

Carnivalizing Jonson: A Reply to Rocco Coronato*

BRUCE BOEHRER

I admire Rocco Coronato's recent discussion of carnivalesque motifs in the work of Ben Jonson, a discussion that contributes significantly to recent reappraisals of the poet's reputation as the father of English neoclassicism. Since the following remarks will necessarily focus upon certain ways in which my reading of Jonson diverges from Coronato's, I want to begin by marking my general support for Coronato's project. When Coronato urges scholars to "dismiss . . . simplified binary oppositions between the high and the low, the Court and the people, the learned and the popular" (197) in their assessment of Jonson's work, he issues a call echoed by much recent research on Jonson, including my own.¹ To this extent, I would like to propose the present response not as an assault upon Coronato's general undertaking, but rather as an attempt to enlarge upon his work by noting its potential for expansion and its areas of possible instability.

Coronato's article begins by identifying two tendencies in traditional Jonson scholarship that have arguably contributed to an unjust estimate of the poet's relation to the carnivalesque: first, a scholarly inclination to "underline [Jonson's] literary merits, instead of his primary business as a man of the theatre" (180), and second, an assumption that "Jonson's bookish sticking to the learned tradition smacked of his idiosyncratic distaste for the popular canon" (180). As an alternative to these tendencies, Coronato suggests that "studies on Jonson . . . need . . . a new reconciliation between . . . popularesque, theoretical overturning and . . . literary and historical contexts" (197). The body of Coronato's argument, then, is

*Reference: Rocco Coronato, "Carnival Vindicated to Himself? Reappraising 'Bakhtinized' Ben Jonson," *Connotations* 6.2 (1996/97): 180-202.

consumed by three cases that illustrate the need for such a reconciliation: *Sejanus's* use of classical source-material to allude to moments of popular rage and misrule; *Epicoene's* invocation of carnivalesque rituals such as the charivari to "expos[e] . . . their alleged power as popular tools of justice" (190); and the conflation of cook and poet in *Neptune's Triumph for the Return of Albion*, a conflation which rejects learned antecedents in favor of "a popular vein of grotesque display" (196). According to Coronato, such cases "draw upon the learned tradition to stage the popular element" (182), and thus, presumably, resist efforts to construct the popular and learned canons as mutually-exclusive binaries.

My reservations with this argument begin with Coronato's distinction between Jonson's "literary merits" and "his primary business as a man of the theatre." This strikes me as an odd contrast to draw at the beginning of an essay that seeks to avoid "simplified binary oppositions" in Jonson's work. Moreover, Coronato himself seems to be of two minds as to the significance of the contrast he draws. In the early going, he clearly approves of the view that Jonson was primarily "a man of the theatre," and he opposes this view to the "reference-spotting habit[s]" of literary historians who privilege page over stage. To this extent, Coronato would appear to be employing a fairly conventional version of the opposition between literary studies and theatrical performance, an opposition that seems also to underlie Eliot's famous complaint that Jonson's work has been "damned by the praise that quenches all desire to read the book," and that it is in fact thus "read only by historians and antiquaries."² For Eliot, the letter killeth, and Coronato adds that the performance giveth life; thus Jonson needs to be rescued from scholars who think of him in literary rather than in theatrical terms.

As a literary historian myself, I am perhaps predictably suspicious of efforts to lend priority to theater over text. But more interesting than my own prejudices is the fact that Coronato himself abandons his opening stance rather quickly. Thus, after ranging his work against the "reference-spotting habit[s]" of earlier readers, Coronato then proceeds to his own project, which surprisingly enough turns out to involve a good deal of reference-spotting, too. Focussing, for instance, upon the passage in *Sejanus*

that describes the dismemberment of the play's hero by an angry mob, Coronato teases out a series of allusions to Dio Cassius, Claudian, Cicero, Tacitus, and Ludovicus Caelius Rhodiginus in order to detect a "learned retrieval of popular attendance" (185) in Jonson's verse. Again, Coronato reads *Epicoene* against a range of background-texts that include Libanius' *Declamations*, Plautus' *Casina*, and comedies by Machiavelli and Aretino; *Neptune's Triumph*, in turn, emerges as a pastiche of Athenaeus, Vitruvius, Puttenham, John Taylor, Rabelais, and a number of minor carnivalesque texts. Admittedly, Coronato does insist in these cases that "the stress ought to be laid not on direct transmission of passages or stage tricks, but rather on the meaning of the festive occasion" under scrutiny (188-89), but Coronato's own scholarly practice offers readers a distinction without a difference.

