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Activities and Extras for “Witty Numbers” Lecture, SOF East Coast Symposium, April 10, 2021:

Please Read in Advance of Lecture

The rationale and basic method used by Ben Jonson in his first folio epigram to accompany the Droeshout engraving is sketched out by Plutarch in his *The Oracles at Delphi*: First he recounts a tale of how certain poets used to write verses *around* an oracle, like placing a fortune inside a cookie: “Certain men with a gift for poetry were wont to sit about close by the shrine waiting to catch the words spoken [by the oracle], and then weaving about them a fabric of *extempore* hexameters or other verses or rhythms as ‘containers’ (αγγεῖα) so to speak, for the oracles” (407, Babbitt, p. 331).

This concept of “an oracle within a poem” or a concealed “form within a form” is an idea both ancient and abundantly manifested in Jonson’s works, as Richard S. Peterson has shown in his essay “Poet as Vessel” in his *Imitation and Praise in the Poems of Ben Jonson* (1981).

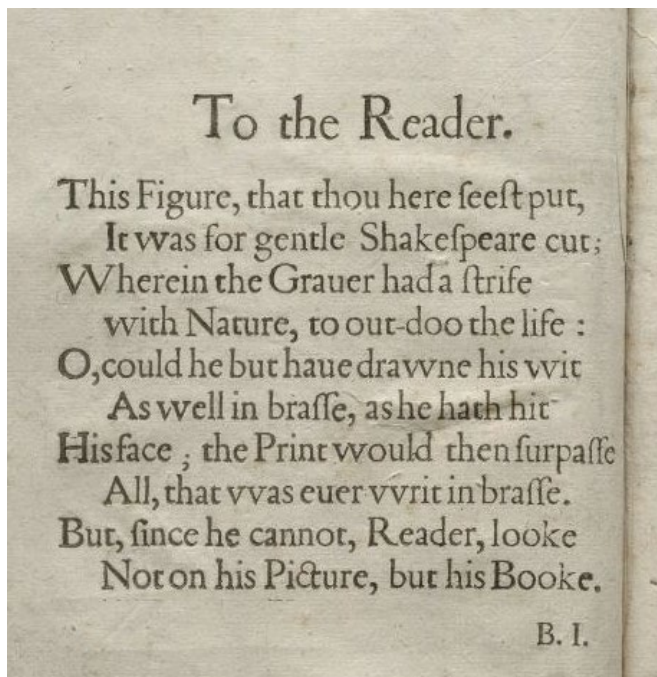
Later Plutarch explains that such evasive methods were needed by the oracle in the face of the threat of violence by powerful displeased oracle-seekers:

“Powerful States and kings and despots, who cherished no moderate designs, used to appeal to the god regarding their course of action; and it was not to the advantage of those concerned with the oracle to vex and provoke these men by unfriendliness through their hearing many of the things that they did not wish to hear. . . inasmuch as the god employs mortal men to assist him and declare his will, whom it is his duty to care for and protect, so that they shall not lose their lives at the hands of wicked men while ministering to a god, he is not willing to keep the truth unrevealed, but he caused the manifestation of it to be deflected like a ray of light, in the medium of poetry, where it submits to many reflections and undergoes subdivisions, and thus he did away with its repellent harshness.

. . . There were naturally some things which it was well that despots should fail to understand, and enemies should not learn beforehand. About these, therefore, he put a cloak of intimations and ambiguities which concealed the communications so far as others were concerned but did not escape the persons involved nor mislead those that had need to know and gave their minds to the matter” (407, p. 333-335).

Activities

- 1.) Try giving your “mind to the matter.” Before the lecture, mark out the iambic feet in Ben Jonson’s first folio epigram below. In this perfectly constructed iambic tetrameter verse, you will count four feet per line, with two syllables in each foot. Use a slash or a dot or whatever you like to mark out the feet.
- 2.) Once you have identified all forty feet, count and then circle the 11th foot. Count and circle the 9th foot after that. Repeat once and extract all four feet together as a complete “oracle” written inside of Jonson’s verses.



Your Notes: