

# Staging Ben



# Staging Ben:

*A Collection of Essays  
on the Theatricality  
of Jonson's Plays*

Edited by

Marshall Botvinick

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## INTRODUCTION

### MARSHALL BOTVINICK

Perhaps no great dramatist has been labeled less dramatic than Ben Jonson. Although Jonson is partially responsible for this characterization of his work, the extent to which this accusation has dogged him is in no way proportional to his offense. Despite a steadily increasing body of scholarship dedicated to rehabilitating his reputation, Jonson continues to suffer from the misguided notion that his plays are primarily literary creations and are thus ill-suited for the theatre. In this introduction I will present readers with some of the most common critiques of Jonson as a theatre artist before debunking these persistent mythologies. In addition, I will use the introduction to prepare readers for the material in subsequent chapters, all of which are a form of performance criticism committed to demonstrating the innate theatricality of Jonson's plays. It is my hope that by the end of this introduction—and certainly by the conclusion of this book—readers will see Jonson as a playwright who is passionately engaged with the theatre and whose plays yield numerous exciting possibilities in performance.

The most damning critique of Jonson is that he possessed an intense hostility to the very idea of theatre and that his plays, as a result, suffer from this antitheatrical prejudice. Although these arguments contain some persuasive points, they ultimately collapse because they ignore a simple question: why would Jonson, a man whose dramatic writing sent him to jail on multiple occasions, devote his entire professional life and risk his personal safety for something that he was philosophically opposed to? Despite this major flaw in their position, there are many scholars who advance the claim that Jonson despised the medium he worked in. Una Ellis-Fermor writes:

As an artist and as a man, Ben Jonson was originally non-dramatic; at no time did he dramatize himself and it was only with some difficulty that he dramatized anything else. . . . There is, as it were, a deeply inherent non-dramatic principle in him. (Ellis-Fermor 1973, 99-100)

And:

All the other major dramatists [of the period] were artists by instinct, theatre-men by profession and moralists, if at all, by fits and starts. . . . In Ben Jonson the moralist came first—if only by a short length. (Ellis-Fermor 1973, 116)

Although Jonas Barish characterizes Jonson's attitude toward the theatre as one of ambivalence, he still makes several unequivocal statements—such as the one below—about Jonson's distaste for the theatre:

Wherever we look, then, within the plays or outside them, in structure or in moralizing comment, we find a distrust of theatricality, particularly as it manifests itself in acting, miming, or changing, and a corresponding bias in favor of the “real”—the undisguised, unacted, and unchanging. (Barish 1981, 151-52)

Even more recently, Leah Marcus has written that “Of all the major Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, [Jonson] was easily the most vocal in his contempt for the theatre as an institution” (Marcus 1995, 176). In addition to the aforementioned flaw in their logic, these arguments conveniently ignore certain aspects of Jonson's work while, at times, relying excessively on a single play to make generalizations about Jonson's entire oeuvre. For instance, the harsh punishment of the theatrical Volpone is harped on while the triumphs of the equally theatrical Dauphine and Face in *Epicoene* and *The Alchemist*, respectively, are given short shrift. Furthermore, these scholars struggle to account for Jonson's treatment of Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, a character in *Bartholomew Fair* who is ultimately rendered speechless during his attack on the theatre.<sup>1</sup> Finally, these arguments have a tendency to conflate Jonson's theoretical statements with his dramaturgical strategies. It is impossible to deny that Jonson's critical writings, prologues, and inductions demonstrate a certain hostility toward audiences and perhaps even the theatre as an institution; however, that does not mean that Jonson was unable to put aside these biases when they hindered his art. Like many moralists (and artists), Jonson did not always practice what he preached. In essence, to judge Jonson's plays on the basis of his prefatory matter is the equivalent of

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus even goes so far as to claim that Jonson feels a sense of kinship with Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, but her position relies on extratextual sources, such as prefatory materials and the suggestion that Jonson's biological father might have been a Puritan, while ignoring the more obvious and important evidence in the text.

judging a president based on his campaign speeches and not his actual policies. But perhaps the most powerful rebuttal of those who claim Jonson's work suffers from an antitheatrical prejudice came in 1660 when *Epicoene* was chosen as the first play to be performed once the theatres officially reopened after being closed by the Puritans for eighteen years. One would assume that for such an event only a play that celebrated the very idea of theatre would be selected, and so it is not without significance that the first actors to perform legally in England in almost two decades considered *Epicoene* to be the appropriate play for the occasion.

Another common critique of Jonson's playwriting is that his characters are not dramatically compelling. The primary criticisms of Jonson's approach to character are as follows: Jonson's characters possess no positive traits and are therefore impossible to emotionally invest in, and Jonson's characters are one-dimensional caricatures and lack the psychological complexity of characters found in works by his peers, most notably Shakespeare. Although these criticisms have surrounded Jonson's work for centuries, it was not until the Romantic period that they took root in the cultural zeitgeist and began to control the perceptions of scholars, theatre reviewers, and theatre practitioners. Undoubtedly, Jonson possessed a cynical view of humanity, and this can be seen in his decision to populate his best plays almost exclusively with rogues and gulls. For many, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the complete absence of virtue in Jonson's characters is problematic. Commenting specifically on *Volpone*, Coleridge states:

This admirable, indeed, but yet more wonderful than admirable, play is from the fertility and vigour of invention, character, language, and sentiment the strongest proof, how impossible it is to keep up any pleasurable interest in a tale, in which there is no goodness of heart in any of the prominent characters. After the third act, this play becomes not a dead, but a painful, weight on the feelings.<sup>2</sup> (Coleridge 1836, 2:276)

But why must plays be populated with decent characters? Many great modern dramas, from *The Threepenny Opera* to *Glengarry Glen Ross*, succeed precisely because the characters are despicable. Times have changed since the dictates of Sentimentalism, Romanticism, and Victorian morality prompted audiences to demand virtuous characters. We live in a cynical age where antiheroes and lowlifes have a great appeal on both the stage and screen, thus making now an ideal time to revive a writer as

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<sup>2</sup> Earlier in his thoughts on Ben Jonson, Coleridge admits that only *The Sad Shepherd* contains a character with whom he can "morally sympathize" (Coleridge 1836, 2:269).

misanthropic and jaded as Jonson.

As for the critique that Jonson's characters are one-dimensional, it is voiced most clearly by the nineteenth-century literary critic William Hazlitt. Blasting Jonson for writing caricatures and not characters, Hazlitt says:

His imagination fastens instinctively on some one mark or sign by which he designates the individual. . . . Each of his characters has a particular cue, a professional badge which he wears and is known by, and by nothing else. (Hazlitt 1845, 43-44)

And:

The titles of his dramatis personae, such as Sir Amorous La Fool, Truewit, Sir John Daw, Sir Politic Would-be, &c. &c., which are significant and knowing, show his determination to overdo everything by thus letting you into their characters beforehand, and afterwards proving their pretensions by their names. (Hazlitt 1845, 47)

Echoes of Hazlitt's diatribe can be seen a century later in the writing of Edmund Wilson, who writes:

Though he attempts a variety of characters, they all boil down to a few motivations, recognizable as the motivations of Jonson himself and rarely transformed into artistic creations. Shakespeare expands himself, breeds his cells as organic beings, till he has so lost himself in the world he has made that we can hardly recompose his personality. Jonson merely splits himself up and sets the pieces—he is to this extent a dramatist—in conflict with one another; but we have merely to put these pieces together to get Jonson, with little left over. (Wilson 1963, 62)

Some scholars, such as Anne Barton and Brian Woolland, have challenged this unflattering description of Jonson's approach to character. Barton argues:

Nothing has been more injurious to Jonson than his own formal dicta and theories. In particular, his loosely formulated (and inconsistent) theory of humours has told against him. Especially after Shakespeare's way of handling character became established as an ideal, the supposed tyranny of 'humours' has served to blind readers to the subtlety and humanity of mature Jonsonian characterization. (Barton 1984, x)

While Woolland claims:

Close work on the plays reveals many of Jonson's characters to be far more complex than is commonly acknowledged. They frequently attempt

to reconstruct themselves during the course of a play; and to see them as complex social constructions is far more productive than bemoaning their lack of psychological depth. (Woolland 1999, 93)

However, even Barton and Woolland, in their laudable attempts to find nuance in Jonson's characters, operate from the premise that a three-dimensional approach to character is superior to a one-dimensional approach, but this is not necessarily correct. Although certainly a more sophisticated method, the creation of psychologically complex characters is not always more effective at eliciting laughter from audiences. In fact, there are numerous examples to suggest that it is less effective. From Plautus to *commedia dell'arte* to Molière to Tina Fey's wildly successful sitcoms, there is a storied tradition of comedy that has delighted audiences with characters who possess only a single trait taken to a ridiculous extreme. Like Jonson, both Plautus and Molière use charactonyms to reveal character. Even the unimpeachable Shakespeare periodically resorts to this method of establishing character (Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Doll Tearsheet, etc.), yet neither he nor the other great comic dramatists have been repeatedly raked over the coals like Jonson has for this choice. In short, Jonson's decision to fill his plays with character types as opposed to people is not inherently negative. Rather, it has the potential to please audiences so long as actors embrace—as opposed to fight—the “overdone” nature of Jonson's characters.

Inverting Jonson's eulogy to Shakespeare, a third major critique of Jonson damns him for being of an age but not for all time. In other words, Jonson's plays suffer from an excess of topicality and are thus localized to the world of seventeenth-century England. While it is true that most of Jonson's comedies chronicle the realities of English life during the Elizabethan-Jacobean era, this does not mean that his plays are no longer relevant. Universal truths can be found in specific historical moments. Although often likened to Dickens and his humorous renderings of nineteenth-century English life, Jonson and his work have never been accorded the same status that has been awarded to the great novelist.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is because theatre, unlike the novel, exists only in the present moment; however, the more probable explanation has to do with the frequent false comparisons between Jonson and Shakespeare. These comparisons persist even into Jonson's tragedies. Writing about *Sejanus* and *Catiline*, Ellis-Fermor argues:

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that Dickens performed in Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*.

Both are Roman plays in a sense that is true of no other play of this period. . . . Jonson has again and again in *Sejanus*, and to almost equal extent in *Catiline*, subjected his imagination, and the result is two plays which are not Jacobean London transposed to a foreign setting but Rome itself, the Rome of Tacitus and Sallust not only in fact and historical detail, but in spirit. The Rome of *Julius Caesar*, of *Antony and Cleopatra*, is a world made by imagination ideally true; that of *Sejanus* and *Catiline* seems, by reproducing the psychological processes of another race and age, to give us a truth whose virtue lies, on the other hand, precisely in its actualness. (Ellis-Fermor 1973, 109)

By recognizing the virtue in Jonson's ability to capture specific moments in time, Ellis-Fermor is kinder to Jonson than many scholars, yet she still treats him like a journalist and not an artist capable of transforming the specific into something loftier. This repeated mischaracterization of Jonson as an observer devoid of imagination has left him confined to an age when in fact he is both of an age and for all time. Can one truly claim that *Volpone's* Venice, a nightmarish civilization in which greed is the only law, possesses no timeless characteristics? Similarly, Jonson's rendering of the Bartholomew Fair is not merely a chronicle of an annual event in Smithfield. Rather, it is a remarkable dramatization of the spirit of carnival, a demonstration of Jonson's belief that all the world's a fair. Even the house in Blackfriars, which provides the setting for *The Alchemist*, is a magical laboratory of transformation in which identity, dreams, and objects can change at a moment's notice. Thus, recognizing the ways in which Jonson's plays transcend the conditions of Elizabethan-Jacobean life is essential for Jonson's legacy, and it is something that theatre practitioners can assist with by staging his plays in ways that accentuate their timelessness.

One final critique of Jonson is that his plays are too lengthy to be enjoyed by today's audience. Of the four major criticisms leveled at Jonson, this is the most easily remedied. Dramatic texts are flexible and can be cut down for performance. Even Jonson acknowledges this, admitting that the published versions of *Every Man Out of His Humour* and *Sejanus* are markedly different from the versions performed on the English stage. Remarkably on this fact, Barish states that "Jonson, clearly, is thinking of [*Every Man Out of His Humour*] now as a reading experience rather than a theatrical experience, as a literary entity, with rules of its own that dispense it from such purely theatrical constraints as that on length" (Barish 1981, 137). Barish goes on to note that the published version of *Every Man Out of His Humour* runs 4,500 lines, which is significantly longer than any of the three *Hamlet* texts; and he then points out additions that Jonson makes to his other early plays: *Every*

*Man in His Humour*, *Cynthia's Revels*, and *The Poetaster*.<sup>4</sup> For Barish, this all constitutes evidence that Jonson is looking to preserve his plays as literature and not as performable texts. However, there are other ways of construing this. For instance, one can see it as evidence that Jonson is a dramatist who is acutely aware of what works best on the page and what works best on the stage. Furthermore, in Jonson's choice to expand his texts for print, one can find his endorsement of abridging them for performance. Length, though, is more than just an issue of line number. There is the objective length of a play as well as its perceived length. Reading Jonson can often be a slow and painstaking process with the reader flipping back and forth between the text and the notes.<sup>5</sup> Watching Jonson's plays, however, can and should be a very different experience. At their best, these works are chaotic and filled with rapid-fire entrances, exits, and costume changes. There is no way for a reader to experience this breakneck pace (sadly, all too often theatregoers do not get to experience this pace either due to a failure of direction); as a result, Jonson's writing has been mischaracterized as plodding and orderly. Thus, the key to solving the problem of length and unlocking Jonson's dramatic power can only be found in the pacing of a production. When viewers, like the characters, do not have a moment to catch their breath, questions about Jonson's unmanageable length begin to dissipate.

Each chapter in this collection is, in one way or another, a rebuttal of these common attacks against Jonson. Analyzing the production histories for *Sejanus* and *Catiline*, Katie Razor's "The Neglected Tragedies: Reviving *Sejanus* and *Catiline* for Contemporary Audiences" explores why these plays have failed to attract an audience and offers a way forward for practitioners interested in resurrecting these seldom performed works. In "Editing *Volpone* for the Modern Stage," Marshall Botvinick confronts the problem of length in *Volpone* and examines various editorial choices that can be made to mitigate this difficulty in performance. In

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<sup>4</sup> It is significant that Barish cites Jonson's earliest plays, which were written before he reached his creative peak. In stark contrast to the published versions of the early plays, the quarto and folio editions of *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* (arguably Jonson's two greatest plays) are highly stable and likely represent the plays as originally performed. This suggests not only Jonson's maturation as a dramatist but also his strong desire to ensure the performability of these specific texts in the future.

<sup>5</sup> For thoughts on how even the layout in modern editions slows the pace of Jonson's playtexts, see Cave, Richard. 1999. "Script and Performance." In *Ben Jonson and Theatre*, edited by Richard Cave, Elizabeth Schafer, and Brian Woolland, 23-32. London: Routledge.

“The Hard Work of Playing: Art and Authority in *The Alchemist*,” Derek B. Alwes refutes the claims of those who accuse Jonson of antitheatricalism and argues that the rogues function as the heroes of *The Alchemist* precisely because they affirm the joy and power of theatre. Finally, Emily Thompson’s “‘Fleshly Motion’: Puppets and the Performing Body in *Bartholomew Fair*” investigates the ways in which nonhuman entities, such as puppets, stage properties, and set pieces, become vital participants in this 1614 comedy. Taken cumulatively, these essays demonstrate the tremendous dramatic potential of Jonson’s plays and, I hope, offer a template for practitioners looking to harness that latent energy. Certainly, today’s theatre could benefit from more Ben Jonson in its offerings.







