

Honest Ben

and the Two Tribes He Hath Left Us

by Gabriel Ready

In the early 1620s, an already famous Ben Jonson began frequenting a tavern on Fleet Street in London. Perhaps he was trying to escape the trials of the outside world and the political realities underpinning a patronage system he relied on so dearly. Whatever the reason, the rules for inclusion, and exclusion – *Leges Convivales* or Rules of Conviviality – were engraved in marble over the mantelpiece of the room:

Let none but guests or clubbers higher come,
Let dunces, fools, sad, sordid men keep home;
Let learned, civil, merry men be invited...¹

The original Tribe of Ben was rather ambiguous and small. Today, the tribe is less ambiguous and very large.

In 2012 with great cheer and much drinking of malmsey and sack, the new authoritative modern-spelling edition of the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* (CWBJ) was unveiled, succeeding the Herford and Simpson edition published over sixty years earlier by Oxford University. An electronic edition of CWBJ, originally launched in 2014 with a second release of material² scheduled for 2015, will further help fulfill one of the main objectives of the twenty-plus-year project – that is, to better promote the reputation of Ben Jonson.³

Bibliophiles can be forgiven if they gravitate to the seven-volume print edition that contains seventeen extent plays, more than thirty court masques and entertainments, and three collections of poems. In the history of early modern books and what constitutes an authoritative collection, the English satirical playwright was a pioneer. He personally oversaw his own collection published in a luxurious folio format that included, to the bemusement of some, his plays. Jonson called his collection *Workes*, a term that at least one of his contemporaries mocked but that his Cambridge editors have honoured and retained.

It is easy to forget that the 1616 *Workes* was a bold-faced effort of ego and willpower, offering some measure of the writer at the center of the production. For their part, the Cambridge editors have made the equally bold move of organizing the texts chronologically, as if guided by Jonson himself, ever-present and never more so than today. All previous major collections were organized by genre so the chronological

ordering of the entire Jonsonian canon is a singular achievement. One hesitates at the idea of an electronic edition, not because it is a bad idea – it is not – but because it undercuts the historicist approach that “aims to relocate Jonson more emphatically in his times.”²⁴

The recent re-examination of Jonson has opened up fascinating new vistas. The re-dating of *A Tale of a Tub*, once believed to be written in the 1590s, is now dated 1634. This astounding 40-year adjustment confounds the notion of a lyrical phase or a portrait of the artist as a young man. Two versions of *Everyman In His Humour*, each assigned to their respective periods in the writer’s life (in volume 1 and volume 4), are separated by a dozen plays, a score of masques/entertainments, and countless epistles and poems. Ian Donaldson, one of the CWBJ editors, concludes that “the revised Jonsonian chronology gives an altogether more irregular, various, and interesting view of the canon, and of the imaginative development of the author.”²⁵

Donaldson’s *Ben Jonson: A Life* came out a year before the CWBJ, and is in many respects a companion to the new collection, focusing on how a bricklayer’s son became England’s first literary celebrity. Donaldson begins with a description of Jonson’s walk to Edinburgh in 1618. Thanks to a recently discovered diary, we now know that Jonson was accompanied by a fellow walker, a younger companion (perhaps his godson) whose principal job was to write what appears to be a testimonial, certifying that the walk from London to Edinburgh had indeed taken place, maybe to fulfill the requirements of a wager. Walking great distances on a wager was not unheard of in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, and was something akin to today’s extreme sports – in 1589 one gentleman walked backwards for twelve consecutive days.

There is a feeling that the wager is unlikely to be the only reason for Jonson’s walk. Anton Chekhov, after finally achieving recognition as a serious writer, set out in 1889, against the advice of family and friends, and quite recklessly when considering his health, on an arduous eleven-week journey from Moscow across Siberia so he could administer a census of the penal colony on Sakhalin Island. Chekhov’s sojourn was officially for the purpose of social science but the real motive is less clear.

One thing is certain: Jonson’s long walk to Edinburgh confirms that the writer had already achieved national stardom. He was received with pomp and feted in the towns he visited. The doors of grand country houses were opened to him, offering

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him their best beds, food, and drink. It is a safe bet that Jonson drank his fair share of Canary wine. And so begins the odyssey of this new life of Ben Jonson, which our biographer tells us is a study of how Jonson “had managed by this period of time to achieve such extraordinary fame, [and] how he had already become such a living legend.”⁶ This extraordinary fame was cemented two years before the foot voyage to Edinburgh with the publication of *The Workes of Beniamin Ionson* . . . “here was fame as Jonson might have liked to know it . . . enshrined in the seeming permanence of a printed book.”⁷

Coincidentally Jonson’s monument to posterity was published in the same year as William Shakspeare’s death, an event that appears to have passed without a contemporary report. Thus, a narrative ostensibly examining one writer’s fame, in the decisive chapter titled “Fame,” is interrupted for the purposes of untangling a number of mysteries that involve another writer, the dispossession of fame being a far more unequivocal marker.