After all, if one can only discover "the meaning of [a] festive occasion" through "reference-spotting" behavior, what made reference-spotting such a bad idea in the first place? Coronato's essay never really faces up to this question; instead, it begins by decrying a tendency that it then co-opts in terms of its own critical procedure. This fact may register a certain instability in Coronato's own work: to avoid becoming one more in the long line of "historians and antiquaries" with whom Jonson has been associated at least since the time of Eliot, Coronato must distance himself from traditional "reference-spotting" criticism. Unfortunately, this is tantamount to distancing oneself from the profession of literary history *tout court*, and once Coronato has done this, since he still has an essay to write, he has no choice but to revert at once to literary-historical business as usual.

Nor are Coronato's motives here idiosyncratic or irrelevant. Indeed, I believe they are of the essence, insofar as they refigure a dilemma central to Ben Jonson's own career and productivity. Coronato's essay has discovered, that is to say, that in order to distinguish oneself, one must distinguish oneself *from others*, and that this very process of self-distinction is therefore also a process of self-limitation and isolation. Just as Coronato seeks to differentiate his critical practice from that of (other) "historians and antiquaries," Jonson's career repeatedly manufactured self-defining

moments of confrontation: the Poet's War, the quarrel with Inigo Jones, the quarrel with Gabriel Spencer, the testy relations with audiences both high and low, etc., etc.³ Moreover, just as Coronato is left with the uneasy problem of living with the consequences of his self-differentiation, so was Jonson. Coronato's solution to this problem—a solution also adopted by Jonson, I think, when he silently absorbs precursor-texts and popular motifs into his own work—is to proclaim his own difference from other authors, and then to proceed with their general project as if it were his alone.

I believe this line of analysis explains why Coronato's scholarly practice should undercut his own stated opposition to reference-spotting behavior. Moreover, I believe this analysis may also explain a related peculiarity of Coronato's article: the fact that, while it is committed to "simplified binary oppositions," it should nonetheless begin with the venerable binary of stage and page. One of the great difficulties involved in liberating Jonson's work from the tyranny of binary thinking is that Jonson himself was so fond of drawing distinctions, many of which take binary form. "Thou art not, *Penshurst*, built to envious show";⁴ "Who e're is rais'd, / For worth he has not, he is tax'd, not prais'd" (*Epigrammes* 45.15-16); "I a *Poet* here, no *Herald* am" (*Epigrammes* 9.4): these are self-evidently not the words of an author averse to binary differentiation. Thus, if one wishes (as both Coronato and I do) to tease out relatively fine shades of meaning in Jonson's work, one must nonetheless do so in a way that acknowledges the presence of binary thinking as a powerful and recurring motif in the poet's career. My own inclination is to think of Jonson's binarisms as a consciously-conceived discourse whose inherent difficulties generate a complementary and persistent element of fluidity in the poet's work. Thus, for instance, when Jonson employs the language of regurgitation and defecation to attack Thomas Dekker and John Marston in *Poetaster*, that language serves, on one level, to distinguish Jonson from his opponents (they are "vnclane birds, / That make their mouthes their clysters" ["Apologetical Dialogue" 219-20]; Jonson, presumably, is not). But at the very same time, Jonson's satire betrays a deep interdependence upon the very works and authors it attacks—works whose characteristic diction

Jonson adopts and regurgitates, and authors who figure variously in Jonson's life as friends, enemies, and co-authors. To this extent, *Poetaster* does not simply attack Jonson's enemies in the War of the Theaters; it also, in an odd way, collaborates with them. I believe Coronato's essay is sensitive to such complexities and thus seeks to balance the claims of Jonson's binarisms against those of his polysemous ambiguities. One result is that Coronato espouses a dominant commitment to moving beyond "simplified binary oppositions," while those oppositions quietly repopulate his essay through the old tension between literary history and theatrical performance.

In the end, Coronato adds substantially to the growing case for a more nuanced critical appraisal of Jonson's work. By locating versions of popular festivity within the so-called learned tradition, and vice versa, Coronato has contributed to a line of scholarly analysis—notably exemplified by the work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White as well as by that of Leah Marcus⁵—that seeks to modify the Bakhtinian distinction between the grotesque and classical bodies so as to render it more open and malleable. Where Coronato's valuable work runs aground, it does so through his own unnuanced dismissal of "the Bakhtinians' trivialising attitude [sic] of universalization" (181), through his concomitant and problematic efforts to distinguish his own work from that of earlier literary historians, and through his incompletely-formulated view of Jonson's fondness for binary discrimination. In this last respect, I believe Coronato's work also suggests a fruitful avenue for further research and writing.

Florida State University
Tallahassee

NOTES

¹Bruce Boehrer, *The Fury of Men's Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997) *passim*.

²T. S. Eliot, *Essays on Elizabethan Drama* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, n.d.) 65.

³See George Rowe, *Distinguishing Jonson: Imitation, Rivalry, and the Direction of a Dramatic Career* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988) passim.

⁴*The Complete Poetry of Ben Jonson*, ed. W. B. Hunter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963). Further references to Jonson's verse are to this edition.

⁵Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986); Leah Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of the Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986).