Will Houston as Sejanus with Senators in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2005 production of *Sejanus*. Photo by Stewart Hemley. (© RSC)

# THE NEGLECTED TRAGEDIES: REVIVING *SEJANUS* AND *CATILINE* FOR CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCES

KATIE RASOR

For more than four hundred years, Ben Jonson's reputation as a tragedian has been maligned. An unsigned review of *Catiline* from 1747 condemns the playwright as "hardly capable of moving an audience" (Anon. 1990, 413). As recently as 2005, Gary Taylor, writing for *The Guardian*, warns readers "Whatever you do, don't read Jonson's *Sejanus*" (Taylor 2005, 14). Theories about why Jonson, so widely lauded for his comedies, has faced such harsh censure for his tragedies abound. One popular theory is that he overemphasized historicity at the expense of plot and character. Richard Hurd articulates this position in his 1749 comparison of Shakespeare and Jonson. Looking at *Catiline*, Hurd writes, "But the poet was misled by the beauty it appeared to have in the original composition, without attending to the peculiar laws of the drama . . ." (Hurd 1990, 424). In a sentiment that echoes past critics and would be repeated by future ones, Hurd notes that long passages laden with direct translations of source material encumber Jonson's tragedies. To some degree, the criticisms of *Sejanus* and *Catiline* are true: Jonson focused more on historical accuracy than on creating a piece of entertainment, and in doing so he incited the hatred of the common viewer and the love of an elitist few. It is also true, however, that in these tragedies we see evidence of Jonson's comic genius and modern sensibility, and it is for this reason that these pieces merit revival. Practitioners must, as T.S. Eliot says, "approach Jonson with less frozen awe of his learning" and a willingness to prune in order for these plays to have new and vibrant life on the contemporary stage (Eliot 1932, 81). With the aim of discovering new life in these plays, this chapter will examine the production histories and critical positions regarding *Sejanus* and *Catiline*, identify the challenges posed by these texts, investigate the methods by which these obstacles have been or could be overcome, pinpoint the primary strengths of these tragedies, and explore how these virtues can be accentuated in performance.

The 1603 premiere of *Sejanus* is widely believed to have been a spectacular failure. In his stage history of *Sejanus*, Tom Cain notes that audiences probably did not even allow The King's Men to finish their production at the Globe, citing Francis Osborne's recollection that as a child he "hissed *Sejanus* off the stage" (qtd. in Cain 2014, 1). Further evidence of the play's initial failure can be seen in the prefatory materials found in the 1605 Quarto. John Marston implores friends to "spare your unneedful Bayes" (Marston 1990, 66), and a writer believed to be Edmund Bolton talks of the "people's beastly rage" (Bolton 1990, 101). Scholars have not been able to ascertain with any certainty what triggered such negative reactions since the script published two years later contained extensive revisions, which Jonson himself notes in his "To the Readers." Moreover, The King's Men were likely to have made cuts.<sup>1</sup>

There are theories, however, regarding what may have so offended the crowd's sensibilities. The first possibility is that the audience was put off by Jonson's emphasis on historical accuracy and fidelity in his translation of classical speeches. Cain explains that "Cordus's speech might have impressed those who recognised its source, but it can hardly have held the attention of those who did not appreciate its accuracy, and were not unreasonably looking for drama in the theatre" (Cain 2014, 2). William Fennor's "Description of a Poet" supports this possibility when he describes the reception of *Sejanus* by the grounded men "Like hissing snakes, adjudging [the production] to die; / When wits of gentry did applaud the same" (qtd. in Ayres 1990, 38). This seems to suggest that the educated classes may have held some appreciation for Jonson's work but were out-voiced by the majority.

An examination of historical circumstances offers a second explanation for the audience response. Premiering the same year that the popular and long-reigning Queen Elizabeth I died, the play may have triggered unfavorable parallels between Tiberius' potentially dangerous favoritism of Sejanus and the vying of Sir Walter Raleigh and the Earl of Essex for the aging, heirless queen's preference.<sup>2</sup> Philip J. Ayres' article "Jonson, Northampton, and 'Treason' in *Sejanus*" asserts that the rage the play incited did not have to do with parallels between the Queen and Tiberius but with those between Northampton's political enemy Raleigh, whose

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<sup>1</sup> See Cain's assertion in his production history of *Sejanus*.

<sup>2</sup> Fiona Mountford expresses this theory in "Empire of Bloodshed." Ayres acknowledges this theory but rejects it, stating that "the action against Jonson is unlikely to have had anything to do with a resemblance between the theme of *Sejanus* and the Essex rebellion, which was not a burning issue when the play was first produced" (Ayres 1983, 357).

treason trial occurred the same year, and Silius, the war hero who is unjustly tried for treason.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Cain observes that a “possible cause of the audience’s reaction . . . was not boredom, but over-simple political interpretations of the play” (Cain 2014, 2). “Over-simple” though this reading of the play may have been, it seems to have caused significant problems for Jonson, who was charged with treason and brought before the Privy Council.

Jonson’s cynicism offers a third potential cause of censure. In uncertain political times, Jonson refused to give his audiences the comfort of a resolution that reinforces the triumph of morality and order. While it is true that the wicked Sejanus’ death ends the arc of his character—an ending to be expected given the title—, Jonson reveals Tiberius, who suffers no punishment at the end of the play, to be the greater villain. Jonson even denies more noble characters, such as Agrippina, the potentially cathartic death scenes so often found in the Greek tragedies he sought to emulate. Instead, Livia quietly disappears, unpunished for her role in the murder of her own husband, while Sejanus’ previously unseen children suddenly materialize to pay for their father’s sins. Nameless and blameless, these children “Whose tenderness of knowledge, unripe years, / And childish silly innocence was such / As scarce would lend them feeling of their danger” are “drawn forth for farther sacrifice” (5.853-55, 852)<sup>4</sup> after the execution of their father. The savage rape of Sejanus’ young daughter before her murder is all the more upsetting in its facilitation by the newly powerful Macro as it eliminates any hope the audience may have had for him as a potential source of justice in Rome. Any satisfaction of seeing Sejanus brought to justice is overpowered by the unjust murder of his children and the grim knowledge that Tiberius’ vicious right-hand man has been replaced by someone possibly even more savage. Arruntius, the closest thing Jonson gives his audience to a relatable character in the play, receives no absolution for his passivity and no hope for the future. He is left friendless and powerless to watch the rise of a threat whose danger and unpredictability far surpass that of any individual we have seen thus far: the masses. He asks, “What says now my monster, / The multitude?” (5.889-90) and learns that the tide of mob opinion has again shifted and that now they weep for the man they have just killed. By the end of the play, Jonson has denied his audience order, justice, and hope. It is unsurprising then that Elizabethan audiences, accustomed to tidy and

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<sup>3</sup> See Ayres (1983, 358) for a more detailed discussion of the parallels between Raleigh and Silius.

