

# Reproducing Living Organisms: Ben Jonson's Dramaturgy of Procreation

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## I

In his *Tusculan Disputations* Cicero compares various kinds of human activities in relation to the future after death to the act of procreation, as something that compensates for man's mortality:

"Trees does he sow to be of service to the coming age," as Statius says in the *Synephebi*, and what notion is in his mind except that even succeeding ages are his concern? Shall then a farmer industriously sow trees, no berry of which his eyes will ever see, and a great man not sow the seed of laws, regulations and public policy? The begetting of children, the prolongation of a name, the adoption of sons, the careful preparation of wills, the very burial monuments, the epitaphs—what meaning have they except that we are thinking of the future as well as the present? (1.14.31)<sup>1</sup>

In this sense Ben Jonson has a good claim to be included among the most consciously "procreative" of poets. First, he was highly concerned with producing his literary offspring, by instructing young followers who are aptly called "the Sons of Ben," or the "Tribe of Ben." The "legitimate" ones numbered nearly twenty, most of whom were at one with Thomas Randolph in declaring:

And to say truth, that which is best in me  
May call you father; 'twas begot by thee.<sup>2</sup>

Besides forming a patriarchal tribe, Jonson was very keen to write and edit his own fruit of "labour" to hand it down to posterity,<sup>3</sup> on account of which he was to be immortalized as a patron saint of poets:

When I a Verse shall make,  
 Know I have praid thee,  
 For old *Religions* sake,  
 Saint *Ben* to aide me.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of fostering one's own successors or the attempt to immortalize one's own work may not be unique or innovative. Yet what characterizes Jonson is that he understood his act of literary "procreation" in terms of biology.

Apart from his paternal personality, Jonson's charisma as father chiefly consisted in his classical learning. As "the only competent critic of the early 17th century" (Thomas Rymer 'Preface to Rapin'), he impressed at least three succeeding generations of playwrights and critics.<sup>5</sup> And what attracts our attention here is that his strong desire to establish paternity is closely linked with his battle to lay down classical laws for the English stage that would compare with those of the Continent.

## II

Like many other Renaissance humanists, Jonson derived the "rules" of the poet's, and especially the playwright's art from Aristotle and Horace:

Hee [who wishes to be a poet] must read many; but, ever the best, and choisest: those, that can teach him any thing, hee must ever account his masters, and reverence: among whom *Horace*, and (hee that taught him) *Aristotle*, deserve to bee the first in estimation. *Aristotle* was the first accurate *Criticke*, and truest Judge; nay, the greatest *Philosopher*, the world ever had. . . . (*Discoveries* 2507-13)

Here we may wonder what Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars poetica* have to do with paternal affection or desire for procreation. Today these treatises are sometimes regarded as killing rather than fostering creativity. But this offers only a limited view of their vision of poetry, which was esteemed as "Queen of Arts" (*Discoveries* 2382), able to subjugate and authorize all other sciences and arts. According to Elder Olson, separating the study of poetry and other sciences is a recent phenomenon; no sooner had the *Poetics* been regarded as a separate Aristotelean treatise, than works of

literature began to be appreciated as self-contained artifacts (introduction x-xvii).<sup>6</sup> Around 1600, the *Poetics* was regarded as an integral part of the corpus of Aristotelian philosophy.

Among many annotators of the *Poetics*, Jonson specially trusted the Dutch scholar Heinsius, prior to the French classicists in the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> His *De tragoediae constitutione* [*On Plot in Tragedy*] (1611) was hailed as “the quintessence of Aristotle’s *Poetics*”; it was remarkable for its interpretation of the treatise in the light of Aristotelian philosophy as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

It is noteworthy in this context that Aristotle was essentially a natural philosopher, particularly a biologist—his treatises on animals comprise a significant 20 per cent of his extant works. The famous metaphor of “the beginning, the middle and the end” (*Poetics* ch. 7; *Discoveries* 2706-07) which makes the core of his concept of “imitation/*mimêsis*” has strongly biological associations, in comparing a poetical work to a living organism with its head, body and limbs in accordance to its proper magnitude.

