



Ben Jonson.
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Jonson, Ben (1572-1637)

by Claude J. Summers

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There is no evidence that playwright and poet Ben Jonson, one of the most important figures in English literature, was ever himself involved in same-sex sexual relationships. While his most significant emotional bonds may have been with other men (especially the so-called "Sons of Ben," younger poets and playwrights with whom he socialized), he has sometimes been described, with some justice, as misogynistic and homophobic.

Yet he deserves attention for his depictions of same-sex relationships in both dramatic and non-dramatic works. These depictions help illuminate early modern constructions of homosexuality and the dynamics of gender ambiguity and eroticism on the transvestite English Renaissance stage.

In his poetry, Jonson's allusions to same-sex eroticism are satiric. In *Epigram 25*, "On Sir Voluptuous Beast," for example, Jonson ridicules a libertine who instructs his "faire, and innocent wife" in "how his GANIMEDE mov'd, and how his goate," thus equating homosexuality and bestiality, both of which were often subsumed under the all-encompassing rubric *sodomy*.

Jonson deserves credit for naturalizing in English the classical term for lesbians, *tribade*, derived from the Greek verb *tribein*, "to rub." But in his use of this term, he clearly views female homoeroticism with distaste. For example, in his "Epigram on the Court Pucell" (*Underwood 49*), Jonson not only denigrates the poetry of Cecilia Bulstrode, a young court lady, as the product of lesbian rape, but also implies the unnaturalness of women writing poetry, when he asks, "What though with Tribade lust she force a Muse?"

One of the most learned classicists of his era, Jonson certainly was aware of the vast classical literature of homoeroticism. But it is telling that he tends to downplay the homoeroticism of these texts. When he uses them as sources, he, like many other Renaissance authors, generally heterosexualizes them. For example, his lyric addressed to Celia, "Drinke to me, onely, with thine eyes" (*Forest 9*), is cobbled together from discrete passages of Philostratus's letters to a boy with whom he was infatuated.

Same-sex eroticism is present in a number of Jonson's plays, but it is especially prominent in three: *Sejanus* (1603), *Volpone* (1606), and *Epicoene* (1609). Gordon Sweeney observes that "The thread of homosexuality that runs through *Sejanus*, *Volpone*, and *Epicoene* takes an intriguing twist in the course of the three plays." In *Sejanus*, homosexuality is figured as a sign of degeneracy; in *Volpone*, sexual irregularity is treated playfully; and in *Epicoene* "homosexuality is presented as the acceptable behavior of a young man about town."

Jonson's historical tragedy *Sejanus* is particularly interesting for its convergence of homosexuality and political violence. The play establishes homosexuality as a notable characteristic of both the emperor Tiberius and his ambitious favorite Sejanus, who is described as a "noted pathic [or passive homosexual] of the time" and "a stale *catamite*."

In the play, homosexuality is presented as emblematic of the spiritual disorder and social chaos of imperial

Rome. But the ferocious brutality visited upon Sejanus at the conclusion of the play, where he is not only beheaded, but his body is also literally torn limb from limb, may reflect English rather than Roman attitudes. More specifically, Sejanus is subjected to the vicious punishment prescribed for a sodomite under English law.

In contrast, Jonson's comedy of manners *Epicoene* revels in the sexual and gender transgressions of his upper-middle-class London characters, even as it also ridicules their violations of decorum. At the center of the play are three gallants whose sophistication is indicated by their casual acceptance of the varieties of sexual expression; one is described as a "man that can melt away his time, and never feele it! What, betweene his mistris abroad, and his engle [i.e., a boy used for sexual purposes] at home, high fare, soft lodging, and his fiddle." Jonson's non-censorious use of the term *engle* in this passage is unusual in the Renaissance, when it is most often a term of abuse.

The title character of *Epicoene* is a boy in disguise as a young woman who marries an old man. Other characters in the play, such as the Otters, whose marriage reflects a deliberate reversal of traditional gender roles, and the Ladies Collegiate, a group of women who live apart from their husbands and behave "with most masculine, or rather hermaphroditicall authority," also transgress sexual and gender boundaries.

Jonson's intent in *Epicoene* (the name means "androgynous" or having the characteristics of both sexes") is to provoke a reexamination of gender and sex roles and to interrogate the sex-gender system of his day. Moreover, his exploitation of the conventions of the transvestite Renaissance stage in order to feature a male actor who portrays an apparently female character only finally to reveal the character as male may indicate his awareness that masculinity and femininity are social constructions rather than immutable natural characteristics.

Although Jonson is frequently accused of misogyny and homophobia, Richmond Barbour may well be right to assert that in sexual matters, "Jonson is deeply divided, by turns authoritative and subversive."

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