The Jonson biographer offers two reasons to explain the incongruence of events circa 1616: the difference between Jonson’s monument to posterity represented by his *Workes* and the silence emanating from Stratford. Jonson’s position at court was more prominent, he suggests. Of Shakespeare’s position at court we know next to nothing.⁸

From November 1604 through February 1605, the King’s Men performed eleven times at court, including seven plays by Shakespeare and two by Jonson. In the winter of 1612-13, during the celebration of a royal marriage, the King’s Men gave twenty performances, including seven plays by Shakespeare, one by Jonson. Perhaps this is a reflection of Shakespeare’s themes, which focus on the aristocracy whereas Jonson’s comedies revolve around the follies of upward social mobility. There is speculation⁹ that the court’s passion for Shakespeare resulted in an influx of expensive presentation manuscripts that may have had an impact on the trade in new titles at St. Paul’s Churchyard. In effect, Shakespeare’s popularity at court stopped the publication of any more work by him. The same cannot be said of Jonson. Notably, Jonson wrote one masque per season and Shakespeare did not. Jonson’s relationship with patrons is as clear as Shakespeare’s is unclear. Comparing the courtly profiles of Jonson and Shakespeare leads us to conclude these were artists with very different objectives though their target audiences were similar.

Another reason Donaldson offers for the discrepancy between Jonson finding support to publish his collected works and Shakespeare dying without mention, is that Jonson was much more interested in promoting his work. Again, it is difficult to formulate an explanation of Shakespeare’s interests in this area. Shakespeare play publication before 1623 can be grouped into three phases.¹⁰

Table 1: First-time publication of Shakespeare plays

YEAR	PLAY	ATTRIBUTION
1594	<i>2H6</i>	—
	<i>Tit.</i>	—
1595	<i>3H6</i>	—
1596	<i>E3</i>	—
1597	<i>LLL (0Q?)</i>	?
	<i>R2</i>	—
	<i>R3</i>	—
	<i>Rom.</i>	—
1598	<i>1H4</i>	—
	<i>LLL</i>	“Newly corrected and augmented <i>By W. Shakespere.</i> ”
1600	<i>H5</i>	—
	<i>MV</i>	“Written by William Shakespeare.”
	<i>2H4</i>	“Written by William Shakespeare.”
	<i>Ado.</i>	“Written by William Shakespeare.”
	<i>MND</i>	“Written by William Shakespeare.”
1602	<i>Wiv.</i>	“By William Shakespeare.”
1603	<i>Ham.</i>	“By William Shake-speare.”
1608	<i>Lr.</i>	“M. William Shak-speare: <i>HIS</i> ”
1609	<i>Tro.</i>	“Written by William Shakespeare.”
	<i>Per.</i>	“By William [] Shakespeare.”
1622	<i>Oth.</i>	“Written by William Shakespeare.”

1594-1597		Anonymity Phase
1598-1603		Promotional Phase
1604-1623		Dormancy Phase

The first phase was short, an anonymity phase that lasted just four years, when at least seven different plays were published without an author’s name on the title page. The second phase was an equally fleeting and frenzied promotional period that lasted between 1598 and 1603, in which at least eight new plays were published with the name Shakespeare on the title page. Importantly, and a hallmark of the second

phase, most of the previously published anonymous plays were re-packaged, often times augmented, and sold under the name Shakespeare. Whether Francis Meres's remarks in *Palladis Tamia* triggered it or not, the promotional period culminated with the release of *Hamlet* in 1603. The effects of the second phase must have been readily apparent in London as the book market was glutted with Shakespeare titles.¹¹ Then the third and most prolonged period, best described as the dormancy phase, lasted twenty years, as if Hamlet's dying words – "The rest is silence." – were a directive aimed at stationers (Table 1, above).

In short, barring a few exceptions,¹² there was a virtual stop-work-order for printing of new plays by Shakespeare. Some might refer to the dormancy phase as the slow-cooker period, meaning that a more serious folio publication was an apple-of-his-eye project as early as 1603. Another argument put forward is that an oversupply of Shakespeare titles in the book market made publishing his new work commercially unviable, but this cannot explain the prolonged duration of the dormant period nor the fact that stationers were still taking advantage of the name.¹³

Thus, the publishing history of Shakespeare titles experienced two false starts in less than a decade, and then around 1603 unknown impediments stopped the dramatist for two decades from further bringing out new plays in print. No such impediment appears to have existed for Jonson over the same years, with his publishing record following a perceptible ascent towards the 1616 *Workes*.

Looking at Shakespeare's *First Folio* of 1623, there remains the thorny question of why he was not the executor to his own writings. The most infamous last will and testament in literary history does not mention any of the orphaned manuscripts. Indeed, the nineteen unpublished plays of 1616 are the siren song of Shakespearean studies.¹⁴ However, the prevailing orthodox response today appears to be one of common sense, that the anaemic printing record post-1603 and the absence of plays in the last will and testament do not reflect Shakespeare's genuine attitude towards his creative work. One of the lead Shakespearean scholars to articulate this response was new bibliographer W.W. Greg, who was vigorously opposed to the idea that Shakespeare was "indifferent to the fate of his own works."¹⁵ Greg and his generation, of course, were battling an outdated conception of Shakespeare that was rooted in the romantic tradition with William Hazlitt's essay "On Posthumous Fame – Whether Shakespeare was influenced by a love of it?" serving as a model point of view.¹⁶

