Ben Jonson and the Drummond "Informations": Why It Matters

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The versions of Sir William Drummond's account of his conversations with Ben Jonson on his visit to Scotland have long been understood as a leading source of information for biographers of Jonson. The most recent (Ian Donaldson[1]) recommends that the opus be now referred to as *Informations to William Drummond of Hawthornden,* or *Informations* for short. It purports to contain the remarks or notes on the remarks by Jonson in conversations with Drummond.

There are two references to Shakespeare in it:

> "That Shakspear wanted Arte"
> "Sheakspear, in a play, brought in a number of men saying they had suffered Shipwrack in Bohemia, where there is no sea neer by some 100 miles."

These statements appear to denigrate the author in his guise as "Shakespeare" and to run contrary to Jonson's otherwise consistent critique and praise of Shakespeare as evidenced in Jonson's "Ode to Shakespeare" in the preface to the 1623 First Folio, and some may think that not a great deal turns on them. However, other references in *Informations* — particularly to Fletcher — run contrary to evidence of Jonson's opinions as expressed elsewhere. Taken together, these references make it difficult to correctly perceive the literary scene in the period after Oxford's death in 1604, and might be thought to be damaging to the Oxfordian hypothesis. Particularly damaging is the notional support given to the contention that Fletcher and "Shakespeare" collaborated during the latter's lifetime in the production of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

Our case requires that Jonson must continue to be seen as the almost uncritical admirer of Shakespeare, who, even while being slightly critically askance of him, could still write, "For I loved the man, and do honour his memory (on this side idolatry) as much as any."[2]

In 1925 a Mr. C.L. Stainer published a small booklet[3] of some eighty octavo pages denouncing *Informations* as an eighteenth-century forgery. Stainer's booklet is so badly organized and is such a muddle of good points, bad points and rubbish

that the high priests of Jonsonian scholarship of that time had very little trouble in picking holes in it. Their leader, Percy Simpson, did so in nine pages in January 1926.[4] There the position has stood to this day and is echoed by Donaldson.[5] Stainer is, however, very good at identifying characters mentioned in *Informations* and in the letters referred to below with people whose existence in 1618-19 was already known in 1711, when *Informations* was published.

Because of the potential incompatibility between Drummond and the Oxfordian hypothesis, I did think there might be a case of no smoke without fire.

One of Stainer's points is that the forger had the year wrong. So, Jonson's activities should be looked at. From Christmas 1604 to 1623, Jonson was primarily responsible for the Court masques and revels and only three times during that period was he passed over, namely 1606, 1612 and 1618. His effort in 1617 (*Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*) was deemed so dull that one critic suggested that he take up bricklaying again, and the 1618 masque was assigned to Chapman: 1618 must be the year Jonson went to Scotland, walking all the way. Very recently James Loxley, an intrepid scholar from Edinburgh, has unearthed a diary of the journey kept by a godson who accompanied him the whole way. The inference is that there was money on it, and the godson was chosen to make sure Jonson did not cheat. Jonson left London on Wednesday, July 8, and arrived in Edinburgh on Thursday, September 18, 1618. John Taylor, the "water poet," records meeting Jonson in Leith in that month, and in October the Edinburgh City Council gave a banquet in his honor.

The godson was no longer required, as the return journey was apparently not to be vetted. He left by boat from Leith (the port of Edinburgh) on October 5, 1618.

There is one further piece of evidence. John Selden (1584-1654), historian and antiquarian, had written *History of Tithes,* published in November 1618. The book caused a furor because it contended that tithing was subject to the law, and was not the divine right of the bishops of the Church of England. The bishops lobbied the King, and James summoned Selden to face him personally to debate the question.

