Early Theatre
A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama

Volume 5 | Issue 1 Article 11

1-1-2002

Book Review: Richard Harp and Stanley Steward (eds). *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

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Recommended Citation
Hirsh, James. 'Book Review: Richard Harp and Stanley Steward (eds). *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.'. *Early Theatre* 5.1 (2002): 102-7 (paper). Article 11.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/earlytheatre/vol5/iss1/11

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reception theories. White is an interesting choice for author of this particular essay because he is at odds with much of what the primary perspective of the volume represents. He writes, of a broadly defined materialist criticism, that while it 'opens up new interpretation . . . it is fair to say that it risks losing some of the strengths of earlier modes like new criticism, which focused attention on textual details, and formalism, which illuminates dramatic structure in ways that explain theatrical effect' (290). Although his essay could hardly be called dissenting, it does remind us how much might be lost in the name of theory.

Any book that offers itself as a work of reference should have reasonably up-to-date bibliographies. Each essay here is followed by its own reading list, but they vary widely in quality and comprehensiveness. Honigmann's contains only four titles, two of them published in the 1930s. Mowat's contains 21, almost all of them published after 1986. The volume aims to make up for this inconsistency with Dieter Mehl's valuable survey 'Shakespeare reference books'. This is an updating of his contribution to the 1986 volume, in which under a variety of subheadings he identifies the best or most useful reference tools, including a number of Internet sites. There is one interesting omission. In his 1986 survey Mehl included in the category 'handbooks' the 1971 *Companion* edited by Muir and Schoenbaum. It is gone from his updated survey and is not replaced by the 1986 volume. The implicit though surely unintended suggestion that the new *Companion* has displaced its predecessor should, I think, be ignored. The two volumes are sufficiently different in orientation that they are best understood as complementary. The value and force of Shakespeare's works may be ever-changing, but not everything changes at the same rate and, as White reminds us, voices from the past can still have a lot to say to us.

peter hyland

Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart (eds). *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp xvi, 218.

A collection of essays declaring itself to be a 'Companion' sets up particular generic expectations that are not easy to fulfill. Such a collection implicitly seeks to satisfy a variety of readers with divergent interests. Specialists expect a handy reference tool and synthesis of the current state of knowledge about the subject. Non-specialist scholars, graduate students, undergraduates, and general readers all expect an introduction to the subject, but the kind of contextual

information required by these groups varies considerably. Striving to meet the needs of each of these audiences without simultaneously alienating the others is not quite attempting to square the circle, but it comes close. Such a text should be not only a reliable companion to its subject but also a versatile companion to a wide circle of readers. Despite some flaws and omissions, *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, which includes fourteen essays on a range of important topics by some of the most distinguished Jonson scholars in the world, fills the bill.

Unfortunately, the collection gets off to a shaky start. The very first page of the first chapter, a biographical essay by Sara van den Berg, contains four inaccurate or misleading assertions. Van den Berg mentions 'Abraham van Blyenberch's painting of Jonson in the National Portrait Gallery', but as Stephen Orgel points out in a later chapter, 'the original is lost, ... the painting of Jonson in the National Portrait Gallery is an early copy' (143). Van den Berg asserts that 'There are few personal lyrics among his poems, no soliloquies in his plays'. She seems to be using the words 'personal' and 'soliloquies' in peculiar ways. Jonson wrote more than a few memorable poems that are 'personal' in the ordinary sense of the word, including 'On My First Son' and two odes 'To Himself'. Soliloquies occur less frequently in Jonson's plays than in Shakespeare's, but they do occur, sometimes conspicuously. In a later chapter R. V. Young discusses 'Knowell's soliloquy ... at the opening of the fifth scene of Act II' of *Every Man in His Humour* (46), a speech that occupies 66 lines. Van den Berg's declaration that 'Jonson was the first Englishman to earn his living as a writer' is also misleading. A number of writers, mainly literary hacks, had been living by their pens, however meagerly, by the time Jonson arrived on the scene. After this inauspicious beginning, however, the essay provides a competent though sketchy overview of Jonson's life and career.

In the second chapter Martin Butler describes Jonson's love-hate relationships with London and with London theaters and establishes a connection between the two relationships. 'Preoccupied as they are with pleasures and follies in a city setting,' Jonson's plays 'may be read as foundational texts in the emergence of a modern urban consciousness' (20–1). In *The Alchemist* he 'seized upon alchemical transformation' as a 'metaphor for urban experience' (21). Butler notes that Jonson was both 'one of the stage's most effective defenders' and 'also one of its fiercest critics' (23). Jonson implies that 'no less than the gulls, the Blackfriars spectators have been alchemized' and thus sets up a 'subversive similarity between the world of the theatre and the world of the city' (28).

Leah Marcus describes Jonson's love-hate relationship with the royal court. He produced fulsome panegyrics as well as ruthless, sometimes reckless, satirical excoriations of the vices of the court and courtiers. Jonson possessed an 'idealized image of himself as corrector of his social betters' (32). His mixed feelings toward the court were reciprocated. He received a royal pension, was appointed poet laureate, and was frequently commissioned to write court masques, but some of his writings angered and alienated those he sought to reform. Marcus is careful to point out that, while Jonson had frequent interactions with the Jacobean court, he was an 'outsider' in relation to the courts of Elizabeth and Charles (40).

In a learned chapter on Jonson's learning, R.V. Young shows how Jonson 'converts ancient models into the very substance of his texts in a way that results in independent, coherent works of his own without erasing the visible features of the sources' (43). An example of this conversion occurs in the song to Celia in *Volpone*, which begins with a close imitation of a passionate love lyric by Catullus, but which Volpone employs in furtherance of his callous and futile attempted seduction. As Young notes, a playgoer's awareness of the source sets up an ironic contrast that intensifies the impact of the episode.

The plural noun in the chapter title 'Jonson's satiric styles' reflects Richard Dutton's view that although 'Jonson's commitment to "satire" ... informed his whole career' (59), his satiric techniques underwent a series of alterations. In *Every Man out of His Humour*, Jonson includes an unrestrained Juvenalian satirist as a character. In *Cynthia's Revels* and *Poetaster* the 'biting satirist' (62) gives way to the more moderate and detached figures of Criticus and Horace. After *Poetaster* Jonson began employing a governing metaphor as the primary mechanism of satire. 'The beast fable of *Volpone*, the alchemical 'commonwealth' of *The Alchemist*, the fair of *Bartholomew Fair*, are all metaphors of a rapacious world in which human aspiration is perverted by sub-human appetite' (66). In his 'neglected masterpiece' *The Devil Is an Ass*, a parodic 'history in brief of the Renaissance stage' (67–8), Jonson not only implies that members of the audience resemble the gulls on stage but 'acknowledges – however obliquely and ironically – that he is himself an element in the folly and vice that the play ridicules' (69).

In 'The major comedies', David Bevington also focuses on the element of satire and provides thoughtful commentary on the characters who populate *Volpone*, *Epicœne*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*. Bevington's focus is at times restricting. He points out that Volpone's actions 'have gone beyond the proper bounds of satire' (76), but he does not pursue to an answer the

question whether the play is therefore flawed or instead successfully transcends the genre of satire. Bevington's discussion of *Bartholomew Fair* is especially illuminating partly because he does not allow his concern with satire to limit his analysis: 'This play is less of a satire than its predecessors, and more of a celebration of *la comédie humaine*' (85).

A sub-genre of Jonson criticism in recent years has been the intrepid defense of one or more of Jonson's late plays, dismissed by John Dryden as 'dotages'. Richard Harp's chapter provides judicious commentary on *The Staple of News*, *The New Inn*, *The Magnetic Lady*, and *A Tale of a Tub*. While acknowledging flaws, Harp locates valuable elements that have been obscured because these plays do not fit the patterns of Jonson's earlier plays.

Russ McDonald's chapter on 'Jonson and Shakespeare and the rhythms of verse' admirably succeeds in its two-fold purpose: surveying the 'relations between the two playwrights mainly from Jonson's position' (103) and then focusing on a comparison between their prosodic techniques. McDonald adroitly bridges the gaps among the diverse audiences of the volume. After succinctly providing general readers with such basic information as the definition of blank verse, he quickly proceeds to a cogent, in-depth analysis of prosody, supported by vivid examples and telling statistics. McDonald finds 'pervasive binary rhythms' in Shakespeare's verse and argues that this element of form reflects elements of the content of Shakespeare's works, their 'enormous system of equivalence and duplication' encompassing wordplay, parallel plots, inclusion of comic and tragic tonalities in the same play, and thematic complementarity (112–13). By contrast, Jonson's 'poetic instrument ... is unbalanced, anti-symmetrical, and accumulative'; 'phrases are staccato'; and 'pauses refuse to conform to a regular pattern' (113). McDonald shrewdly connects Jonson's 'additive habit' to his 'desire to make an irrefutable case, to accumulate evidence' (114), his 'compulsion to overwhelm his audience with illustration' provoked by 'the passionate outrage Jonson feels toward the world he represents' (115).