Portraying Shakespeare as a literary dramatist who was preoccupied with legacy and revision, writing not only for spectators but rewriting for readers as well, presents its own set of problems because it recasts his relationship with the shareholders in fundamental ways. If Shakespeare is indeed concerned about his work in print, it is reasonable to assume that control over playbooks was a significant wedge issue, a

cause of disagreement, friction and division. Between 1603 and 1616, there is a total of nineteen unpublished plays and a number of competing stakeholders that included theatrical shareholders, stationers, the public, the aristocracy, and an absent, silent author... all of these variables conspire against an unfussy retirement in Stratford.¹⁷

When an artist offers works of deep insight into the human condition, it is a common practice to let go a bit, let our defenses down and slacken our efforts at comprehension. It is a humbling but beautiful pitfall, repeated again and again across time and space, readers and spectators falling, falling into the bottomless embrace that is the mysterious work of Shakespeare. We are face-to-face with the exception, a dreamscape that Ron Rosenbaum evokes passionately in his *Shakespeare Wars*. That this type of reaction is a sentimental cliché makes the experience no less valid. However, when attempting to make sense of an artist's life, it is a mistake to approach the subject as an exception to the rule, because if we do, we end up with the nonsensical position of Stephen Greenblatt, who chastens any doubt and posits that Shakespeare simply willed himself into the world.

The Folger Shakespeare Library hosted a conference in April 2014 on 'Shakespeare and the Problem of Biography' to mark the 450th anniversary of their faithful devotion to history's man. Attendees at the conference seemed to lament the state of their arid garden all the while leaving the authorship question wanting of husbandry and greater appreciation. The authorship question – the defiantly impolite notion that someone other than the man from Stratford wrote the works attributed to him – is deeply divided along tribal lines. Face-to-face skirmishes are infrequent, confined to the street because scholars guardedly avoid the subject, which is as attractive to them as a pus-filled boil. At the conference, the authorship question was not permitted.

Behind enemy lines, in the safety of the tribal encampment, opinions are aired with unrestrained zeal. On the challenges of writing Jonson's biography, for example, and without any sense of hyperbole, Donaldson reports "The puzzles and excitements that confront a biographer of Jonson, despite the confident pronouncements to the contrary by an earlier generation of academics, are not (in short) so very different from those that are faced by a biographer of Shakespeare, or of any other writer from the early modern period."¹⁸

Our idea of Shakespeare and the traditional biography is strongly shaped by a reading of Jonson. Jonson mediates our relationship with Shakespeare. He is Shakespeare's successor, his first critical reader and, long before there were general editors, his first general editor. Orthodoxy is tacitly aware of Jonson's importance to the traditional narrative. If we want to know why the biographical problem that is Shakespeare persists, we need look no further than Jonson.

Take Donaldson's handling of *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599). *Every Man Out*

was a not-so-successful satiric play and Jonson's initial foray in the War of the Theatres, a flameout that occurred between 1599 and 1602 among rival poets and players in the close-knit London theatre community. The feud was started in part when playwright John Marston torched Jonson in *Histrionomastix* (1599) through the character of Chrisoganus.¹⁹

Not everyone agrees on all of the allusions during this acerbic, restless period – there were many targets – but some allusions are more obvious than others. One of the easy ones is Jonson's parody of the Stratford man, cited by E.K. Chambers as a contemporary allusion in his *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (1930). Jonson attacks the Shakespeare family's acquisition of a coat of arms in the character of Sogliardo whose crest features a boar without a head and the motto "Not without mustard." The motto for Shakespeare's coat of arms was *Non Sans Droit* or "not without right."

It is important to note Donaldson does not look at Sogliardo, though the character rents a room at a London inn, owns property in the country and is predisposed to the world of usury, exactly like history's man. After six pages on the racket of acquiring arms, and adding colour to his narrative, a verdict is finally reached. The parody is about the abuses of heraldry in the abstract because, Donaldson confesses, he cannot accept "the picture of Jonson as plebeian underdog, barking at Shakespeare, the pretender of gentility."²⁰

This is a convincing alibi until Donaldson describes Jonson's later legendary creative relationship with the architect Inigo Jones. The two worked together on masques throughout the Jacobean period and were well known for their squabbles. Jonson's class-conscious derision of Jones is faithfully noted by the biographer who writes that "Even less kindly – even less reasonably, given his own family background – Jonson was to taunt Jones, the son of a Welsh clothworker, on his humble origins"²¹

The life of Jones can withstand the weight of a personal attack while the life of Shakespeare cannot: the shoulders are too narrow, the backbone is too delicate. Jones had actually been to Italy, to cite one clue. The reasons for not looking at the character of Sogliardo in *Every Man Out* are obvious enough.²² He is a buffoon and gull. He is a "lump of copper." Without wit, Sogliardo is threadbare in learning, messes up his knowledge of foreign languages when courting women and is told that he can pass for a clown, which he takes as a compliment. In accordance with comedic conventions, the Sogliardo character functions as an *alazon* – or imposter.²³

More than previous generations, the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* offers an intimate portrayal of a combative Jonson, a complicated, multi-faceted man whose many secrets remained mostly secret. From the very beginning of his career Jonson was a writer to be reckoned with, a confrontational artist who resisted

pigeonholing and took on all comers. The satirical play *The Isle of Dogs* (1597), co-written with Thomas Nashe, was judged to be lewd, seditious and scandalous; one of the targets put forward is Queen Elizabeth herself. The production was immediately taken down and the 25-year-old Jonson was hauled into prison before being questioned by the authorities. The manuscript was expunged from history. Still, Jonson managed a writing career spanning three different reigns – the Elizabethan, the Jacobean and the Caroline – when the pitfalls of being a commentator were many and the consequences severe. He would be imprisoned again and questioned by authorities on numerous occasions. After forty years of wrestling with his opponents and bragging about conquests, the scurrilous Jonson never did lift the veil on *The Isle of Dogs*. Still, the Cambridge editors have provided an eight-page essay to decipher the meaning of the absent, co-authored play.²⁴

Jonson's indirect forms of utterance and mediating positions are well known.²⁵ One art form Jonson perfected was the writing of prefaces, introductions, dedications, inductions, choruses, prologues, and epilogues. Paratextual material is used to achieve many ends, such as promoting the author, introducing the text proper, and pandering to patrons and the reading public. Among its many uses and abuses, paratexts were indispensable for outflanking the state-decipherer, the politic picklock, and the invading interpreter.

Paratexts are situated in the multiple arenas of artistic licence, patronage, and the commercial practices of stationers, and are not to be confused with conspiracy theories. Speaking on behalf of authors, Jonson transforms the Induction into a social contract in *Bartholomew Fair* where a Scrivener presents “articles of agreement” between spectators and the author. Among the articles, the spectator must agree not to search out any real persons in the play such as a “concealed statesman by the Seller of Mousetraps.” This conceit, used as often today as ever before, was effective in protecting the author while also extending protection to other individuals who may be alluded to and attacked in the action of the play. Sometimes the sole objective of a paratext is to shutter identification. In this the paratext is a not too distant cousin of the pseudonym. For the author who is subject to punishment – to borrow a phrase from Foucault – and for the Jacobean satirist especially, paratexts provide ready-made answers for hostile auditors.

Some twenty years after *The Isle of Dogs*, an older and more socially connected Jonson was engaged in one of his most weighty projects: the prestigious folio edition of *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*. At the request of his lifelong patron, William Herbert 3rd Earl of Pembroke, Jonson was employed with contributing two poems and overseeing the armature of the book, with his 1616 *Workes* serving as a model.

Jonson had prepared his entire life for the assignment, the official introduction of

gentle Mr. Shakespeare, the Sweet Swan of Avon. The effect of the First Folio's prefatory material cannot be exaggerated. The seventeen pages of paratext, in which five pages are blank, delivers an irresistible two-punch, an intoxicating English eclogue in one fist and a picture of platonic collegiality and nostalgia for the Elizabethan stage in the other.

Before the folio edition the Shakespearean canon was half its size and the brand was limited to the title pages of cheap quartos and the down-market. It is difficult today to think about Shakespeare minus *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, or the romances such as *The Tempest* and *A Winter's Tale*, a thought invigorated by the idea that they were under threat by "the frauds and stealths of injurious impostors."²⁶ If it is difficult to imagine the canon minus the First Folio, it is even more difficult to imagine the traditional biography of history's man minus the folio's paratextual material.

Proceeding confidently, Donaldson writes "Whatever the extent of his involvement, the stamp of Jonson's authority is clearly apparent in the 1623 Folio. At the outset of the volume, opposite the title page with its famous, if ungainly, portrait of Shakespeare, stands Jonson's verses 'To the Reader,' vouching for the fact that Martin Droeshout's engraving was indeed 'for gentle Shakespeare cut,' and (to the lasting confusion of those wishing to propose an alternative authorship) that the person depicted was indeed responsible for the works presented in this volume."²⁷

The tenor of Jonson's testimony is unmistakable. If anyone can be trusted on what Mr. Shakespeare looked like, it is the venerated, national poet and contemporary Ben Jonson. Honest Ben is what is referred to as a star witness. With the index finger fully extended, Donaldson points to the ocular proof of the Droeshout engraving, thus fulfilling one of the intended outcomes of the First Folio, submitting incontrovertible evidence of attribution. It would be naïve to think otherwise, that is to say, that the Jonson address and Droeshout engraving are there for any other reason than attribution.

With this in mind it must be noted that the First Folio was sold to the decision makers of early modern Europe such as bishops, earls and ambassadors, and was not, as advertised, for the great variety of readers. Only a privileged few could afford the 900-page book. So, importantly, the ocular proof was provided for an elite national and international audience.

There is a tendency to look away from the politics (and until recently, the finances) behind the First Folio, as if the collection was detached from the tediousness of history – a Romantic notion of a poet overheard. The First Folio project is often interpreted as only a disinterested, humanist endeavour aimed at recovering a lost culture, restoring manuscripts and elevating the commercial plays as a literary text.²⁸ However, the dumb figure depicted on the title page is unlike the stamp of humanism prevalent in frontispieces of the period, which as a rule show writers who we

are supposed to imagine sitting in a literary pantheon of a transcendent race. These demi-gods are crowned in laurel wreaths or bays, books at hand. A decision not to be taken lightly, the fathers of the First Folio chose to give history a gentleman without books, a common man.²⁹

Jonson in his address, meanwhile, makes a fetish of the new medium of print, upending the oral-aural culture that served as the backdrop. Print activated an impulse to point and shoot with the eye, alluded to in one of the half-dozen or so meanings behind the expression “hit His face.”³⁰ The marginal orality³¹ of the author – and all that encompasses the rich manuscript culture of the time – was arrested, turning on the image of a face. Is it too much to ask for circumspection in reading the ‘To the Reader’ address from beginning to end, and heed Jonson’s advice to ignore the image? The address announces at once the indeterminacy of a twisted braid:

This figure, that thou here seest put,
 It was for gentle Shakespeare cut;
 Wherein the Graver had a strife
 With Nature, to out-do the life.
 Oh, could he but have drawn his wit
 As well in brass as he hath hit
 His face, the print would then surpass
 All that was ever writ in brass.
 But since he cannot, *reader, look*
*Not on his Picture, but his book.*³²
 [emphasis added] (5:637)

Not only is the reader encouraged to skip the Droeshout image, the word “brass” is emphatically repeated, used twice in ten lines. Brass was another word for copper but importantly, during Jonson’s time, it also meant brazenness, effrontery, impudence.³³

In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, book study is initiated by a desire of fame, something the King of Navarre refers to from the beginning as being engraved on their tombs: “Let fame, that all hunt after in their lives, / Live register’d upon our brazen tombs / And then grace us in the disgrace of death” (1.1.1-3). The brazenness reverberates in the recognition scene with Berowne confessing to Rosaline, acknowledging his disguise and scheming:

Thus pour the stars down plagues for perjury.
 Can any *face of brass* hold longer out?
 Here stand I, lady, dart thy skill at me,
 Bruise me with scorn, confound me with a flout,
 Thrust thy sharp wit quite through my ignorance...
 [emphasis added] (5.2.394-9)

The “face of brass” trope is reworked by Jonson in his opening address to the folio. Consummation is delayed in both instances, for Berowne in the play, by one year and a day, and for the Reader of the First Folio, who is told to proceed straight to the plays rather than fingering the Droeshout and the other paratexts in search of an author. An additional skein of ambiguity underlies the metal brass and recalls Jonson’s insight into metallurgy and smithies and the never-ending instability forced upon the audience and their victims by the characters Subtle, an alchemist, and his duplicitous partners Face and Common in *The Alchemist*.

There is a touch of vertigo in Jonson’s discreet ten-line poem that opens the First Folio. The ascent is towards what is promised, an unparalleled literary creation represented by the plays themselves, containing the author’s wit, juxtaposed with a descent towards the imperfections of the metal copper, the anxieties over the technology of print, and references of earthly mortality and the engraver’s strife with nature that ended badly. The author is not to be found in the polarity of the address because he is suspended in the in-between, in purgatory.³⁴ Despite the travails of scholarship, his release from heaven’s antechamber seems as unlikely today as it was in 1623.

The slyness and obfuscation detectable throughout the First Folio Preface are known, if not transparently communicated or fully acknowledged.³⁵ The handle ‘small Latin, less Greek’ has launched a thousand monographs, and many other riddles abound...

... for his wit can no more lie hid, then it could be lost.³⁶

Or blind affection, which doth ne’er advance
The truth, but gropes, and urgeth all by chance;³⁷

...he seems to shake a lance,
As brandished at the eyes of ignorance.³⁸

One of the problems with the First Folio Preface is that Jonson draws upon a direct style, except when he does not. That he probably contributed in a major way to writing the letters undersigned by the fellow actors John Heminges and Henry Condell, one to the ‘Noble and Incomparable Pair of Brethren’ and the other ‘To The Great Variety of Readers,’ does not clarify the framing effects of the Preface. There is over two hundred years of suggestive commentary regarding these letters, one of which is full of Jonson’s style and phrasing.^{39 40}

Classifying the letters as collaborative efforts or solely by Jonson’s hand would have seen them into the CWBJ print edition, necessitating an introduction to the First Folio Preface. By omitting the letters from the print edition, the orthodox editors have

managed to side-step a task tantamount to Abraham's fear and trembling. Critically, there was no introduction for his two poetic works either. For its part, the CWBJ plans a second release in 2015 of material for what it calls a Dubia section, an online edition of the few texts which have been spuriously attributed to Jonson. The letter 'To The Great Variety of Readers' will be included, with Donaldson editing, but not the letter to the 'Noble and Incomparable Pair of Brethren.' Judging the most in-criminating of the letters as a "text on the margin" and dealing with it at a comfortable distance behind the closed door of Ben Jonson Online (BJO) restricted content is one way of controlling the message. Leaving out the letters represents a startling contrast to current academic thinking, which finds itself possessed with the idea of collaboration. One assumes that appearing unfashionable was a small sacrifice.

Jonson's testimony as a star witness becomes somehow tainted, the footing less sure, if the epistles are admitted into the Jonsonian canon. At risk is a conventional understanding of the Preface. It pushes the discussion beyond rhetorical anomalies and accidental Jonsonian echoes, and raises questions about motivation and intention. Instead of Jonson's direct and indirect styles, CWBJ would have been forced to talk about misdirection. If Heminges and Condell lack the skills to write introductory epistles, how could they have possibly edited the thirty-six plays? Are they really the prime movers of the First Folio project? In short, both the credulity of Jonson and the authority of Heminges and Condell cling precariously to the slippery slopes of the First Folio letters.