Jonson was well aware of this in citing Heinsius:

The Fable [plot] is call’d the Imitation of one and intire, and perfect Action; whose parts are so joined, and knitt together as nothing in the structure can be chang’d or taken away without imparing, or troubling the whole; of which there is a proportionable magnitude in the members. . . . Whole, we call that, and perfect, which hath a beginning, a mid’st, and an end. . . . (*Discoveries* 2681-86; 2706-07)<sup>9</sup>

Nor was Horace indifferent to biological connotations in his *Ars poetica*; he adopts the notion of “the beginning, the middle and the end” (*Ars poetica* 151-52), and his metaphor of “Chimeraes or monsters” at the beginning of the treatise refers to the lack of proportion between the whole and each part criticized by Aristotle (*Poetics* ch. 23).<sup>10</sup>

Strangely enough, when Jonson declares that poetry is “an Art of imitation” which expresses “the life of man in fit measure, numbers, and harmony” (*Discoveries* 2347 ff.; *Poetics* ch. 2), his primary concern seems to be for faithful sketches of men, with appropriate magnitude and proportion, rather than for the whole scheme of the play.

The title page of *Sejanus* (1605 Q) focuses on presenting true likenesses of men:

Non hñc Centauros, non Gorgonas, Harpyasque Invenies: Hominem pagina nostra Sapit.

[Not here will you find Centaurs, not Gorgons and Harpies: 'tis of man my page smacks.]

And the prologue to *Every Man in His Humour* (1616 F) promises to deal with “men,” not “monsters”:

... deedes, and language, such as men doe vse:  
 And persons, such as *Comædie* would chuse,  
 When she would shew an Image of the times,  
 And sport with human follies, not with crimes. (21-24)

Giving priority to the characters over the plot, Jonson may seem at odds with Aristotle, who preferred the plot above all other components (*Poetics* ch. 6). Yet this is in fact due to Aristotelian philosophy being deeply rooted in biology. Aristotle positively insists that the state of individuation, rather than an integrated state as part of a species, is the “true” form of living, because the individual is more operative than class in generation or procreation (*Generation of Animals* 4:3).

This belief is reflected in the following passage of the *Ars poetica*, where Horace applies the idea of a proportionate organism to each individual character:

He [the poet] can,  
 Indeed, give fitting dues to every man.  
 And I still bid the learned Maker looke  
 On life, and manners, and make those his booke,  
 Thence draw forth true expressions.

(Jonson's translation of *Ars poetica* 451-55; Horace's original 315-18)

This rule is followed closely by Jonson who not only aimed at an accurate portrait of each character, but tried to provide a “varietie of speakers”:

... and is it not an object of more state, to behold the *Scene* full, and relieu'd with varietie of speakers to the end, then to see a vast emptie stage . . . ?

(*Every Man out of His Humour* 2.3.297-301)

So Thomas Shadwell, his ardent disciple, proclaimed Jonson the only person who was able to give perfect representations of human life by representing a variety of humour characters.<sup>11</sup>

No doubt this attitude is based on Heinsius, who asserts that Aristotle's position is that "as many persons of the best moral character as the design permits should be introduced into one and the same play" (ch.14). And their belief "the more the better" originates ultimately in the Aristotelian view of procreation:

. . . the most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and divine. That is the goal for the sake of which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible. (*On the Soul* 2:4)

Here a problem may arise as to whether Jonson regarded the variety of humorous characters of his own creation as his own likeness. For the most part Jonson's [humour] characters are nearer to "monsters" than "men," and they are frequently presented as a butt for satire. How could he take pride in "begetting" them when he seems to lack fatherly affection towards them? And if he could, how could it be related to his grand project of acquiring "immortality" by handing them down to posterity?

### III

The first thing to be noted with Jonson is that he did not interpret life idealistically. By poetry he meant primarily drama, and by drama he meant primarily comedy,<sup>12</sup> and his notion of comedy is "Imitatio vitæ, Speculum consuetudinis, Imago veritatis" (*Every Man out of His Humour* 3 Grex, 202-12). Aristotle, Jonson's "first accurate Criticke, and truest Judge," is more ruthless in depriving us of our illusion that this "image of truth" or reality of life is beautiful:

Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. (*Poetics* ch. 5)

As an innate biologist, Aristotle knew too well that “the life of man” is not altogether different from that of the lower animals, both in the shape and way of generation:

Men, and Birds, and Quadrupeds, viviparous and oviparous alike, have their eyes protected by lids. (*Parts of Animals* 2:13)

All animals whatsoever, whether they fly or swim or walk upon dry land, whether they bring forth their young alive or in the egg, develop in the same way. . . .  
(*History of Animals* 7.7)

Far from being “the paragon of animals,” man participates in what is described as “ugly” in his definition of comedy in the *Poetics*. In the *Parts of Animals* Aristotle declares that he will treat all animals alike including man, “without omitting, to the best of our ability, any member of the kingdom, however ignoble,” and warns us not to “recoil with childish aversion from the examination of the humbler animals,” for “if any person thinks the examination of the rest of the animal kingdom an unworthy task, he must hold in like disesteem the study of man”:

. . . so we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful. Absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in Nature’s works in the highest degree, and the resultant end of her generations and combinations is a form of the beautiful. (*Parts of Animals* 1.5)

It may be assumed that Aristotle’s attempt to give “an equal value” to man and lower animals as living creatures is closely related to his concept of imitation in the *Poetics*. After pointing out that man is the most imitative of living creatures, Aristotle mentions the most ignoble animals and dead bodies as possible objects of imitation:

Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, “Ah, that is he.” (*Poetics* ch. 4)

In the *Topics* (1.7) Aristotle defines man as “an animal that walks on two feet,” and Horace describes his vulgar style which reflects the daily life of ordinary people as “‘chats’ that crawl along the ground” (*sermones . . . repentis per humum*; *Epistles* 2.1.250-51) in association with four-footed beasts. Far from seeing man as the lord of creation, both authors adopt a surprisingly homological attitude, attempting to seek constitutional and functional analogies between man and the animals.

The attitude of giving an equal value to man and “lower” animals was inherited by Juan Huarte de San Juan, a Spanish physician, whose *Examen de ingenios para las ciencias* [*The Examination of Mens Wits*] (1575) became a bestseller throughout Europe:

. . . the difference which is found between man and brute beast, is the selfe same which is found betweene a foole and a wise man; which is nought else than in respect of the more or lesse. (ch. 3)

If there is little difference between man and animals, then there would be still less among men:

By this reckoning it appeareth, that nature cannot fashion such a man as may be perfect in all his powers, nor produce him inclined to vertue. How repugnant it is vnto the nature of man, that he become inclined to vertue, is easily prooued, considering the composition of the first man [Adam] . . . by the hand of so great an artificer [God]. . . . (ch. 14)

Since there is ample evidence Jonson read the book in Thomas Carew’s English translation (1594),<sup>13</sup> it may help to elucidate the meaning of the title *Every Man in His Humour*—no one is free from faults and defects inherent in flesh and blood, and a poet should describe men as such.

“O, manners! that Nature should bee at leisure to make ‘hem!”—exclaims the young Edward Knowell, enjoying and admiring the variety of other men’s humours (*Every Man in His Humour* [1616 F] 4.7.146-47), yet the fact is that this cool observer also is “in his humour” since he himself is “like to be wrought / To every vice, as hardly to be brought / To endure counsell” (Jonson’s translation of the *Ars Poetica* 231-33; Horace’s original, 162-63).

Most properly Jonson concludes his prologue to the same comedy:

... you'll all confesse  
 By laughing at them, they deserue no lesse:  
 Which when you heartily doe, there's hope left, then,  
 You, that haue so grac'd monsters, may like men. (27-30)

## IV

Nearly two centuries ago Gifford ascribed Jonson's relative "unpopularity" (when compared with Shakespeare) to his lack of what he calls "just discrimination":

There is yet another obstacle to the poet's [Jonson's] popularity, besides the unamiable and uninteresting nature of some of his characters, namely a want of just discrimination. He seems to have been deficient in that true tact of feeling of propriety which Shakespeare possessed in full excellence. He appears to have had an equal value for all his characters, and he labours upon the most unimportant, and even disagreeable of them with the same fond and paternal assiduity which accompanies his happiest efforts. (my italics)<sup>14</sup>

Whether Gifford's criticism is right or not, what he regards as Jonson's "defect"—"the same fond and paternal assiduity"—strongly points to him as a poet of procreation. Gifford says "the most unimportant, and even disagreeable of them," yet we should rather think that Jonson regarded none of his characters as "unimportant" or "disagreeable."

According to Aristotle, what seems "ugly" at first sight, may strike us with a "beauty" of its own the moment we discover the "absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end" in "Nature's works." Equally, we are expected to regard whoever makes most of his or her natural faculties as "agreeable."

Jonson shows no less magnanimity than Volpone, who is praised for knowing

the vse of riches, and dare giue, now,  
 From that bright heape, to me [Mosca], your poore obseruer,  
 Or to your dwarfe, or your *hermaphrodite*,  
 Your *eunuch*, or what other household-trifle  
 Your [Volpone's] pleasure allowes maint'nance. (*Volpone* 1.1.62-66)



Brainworm, the "base" servant, and Mosca, the "contemptible" parasite, frankly admire themselves, when each finds himself "translated thus, from a poore creature to a creator," by developing their inborn talents to the full.<sup>15</sup> Even the "deformed" trio—Nano, the dwarf, Castrone, the eunuch, and Androgyno, the hermaphrodite—who are said to be Volpone's "bastards," or the inhabitants of Bartholomew Fair, who are put beyond protection of the law, win our admiration by their ability to pursue and enjoy their own happiness under a serious physical or social handicap.