The collection contains several fine chapters that are of less specific interest to readers of *Early Theatre*. Ian Donaldson provides a magisterial survey of Jonson's poetry. In a chapter devoted to 'Jonson and the arts', Stephen Orgel finds it more than coincidental that Jonson served as an apprentice bricklayer and that architecture became 'a controlling metaphor for Jonson's sense of his career' (146). Orgel also maintains that profuse catalogues of art objects in Jonson's works express the exuberant spirit of early modern capitalism and the acquisitive impulse that led to the creation of the prototypical art collections

of the period. Of interest mainly to specialists, James A. Riddell's essay on the 1616 folio of Jonson's *Works* argues that Jonson designed the volume to impose a semblance of unity on his writings in diverse genres. In 'Jonson's classicism' John Mulryan arrives at a conclusion similar to Young's, that Jonson used source material creatively rather than slavishly, but Mulryan supplies a different set of illuminating examples. Stanley Stewart provides a very useful account of Jonson's literary criticism.

The entertaining final chapter, 'Jonson's critical heritage' by Robert C. Evans consists partly of a stock market report of the ups and downs of Jonson's reputation and partly of a series of catalogues, some of which are catalogued here: major twentieth-century critics of Jonson and the topics they explored; pre-twentieth-century critics of *Volpone*; elements in *Volpone* that have been praised; themes that critics have discovered in the play; themes, dramatic techniques, tones, structures, and topical allusions that have been discovered in *Epicœne*, as well as analogues that have been noted by scholars; and similar lists for *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*. Some of these catalogues contain forty or more items. This is an unusual and audacious procedure for a scholarly essay, but I think it works here for two reasons. First of all, it provides the most amount of information in the least amount of space and will be useful as a reference tool, especially for undergraduates on the hunt for paper topics. Secondly, it is a fitting way to end the collection since there is something Jonsonian about these catalogues. Many of the terms used by McDonald to describe Jonson's style also describe Evans's: 'accumulative', 'staccato', 'curt', 'additive'. Evans's lists resemble, in particular, Sir Epicure Mammon's catalogue of what he will acquire with the proceeds of the 'projection' in *The Alchemist*. This resemblance sets up a half-comic, half-serious metaphor for critical commentary as a fanciful alchemical projection (and possible con game).

Van den Berg's claim that Jonson was 'the first Englishman to earn his living as a writer' is an example of a tendency in the collection to carry companionship to the point of partisanship. 'In many ways, Ben Jonson is the literary figure of greatest centrality of his time' (Preface, xi); 'his are England's first fictional characters to be alienated by urban life' (Butler, 22); 'the modern idea of an "author" – one who takes particular care with the exact physical appearance of his words – began with Jonson' (Riddell, 154). There may be a grain of truth in each of these claims and similar ones elsewhere in the collection, but many require qualification, and collectively they overstate Jonson's priority. A second edition of the *Companion* might contain for the benefit of general readers more

information about English Renaissance stage conditions (about such matters as casting, stage conventions, and theater architecture) than Butler includes in his fine chapter, which is more narrowly focused on Jonson's love-hate relationship with theater. A new chapter might be devoted to the post-Renaissance performance history of Jonson's plays. The sketchy biographical chapter might be expanded, and a reproduction of the National Portrait Gallery painting of Jonson might be included. Separate sections on each of the major plays might be added to the Selected Bibliography. Although there is room for improvement, this is a valuable resource as it stands, an amiable companion at the service of both scholars and general readers.

james hirsh

Chris Humphey. *The Politics of Carnival: Festive Misrule in England*. Manchester Medieval Studies. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001. Pp xiii, 113.

This slim book of 113 pages takes on two issues of concern to medievalists these days: first, how to understand the applicability of contemporary theory to medieval materials, and, second, how to establish a dialogue with scholars working in later periods. While I would describe it as a valiant attempt to deal with both issues, I'd rate its success as decidedly mixed.

The history/theory divide is acutely felt by many medievalists; contemporary theory seems to ignore the complex contingencies revealed by close examination of historical facts. In this book, Chris Humphrey reviews well-known theories of festive misrule in the first two chapters and then tests them through specific case studies of Norwich and Coventry in chapters three and four. The Manchester Medieval Studies series aims to combine scholarship with recent approaches 'in a form accessible to the non-specialist reader'. Perhaps this goal accounts for my sense that the book is, paradoxically, both sketchy and long-winded. At times the pace of argumentation in the review of theory (chapters 1 and 2) seemed very slow, but presumably this was deliberate given the aims of the series. Conversely, the two historical case studies in the politics of civic performance (chapters 3 and 4) were interesting but seemed more suited to an article than a full-length study.

As Humphrey notes, the widespread interest in the meaning of carnival festivities, inversions, and transgressions can be traced to Mikhail Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and his World*. Given the amorphousness and ahistoicism of