We can be sure that a similar restraint would not have applied had Shakespeare been thought to have ghostwritten prefatory letters on behalf of contemporaries.⁴¹

Jonson held a lowly view of collaboration and actors of the loathed stage.⁴² A comparison of the 1616 and the 1623 projects shows the distinct programmes of each, how *Workes* whitewashes the presence of collaboration and the theatre while the First Folio assigns the camaraderie of the fellow actors and the theatre as the primary motifs. The beloved folk heroes of the prefatory narrative are Heminges and Condell, faithful guardians who have, with great pain, allegedly collected the plays "without ambition either of self-profit, or fame: only to keep the memory of so worthy a Friend, & Fellow alive." They are caricatures of course, who could be interpreted as displacements⁴³ of Mr. Shakespeare himself, although they are more fittingly agents of disarmament, condensed versions of the rude mechanicals from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where "never any thing can be amiss, when simpleness and duty tender it"(5.1.82-3).

The author presented in the First Folio Preface is a reworking of earlier models. A liberal, yet mindful approach towards the author function in Jonson's *Workes* fore-shadows many of the devices to be used to full effect in the First Folio.⁴⁴ Jonson consciously organized his original 1616 collection to present an author outside

history, “removing evidence of internal development and authorial biography.” He purposely “obscured the circumstances behind some of its texts” and revised “in order to convey an impression of premature maturity in himself as young playwright.”⁴⁵

The biography that can be gleaned from the First Folio Preface is mostly an empty vessel – though the scattered fragments set the imagination on fire – and so all the more vulnerable to the vagaries and protean practices of actors, scholars, biographers and fanatics. When it comes to tracing the arc of Jonson’s fame, the story is not unlike the gothic tale of Victor Frankenstein who bestows animation upon lifeless matter, only to succumb to his creation. The decline in Jonson’s reputation coincided with the rise in Shakespeare’s for “...fame whose uncertainty Jonson had always recognized, had proved to be an erratic friend.”⁴⁶

At present there is no complete study of Jonson’s after-life.⁴⁷ Irony aside, the after-life of Shakespeare, despite an unnatural birth, is well known. Shakespeare is a commercial brand belonging to the world, representing many things, most powerfully though, the relativist values that are the sign of modern, democratic times. What we want to believe about history’s man is more important than what is actually not there. It is a comforting story and a significant part of Jonson’s legacy and, arguably, his most enduring contribution to the history of letters. The centripetal force that is Shakespeare was always going to be a decisive factor in an assessment of an authoritative collection of Jonson. Though this generation’s Jonsonian scholars had promised not to shy away from presenting a more complicated picture of their author, they have failed to deliver on the aspect of Jonson that matters most.

A long time ago the Tribe of Ben metastasized into a professional outfit. Today the purpose and objectives are clear. The tribe supports a sleek business model based on conventional wisdom, an academic assumption that stepping back is inefficient, or worse, a symptom of disease. Advances in knowledge are few and far between yet information processing continues on apace, moving forward in one endless binge. Though the Falstaffian gormandizing has created perverse expectations, the very idea of a member of the Tribe of Ben putting down his six penny bottle of ale and getting out of his tavern chair to get the door is abominable. If only they would stop fingering the boil. If only the intolerable impudence of Freud the Dunce, Twain the Sad, and Whitman the Sordid would cease and desist. If only!

Notes

1. *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* (CWBJ), ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5:418-419.
2. The CWBJ's planned second release of material consists of poems that have, at one time or another, been attributed to Jonson; edited sections of the material thought to have been contributed by Jonson to Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*; 'Ben Jonson His Motives', 'To The Great Variety of Readers', and 'Sermones fideles'; and Jonson's purported additions to *The Spanish Tragedy*. The First Folio letter is to be edited by Ian Donaldson. There will also be a series of essays on Jonson's possible involvement in the following plays: *Rollo or The Bloody Brother*, *Guy of Warwick*, *The Widow*, *The London Prodigal*, *The Fair Maid of the West*.
3. Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson, A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 440.
4. CWBJ, 1: lxvi.
5. Donaldson, 8.
6. *Ibid.*, 41-42.
7. *Ibid.*, 331.
8. William Kempe, William Shakespeare and Richard Burbage of the Lord Chamberlain's Men received payment in March 1595 for performances they gave during the previous Christmas season at Whitehall. ("Shakespeare: The Evidence" by Ros Barber <https://leanpub.com/shakespeare/read>, Section 2.3, Bullet #1).
9. "Print publication seems to have been postponed, possibly in lieu of manuscript presentation copies for influential patrons. Whatever other reasons there may have been for this postponement – restricted playing owing to the plague, disgust over the kind of editions Pembroke complains about in his letter to the Stationers' Company, a glut in the market of printed playbooks, or more specifically the great number of copies of 'Shakespeare' playbooks

which remained unsold in the early years of the seventeenth century – the time may well have come when Shakespeare and his fellows projected a collected edition and therefore refrained from publishing in cheap quartos. All things considered, the likelihood is that Shakespeare, late in his career, believed that the publication of his plays had been interrupted, not ended.” Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare As Literary Dramatist* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 138.

- 10 The anonymity phase consisted of at least seven new plays in four years (1594-1597): Tit., 2H6, 3H6, Rom., R2, R3 and 1H4. *Arden of Faversham* and *Edward III* were published anonymously in 1592 and 1596, respectively. The promotional phase consisted of eight new plays in five years (1598-1603): LLL, MND, MV, 2H4, Ado., H5, Wiv. and Ham. The dormancy phase consisted of four new plays that “scaped” over a 20-year span, with concentrated leaks in 1608-09 of Tro., Lr., and Per. (not to mention Son.), and the publishing of Oth. in 1622 when the Folio project was already underway.
- 11 There were two separate trends that appear to coincide and reinforce each other. There was the general trend of publishing plays in cheap quartos which accelerated over the 1590s and peaked in the early 1600s. There is also the trend in publishing “Shakespeare” which peaked around 1601, the same year of the Essex rebellion, something that Oxfordians should consider providential. Between 1601 and 1602 there were over twenty Shakespeare titles for sale, with the saturation extending beyond Shakespeare: “No one knew it at the time, but 1600 would be the high-water mark for literary titles in the entire STC era (1475-1640).” Douglas Bruster, “Shakespeare the Stationer,” *Shakespeare’s Stationers: Studies in Cultural Bibliography*, ed. Marta Straznicki (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012) 119-121.
- 12 The Quarto of *Troilus and Cressida* exists in two versions, Quarto **a** and Quarto **b**, both published in 1609. The British Library notes that Quarto **b** differs from Quarto **a** only in the title-page and the addition of a single leaf. Quarto **a** title-page identifies the play as “The historie of Troylus and Cresseida” and states “As it was acted by the Kings Majesties servants at the Globe.” Quarto **b** title-page identifies the play as “The famous historie of Troylus and Cresseid” with no mention of any performances. The additional leaf of Quarto **b** follows the title-page and is headed “A never writer, to an ever reader. Newes.” and informs the reader to “thank fortune for the scape it [the play] hath made amongst you.” The additional leaf, sometimes referred to as an advertisement, suggests foremost that Shakespeare publications were under considerable control, making any new cheap publications unlikely or accidental. We can surmise that the restricted publishing agenda was first

instituted in 1604 and formally ended in 1623.

- 13 “We do not know why Shakespeare sold so few of his Jacobean plays. We can speculate that perhaps a larger collection was planned, or that his finances had changed, or that the saturated market for his works lowered what he could get for new titles to a level that made their sale an unattractive proposition.” *Ibid.*, 130.
- 14 Plays printed for the first time in the 1623 folio are: *Tmp.*, *TGV*, *MM*, *Err.*, *AYL*, *Sbr.*, *AWW*, *TN*, *WT*, *Jn.*, *1H6*, *H8*, *Cor.*, *Tim.*, *JC*, *Mac.*, *Ant.*, *Cym.* Of note, *TNK* was first published in quarto format in 1634.
- 15 W.W. Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio: Its Bibliographical and Textual History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1955) 8.
- 16 William Hazlitt’s essay on Shakespeare’s fame was first printed in *The Examiner*, in 1814.
- 17 “... and if the plague made London revivals uncertain, then perhaps not much benefit could have been derived from early publication, and Shakespeare and his manuscripts may have been mostly in Stratford. Ultimately, however, the exact reasons for the marked decrease in newly published Shakespeare playbooks after 1603 must remain a matter of speculation.” Erne, 11.
- 18 Donaldson, 21.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 172.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 164. Coincidentally, in a footnote, the CWBJ editors link the dialogue between Mitis and Cordatus of *Every Man Out* (CWBJ, 1: 2.3.242-254) with the other frequent disclaimers in *Poetasters*, *Volpone*, *Bartholomew Fair*, and *The Magnetic Lady* where Jonson argues against the practice of connecting real people to the characters in his plays. However, a more sensitive reading of the Mitis and Cordatus’ commentary suggests something in the opposite direction, that Jonson is attacking readers who reflexively turn his characters into abstractions where “Nero should mean all emperors... in our Sordid, all farmers,” the very thing that Donaldson does when he writes that Sogliardo is a caricature of all the new self-made men who dubiously apply for arms.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 202.

- 22 Diana Price, *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography: New Evidence of an Authorship Problem* 2nd ed. ([SUB] Greenwood Press 2001; paperback 2013) 66-75.
- 23 "The type of character involved here we may call by the Greek word *alazon*, which means impostor, someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is." Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 39.
- 24 *The Isle of Dogs* play was likely an open secret and probably resonated throughout the community for years. See CWBJ, 1:101-109.
- 25 John Roe suggests Jonson's evasiveness is rooted in a desire for peace, which makes "it difficult for the reader to say conclusively where or at whom he may be pointing an incidental finger." See "Style, Versatility, and the Politics of the Epistles," *Ben Jonson and the Politics of Genre*, ed. Cousins and Scott, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 97.
- 26 First Folio Preface, 'To The Great Variety of Readers' (quote from 1972 Riverside Shakespeare edition).
- 27 Donaldson, 371. In addition to the Droeshout-Jonson tautology, claims even extend to the portrait's verisimilitude; see Adam Gopnik "The Poet's Hand," *The New Yorker* (Apr. 28, 2014): 40: "We can be certain that the Droeshout engraving looked like Shakespeare because his friend Ben Jonson says that it did, in a dedicatory poem placed right beside it."
- 28 Leah S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and its Discontents* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 30.
- 29 For detailed discussions on the First Folio preface, see Marcus, 2-43; Price, 179-200; and Katherine Chiljan, *Shakespeare Suppressed* (San Fransisco: Faire Editions, 2011), 137-171. Also undermining the so-called "editors" Heminges and Condell, see Sonia Massai, "Edward Blount, the Herberts and the First Folio," *Shakespeare's Stationers: Studies in Cultural Bibliography*, ed. Marta Straznicky (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 132-146. Massai's essay is a reworking of an idea advanced by Gary Taylor in his McKenzie lectures at Oxford University in 2006.
- 30 "One ambiguity appears in the phrase 'hit his face,' which refers to the engraver who cuts the image into the metal plate. However, 'hit' is also a past tense of 'hide.' So the line may also read, 'the engraver has hidden the face of the author.' The author may be hidden, figuratively speaking, behind the

harlequin portrait, not unlike an author who hides behind a made-up name.” Price, 182.