<sup>4</sup> All references to *Sejanus* come from the text edited by Philp J. Ayres and published by Manchester University Press in 1990.

morally satisfying resolutions, may have chafed against this dark and humorless worldview.

An additional theory<sup>5</sup> about the negative audience response is that Jonson's method of characterization did not allow audiences to empathize with the protagonist. Indeed, when compared to more popular stage villains of Jonson's day—particularly those created by Shakespeare and Marlowe—, Sejanus reads as unsympathetic. Unlike Marlowe's Faustus, Sejanus' pursuit of a wife does not pause for a moment of bittersweet reflection. Instead he announces adultery to be “the lightest ill / I will commit” (2.150-51). He displays no inner turmoil for his role in murdering the obstacle to his desires as *Hamlet's* Claudius does in a pitiable moment of attempted prayer. Even Sejanus' attitude toward divinity is one of active hostility. He publicly ridicules a priest, bellowing: “Be thou dumb, scrupulous priest; / And gather up thyself, with these why wares, / Which I, in spite of thy blind mistress, or / Thy juggling mystery, religion, throw / Thus scorned, on the earth” (4.190-94). In addition to making his protagonist unrelatable, Jonson denies him charm. Marlowe allows an audience to admire Faustus' mischievous sense of humor as he wields his temporary magic to embarrass the powerful. Shakespeare draws the audience into Richard III's spell with his wit; however, Jonson reserves the cleverest lines in *Sejanus* not for the title character, but for the ineffectual Arruntius. Thus, having kept his audience from pitying or even liking the main character, Jonson may not have been able to sustain their interest and attention all the way to his fall.

The audience's attention might have survived the unlikeable protagonist if Jonson had not also denied them onstage action, particularly violence. In his desire to adhere to the conventions of classical tragedy by keeping the most extreme violence offstage, Jonson ignored the expectations of his audiences in what Anne Barton characterizes as his “perverse refusal to stage most of the episodes which his source material would suggest were central in Sejanus's bid for supreme power” (Barton 1984, 97). While history and plot provide ample opportunity to show the lethal results of Sejanus' machinations—be it Drusus' poisoning, Sabinus' execution, or ultimately the death of the title character and his family—, Jonson's

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth acknowledging that this theory may be somewhat influenced by the aesthetic preferences of later audiences—particularly those from the Romantic period forward—, but a comparison with more popular tragedies of the day is a reasonable way to extrapolate audience preferences during Jonson's day. Moreover, this theory is also relevant in the context of this chapter as these preferences apply to current and future audiences, and the objective of this essay is to examine ways to stage the play in a manner that is effective today.

audiences instead only hear about them second hand. In an era of exciting onstage violence, such as the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear* or the overwhelming carnage of *Titus Andronicus* with its numerous onstage deaths and acts of mutilation, Jonson's intransigent restraint must have disappointed or even enraged theatregoers.

Whatever the cause of *Sejanus'* inauspicious beginning, the fate of the play improved slightly during the 1600s. Cain observes that Jonson's 1616 letter to D'Aubigny indicates that *Sejanus* enjoyed at least a few performances before the theatres were closed in 1642; however, little else is known beyond that. "Equally scanty," he says, is the information about post-Restoration productions other than the fact that Thomas Killigrew's company did stage it (Cain 2014, 2). Then, aside from a seemingly unproduced eighteenth-century adaptation by Thomas Gentleman, the play went unnoticed for 250 years. In the early twentieth century, *Sejanus* made a quiet return to amateur and academic stages, beginning with a single-show production directed by William Poel. Despite receiving a positive review, Cain notes that "Poel's one-night production was never likely to cause a revival of interest in *Sejanus* itself" (Cain 2014, 3). Instead, he credits the University of Sussex and University of Cambridge productions in the 1970s as helping to resurrect the long-dead play. In 1988, a fourth production of *Sejanus* was performed under the direction of the soon-to-be famous Matthew Warchus in his directorial debut at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Cain notes that "between 1973 and 1988, *Sejanus* had as many different productions as it had had over the previous 250 years" (Cain 2014, 3). *Sejanus* then experienced its "most significant and almost certainly the most accomplished revival since The King's Men had first staged it" with the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2005 production, directed by Gregory Doran (Cain 2014, 4). The production was a success, receiving largely positive reviews and enjoying an extended run in London. Nicholas de Jongh's review in the *Evening Standard* calls the production "disturbingly fresh, sparky and relevant" (De Jongh 2006, 39) while Rebecca Tyrrel, writing for the *Sunday Telegraph*, credits Doran with creating a "high, exciting, bloody drama" (Tyrrel 2005, 9). In his review for *The Guardian*, Michael Billington praises Doran's "mastery," but says "what truly exhilarates is the rediscovery of a play that shows Jonson's understanding of both the practical mechanics and insane corruption of power" (Billington 2005, 28). Other reviewers echo Billington's enthusiasm for the script. Kristen McDermott, writing for *Theatre Journal*, says that "one hopes [the production's strengths] will inspire others to attempt productions of this play" (McDermott 2006, 129); and in his article for the *Ben Jonson Journal*, Ali Chetwynd predicts that

the success of the RSC production will “single-handedly revive *Sejanus*” (Chetwynd 2007, 100). However, a decade after the acclaimed revival of this long-shunned piece, no other professional productions have taken place.

