

JONSON: OXFORD'S CHIEF ADMIRER

By Richard Malim

More coverage needs to be given to the argument that Ben Jonson was a supporter of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, as the author of the works of 'Shakespeare', especially as it appears to be 'orthodox' policy that any such connection should be ignored or suppressed. Kevin Gilvary detailed this attitude in depth,¹ and Bryan Wildenthal has pointed out that the recent Folger Folio Tour Exhibition managed not to mention Jonson at all,² notwithstanding that there is at least a majority view that he was the principal editor of the 1623 First Folio, as well as the composer of the Hemmings and Condell letters in the Preface as discussed by Donaldson³ (370). Alexander Waugh reveals on his YouTube channel that Jonson is covertly referred to as the editor of the 1623 Folio by Abraham Holland's Latin poem under Jonson's portrait at the front of the second edition of Jonson's *Works* 1640.⁴ The poem contains the line: *Vindex ingenii recens sepulti* – 'the recent vindicator of the buried genius'. This must be confusing to the orthodox scholar: why does that genius (allegedly in the forefront of the nation's literature from 1593 on) need a vindicator in 1640?



Oxfordian literature tends to be in favour of a close relationship bordering on hero-worship on Jonson's part, culminating in the vast responsibility and labour of the editorship, together with the comprehensive Ode, of the 1623 Folio, and shown in such references to Oxford as Virgil in *Poetaster* V. i. and to his 'playbooks' in *The Devil Is An Ass* II. i. as discussed in the 2011 *DVS Newsletter*.⁵ Jonson acted as Oxford's hatchet man in the total evisceration of the armigerous 'gentleman' Shaksper in *Every Man Out Of His Humour*. In the 'Latten Spoons' story we see Oxford preparing a Christening present for Jonson's short-lived baby son.⁶

Mutual antagonism of Jonson and Oxford/Shakespeare towards Essex

We can line up many writers such as Thomas Watson, John Lyly, Thomas Nashe, Ben Jonson, John Marston, Everard Guilpin, Francis Beaumont and (later) George Chapman as Oxford's admirers and supporters. Edmund Spenser and the followers of Philip Sidney are (to an extent) literary opponents: see 'Band of Brothers' report in the January 2021 *DVS newsletter*⁷ and Ian Johnson's book *Renaissance Man*.⁸ Oxford's chief enemies are Robert Devereux, the 2nd Earl of Essex and Henry Howard, afterwards Earl of Northampton. I need hardly deal with Howard who is shown as one of the accused denounced by Oxford before the Queen way back in 1581.⁹

Essex is another matter, and Jonson can be shown as a non-supporter of him too. First of all, there was probably no one Oxford hated more – and with good reason¹⁰ – which he indulged with his portrait of Essex as Achilles (Essex's admirers' name for him) in *Troilus and Cressida*. Notwithstanding his fall and subsequent execution in March 1601, Essex's reputation continued to hold up strongly, especially as the new King James in the first year of his reign 1603 restored to favour all those (survivors) who had been Essex's supporters. Samuel Daniel's *Philotas*, which was thought to be pro-Essex was brought to the attention of the Privy Council.¹¹ Chapman's second tranche of Homer translations *The Shield of Achilles* 1598¹² was dedicated to Essex (as Earl Marshall at the time) and shows considerable bias towards Achilles, which was the sobriquet his admirers gave to Essex (contrast Oxford's denigration of Achilles in *Troilus And Cressida*; everyone knew who he meant). But in 1613 Chapman published his play *The Revenge of Busy D'Ambois* with the famous poem to the long dead Oxford, 'I over-tooke, coming from Italie, In Germany, a great and famous Earl...' ¹³ Jonson, who was always anxious to maintain his reputation as a scholar, and Oxford therefore appear to have decided to write a play to forward both their interests. Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall* comes into existence with Jonson's concordance of Latin references in the 1605 printed edition. Donaldson³ (181) correctly suggests that the acting edition was written earlier. There is no record of its reception but it is significant that it was not revived, possibly explained by a note in Jonson's own introductory letter in the printed edition of *Sejanus*:

Lastly, I would inform you, that this book, in all numbers is not the same with that which was acted on the public stage; wherein a second pen had a good share: in the place of which, I have chosen to put weaker, and, no doubt, less pleasing, of mine own, than to defraud so happy a genius of his right by my loathed usurpation.