- 31 Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 118. The First Folio syndicate is plagued by the Enobarbus syndrome, undoing what it does, and brings to mind Plato’s reactionary defence of orality in the Phaedrus and Seventh Letter. Jonson the writer is almost always backstopped by an oral-based knowledge. Those who knew what they were reading knew it very well because the Jonsonian text (that proliferated predominantly in manuscript copy pre-1700) was simply a supplement to a more fundamental understanding.
- 32 CWBJ, 5: 637-642.
- 33 The “face of brass” in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* exercises a more intimate aspect of the trope. For a more social aspect there is the “brazen Head” in Robert Greene’s *The Comical History of Alphonsus, King of Aragon* (circa 1590) featuring the imposter Mohamet, the supreme juggler of a false religion. For the technological aspect, there is the talking metal head in Robert Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (circa 1590). For Mohamet see JSTOR, Elie Salem “The Elizabethan Image of Islam,” *Studia Islamica*, No. 22 (1965), 43-54. For a discussion of Bacon’s automaton, see “The Talking Brass Head as a Symbol of Dangerous Knowledge in Friar Bacon and in Alphonsus, King of Aragon” by Kevin LaGrandeur, *English Studies*, Vol. 80, no. 5 (1999).
- 34 “The First Folio opens with an implicit promise to communicate an authorial identity, which it instead repeatedly displaces: Shakespeare is somehow there, but nowhere definitively there.” Marcus, 20.
- 35 “Rather than making plain what appears obscure, however, Ben Jonson’s short poem unsettles what seems direct. Shakespeare, the verses tell us, is not to be found after all in the compelling image opposite. The poem undermines the visual power of the portrait by insisting on it as something constructed and put there.” Marcus, 18. “If anything, they [readers] will be subjected to special frustration, since the title page refuses to yield a clear message about the author.” Marcus, 22.
- 36 First Folio Preface, “To The Great Variety of Readers” (quote from 1972 Riverside Shakespeare edition).
- 37 First Folio Preface, Jonson’s eulogy. See CWBJ, 5: 638-642.

- 38 First Folio Preface, Jonson's eulogy. See CWBJ, 5:638-642.
- 39 See Donaldson, 371. When he writes that "Part of this address is indisputably the work of Heminges and Condell themselves . . .," is Donaldson not admitting that Jonson indisputably wrote other parts?
- 40 The Jonsonian echoes include the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, the preface to *The Alchemist*, the epigram "To My Bookseller" and his *Discoveries*. See Greg, 26-7; Chiljan, 145-149; George Steevens, *Boswell's Malone* (Third Variorum, 1821), 2:663; Joseph Loewenstein, *Possessive Authorship* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 175; Debora K. Shuger, Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Peabworth, *Ben Jonson Revisited* (Twayne Publishers, 1999), 219.
- 41 Face-to-face collaboration between the 51-year-old poet in Ben Jonson, the 67-year-old grocer in John Heminges, and the 55-year-old property owner in Henry Condell seems highly implausible. If it must be collaboration, the task is most likely to have been shared between Jonson and Blount or another as yet unidentified agent inside the Sidney-Herbert-Montgomery patronage network. Whoever the collaborator was, the omission of "To The Great Variety" from the CWBJ print edition reinforces a scholarly predilection to not formally recognize Jonson's authority behind the project and curtail any additional probing into the messiness that is the First Folio Preface. Attenuating Jonson's role in the First Folio also encourages the Heminges and Condell narrative to stand uncontested. Unacknowledged plays, collaborative efforts and lost works receive full, respectful attention in the CWBJ. Moreover, an unstable work not authored by Jonson is included in the CWBJ in volume 5, *Informations to William Drummond of Hawthornden*; the copy-text for *Informations* is not an autograph or authorial manuscript copy but a scribal transcript made by antiquary Sir Robert Sibbald in the eighteenth century.
- 42 Donaldson, 99-100 and 235-237; David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 245. Ben Jonson's "Ode: To Himself" is popularly cited: "Come, leave the loathed stage / And the more loathsome age,..." CWBJ, 6:310.
- 43 "To speak of the restored Folio editions as 'absolute in their numbers' was not to speak the argot of the theatre, but that of the humanist philology, which had long been appropriated by the book trade. If Heminges and Condell could think in these terms about Shakespearean texts, so, too, could Shakespeare..." Loewenstein, 100-101.

44 “The men who prepared the folio for the press (and Jonson may well have been one of them) remade Shakespeare in Jonson’s image.” Riggs, 276.

45 CWBJ, 1: Ixiv-Ixviii

46 Donaldson, 430.

47 Donaldson, 514.