Selden, perhaps twelve years younger than Jonson, had never met the King, was understandably nervous and arranged to be accompanied by two friends. One was Jonson, who knew the King well enough, after the production of some fifteen Court Masques, and so Jonson is placed in England in mid-December 1618 at the time of Selden's first meeting with the King. Selden wrote his memoir at the end of his life, and Donaldson suggests he may have confused this meeting with one at a later date, but by then his book had become an Ecclesiastical and Privy Council matter, and later meetings with the King took place on a more official basis. At that first meeting, James had virtually let Selden go (he acknowledges that Jonson was helpful then), to the annoyance of the Bishops. Were it not for the dates in *Informations*, no one would dispute Selden's version.[6] It means that after the City of Edinburgh's banquet in his honor in October 1618, Jonson must have quickly returned to England by December, too late for the preparation of the Chapman masque of 1618-19, but in time to be briefed by Selden. There is no evidence of a return journey on foot in winter and if there had been one, Jonson would have told everybody.

The sum of the evidence is that Jonson walked to Scotland in the summer of 1618 and returned in the late autumn. The thought of anybody (let alone a conspicuously overweight forty-six-year-old academic) attempting to return on foot during a Scottish winter (November to March) is beyond contemplation. Had he done so, Jonson was hardly likely to better his outward time of two months and seven days at that time of year. Planning for a Masque in 1618 would have had to start before Jonson was (or would be known to be) available, so it is no wonder Chapman was employed as the Masque-maker that year.

Informations exists in two versions: one a folio, printed but apparently extensively edited, appearing in 1711; the other a manuscript discovered in 1833, purporting to be a copy transcribed (the handwriting has been verified) by Sir Robert Sibbald, a noted antiquary in c. 1710, from the original said by him to be in Sir William Drummond's hand. No original has been found.[7] However, Professor Donaldson has kindly provided me with a copy of his Textual Essay to *Informations* as part of his Introduction to Jonson's Complete Works, soon to be published electronically, in which he mounts a spirited *prima facie* defense of the provenance of the two documents.

The introduction to the 1711 folio says that Jonson "came down to Scotland on Foot in the year 1619 on Purpose to visit him [Drummond]," which is wrong. There is extant a letter to Sir Dudley Carleton dated 4th June 1617: "Ben Jonson is going on foot to Edinburgh and back for his profit," which indicates that a bet was involved (perhaps the return walk on foot was waived as nothing is heard of it).

The editor of *Informations* prints a purported letter dated May 1619 from Jonson to Drummond on his return to London. It is suspect for three reasons: First, Jonson was in Oxford in May and the letter gives no London address; second, it is signed *Ben Johnson,* whereas Ben always spelt it *Jonson*; and third, it speaks of "reporting to the King," as if he had some commission from the King (while the editor has told us Jonson went to Scotland for the purpose of seeing Drummond), and the King, having recently lost the Queen in March, was himself convalescing from a very serious illness out of London until his return to London on June 1. Stainer makes the good point that the King had himself visited Scotland at length in 1617 and would have been perfectly adequately informed about affairs there without Jonson's "assistance."

The folio produces a purported (I use that word because it was "found" in the papers of the alleged sender) letter from Drummond dated January 17, 1619, which says: "I have heard from the Court, that the late Mask was not so approved of the King, as in Former Times, and your absence was regretted." This can only be intended to refer to the Chapman masque of 1618-19 (Jonson, back in London, would have known the climate of opinion anyway), for Jonson was in fact responsible for the 1619-20 masque, which seems to have been successful. Until 1752, when the New Style calendar came in, the New Year was deemed to commence on March 25: thus, in England any year mentioned in a date between January 1 and March 24 actually refers to what we now think of as the previous year. However, in

1600 the Scottish Parliament adopted January 1 as New Year's Day, and this does seem to have been used informally as the seventeenth century wore on in both countries. So the purported date of this letter must be New Style 16<u>19</u>.

The manuscript version goes on to say that "He [Jonson] went from Lieth [sic] the 25 of January 1619."[7] To keep the show on the road, this date must be meant to mean January 1619/20. The system does seem to have confused both Sibbald and the editor of the printed folio (see the discussion on Jonson's age below).

Stainer also touches on the question of whether Drummond was actually at home at Hawthornden at the time. He had inherited the estate in 1610, and published two small books of poems in 1613 and 1614. An anonymous poem, *Forth Feasting* (1617), is ascribed to him. Significantly, it was not included with the presentational volume of poetry presented to King James on his visit to Scotland in 1617. Drummond published nothing else until 1623. Moreover, the introduction to the printed folio says in essence that he stayed eight years abroad from 1614 or 1615 on. Stainer notes that although poet John Taylor mentions a Mr. *David* Drummond, he makes no mention of *Sir William*, who one would think would have extended his hospitality to Taylor. For Jonson to be back in London in early December, any meeting with Drummond (if there was one at all) must have been short, and must have taken place in September-October 1618.

Before turning to the content of the folio and the manuscript, we ought to consider what, if we think these documents were faked, was the point of them. Stainer suggests that they were an attempt to make the folio more serviceable and "to claim a poet for Scotland," by which I assume he means to show that Jonson had Scots origins. Both folio and manuscript affirm that Jonson said: "his Grandfather came from Carlisle, and he thought Anandale to it, he served Henry 8, and was a gentleman." There is no other such evidence of his grandfather extant. "*Anandale*" links the grandfather to the reiver family of Johnston of Annandale. Percy Simpson dismisses the "a poet for Scotland" claim as "puerile." No doubt it might seem so in 1926, but in 1711 (and in 2011) the thought cannot be brushed off so lightly. The then very unpopular Union had only just (1707) come into existence, and we now see Scottish Nationalism as a renewed political force. There were plenty of Scots who understandably would wish to see Scottish national and cultural traditions preserved; why would some not take even more direct steps? It is notable that Sibbald, a one-time Catholic, and Bishop Sage, one of the progenitors of the printed folio, who was a non-juror (i.e., one who, having sworn allegiance to James VII and II, could not see his way to doing the same for William III in James's lifetime), seem to be part of the small High Anglican (in Scotland, Episcopalian) Jacobite-minded group who might favor the Old Pretender and with him a Scots nationalist outlook. The publishers (including Sage) could well have been Sibbald's dupes.

One of the tests for the folio and the manuscript is to see what is brand new, i.e., for which there is no evidence in the folio and/or the manuscript. There is a wealth of references to documents which were available for the producers of the material in 1711, but in general they can add nothing to a search for a solution to the problem. There is also the question of amendments to the existing documents. Do

they indicate earlier genuine versions or are they concoctions to lend verisimilitude to their scenario? For instance, in conjunction with a purported letter from Jonson to Drummond dated January 19, 1619, to copies of nos. VI and VII of the 1641 *Underwood – Miscellaneous Poems,* in the printed (but not in the manuscript) edition, are given introductions, that for no. VI being particularly florid. Both have Jonson spelling his name *Johnson*, which is a matter of comment. Jonson's own 1641 version is headed "My picture, Left in Scotland" and contains the lines "My hundreds of grey hairs/ Told seven and forty years," which makes the date of the poem 1619 (Jonson was born June 11, 1572), but for some reason the line is altered to "Told six and forty years," which from the producers' angle would make the poem one year earlier. Either the producers miscalculated the year or they believed that Jonson was born in 1574, so he would be forty-six years old in 1620, which is the year they need to agree with the rest of their production. For very many years scholars believed Jonson was born in 1574 and the true date (or perhaps a date with rather more certainty) of 1572 has only relatively recently been recognized (and a nasty hole is blown in the concoction).

We find other discrepancies in *Informations:* "He was a Master of Arts in both Universities <u>by favour not his studie"</u> (the underlined portion not in the printed folio). Jonson did not become a Master of Arts at Oxford until July 19, 1619, *after* he had returned from Scotland.

"[S]ince his comming to England [i.e. from the Low Countries, sometime in 1597], being appealed to in the fields [folio: to a Duel], he had killed his adversary, which had hurt him in the arm, and whose sword was 10 inches longer than his; for the which [folio: For this Crime] he was emprisonned, and almost at the gallows." It is noticeable that Jonson does not tell Drummond who his opponent was.

This information was not available in 1711, but we now know he was Gabriel Spencer, a fellow actor. In dueling there was a strict rule that the weapons had to be of the same length, which makes this version ludicrous. There is no evidence that Jonson went to prison on this occasion. Jonson himself says he went to prison once before 1605, and the warrant for his release is dated October 8, 1597, along with those for his Gabriel Spencer (his subsequent victim) and Robert Shaa, as noted in the Privy Council records.

In 1605 Jonson wrote to Robert Cecil (Earl of Salisbury) from prison, where he had been committed with Chapman. *Informations* reports :"He was delated (Folio: accused) by Sr James Murray to the King for writing something against the Scots in a play *Eastward Hoe*, and voluntarily imprissoned himself with Chapman and Marston…." His letter to Cecil does not mention Marston, and the thought that that one might voluntarily imprison oneself in a Jacobean jail is again ludicrous. *Informations* then suggests that all three were in danger of mutilation,[8] which again seems unlikely.

"When the king came in England [in 1603], at the tyme the pest was in London, he being in the country at Sr Robert Cotton's house with old Camden, he saw in a vision his eldest son…. (as if already dead)." Stainer ascertained that

Cotton's house was in the process of being built and was not completed until some time later.

"Sr John Roe . . . died in his armes of the pest, and he furnished his charges, 20lb; which was given him back." Stainer makes the point that the only treatment for the plague was complete isolation and, as for Jonson discharging the funeral costs for the family, this is altogether unlikely.

"Of their [folio: the English] Nation, Hookers Ecclesiasticall historie (whose children are now beggars). . ." (the underlined portion not in the folio). Stainer shows that this is a story taken from Anthony Wood's 1661 diary, and was untrue since two of Hooker's daughters died young and the other two married, without any suggestion of poverty.

"Tailor was sent along here to scorn him" (not in the folio). Stainer shows from the water poet Taylor's own works that Taylor had a very high opinion of Jonson, and how much he appreciated Jonson's kindnesses to him in Scotland.

"Overbury was first his friend then turned his mortall enimie" (not in the folio); and "The Countess of Rutland. . . Sir Th: Overburie was in love with her and caused Ben to read his Wyffe [a poem] to her, which he with an excellent grace, did, and praised the author. That the morne thereafter he discarded with Overburie, who would have him intend a sute that was unlawfull...."[9] Jonson's *Epigram* CXIII, written on Overbury's return to England in 1610, is laudatory, and the Countess died in August 1612. Overbury was imprisoned in the Tower in April 1613 and there murdered in August 1613. A poem of Overbury's, *The Husbande,* was published in 1614 (the same year as *The Wyffe* appeared). Jonson wrote commendatory verses to it and also Epigram 113, published in 1616. "To the worthy Author...." Some "mortall enimie"! *Informations* is the only "evidence" of the alleged enmity.

An even more damning point is that Overbury is not elsewhere recorded as having shown the slightest interest in women at all. His great friend, lover and protector up to 1613 was the King's homosexual favorite Robert Carr. The poem *Wyffe* is scarcely an invitation to loose behaviour on the part of a wife: quite the reverse. Overbury's own father suggested that he wrote it as part of his anti-heterosexual campaign to deter Carr from marrying the Countess of Essex once she had obtained the annulment of her earlier marriage.

"That Epithalamium that wants a name in his printed Workes was made at the Earl of Essex marriage." There was no need to draw attention in this way to the subsequent annulment, the result of a political/judicial fiddle and the greatest scandal of the reign, as Drummond would have known all about it as well as Overbury's subsequent imprisonment and murder at the behest of the Countess and the fall-out from them. Jonson also wrote a poem to Somerset for the day of his wedding to the Countess of Essex, again bravely alluding to Overton : "Wife, in worth, thy friend did make...."

"His inventions are smooth and easie, but above all he excelleth in translation." Jonson's translations are few in number, and he never published them.

"He hath commented and translated Horace *Art of Poesie*: it is in dialogue

ways; by Criticus he understandeth Dr. Done [Donne]." Criticus appears as a character in the quarto version of *Cynthia's Revels*; it is generally recognized to be Jonson's self-portrait, and was so understood at the time.

"He said to Prince Charles of Inigo Jones, that where he wanted words to express the greatest villaine in the world, he would call him ane Inigo" (not in the folio).