Ironically, *Catiline*, which is now seen as the inferior tragedy, initially enjoyed much greater popularity than its predecessor. Based on Jonson’s introduction in the first quarto, the play, which premiered with *The King’s Men* in 1611, appears to have had a mixed reception but not the violent response that *Sejanus* encountered less than a decade prior. *Catiline* had an apparently successful revival in the early 1630s and again during the Restoration. The first revival during the Restoration on record was a 1668 production for Charles II, which may be best remembered for the lively social scandal it helped to exacerbate. According to Inga-Stina Ewbank and Eugene Giddens, the show “became a vehicle for factional conflict between the King’s mistress, Lady Castlemaine, and Lady Harvey, an ally of the Duke of Buckingham” (Ewbank and Giddens 2014, 2). Castlemaine contrived to have the actress playing the old and ugly Sempronia perform the character as a parody of Lady Harvey, causing the performer to be briefly jailed and then attacked with a barrage of oranges by Harvey’s allies upon her return to the stage.

The reception that the play itself received was not much warmer. The 1668 production also featured an epilogue performed by famed comic actress Nell Gwynn, playfully mocking Jonson’s lofty tone. Samuel Pepys’ diary entry after viewing the performance is even less complimentary. In his December 19, 1668 entry, he writes:

. . . saw “*Catiline’s Conspiracy*,” yesterday being the first day: a play of much good sense and words to read, but that do appear the worst upon the stage, I mean, the least diverting, that ever I saw any, though most fine in clothes; and a fine scene of the Senate, and of a fight, that ever I saw in my life. But the play is only to be read . . . (Pepys 1990, 269)

Ewbank and Giddens note that Pepys’ low opinion notwithstanding, the piece appears to have enjoyed regular productions over the next few decades. Although little is known about these productions and their reception, Ewbank and Giddens cite the existence of four quartos (1616, 1636, 1669, and 1674) as evidence of a positive overall response, noting that “the very presence of those reprintings points to audience interest” and that “even if the applause was not unanimous, Restoration audiences found something to admire in this tragedy” (Ewbank and Giddens 2014, 2-3). The last reference to stagings of *Catiline* during this period came in 1691 when Gerard Langbaine wrote that “This Play is still in Vogue on the



Stage, and always presented with success” (qtd. in Ewbank and Giddens 2014, 2). If it is possible to “jinx” a play, this assertion may have done it. Despite reprints of the script throughout the eighteenth century, *Catiline* fell out of favor and there has been only one recorded professional production since.

*Catiline* enjoyed a one-show resurrection on November 26, 1963.<sup>6</sup> Produced under the umbrella of the Royal Shakespeare Studio, the show took place in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre conference room for an audience primarily composed of the RSC artistic community, including Peter Brook. The production was directed by author, biographer, and critic Garry O’Connor when he was only twenty-three and working as an assistant director for the company. In a 2015 interview with O’Connor, he recalls having chosen the script after working on a main stage production of *Julius Caesar* starring Roy Dotrice, whom he believed would make an excellent *Catiline*. He describes the rehearsal process as being squeezed around the performance schedule of the cast, which in addition to Dotrice, featured Janet Suzman in her first year at the RSC as Fulvia, Derek Waring as Quintus, and Martin Jenkins as Cicero (O’Connor 1963). O’Connor made extensive cuts to the play so that it ran roughly sixty minutes without an intermission. O’Connor recalls that the production, done in a “Theatre of Cruelty” style with an emphasis on heightened characterization, induced the company to offer him more directing opportunities. Although Royal Shakespeare Studio pieces were generally produced as an implicit “try out” for the main stage, *Catiline* did not enjoy any further development at the RSC. Thus, like *Sejanus*, *Catiline* slipped out of the public eye. This leaves us to wonder: why?

As with *Sejanus*, many have deemed the text of *Catiline* unsuited for full production, often citing length as the major culprit. Richard Hurd’s assessment of *Catiline* highlights a primary pitfall in this vein: Jonson placed too much emphasis on the historical sources from which he drew his material. Citing Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, Hurd observes that in his slavish attention to historical detail, Jonson let the source shape the play instead of the other way around, thus violating Horace’s caution “not to follow the trite, obvious round of the original work” (Hurd 1990, 423). The solution here, as demonstrated in the 1963 staging of *Catiline*, is simple: practitioners must make the cuts that Jonson was unwilling to make.

For *Catiline*, O’Connor drew upon his strengths as a writer to shape the structure of the piece by cutting the text, condensing the scenes to four

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<sup>6</sup> This production is documented on the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust website’s production history of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

main locations, and intercutting a scene from Act 1 with text from Act 3 in order to introduce the rivalry between the title character and his foil, Cicero, earlier in the play. For *Sejanus*, director Gregory Doran took a different approach to reshaping, focusing more on trimming than reordering. Cain describes Doran's solution as follows: "By cutting about a quarter of the play as it was printed in 1605, and reducing the number of characters, particularly of Sejanus's time-serving followers, Doran greatly eased the demands on the audience's patience made by the long and accurate versions of Tacitus in which Jonson took such pride" (Cain 2014, 4). Straightforward as this solution may seem, it appears to have proved effective in production. Even with extensive cuts the show maintained a two-and-a-half-hour run time but managed to be praised for its quick pace—a commendation neither of the plays' original productions received.

The solution of judicious cuts applies equally well, if not better, to Hurd's second criticism: Jonson was too thorough in his literal translations of the original speeches and let himself become a "translator instead of imitator" (Hurd 1990, 423). Hurd notes that "the speeches of Cicero and Catiline, of Cato and Caesar are, all of them, direct and literal translations of the historian and orator, in violation of [Horace's] second rule" (423). In other words, a playwright should adapt the source material to fit the medium instead of focusing on word-for-word preservation of the original source. Similarly, Tiberius' Act 1 address to the senate in *Sejanus* derives almost directly from Tacitus' *Annals*.<sup>7</sup> The translations, while certainly impressive from an academic standpoint, encumber a production's pace and offer little of interest to today's theatregoers, the majority of whom have not studied Latin. Undoubtedly, these speeches were among O'Connor's and Doran's redactions as they prepared their scripts for production. Indeed, when asked about the primary challenge of staging *Catiline*, O'Connor readily cited the "very long speeches of Cicero" as weighing the script down (O'Connor, Personal Communication, 2015).

Hurd also notes that in *Catiline* the historian in Jonson seems to have overruled his judgment as a dramatist with his inclusion of not only the whole Catilinarian war, but also the trials and respective punishments of each individual conspirator—items of more historical than dramatic interest. In Jonson's day, knowledge of Roman history may have been common among males of the upper classes, but the groundlings certainly would not have enjoyed access to it. Although education may be more widely accessible in the West today, the focus has shifted away from classical history. This makes audiences even less likely to demonstrate an

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<sup>7</sup> See Ayres' footnotes on page 104 of the Manchester University Press edition.

enthusiasm for unadulterated historical accuracy now than they would have been in the seventeenth century. Moreover, without the benefit of a broader view of Roman history, scenes and characters which are not well-justified in the text risk confusing viewers trying to ascertain their relevance in the dramatic narrative. In critical responses to the RSC's *Sejanus*, this concern took shape in the observation that familiarity with Roman history is useful in one's appreciation of the play, if not strictly necessary. Citing the play's reputation for being "dauntingly cerebral," Fiona Mountford notes the "advantage" that would come from "a working knowledge of Claudio-Julian history" in her 2005 article for the *Evening Standard*; but then she immediately voices one of the solutions the production utilized when she suggests "some judicious studying of the family tree in the programme" (Mountford 2005, 39). Beyond the program and the cuts to the script, the RSC's production of *Sejanus* endeavored to overcome this hurdle by building some additional exposition into the show's opening. Doran's production opened with a dumbshow funeral for Germanicus, Tiberius' heir whom he is believed to have had poisoned. This choice helped to "contextualize" the play in Roman history and seems to have proven successful as only a few reviewers bemoaned their lack of historical knowledge.

Doran's staging choices also helped alleviate, if not altogether solve, another common complaint by modern critics: Jonson's refusal to stage the most exciting and bloodiest events. Fortunately, Doran set a model for updating the tragedies to fit the tastes of contemporary audiences by returning the action to the boards. For example, instead of allowing the audience to simply hear the news of Drusus' murder when Agrippina does, Doran had Tiberius' doomed heir "[run] mad and froth-mouthed across the stage after drinking the fatal draught" (Segal 2005, 25). Doran also took full advantage of what little violence Jonson did include onstage. He made sure that Silius' death was not simply shocking but gruesome. A blood pump positioned under the raked stage created a particularly gory sequence as the blood of the fallen Silius rolled downstage toward the audience,<sup>8</sup> a moment well-suited to contemporary audiences' appetite for violence and strong visual imagery.

Most significant, however, is how Doran chose to address the challenge of Tiberius' disappearance at the end of Act 3, a dramaturgical

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<sup>8</sup> Much of the information on the staging of violence in the 2005 RSC production of *Sejanus* comes from accounts given by Catherine Fannin Peel, Internal Education and Development Executive at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, in a 2015 phone interview as well as excerpts from the production prompt book and contact sheet, also supplied by Ms. Peel.

choice on Jonson's part that Barton labels "an enormous risk" (Barton 1984, 104). Doran solved this problem by having Tiberius read the letter that seals Sejanus' fate from a separate area on the stage instead of having the speech delivered by a messenger. This visually reinforced the shock of discovering that Tiberius is a more effective politician than Sejanus—or indeed the audience—had believed him to be. Doran then took this moment a step further by creating a reminder, or at the very least a clue, as to the future of Rome after the play has ended. In Doran's staging, Caligula, who would succeed Tiberius and become an even more depraved dictator than his predecessor, stood next to the emperor in that moment and watched his path to power grow clearer. While Caligula's presence might have had more significance for those with a background in Roman history, the mood it created was clear to the audience as a whole. Mountford notes that "even if one struggles to place every last senator, what is unmistakable is the atmosphere of mounting menace" (Mountford 2005, 37).

