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Jonson and the court

In dedicating the 1616 Folio version of *Cynthia's Revels* to the court, Jonson addressed that body as “A bountiful and brave spring” that “waterest all the noble plants of this island. In thee, the whole kingdom dresseth itself, and is ambitious to use thee as her glass. Beware, then, thou render men’s figures truly, and teach them no less to hate their deformities than to love their forms; for, to grace there should come reverence; and no man can call that lovely which is not also venerable.”¹ If, as Jonson claimed, the court nurtured and sustained the whole island, it would be impossible to overestimate the importance of his self-appointed role as court reformer. Throughout his career, though in varying modes and intensities at different times, he assigned himself the gargantuan and foolhardy task of critiquing the foibles and vices of the court.

Jonson lived most of his life in close proximity to the English court at Whitehall, and the court figures prominently in his writings. But physical proximity is not the same thing as access. The court can be defined variously: as a bureaucratic and ceremonial structure sometimes located at Whitehall but accompanying the person of the monarch from one royal seat to another; or as the social group of those who had regular access to the monarch, not only in the royal presence chamber, where access was relatively unrestricted, but in the privy chamber, to which entry was much more difficult. Or the court can be defined much more loosely as a network of affiliations and a culture generated specifically by or for the bureaucratic structure and the social group that were also called the court. Only in the third and most capacious sense can Jonson be regarded as having been close to the court, and even there, our perception of his proximity to power is often grounded less in historical realities than in his own imaginative rendering of them. To the extent that Jonson’s writings convey a sense of intimacy with the monarch and chief courtiers, that intimacy is often a carefully modulated construction. Part of the fascination of Jonson’s literary portrayals of the court, the monarch, and the English subject’s relationship to both, derives from our recognition of a significant gap between the standard contemporaneous views of this triangulation and Jonson’s configurings of it.

Jonson's first known foray into satire upon the manners of the court appears to have ended unhappily: when he was still in his early twenties he was briefly imprisoned for his part in the daringly scurrilous *Isle of Dogs* (1597). The text of this play is lost, but it is titled after an island in the Thames where Queen Elizabeth I kenneled her hounds, and probably suggested likenesses between the Queen's canines and her courtiers. Two years later Jonson had recovered sufficient reputation to have a play performed at court. In the first performance of *Every Man out of his Humour* in the public theatre (1599), a boy actor impersonating Queen Elizabeth evidently appeared on stage at the end, abruptly terminating the display of wayward humors in the body of the play and also the asperity of its satirist figure, Malicente, identified closely with Jonson himself. At the performance before Elizabeth during the revelry of the 1599–1600 holiday season, a similar ending must surely have made use of the presence of the Queen at the end: she is the bright "sun" and clear flood of silver water who purifies the passions of the satirist and her other malcontent subjects. Indeed, *Every Man Out* may have been the play the Queen attended in 1601 when she is reported to have visited Blackfriars after a private dinner at the Lord Chamberlain's.

Elizabeth was known for her ability to create instant rapport with the populace, of whatever station and calling. Her "Golden Speech" of a year later repeatedly and memorably invoked her forty-year love affair with her people, "for above all earthly treasures I esteem my people's love, more than which I desire not to merit." Its delivery was an elaborate choreography of mutual bowings and exchanges of adoring respect between the Queen and members of Parliament. At much the same time that *Every Man out of his Humour* was performed at court, Dudley Carleton, who was temporarily in attendance there, reported that the Queen "played the goodfellow amongst us these holy-days at dancings and music . . ." ² That is not the monarch portrayed in *Every Man out of his Humour*. The Elizabeth who intervenes at the end of Jonson's play is a distant, aloof figure who reforms her subjects not through love but through intimidation, through a remote power accessible only to the extent that it is assimilated to natural forces like sun and water.

Cynthia's Revels, or the Fountain of Self Love, written shortly after *Every Man Out*, performed publicly by the Children of Queen Elizabeth's Chapel during fall, 1600, and performed at court during the 1600–1 holiday season, offers a more complex working of the relationship between Elizabeth and her courtiers. In this play the setting is prudently distanced to "Gargaphie," a valley and spring sacred to Diana, and Elizabeth is imagined as "Queen and Huntress chaste and fair," the virgin goddess Cynthia, whose court and revels, like that of the moon she personifies, are only of the night. In *Cynthia's Revels* Jonson continues to portray the Queen as aloof from her people, but she has both reason and a plan for a cure: her erstwhile favorite Acteon (an allegorical depiction of

the Earl of Essex, who had earned the Queen's displeasure through his military failures in Ireland and his insolent obliviousness to royal commands) has been punished and his adherents have breathed "black and envious slanders" against the Queen in reaction. Elizabeth/Cynthia proclaims a "solemn revels" at which she will ameliorate the appearance of austerity and distance by opening her court to outsiders and gracing it with her presence.

But even with this scenario established, Jonson does not display the Queen in the intimate, loving interaction with her subjects for which she was famous. Rather, he interposes another satirist figure – in this instance Crites (Criticus in the quarto version and probably in the play as performed), a low-born but stoically imperturbable scholar suspiciously like Jonson's idealized image of himself as corrector of his social betters. Crites' true peers are the inner circle of Cynthia's court and the monarch: among themselves, the three confer in blank verse, the verse form also employed by the classical divinities who appear within the play, while the less privileged courtiers in the play always blither in inchoate prose. After Crites has shown his mettle by critiquing their follies, Cynthia is prompted by Arete, one of her ladies in waiting (probably representing Jonson's patroness the Countess of Bedford, who held that role at court) to call for a masque of Crites' devising. Cynthia is awestruck by the masque's exquisite beauty and its mirroring of her own virtues. Thenceforth, Crites is chosen as a familiar and favorite: he is "our Crites; / Whom learning, virtue, and our favour last / Exempteth from the gloomy multitude" (5.8.32–3); he is entrusted, along with Arete, with the task of reforming the folly and self-love of the court.

To associate Crites with Jonson is impossible in view of the effrontery involved: Elizabeth was not known to admit any below the rank of the gentry as her intimates, and we have no evidence that Jonson succeeded where others had failed. But the association is also inescapable. In *Cynthia's Revels* Jonson constructs for himself, or at least for his own idealized self, a stoic persona "never moved nor stirred at anything," a fantasy of wish-fulfillment by which his learning and moral probity earn him the place of royal favorite – a much worthier successor to Essex who belongs to the Queen's inner circle and polices the court rather than encouraging it in excess and vice.

A subtext of this masque may well have been the controversy over monopolies. Elizabeth had already withdrawn Essex's monopoly of currants; a year later in her Golden Speech before members of the 1601 Parliament, she was to promise reform of the financial and other excesses she had permitted many of her courtiers through her tolerance of their abuse of monopolies. In *Cynthia's Revels* she similarly recognizes excesses she had previously overlooked, but it is Jonson/Crites who serves as her agent, interposing himself between the monarch and her subjects to ameliorate past abuses. Crites is not deformed by court life but becomes more himself insofar as he belongs to Cynthia (5.8.34); he can

therefore offer himself as a peculiarly suitable delegate for restoring the courtiers to a similarly centered selfhood.

But the fantasy was only that: *Cynthia's Revels* was not "liked" at court, and its successor play *Poetaster*, in which the Jonsonian critic-figure became no less a personage than Horace, appears to have succeeded no better as a bid for employment and patronage, though the name seems to have stuck and Jonson was sometimes styled "our English Horace" by his admirers. In reality, as in his dramatic images of her, Elizabeth remained aloof: her unwillingness to spend the royal treasury on patronage rewards to poets (at a time when she was fighting an expensive war against Spain) caused her to appear cold and unnurturing to Jonson even while she was portrayed as warm, loving, and maternal in other contexts. Jonson had to wait for the advent of James I before he was to be adopted as artist-reformer at court, and then his chief medium was not the public theatre but private royal entertainments, similar to the masques embedded within *Cynthia's Revels*, which allowed him to bypass the awkward business of representing himself on stage.