There is no particular evidence that Jonson disliked Inigo Jones to such an extent as early as 1618: The really serious breaches between them occurred in the 1620s. It is highly unlikely that Jonson would have such speech with the King's heir. Simpson relies on *Epigrams* CXV and CXXX (which he gets the wrong way round and misnumbers the latter as CXXIX) to show that the enmity was already in full flow, notwithstanding that Jonson and Jones worked on later Masques. The references in CXV are more generally accepted than those in CXXIX as referring to Jones. The former (*On the Town's Honestest Man*) denies that it is aimed at a specific victim:

....but this one
Suffers no name, but a description
Being no vicious person, but the Vice
About the Town. . .

* * *

.....doth play more
Parts than the Italian could do with his door
Acts Old Iniquity, and in the fit
Of miming, gets the opinion of a wit
Executes men in picture: by defect
From friendship, is its own fame's architect,
An inginer in slanders of all fashion
That seeming praises, are yet accusation
Described it's thus: defined would you it have?
Then, the Town's Honest Man's, her errant'st knave.

One critic[10] points out that the "Italian" can be identified and links "Old Iniquity" with older plays' vice figures. I suggest that if *Informations* had not linked Jonson and Jones in a quarrel as early as 1619, there would be nothing much by way of evidence for it, since the two ambiguous epigrams are the sole evidence at this early time, and so *Informations* is likely unreliable. The references to "Iniquity," "architect" and "inginer" might point to Inigo Jones, but they do seem in context to be metaphorical rather than critical.

"When his play of a Silent Woman [otherwise entitled Epicene] was first acted, there was found verses after the stage against him, concluding the play was well named the Silent Woman, there was never one man to say Plaudite to it." The play may have been temporarily suppressed as it contains this reference: "[he can draw maps] of the Prince of Moldavia, and of his [the map-drawer's] mistress,

mistress Epicene" (V.i.18-19). Although not actually in the context of the play the mistress of the Prince, Jonson offended the Lady Arbella, the King's cousin, who was being courted by a claimant to the throne of Moldavia, but there is nothing to show that the play did not have some success.

Throughout there are numerous errors of noblemen's titles, misquotations and critical errors which perhaps the edited version might have put right. While these are a matter of comment, conceivably were it not for the serious matters above they might have been defensible inside a genuine transcript.

We have placed a huge question mark over the reliability, let alone the authenticity, of *Informations*. The next step is to see what it said about the Shakespeare and the Jacobean literary scene, with a bucket of salt at hand.

By way of introduction a confusion is illustrated by report in both the manuscript and the folio within the space of a few lines of each other, tarnishing with unreliability the passages of criticism generally:

> That Silvesters translation of Du Bartas was not well done" and "That the best pieces of Ronsard were his Odes....All this was to no purpose for he neither doeth understand French nor Italiennes [Folio : for he never understood the French or Italian Language].

Early in *Informations* the manuscript tells us that "Shakspear wanted Arte" to which the folio adds, "and sometimes Sense." These views are totally negated by what Jonson wrote four or so years later in the Ode prefatory to the 1623 Shakespeare Folio:

> Nature herself was proud of his designs....
> Yet I must not give nature all: thy art,
> My gentle Shakespeare, must enjoy a part.
> For though the poet's matter nature be,
> His art doth give the fashion; and that he
> Who casts to write a living line must sweat –
> Such as are thine are - and strike the second heat
> Upon the muses' anvil
>
> * * *
>
> . . . even so the race
> Of Shakespeare's mind and manners brightly shines
> In his well-tuned and true filed lines
> In each of which he seems to shake a lance,
> As brandished in the face of ignorance....

No, the remarks in *Informations* merely reflect the taste of second-rate criticism of the late Stuart era when they were written.

Later the second reference appears: "Sheakspear, in a play, brought in a

number of men saying they had suffered shipwrack in Bohemia, wher there is no sea neer by some 100 miles." It seems unlikely that Jonson would so hopelessly distort the plot of *The Winter's Tale*. Until some forty years earlier, Bohemia had a particularly dangerous piece of shoreline on the Danube, and with the start of the Thirty Years War everyone with political interests would know that Bohemia did not have a seacoast. Jonson would be unlikely to make this type of mistake. Anyway, the reference is totally unsupported by the play, where only Antigonus and the baby Perdita survive the shipwreck: The thought that Jonson, who repeatedly shows tight attachment to Shakespeare, making that kind of error is rubbish. Shakespeare is ridiculing the ignorance of the Clown and the Old Shepherd his father.

