonson's apparent independence as a poet was always criss-crossed by professional rivalry. The power of print and emerging market place was in a huge tussle with the old economy and politics of patronage. There are dedications and eulogies but Jonson's voice as the author reigns supreme.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Eisenstein discusses at length about the history of the printing press and how it was instrumental in changing the dynamics between the various stakeholders in the culture industry of England. She traces how the transition from manuscript to print impacted various aspects of the book trade.
2. It is often argued that the impression of Jonson being present to mould all aspects of a play, starting from its playing to reception, from writing to printing makes us aware of a polemic that is often directed against the theatre.
3. Patterson considers literature as a kind of discourse where the socio-political ethos became the watchdog sniffing at possible threats to monarchy. She argues that Jonson was consciously restrained but many innocuous statements point to covert dissent.
4. In *Responsive Readings* Loewenstein speaks of the aspirations of Jonson who sought a position of power and immunity from prosecutions.
5. Richard Burt discusses this transition in the light of Jonson the censored who later becomes the censor, and the vicissitudes of his career.
6. Murray discusses how print results in authorial constancy and its relationship to spectatorship and patronage.
7. Loewenstein speaks of how the advent of printing allowed for ownership of texts and made Jonson almost possessive about his compositions.

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