The first *prima facie* point is that Jonson obviously thinks the printed version is a less worthy effort than the one in which ‘the second pen’ had a share: perhaps this was the reason, coupled with the residuary worship of Essex’s reputation, why there was no revival of this lesser effort. Jonson finishes the Prologue to *Sejanus* by quoting Horace (*Epistles* II. i. 180): ‘*Quem / Palma negate macrum, donate reducit optimum*’ – He to whom / The palm denied receives poverty [in reputation], while the awarded one receives riches.

Secondly, Jonson was usually anything but complimentary to his fellow dramatists, except to Beaumont – see *Epigram* LV: ‘How I do love thee *Beaumont*, and thy muse ...’. John Fletcher is another exception (at first): he received Jonson’s consolation after the failure of his *Faithful Shepherd* in 1610 – rapidly forfeited by *The Tamer Tamed* 1612, Fletcher’s highly offensive ‘take’ on *The Taming of the Shrew* – i.e. highly offensive to the Oxford loyalist in Jonson who in revenge makes him, in my opinion that is, the butt of *Epigram* LVI: ‘Poor poet-ape, that would be thought our chief ...’. I match this with two other Jonson comments on Fletcher, the first in the Prologue to his *The Sad Shepherd*, his riposte to Fletcher’s *The Faithful Shepherd* (‘Where he like poet yet remains, as those / Are painters who can only make a rose’) and the second in his Prologue to the 1634 printed version of *Two Noble Kinsmen*.⁵ Jonson’s usual attitude of complete contempt is reflected (and Wikipedia confirms this view as widely accepted) in the caricature Chrisoganus in the anonymous (probably by Marston) *Histrionastix* 1599, whose contempt for the writers of the players’ company, as compared to the freelance plays-at-the-drop-of-a-hat Posthaste who does not charge them (and who is he supposed to be?) is portrayed in the play as ‘infinite’.

Thirdly, ‘the second pen’, that superior ‘so happy a genius’, is no longer available: the obvious explanation that this writer has died since the staging of the acting version, and here Oxford’s death in June 1604 fits perfectly, as well as justifying the contention as to Jonson’s dedication to Oxford’s memory.

So, the missing link is Jonson's attitude to Essex, which I suggest followed Oxford's. I have to overcome Donaldson's opinion (190):³

Though Jonson's tragedy concerns the downfall of a court favourite, there can have been little correspondence in Jonson's mind between the deserved fate of the corrupt Sejanus [the favourite of the Roman Emperor Tiberius 14-37 AD] and the sudden fall from grace of the 'noble and high' Essex.

In writing that, Donaldson might have considered the attitude of 'the multitude' (who have torn Sejanus apart). In the final scene the messenger says:

Part are so stupid, or so flexible,
As they believe him [Sejanus] innocent; all grieve;
And some whose hands yet reek with his warm blood,
And gripe the part that they did tear of him,
Wish him collected and created new

While Sejanus' fall was rather more sudden than that of Essex, there is a clear correspondence in their reputations' post-mortem fates. Donaldson, however, relies on what he believes to be the genuineness of the content of the so-called *Drummond Conversations* 1711¹⁴ where one of the quotations also relied on by all orthodox commentators refers to *Sejanus*:¹⁵

Northampton [Henry Howard] was his mortall enimie for brauling on a St George's Day [said to be the day in April 1605 on which Howard was inducted into the Order of the Garter] with one of his attenders; he was called before the Council for his *Sejanus* and accused both of popperie and treason before the Council by Northampton.

This can be picked out as one of the many egregious errors evidencing the *Conversations* as a fraud. Northampton was throughout his life a covert Catholic, and after the Gunpowder Plot would be most anxious not to attract any attention. Indeed, he was to serve as one of the conspirators' judges. The other problem is that there is no other evidence let alone a note of the Privy Council record of Jonson's alleged appearance. By 1605 he was scarcely in the Sejanus position obtained by the King's favourites, Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset and, later in the reign, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. Northampton had numerous faults but adultery (let alone matrimony or women generally) appears not to have been one of his pursuits;¹⁶ but adultery was one of Essex's many sins which attracted Oxford's attention – especially as one of the women was his own

(putative) daughter, the wife of the Earl of Derby, who was known for literary interests similar to Oxford's. As he plots the death of the Emperor's likely successor by way of the seduction of his wife, Sejanus soliloquises:

Adultery! It is the lightest ill
I will commit. (II. ii. 12, 13)

This offhand attitude would not commend itself to Oxford, let alone Jonson, the faithful husband (at least to 1605 – and the contrary evidence thereafter is hardly persuasive), and is effectively denounced.

In Jonson's works, Essex most notably does not merit a mention, save that there is a slight reference in Jonson's posthumous *Discoveries* in a paragraph noted as 'scriptorum catalogos':¹⁷

Cicero is said to be the only wit that the people of Rome had equalled to their Empire. *Ingenium per Impero*. We have had many, and in their several Ages (to take in the former seculum)... Sir Nico: Bacon was singular, and almost alone in the beginning of Queen Elizabeth's times. Sir Philip Sidney, and Mr. Hooker (in different matter) grew great masters of wit and language; and in whom all vigour of Invention, and strength of judgment, met. The Earle of Essex, noble and high; and Sir Walter Rawleigh, not to be contemn'd either for judgment and stile. Sir Henry Savile, grave and truly letter'd ...

Oxford/Shakespeare is praised to the heights in an earlier passage (... for I loved the man, and do honour his memory on this side idolatry). Essex has that one perfunctory reference in the whole of the surviving oeuvre of Jonson. 'Noble and high' might ring a bell: Sejanus describes himself when he imagines himself totally untouchable at the moment just before the roof falls in on him as 'Great and high' (*Sejanus* V. i. 5). Jonson's little private joke to himself and the shade of Oxford?

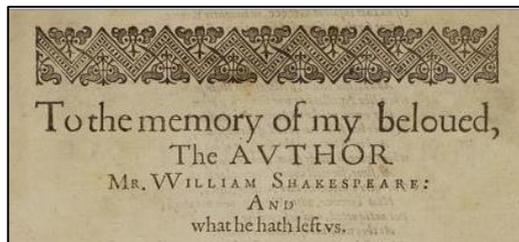
While Oxford was alive Jonson might have sufficient social protection in most circumstances: once Oxford was dead in June 1604, he had to be careful. He did manage to incorporate under the introductory letter quoted above a reference to Shakespeare/Oxford, and by suggesting that he was an actor in *Sejanus* using the name 'Will. Shake-Speare', implying a pseudonym. This looks like one of his many efforts to keep the memory of Oxford alive. Twelve years or so later, in the 1616 edition of his collected works the version of the actor's

name is shown without the hyphen and medial capital 'S' (by this time Shaksper would have been almost forgotten in London, with his bogus memory-resurrecting propaganda awaiting the 1623 Folio, with a list of actors including 'William Shakespeare' in first place).

Now it may be that such was the pro-Essex sentiment in London streets after 1601 that *Sejanus* might well have received a rough public reception. On the other hand, Jonson had put an enormous amount of work into it and would want the scholarly admixture preserved. Artful and clever, he devised the prologue to the printed version, making out that he was suppressing elements of Oxford's contribution, which might well have been vitriolic against Essex thinly veiled behind the Sejanus character, preserving the scholarly commentary and distancing himself for safety's sake from too strong an apparent anti-Essex perspective. Of course, there might have been no apparent contribution at all from Oxford but that would never seem to have been Jonson's policy towards Oxford, i.e. to use his name vaguely dishonestly. So, *Sejanus* is gutted, losing any Oxfordian panache, and ceases to be much of a weapon in the hand of Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, however much he might have wanted revenge against Oxford, or of anyone else.

Jonson's relationship with Oxford

The final word surely on Jonson's attitude to Oxford is brought in the Ode in the preface to the 1623 Folio entitled 'To the memory of my beloved' with the emphasis on 'The AUTHOR' rather than his name:



To draw no envy, Shakespeare on thy name
Am I thus ample to thy book and fame;
While I confess the writings to be such
As neither man nor muse can praise too much:

In the light of that one might think that there could be nothing further to say, save that, if Jonson was indeed the editor, he must have devoted an enormous scholastic effort in admiration (why else?) to carrying out the editorial task.

Nevertheless, there were murmurings (and no doubt wonderings) as to why a man like Jonson was quite so self-abasing to a fellow playwright. The beginning of the alleged antagonism was fanned by John Dryden who described Jonson's 1623 Ode as 'an insolent, sparing, and invidious [envying?] panegyric',¹⁸ and these views were taken up by Shakespeare's first biographer Nicholas Rowe, who writes of Jonson's 'proud and insolent nature', and of his inability to look but 'with an evil Eye upon anyone that seem'd to stand in competition with him' with undercurrents of reserve, 'insinuating his Uncorrectness, a careless manner of Writing and want of Judgment'.¹⁹ Schoenbaum²⁰ (96, 97) details the progress of these opinions and by 1728 Alexander Pope is quoted as being of the opinion that Jonson and Shakespeare lived in enmity against one another.