As well as two separate references to Beaumont (in one his age at death is wrong), there are three other references to Beaumont, Fletcher and Chapman:

> 1) "That next himself only Fletcher and Chapman could make a mask" (not in the folio). There is no evidence that Fletcher ever penned a masque – this mannered form of entertainment with its stratospheric expense would hardly be to the extreme Protestant Fletcher's taste.
>
> 2) "Fletcher and Beaumont ten years since hath written The Faithful Shepherdess a Tragicomedy well done" (again, not in the folio).
>
> 3) "That Chapman and Fletcher were loved of him."

This remark is probably derived from a reading of Jonson's posthumous (1641) *Underwood:* "His inventions are smooth and easie, but above all he excelleth in translation." Jonson's translations are few in number, and he never published them. *Miscellaneous Poems* XX (to Chapman) and XIV, respectively. XIV is a sympathetic address to Fletcher on the poor reception of his verse-drama *The Faithful Shepherdess* (in which Beaumont had no hand at all) on its first appearance in 1608. Both poems were available for the second printing of *Epigrams* in 1616 (the first, from 1612, is lost), but curiously neither appeared. Even more curiously, Epigram LV is a panegyric to Beaumont, who died that year (probably earlier in it; the exact date is March 15, 1615/6), followed immediately by a vicious denunciation in the next Epigram (LVI) of the "Poor poet Ape, that would be thought our chief" — clearly Fletcher.[12] The change in Jonson's attitude is not picked up in *Informations,* and may be put down to Fletcher's anti-Catholic sentiments (as interpreted) in the printed edition of *The Faithful Shepherdess,*[13] and in subsequent works. Fletcher's clear Protestant worldview does not bring him into an association with Jonson at any later stage. The Prologue to *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, with its clear denigration of Fletcher, and therefore written after Fletcher's death in 1625, for the 1634 print of the play, depicts Jonson's attitude to both play and dramatist:

> New plays and maidenheads are near akin,
> Much followed both, for both much money gi'en,

If they stand sound and well. And a good play –
Whose modest scenes blush on his marriage day,
And shake to lose his honour – is like her
After that holy tie and first night's stir
Yet still is modesty, and still retains
More of the maid to sight than husband's pains.
We pray our play may be so; for I am sure
It has a noble breeder, and a pure,
A learned, and a poet never went
More famous yet 'twixt Po and silver Trent.
Chaucer, of all admired, the story gives;
There constant to eternity it lives.
If we let fall the nobleness of this,
And the first sound this child hear be a hiss,
How will it shake the bones of the good man,
And make him cry from underground 'O, fan
From me the witless chaff of such a writer
That blasts my bays and my famed works makes lighter
Than Robin Hood !' This is the fear we bring;
For, to say truth, it were an endless thing,
And too ambitious to aspire to him.
Weak as we are, and almost breathless swim
In this deep water, do you but hold out
Your helping hands, and we shall tack about,
And something do to save us; you shall hear
Scenes though below his art, may yet appear
Worth two hours' travail. To his bones sweet sleep;
Content to you. If this play do not keep
A little dull time from us, we perceive
Our losses fall so thick we needs must leave.

The Prologue repays detailed analysis. Because it contains no commendation of Fletcher's contribution, but rather clear denigration of him and the play itself, it cannot have been written for an early production. Likewise, after the denunciation of Fletcher by Jonson, I do not believe Jonson could have written anything by way of prologue for the play before Fletcher died in 1625 (and then he could be ignored), and, as I show, I do believe that Jonson is the only logical author of the Prologue, and he must have pulled rank and sneaked it in to the printed 1634 edition. I do not believe it was meant to be spoken on the stage at all. It starts as a spoof on the genre of mock humility on the part of the cast and the writer.