Mountford's observation that it is difficult to keep track of Jonson's minor characters in *Sejanus* may be indicative of Jonson's insistence on including even the unnecessary details of history in the text to its detriment; however, it is also worth noting the possibility that critics' challenge in sorting senators derives not from their limited knowledge of Roman history, but from the nature of the minor characters in the piece itself. The lack of differentiation between minor characters is a recurring refrain among reviewers of the RSC production and critics of the text. Decades before the 2005 production, William H. Webb in "The Conscious Art of Ben Jonson: *Sejanus* and *Catiline*" calls the characters in both of Jonson's tragedies "stick figures interacting in a historical world which fades further and further beyond the mental horizon of his audience as the centuries pass by" (Webb 1970, 71). In reviewing Doran's version, De Jongh refers to a "vast cast of largely characterless characters" (De Jongh 2006, 39) and Tyrrel notes that "sorting the sycophants from the dissenters in imperial Rome is a thankless task" (Tyrrel 2005, 9). However, Webb argues that Jonson's broadly drawn characters are, in fact, a deliberate choice on the part of the playwright to encourage the audience to carefully consider the arguments instead of empathizing with the characters, and he asserts that too much empathy for any given character risks softening an audience's rigid separation between right and wrong and distracting from Jonson's moral lesson:

[Jonson] uses the historical characters as drawn in history; he gives them no added dimension. . . . The result is the objective presentation of historical facts and therefore objective characterization. The audience is

left cold and judicious. . . . His drama demands a mentally alert audience. The completeness of the drama depends on their judgement. They must not be lulled into passivity; they must exhibit the calm reasonableness that is the mark of a moral man, for their judgement is a part of the drama itself. (Webb 1970, 5-6)

Indeed, in a post-Brechtian world, one sees the potential staging opportunities that could arise from leaning in to Jonson's desire to separate thought from emotion and incorporating the principles of Epic Theatre, articulated centuries after Jonson's death.

For *Sejanus'* first professional production in four hundred years, however, Doran and his production team took a more practical approach to the issue, using subtle differences in toga color to create a visual distinction between the two factions. This creative solution served a myriad of purposes. First, it helped allay audience anxiety about keeping track of teams by providing a color-coded "cheat sheet."<sup>9</sup> Second, this costuming choice helped achieve what Webb argues was Jonson's original goal: encouraging the audience to consider the ideas over the individuals. By grouping minor characters by color, they appropriately lose their individuality and come to be identified first and foremost by their beliefs and affiliation. As Tyrrel indelicately puts it: "And when the final reckoning comes . . . no one is going to give a poisoned fig who these plain politicians are anyway" (Tyrrel 2005, 9). Thus, Doran's staging allowed the actors to function in the largely realistic mode of performance for which the RSC is so favorably known while also giving Jonson's textual objective the benefit of visual reinforcement.

Additionally, this perceived drawback of broadly drawn minor characters actually proves advantageous for modern companies because it offers them casting flexibility, something of great value to small theatres that do not enjoy the Royal Shakespeare Company's funding and resources; with minimal effect on the pieces as a whole, these nondescript characters can often be cut or combined to significantly trim the cast size of the show, making production costs such as actors' salaries and costumes more manageable.<sup>10</sup> This is no small reprieve for plays that have a *dramatis personae* of more than forty characters. Moreover, the opportunity to eliminate minor characters enables the cutting of texts that

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<sup>9</sup> Costuming information is based on Tyrrel's description in her 2005 review.

<sup>10</sup> Pepys' *Diary* shows that the number of characters caused significant financial obstacles for the 1668 King's House production of *Catiline*. He notes that the call for "sixteen scarlet robes" induced the King to provide £500 for costumes and that the delay of those funds held up the production "for some time" (Pepys 1990, 269).

would otherwise have at least a three-hour runtime. Thus, the lack of specificity of the characters becomes a benefit for those seeking not only literal economy but also economy of time while trying to preserve the essence of Jonson's intent. As the characters may have been designed in part for their symbolic functionality, compressing two characters of similar views in no way undercuts Jonson's intent, nor should the combination of minor characters in any way detract from their other valuable function in Jonson's tragedies: comic relief.

For a tragedy *Sejanus* has moments of great levity. The most noted moments of comedy come, surprisingly, in the scenes surrounding Sejanus' fall. At line 399 of Act 5, a classic game of "telephone" begins as senators spread the rumor of Sejanus' impending award of tribunitia power, each swearing to secrecy and then immediately repeating the news to the nearest listener. Even the tense scene of Sejanus' downfall is infused with humor from the senators. Assembled in the Temple of Apollo to hear a letter they believe will further strengthen Sejanus' power over Rome, the senators visually manifest their sycophantism and petty ambition by jockeying for position near Sejanus' feet. As the scene progresses, however, and the letter takes a surprising turn by stripping Sejanus of his power, these same men gingerly scoot away from the fallen favorite, physically and metaphorically distancing themselves from him at line 625. It is moments like these that led Russ McDonald to observe that Jonson's tragedies were invaluable proving grounds for his comedies, going so far to as call Act 5 of *Sejanus* "a comedy in miniature" (McDonald 1981, 294).

While McDonald admires *Sejanus* primarily as the comic forbearer of Jonson's more popular plays like *Volpone*, the play is arguably a comedy on its own terms. The opening scene of *Sejanus* sets it apart from many historical tragedies of the era because the exposition is so rich with humor. Even as Silius provides necessary information regarding Sejanus' followers, he slides in scatological jokes, noting that they are "ready to praise / His lordship if he spit, or but piss fair, / Have an indifferent stool, or break wind well" (1.38-40). Jonson shows Silius, Arruntius, and Sabinus, the voices of discontent and opposition to Sejanus, to be a wellspring of comedy. They regularly heckle senatorial meetings, sometimes until just moments before their own downfalls. Jonson has built these moments of humor directly into the script, requiring only that they be staged to achieve the full impact of what Gary Taylor calls the "first great political cartoon in English" (Taylor 2005, 14).

Recognizing the potential humor embedded in the text, Doran chose to emphasize Jonson's gift for comedy in the RSC's *Sejanus*. The unexpected