It is true that Jonson sometimes fell into satirical rage with some of his characters, but this happens only when they act contrary to their own nature. Fielding, Jonson's ardent admirer in the eighteenth century, aptly points out that the true object of derision or satire is neither ugliness, infirmity, poverty or other misfortunes or calamities;<sup>16</sup> it is affectation—being "in travaile with expressions of another," utterly "forgetfull of himselfe" (*Discoveries* 1093-99).

While carrying out the parental responsibility by giving life to each single product of his literary activity, Jonson frequently wished he could "loose all father" or shuffle off all paternal affection (*Epigrams* 45.5). Even when he "punishes" those who deserve it, he does "begin to pittie 'hem" immediately after that, filled with remorse "To thinke they haue a being" (*Every Man out of His Humour* 5.11.61-63). No doubt it was this all-embracing paternal attitude that attracted so many sons around him.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The quotation is taken from *Cicero XVIII: Tusculan Disputations*, ed. and trans. J. E. King (1927; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>"A gratulatory to Mr Ben. Iohnson for his adopting of him to be his Son" 31-32, *Poems with the Muses Looking Glasse: and Amyntas* (1638) 22-23, quoted in *Ben Jonson*, eds. C. H. Herford, and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1925-52) 11: 390-91. All quotations from Jonson refer to this edition, abbreviated as "H&S."

<sup>3</sup>Ben Jonson, eds. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979) 204.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Herrick, "His Prayer to Ben. Johnson" 1-4, *Hesperides* (1648) 267, quoted in H&S 11: 415.

<sup>5</sup>See Marvin Theodore Herrick, *The Poetics of Aristotle in England* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1930) 43, 36.

<sup>6</sup>Aristotle's "Poetics" and *English Literature: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Elder Olson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1965) introduction x-xvii.

<sup>7</sup>M. T. Herrick 37-38, 45. Jonson quotes Heinsius at length in the *Discoveries*.

<sup>8</sup>Paul R. Sellin and John McManmon, *On Plot in Tragedy*, trans. Daniel Heinsius (Northridge, Calif.: San Fernando Valley State College, 1971) introduction xvi.

<sup>9</sup>Heinsius, *De tragoediae constitutione* ch. 4. Cf. the *Poetics* ch. 6: "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and a certain magnitude . . . in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." English translations of Aristotle's works are from *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984), except for that of the *Poetics*, which comes from *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art with a Critical Text and Translation of the Poetics*, ed. and trans. S. H. Butcher (1895; London: Macmillan, 1923).

<sup>10</sup>Nevertheless, it would be hasty to conclude that by "a living organism of the proper magnitude" they meant the anthropomorphic cosmology of the world of the play, whose inhabitants are influenced by some transcendent will of the macrocosm. It seems more reasonable to interpret that "the magnitude" refers to that of the action comprehensible within our memory (*Discoveries* 2704-2815), and "proportion" to causality of incidents with "necessity" and "probability," without any intervention of supernatural factors. For a detailed discussion of Aristotle's influence on Horace, see Yumiko Yamada, *Ben Jonson and Cervantes: Tilting against Chivalric Romances* (Tokyo: Maruzen, 2000) 25, 159-62.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Shadwell, preface to *The Sullen Lovers* (1668), quoted in Craig 263.

<sup>12</sup>See M. T. Herrick 41-43.

<sup>13</sup>See *Veins of Humor*, ed. Harry Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1972) introduction 7-8; Adrienne Laskier Martín, *Cervantes and the Burlesque Sonnet* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991) 66-70. English translations of the *Examen de ingenios para las ciencias* are from *The Examination of Mens Wits*, trans. Richard Carew (1594; New York: Da Capo P, 1969).

<sup>14</sup>William Gifford (1816) 1: ccxvii-ccxix, quoted in Frances Teague, *The Curious History of Bartholomew Fair* (Cranbury, NJ: Associate UP, 1985) 101.

<sup>15</sup>See *Every Man in His Humour* (1616 F) 2.4.1-2; *Volpone* 3.1.1-33.

<sup>16</sup>Fielding, preface to *Joseph Andrews*, quoted in M. T. Herrick 115.