It is interesting that Jonson appears to attack the reputation of the dead Fletcher, the Protestant Government dramatist, obliquely: "We pray....." (line 9); As in all prologues, the lines are meant to be spoken by a member of the cast. "We"

is therefore the cast, not the two authors. "[F]or I am sure…." (line 9); "I" is Jonson himself, who is sure, and (as the next three lines indicate) so would some of the audience, that the single author referred to Shakespeare ("noble breeder," a learned poet whose literary stamping ground was England and Northern Italy). The word "breeder" might indicate some connection to the original plot, but certainly not to the final product.

Then there is the reference to Chaucer, the principal source of the play's story, but, "If we let fall the nobleness of this" (i.e., dispense with the contributions of Chaucer and Shakespeare, and fail to reach the maiden modesty of a good new play) and the first sound the infant play hears is an auditorium hiss, it will "shake the bones of the good man [Chaucer]" and make him cry out asking that the "witless chaff of such a writer" [Fletcher], which damages his reputation, be fanned away (i.e., the play should be consigned to oblivion). The acting company purportedly "fears" this, and by way of contrast ("to say truth"), suggests the idea for the play may be "too ambitious to aspire to him." This is obscure, but can only mean that the idea for the play is beyond Fletcher's abilities. This is Jonson's cunning stuff, because on a cursory read "him" would seem to refer to Chaucer, when clearly the writer of the "witless chaff," being the nearest person to the pronoun, is intended.

> The cast cry out for rescue from "this deep water: and finish:
> "You shall hear Scenes that below his art may yet appear
> [i.e., even worse than his usual]/ Worth two hours travail …'
> [i.e. hard work, suffering and even labor pains!]

The Prologue finishes, "To his bones, sweet sleep." Again not Chaucer, but Fletcher: ironically, the latter's bones should have the "sweet sleep" of total oblivion, while Chaucer's are "shaken.

The sum is a brilliant Jonsonesque hidden exposé of the true position. Jonson's attitude is borne out by the Prologue to *The Sad Shepherd:*

> Or that the Man who made one such poor flight [i.e., *The Faithful Shepherdess*]
> In his whole Life, had with his winged Skill
> Advanc'd him upmost on the Muses Hill,
> When he like Poet yet remains, as those
> Are Painters who can only make a Rose.

If *Informations* were a reliable source, it would contribute to the idea that *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is a reworking (or even a collaboration) between Fletcher and "Shakespeare" of an older or unfinished Shakespeare play, with Jonson as a supporter both of Fletcher and Shakespeare. While this is ruled out by all the genuine evidence, nevertheless it appears to afford a plank on which the collaboration theory might rely.

So what is the literary value of *Informations,* either the manuscript or the printed version? None, but as a reflection of the political opinion of certain highly

educated Scotsmen in 1711 it may well be of interest. Discard *Informations* and evaluation of Jonson's attitude to Shakespeare (and Fletcher) is no longer impeded. Jonson's future biographers (to say nothing of Shakespeare's) may well find that a more consistent and clearer picture of him emerges.

I put this essay to a major Jonsonian biographer, who told me it was full of unwarranted assumptions and conclusions, but declined to identify any, or to provide a reason for his failing to include, let alone mention, the 1634 Prologue to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* in the *Complete Works of Jonson*. I consider that my assumptions and conclusions are sustained either by evidence or by logic based on that evidence, and I beg leave to disagree.

Why does all this matter? By relegating *informations* to the literary dustbin I present a clearer picture of Jonson's view of Shakespeare.

Endnotes

[1] Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson A Life* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 34 ff.

[2] Ben Jonson, *Discoveries* (1640-41), l. 481.

[3] C.L. Stainer, *Jonson and Drummond /their Conversations/ A few Remarks on an 18th Century Forgery* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1925).

[4] Percy Simpson, "The Genuineness of the Drummond 'Conversations,'" *Review of English Studies* 2 (1926), 42-50 (for which is gratefully acknowledged the help of Bristol University library staff). Although he is on occasion rightly scathing of Stainer, he can nod, too. *Informations* (both the folio and the manuscript) records, "Essex [d.1601] wrote that Epistle or preface before the translation of the last part of Tacitus, which is A.B." Stainer points out that Jonson congratulates Sir Henry Savile on his translation (*Epigram* XCV), and the preface signed A.B. appears in the edition of 1604. A.B. cannot be Essex, but Simpson writes (p. 49), "Edmund Bolton, who is a high authority on such a point, makes the same statement in his *Hypercritica*, which was not printed till 1724." That must be all right then, save that Bolton's only authority must have been the statement in *Informations* (1711), which passes by Simpson entirely.