Like other Englishmen to whom James I was to offer particular favor, Jonson went out of his way to praise the new King even before his installation in London: the "Entertainment at Althorp," performed before Queen Anne and Prince Henry on June 20, 1603, may have been written at the behest of the Countess of Bedford, already one of Anne's ladies in waiting, and hails James I, in a slight adjustment of Jonson's previous praise of Cynthia, as the successful reformer of a court that Elizabeth had allowed to fall into corruption. By 1604 Jonson had also published a volume of panegyric verses for James with copious, learned notes.³ But if Jonson's portrayals of Elizabeth vis-a-vis her court and subjects can be characterized as the imposition of alienating distance, his portrayals of James do just the opposite – create a warmth and familiarity between monarch and subjects that was frequently missing in reality. It became increasingly evident during the early years of James' reign in England that he lacked Elizabeth's magic gift for achieving rapport with her people through the performance of mutual displays of affections. Contemporaries complained that he was silent, withdrawn, and impatient, and played his part in public entertainments with poor grace. Jonson's masques for James I succeeded in part because he designed them to fill a gap: they perform an intimacy between monarch and subjects that, especially over time, became increasingly absent in reality. However, the performance of Jacobean intimacy frequently involved Jonson in an uncomfortably congratulatory acknowledgment of the monarch's imperfections. As early as Jonson's *Private Entertainment of the King and Queen* at Highgate (Mayday 1604), Pan affectionately teased both King and Queen about personal foibles such as drunkenness and an inordinate love of hunting, and asserted that the pair "live safe in the love, rather than the fear, of your subjects."

It is highly likely, as David Riggs speculates, that Jonson owed to the Countess of Bedford his commission as masque-writer to Queen Anne in 1604, when he was chosen to devise *The Masque of Blackness*, performed at court on Twelfth Night 1605, in which Queen Anne and her ladies appeared rather scandalously as “blackamoors.”⁴ Much has been made of the difficulty of this assignment – Jonson had to argue for the beauty of blackness at the same time that he intimated a link between the color and a need for purification to be effected through the cleansing power of James I – but not enough has been made of this masque’s vastly expanded vision, if contrasted with the much smaller, more localized, embedded masques in *Cynthia’s Revels*. Queen Anne and her court had a significant degree of independence from James I, and even at times supported markedly different policy initiatives than he did, but in selecting the role of blackamoors they tapped into a theme that was dear to his heart: the idea of British Empire and the extension of royal power far beyond the traditional possessions of the English crown. In *Cynthia’s Revels* Jonson had associated Queen Elizabeth with the sun and the purifying power of the Thames, but in *The Masque of Blackness*, and its sequel *The Masque of Beauty* performed on Twelfth Night 1608, James’ reputation and healing rays are imagined as extending as far as the Niger River in Africa.

Even before he took the English crown, James I had thought of the British Isles as a single political entity. Great Britain, as James I liked to style it, was not officially created until the early eighteenth century, when England, Ireland, and Wales were officially united with Scotland, but it was promoted in a vocabulary and vision of empire from the beginning of James’ reign in England. Jonson’s language of colonial transformation in the Jacobean court masque enormously contributed to a new role played by entertainments in the court of James I: the masque became a vehicle for the conceptualization of empire and expanding colonial potential. Jonson’s *Hymenæi*, performed for the marriage of the Earl of Essex and Frances Howard, daughter of the Earl of Suffolk, in 1606, celebrated the Union of England and Scotland that James I had effected (through his person as monarch of both realms, if not yet through parliamentary ratification), and figured that Union through a large “microcosm or globe” that was turned, according to one observer’s account, by Ben Jonson himself.

Our poet was not, however, content to remain a mere turner of wheels behind the scenes: he had a strong thirst for public acclaim along with a continuing appetite – no doubt fueled in part by envy – for the excoriation of aristocratic vice. During the years that he was successfully producing masques at the Jacobean court, his plays for the public theatres regularly got him into trouble for satire against the very same court. After *Sejanus* was performed at court during the 1603–4 holiday season, Jonson was called before the Privy Council and accused of treason, presumably because of the play’s highly negative portrayal of imperial

power in the persons of Nero and Tiberius. He got in a far worse scrape for his part in *Eastward Ho!* (1605), which returned to the scene of the *Isle of Dogs* and ruthlessly satirized James I's Scottish courtiers, who had created enormous resentment among English aristocrats by taking the best appointments at court and freezing out English attempts to gain the familiar access to the monarch that they had enjoyed under Elizabeth. For his part in *Eastward Ho!* Jonson was thrown in prison and feared execution, though he was eventually released at the behest of some of his patrons. Thereafter, his plays for the public theatre tended to focus on city rather than aristocratic vice, and Jonson found a more felicitous device for perpetuating his role of Crites for the Jacobean court.

In his preface to *The Masque of Queens*, performed in February 1609, Jonson credits Queen Anne with calling for "some dance or show that might precede hers and have the place of a foil or false masque." He fulfilled her request by devising an antimasque of witches who served as false versions of the idealized procession of queens enacted by Queen Anne and her ladies in the main masque. This bifurcation of masque structure between a negative antimasque and its banishment or reformation in the main masque became the prototype for more ambitious, even reckless antimasques later on by which he was able to satirize court, and sometimes royal, vice at the same time that he celebrated the beneficent rule of the King. *The Masque of Queens*, casting Anne as Bel-Anna, Queen of the Oceans, was apparently the final masque Jonson devised specifically at the command of Queen Anne. For the next decade, Jonson's masques took on subjects that centered far more directly on the power and policies of the King, Prince Henry, and Prince Charles. It is highly suggestive that the development of the satiric antimasque in the *Masque of Queens* was followed closely by a shift to masques that celebrated specific achievements in the public lives of male members of the royal family. Could it be that James recognized the propaganda potential of the form and wished to bring it more directly under his control? James was clearly interested in the masque as a literary type – he had devised a masque of his own in Scotland – but the extent to which he involved himself personally in the specific subject matter of his masques is an issue about which scholars are in disagreement. Whatever the explanation for the shift, from 1610 on the court ladies played a more subservient role in Jonson's masques, representing virtues and attributes centering more directly upon the person and policy of the King; the antimasques during the same period honed in with increased intensity on vices associated with James I as well as members of his court.

The satiric potential of the antimasques is not particularly visible in *Oberon the Fairy Prince* (1611), which featured Prince Henry's debut as chief masquer, or in *The Lords' Masque* (1613), which celebrated the marriage of Princess Elizabeth to Frederick, Elector Palatine, but becomes unmistakable in *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* (1616), which celebrates the King for

his successful undoing of sinister alchemical perversions of humanity produced by his favorites, but also glances with some asperity at James' own "making of men" through his scandalous sale of aristocratic titles and consequent debasement of their previous value. Not coincidentally, Jonson's patron the Earl of Pembroke had assumed the office of Lord Chamberlain during 1615, and that office included among its duties the management of court entertainments. The banner year of 1616, in which both James I and Jonson himself published Folio volumes of their respective *Works*, and in which Jonson was officially appointed poet laureate to the court and offered an annual pension, was also the year in which Jonson became unprecedentedly direct in his antimasque critiques of court vices. If the government thought they could subdue his satiric virulence by buying him off with a pension, they were sadly mistaken. With Pembroke as Lord Chamberlain, Jonson apparently felt assured of support in his portrayal and excoriation of vices that flourished at court. Jonson's masques from 1616 onward celebrate policy initiatives of the King's to reform various abuses, and use the court as a microcosmic laboratory to display their impact on the nation at large. Frequently, the very courtiers satirized in the antimasque would actually dance in the main masque, enacting Jonson's vision of the court as a "bountiful spring" that "waterest" the island as a whole. By displaying their transformation, the courtiers would promulgate a mimetic process by which they themselves had been transformed. Such, at least, was the theory.

The Vision of Delight (1617) celebrates James' policy initiative, articulated with particular forcefulness in a 1616 speech before Star Chamber that was published at the end of his 1616 *Works*, to decrease crowding and disease in London by setting strict limits on new construction and ordering nobles and gentry without specific business in London to return to their country estates to keep hospitality and restore the depopulated countryside. *The Vision of Delight* parallels the King's speech in evoking the fatal attractions of a swollen, overgrown London: the first antimasque represents a city street dominated by grotesque inchoate forms that incarnate urban excess. But the second antimasque of "Phantasms" and nighttime revelry strongly suggests the court as an equally virulent fountain of excess. Even as Jonson celebrates James I's initiative to reduce London and restore the countryside, he calls attention to the court as one of the chief magnets attracting the upper classes to London: insofar as the "bounteous and brave spring" of the court itself is polluted, its emulators learn deformity from its own "glass." The main masque symbolically restored the countryside by taking the courtiers out of harm's way and placing them in a rural "bower of Zephyrus." Beginning in 1616, Jonson's masques typically end in visions of a pastoral countryside rather than a city or a reformed court, thereby acknowledging the King's own "anti-court" initiatives to revitalize the countryside by dispersing the crowds of would-be suitors at Whitehall. But Jonson managed to

have it both ways: the portrayal of courtly corruptions in the antimasques of these entertainments demonstrated the wisdom of royal efforts at reform, but simultaneously offered ammunition to those contemporaries who saw the court and its manners under James as hopelessly corrupt.

In his next masque Jonson was bolder: *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1618) celebrates James I's visit to Scotland during summer 1617, his attempts to replace the authority of the Scottish Kirk with that of the Church of England, and his publication of a declaration that became known as the *Book of Sports* – yet another initiative designed to revitalize the countryside by encouraging traditional sports and pastimes that had been suppressed or fallen into disuse. Jonson brilliantly unites these separate policy initiatives by portraying them as instances of James I's favorite self-portrayal as a bringer of the “middle way” in all things. *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* shows royal power in the form of Hercules vanquishing excess at both the extremes of Catholic superfluity and Puritan denial in order to revitalize the countryside and the nation as a newly-balanced whole. The dances of the main masque demonstrate the courtiers' internalization of Hercules' lessons in moderation and end with Prince Charles and the other masquers poised to take on the demanding role of Hercules for themselves. But the antimasques' visions of excess are specifically tied to the King and his profligate favorites. Comus the belly-god and his drunken retinue are introduced by a Ganymede-figure, Hercules' cupbearer, who bears a strong resemblance to the King's beloved new favorite the Duke of Buckingham, and who acknowledges that it is Hercules' own cup that is being dishonored through Comus' drunken orgies. The fact that Ganymede is made spokesman for the King calls attention to James' fondness for young male favorites like the Duke of Buckingham, on whom he lavished extravagant affection and to whom, seemingly, he denied nothing. The King's own excess is purged along with that of his courtiers in the main masque of *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*, but perhaps less memorably than it is celebrated in the carnivalesque antimasque of Comus and the joys of the belly. Jonson's brilliant tour de force was not appreciated at court. Indeed, as one contemporary reported, Jonson's masque was so thoroughly disliked that “divers think fit he should return to his old trade of bricklaying again.” Perhaps Jonson's portrayal of the royal favorites cut too close to the bone. When Jonson revised the masque to honor Prince Charles' recent investiture as Prince of Wales, he replaced the original antimasques with a much safer display of comical but loyal Welshmen.

The final shipwreck of Jonson's most strenuous phase of attempted reform came in *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621), a masque commissioned by the Duke of Buckingham to celebrate James' visit to his estate in Rutland during that summer's royal progress. In this unusual production, the carnivalesque celebration of excess totally dominates the main masque. The chief courtiers are

imagined as thieving gypsies under the captaincy of Buckingham himself. What Jonson might earlier have identified as vices to be reformed are here collectively celebrated through jests and coterie innuendo: James is welcomed to Buckingham's person as well as to his home, and there are numerous in-jokes about the penetrability of the "Devil's Arse," a cavelike structure in the north of England with obvious homoerotic connotations. *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* was a great success with the court, but a defeat for the Crites in Jonson who had made artistic capital out of bracing encounters between the squalor of an aristocracy gone to seed and the sublimity of its revitalization. Thereafter, Jonson's court entertainments increasingly turned from the domestic to the international scene, and his antimasques identified targets less patently associated with the court.

The dominant subject of Jonson's masques during the 1620s, beginning with *News from the New World Discovered in the Moon* (1620), is celebration of James I as a keeper of peace when most of Europe was at war. What was to become known as the Thirty Years' War had erupted in 1618, and England's involvement appeared inevitable after James' daughter Elizabeth and her husband Frederick, Elector Palatine, were ousted by Catholic Habsburg forces from the largely Protestant Kingdom of Bohemia, over which Frederick had unwisely accepted sovereignty in 1619. James' subjects clamored for news from the continent, and for English military aid to Frederick and the Protestant cause, but he steadfastly refused to intervene. *News from the New World's* antimasques satirize various commercial agents by which the incipient war was reported in England and which James had attempted to suppress by proclamation: a Chronicler (or historian), a Printer, and a Factor (who was located abroad and paid to communicate the latest events via correspondence to his English subscribers). Over against this jangling and illicit "news," the main masque ascends to a new world that is unchanging: the mind and ethos of the King, portrayed as a universal primum mobile who remains in "perfection" and "pure harmony" despite the fantastical irregularities of the newsmongers he has silenced. In actuality, the court, like the nation, was severely divided over the proper national response to the Bohemian crisis; but in Jonson's masque they rally around the King and his pacifism with the grace and predictability of planetary bodies. Once again, we discover an incipient colonial vision, and a portrayal of the scope of royal power beyond anything depicted in Jonson's earlier masques. Through the fertile inventions of the masque poet, what many subjects saw as James' narrow, dangerous isolationism is recast as largeness of vision: the King is celebrated as the unmoved mover of all things – indeed, as a divinity – who presides over and controls a universe rather than a mere kingdom. Ensuing masques for James like *The Masque of Augurs* (1622), *Time Vindicated to Himself and to His Honors* (1623), and the unperformed *Neptune's Triumph for the Return of*

Albion (1624), similarly contrast a petty, commercialized, fragmented, and frequently war-mongering mini-culture in the antimasques with vast and peaceful evocations of royal power in the main masque.

In studies of the Jacobean era, there has been considerable confusion between the actual areas of authority claimed by the King and artistic renderings of universal royal power like those brought by Jonson to the masque. Scholars have tended to see Jonson in *News from the New World* and later masques of the 1620s as simply communicating James' own grandiose notions of royal absolutism. But it is worth noting that Jonson's visions go considerably beyond the King's own assertions of royal prerogative powers, particularly as those assertions have been reinterpreted by recent revisionist historians, who emphasize the limitation of James' power and his reliance on day-to-day negotiation and the painstaking balancing of various factions for successful government. It is Jonson, not James, who portrays royal power as absolute in its operation. Even Jonson's early masques for Queen Anne had celebrated James' transforming mana as international in scope and influence. With the passing of time Jonson's masques increasingly link that power with the "removed mysteries" of neoplatonic planetary magic, portraying it as divinely infinite, unitary, and infallible. Jonson was not, of course, the only English subject to be attracted by neoplatonic imagery of world domination, although he may have been one of the first to apply such notions to the King. In bringing neoplatonic astral imagery to the masque he was enormously aided by Inigo Jones' innovative uses of perspective in his staging designs for the masque, which increased the audience's visual perception of distance and thereby broadened the imaginable range of royal power and authority. For better or for worse, Jonson helped James I to expand his own understanding of the meaning and scope of royal power, and that, no doubt, was part of the fascination of Jonson's masques for early viewers at court.

Did Jonson assume that after the death of James I in 1625, his employment as Crites to the court would be continued under Charles I? In marked contrast to his warm reception of James, complete with a published volume of panegyric verses, Jonson left no known verses in honor of Charles' accession until a belated burst of them in 1629, after the assassination of the Duke of Buckingham, with whom Charles had become intimate after the death of James. Charles continued to pay Jonson's pension at least sporadically, but the poet's services were less frequently called upon at court, and Jonson himself was less able to perform them since he had suffered debilitating strokes in 1626 and 1628. Jonson wrote only a handful of large-scale entertainments explicitly for performance before Charles and his court: *Love's Triumph through Callipolis*, the King's Twelfth-Night masque for 1631; *Chloridia*, Queen Henrietta Maria's Shrovetide masque performed in February, 1631; and two rural entertainments for Charles I on progress, the *Entertainment at Welbeck* (1633) and *Love's Welcome at Bolsover*

(1634), both of these commissioned by the Earl of Newcastle, Jonson's most important patron after the death of the Earl of Pembroke in 1630.

The relative paucity of this Caroline court production is not the result of unadaptability on the part of the poet: his masques for Charles and Henrietta Maria chimed in with the ethos of the new court by exquisitely celebrating the pair's highly publicized cult of married chastity and Platonic love. But it is clear that Jonson felt unwelcome in some of the circles that had nurtured him earlier, and his attempts to create plays for court performance uniformly failed. *The Staple of News* (1626), which takes up many of the same subjects as *News from the New World Discovered in the Moon*, was not liked at court. In an epilogue to his play *The New Inn* (1628–9), which was intended for court performance but never staged there because of its utter failure at Blackfriars, Jonson blamed his waning productivity on neglect by Charles and his consort: "And had he lived the care of King and Queen, / His art in something more yet had been seen" (Epilogue, 21–2). In *The New Inn*, as much earlier in *Cynthia's Revels*, Jonson took the somewhat desperate measure of writing himself into the action of the play as the balancer and corrector of a court-like community gone awry; the poet can be identified on some interpretive levels with the genial Host of the New Inn, who turns out to be a Lord in disguise. The strategy worked no better in *The New Inn* than it had in *Cynthia's Revels*. *The Tale of a Tub* had a little more success: it held the stage long enough to be performed at court in 1634, and was clearly designed to appeal to King Charles at least to the extent that it celebrated his renewal of his father's *Book of Sports* a year earlier. But at court *The Tale of a Tub* was not liked.

A partial explanation for the failure of these works may be Jonson's inability to let go of a quarrel begun more than a decade before. The art of Inigo Jones, the "master artificer" with whom he had collaborated in most of his masques, remained thriving and popular at the Caroline court while Jonson himself faded in influence, and the poet could not resist satirizing Jones and his "almighty shows" even in works like *The Tale of the Tub* in which his obsessive vendetta had no artistically credible place. Jonson's relentless hostility against Jones is a measure of the continuing importance of the court not only to his financial well being but also to his self-definition as an artist. Even at the end of his life, Jonson had not abandoned hope for gaining the respect under Charles I and Henrietta Maria that he had enjoyed under James. When he died in 1637, he left unfinished his elegaic *Sad Shepherd*, which was clearly designed to feed the seemingly insatiable appetite for pastoral drama at the Caroline court. In terms of his relations with the three monarchs under whom he lived and wrote, Jonson's dramatic production for the court takes on a certain melancholy symmetry: under Elizabeth and then again under Charles, he was an outsider looking in, driven to desperate attempts to write himself into favor through

embarrassingly obvious self-portrayals that gave the lie to his favorite public pose of stoic indifference to the court.

If there were space in this essay to take on Jonson's portrayal of the court and courtiers in his lyric poetry, this perception of melancholy symmetry would be disrupted, for Jonson's literary production as a whole was far less centered on the court than were the entertainments explicitly designed for court consumption. In Jonson's *Epigrams*, for example, which he called "the ripest of my studies," published in his 1616 *Works* but mostly composed by 1612, Jonson mentioned the court only in connection with its vices, which he satirized with a corrosive directness that would not have been possible in his antimasques. The court in the *Epigrams* is pathetically reduced to a "Something that Walks Somewhere," a Lord dead in life and buried in its own "flesh and blood" (*Epig.* 11); a "Court-Worm" swathed in silk and as feeble as the small and lowly name-sake that spun the substance with which he covers himself (*Epig.* 15); a spiteful "Courtling" who damns Jonson's work with a fashionable faintness of approbation, or sets himself up as a negative critic in order to gain a reputation for wit (*Epig.* 52 and 72); or a "Fine Lady Would-Be" who has secretly aborted her own child to avoid missing even a few months of the partying at court (*Epig.* 62).

Why is so little note taken in the *Epigrams* of positive forces at court? Jonson mentions King James I and his project for Great Britain in several handsome tributes, and he writes in praise of high government officials like Robert, Earl of Salisbury, James' principal Secretary of State and made Lord Treasurer in 1608; Thomas Egerton, Lord Chancellor; and Thomas, Earl of Suffolk, Lord Chamberlain 1603-14 and Lord Treasurer 1614-19. But never does he explicitly link such figures with the court; only in two cases is the grandee's title mentioned in the poem, and then part of his name is effaced (*Epig.* 64 to Cecil and *Epig.* 74 on Egerton). With lesser court officials the poet's reticence is even more pronounced, particularly if considered by the standards of the usual court panegyric of the time. Jonson's touching poem on Margaret Radcliffe (*Epig.* 40) does not mention her place at the time of her premature death as Queen Elizabeth's favorite Maid of Honor. Lucy, Countess of Bedford, is the recipient of several poems, none of which so much as hint at her high positions at the courts of both Queen Elizabeth and King James. Jonson's poems to Henry Goodyere praise him for his hawking and his choice of friends and books, without any mention of his position from 1605 on as a Gentleman of the Privy Chamber. The courtiers in the *Epigrams* are indistinguishable from the other luminaries in that they are praised for traits of character they hold outside of and in spite of their high office. Like Crites in *Cynthia's Revels*, they are valuable examples for the less centered creatures about court because whatever their official title and degree of responsibility, they remain true to an internalized stoic code of virtue. They are "never moved nor stirred at anything," and are hence most worthy of trust, whether by

a mere subject like Jonson or by a Queen or King. And to the extent that they failed to live up to the poet's characterization of them, Jonson could claim that his goal was, as in the entertainments explicitly designed for the court, reform:

I have too oft preferr'd
Men past their terms, and praised some names too much,
But 'twas with purpose to have made them such.

("An Epistle to Master John Selden" 20-2)

NOTES

- 1 *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, ed. G. A. Wilkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), II, xi.
- 2 Cited by Stephen W. May in *The Elizabethan Courtier Poets: The Poems and Their Contexts* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 20, from Public Record Office State Papers 12/274/86, March 29, 1600.
- 3 Ben Jonson's *Part of the King's Entertainment in passing to his Coronation* on 15 March 1604, his *Panegyre* on the King's opening of Parliament four days later, and the *Entertainment of the Queen and Prince at Althorp* in 1603 were originally published together (HS 7:67).
- 4 David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 118.