[5] In a footnote (447 n.39) Donaldson confirms that he relies heavily on the manuscript version of *Informations*.

[6] Donaldson, 362-363; Selden, *Vindiciae secundum Integritatem Existimationis suae*... (1653), 16-19. Selden's Latin clearly says that Jonson saw to it that the Marquess (afterwards Duke) of Buckingham should stand Selden favorably with the King, and keep him less antipathetic towards Selden's argument. This is a rather different nuance to Donaldson's version. Later on Selden was imprisoned and much less favorably treated, and there can be little doubt that Jonson and another accompanied Selden at this *first* meeting with the King. There would be little point in Jonson (who is not noted as an expert on Anglican Church Law) coming — let alone being admitted — to a subsequent formal encounter (as Donaldson suggests in order to keep within *Informations* timetable) with Church dignitaries involved. Jonson wrote a laudatory poem to Selden who, with Heywood, was his "tenth Muse" ("Underwood" at 31). Amusingly, "Drummond" misread Drayton to ascribe to him the thought that his extra muse was the ninth — a mistake that neither Drummond nor Drayton nor Jonson would make.

[7] An ingenious suggestion that the original was borrowed in 1711 or shortly thereafter and destroyed in a fire in 1899 has no evidential basis (but see Donaldson at 447 n.39). Why was it necessary for an experienced antiquary to make an exact manuscript copy (when any poor student could do the same), when the printer would have required a manuscript of the edited version? The suggestion that the manuscript copy was a draft for editing in the production of the printed fake looks quite enticing, especially as interesting (and some

more ingenious) items in it do not appear in the printed version (see note 10 below)

[8] Perhaps a Scottish nationalist crack at English Justice.

[9] Bacon, well known as a homosexual, implies Overbury was similarly oriented. For this and other evidence, see Anne Somerset, *Unnatural Murder* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 59, 63, 71 and 104ff. The scandal and the subsequent court cases received very wide publicity to the extent that "the whole country was absorbed by what was happening, almost to the exclusion of other business" (id. at 384). Jonson and Drummond could not fail to be well apprised.

[10] William Gifford, *Ben Jonson's Works with a Biographical Memoir* (1816), makes no reference to Drummond because only the printed folio, which omits the story, was available to influence his critique — the manuscript had not been discovered. The editors of the second edition in 1843 (by which time it was) do not amend the section.

[11] Before the appearance of the Clown and the Old Shepherd in the scene (III.iii), the only allusion to the sea is the late editorial insertion in the 1623 First Folio (there being no earlier version) whereby the boatman character in the folio is described as "mariner," not as part of the text but as identity to the character speaking.

[12] Full text of *Epigrams*, LVI:

Poor poet Ape, that would be thought our chief,
Whose works are e'en the frippery of wit,
From brokage is become so bold a thief,
As we, the robb'd, leave rage, and pity it.
At first he made low shifts, would pick and glean,
Buy the reversion of old plays;
[acquire some versions of *The Two Noble*
. *Kinsmen*, *Henry VIII* and *Cardenio*]
now grown
To a little wealth, and credit in the scene,
He takes up all: Makes each man's wit his own;
And told of this, he slights it. Tut, such crimes
The sluggish gaping auditor devours;
He marks not whose 'twas first: and aftertimes
May judge it to be his, as well as ours.
Fool! As if half eyes will not know a fleece [i.e. theft]
From locks of wool, or shreds of the whole piece.

[13] Clare Asquith, *Shadowlands* (Public Affairs, 2005), 275ff. By way of further evidence of the rift between them, Fletcher wrote two poems addressed to Jonson in praise of *Volpone* (1607) and *Catiline* (1611), but nothing later, ignoring *The Alchemist* (1612) and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) and later works (quarto dates given, but first performances at least one year earlier).

[14] I.e., *The Faithful Shepherdess*.