Perhaps the lines in the Ode in First Folio of Shakespeare's plays:

And *though* thou *badst* small Latin and less Greek,
From thence to honour thee I would not seek
For names but call forth thund'ring Aeschylus ...

appear to mislead, but '*though*' here means 'even if [which is not the case]' and '*badst*' is a conditional subjunctive (otherwise Jonson the Classicist would have written 'I *will* not seek ...' in the next line). Aeschylus and co. resurrected by Jonson to honour Shakespeare as an actor and as a writer 'Leave thee [Shakespeare] alone for the comparison' with all the Classical authors and their successors could throw at him. The damage caused by the misreading of '*though*' percolates into modern times, even though C. M. Ingleby (1823-84), the author of the first version of *The Shakspeare Allusion Book*,²¹ exposed the error over a hundred years ago.

With the building-in of the Stratford-upon-Avon fairy tale, the diseased scenario began to breed and multiply (Schoenbaum 97)²⁰ and it became received biography that the author was 'as Jonson tells us, without learning' (Dryden²² – did he seriously believe that?). Dryden was followed by Rowe¹⁸ (1709) and Pope²³ (1725) in their editions of Shakespeare, and the nadir of appreciation of

Shakespeare's scholarship was reached by Richard Farmer in the *Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare*, 1767.²⁴ According to Schoenbaum²⁰ (185), Edmond Malone does not seem to place much credence on these opinions.

In 1808 Octavius Gilchrist (1779-1823),²⁵ a minor critic, reviewed at length these and other items in Jonson's works which critics have from time to time sought to show corroboration for Jonson's alleged attitude, as well as Malone's approach. The scenario had received a fillip with the publication of the works of Sir William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649) in an edition dated 1711, with which were included the famous (or rather infamous, for it is clearly a piece of fakery) *Drummond Conversations*.²⁶ However, there are two references to Shakespeare which the fakers put into the mouth of Jonson: 'That Shakspear wanted Arte' – a statement readily ruled out once the 1623 Ode is consulted; and 'Sheakspear, in a play, brought in a number of men saying they had suffered shipwrack in Bohemia, where there is no sea neer by some 100 miles.' Elsewhere I have shown that there is no reference in the play (*The Winter's Tale*) to the sea and the place of the wreck can be shown on the Danube (Malim, 272 n.28).¹⁰ Oxford/Shakespeare does not make that sort of mistake.

I hope my substantive essay in *Brief Chronicles* 6 in 2015¹⁴ and earlier in the November 2012 *DVS Newsletter*²⁶ would have demolished the claims of authenticity in the account of Jonson's visit to Scotland and his alleged conversations with Drummond. I submitted to Professor Donaldson, the leading Jonson expert and biographer, my essay shorn of its Oxfordian conclusions, under the impression that my assumptions and conclusions are sustained by evidence or by logic based on that logic: he defended the authenticity of *The Conversations* in his book,³ (447 n.39) tells me my essay is full of unwarranted assumptions and conclusions but declining to exemplify in any respect. I was not the first to question their authenticity: in 1925 C. L. Stainer²⁷ published a booklet of denunciation: unfortunately, it was so devoid of logical arrangement that, although the overwhelming majority of all the points against *The Conversations* can be found in it, one almost feels sorry for its orthodox readers. Anyway, the contemporary scholars satisfied themselves that they had no difficulty in disposing of Stainer's thesis, and Donaldson³ (447 n.39) and other modern scholars are happy to follow that lead. And so I left the controversy, adding only

that ‘Drummond’ suggests that Jonson was hauled before the Privy Council for ‘popperie’ presumably to do with *Sejanus*: and that there is no independent evidence, let alone relevance. Donaldson (190)³ wedded to the fraudulent Drummond *Conversations*, admits that much:

Given these uncertainties, it is not easy to know precisely what the fuss was about when Jonson was summoned before the Privy Council, and how the charges of ‘popery and treason’ were sustained. Though Jonson’s tragedy concerns the downfall of a court favourite, there can have been little correspondence in Jonson’s mind between the deserved fate of the corrupt Sejanus and the sudden fall from grace of the ‘noble and high’ Essex.

Gilchrist was anxious to show that commentators including Malone seriously erred in thinking that there was envy, animosity and rivalry between Ben Jonson and [Oxford writing as] Shakespeare, and this is a thesis that should particularly appeal to Oxfordians. Indeed, on the first page of his essay, Gilchrist says, ‘For the honour of literature for respect and veneration which I bear towards these great poets, I trust this tradition so honourable to both, is founded in truth.’ He need not have worried if he had known of Oxford’s authorship. He reviews at length his miserable efforts to find any such in Jonson’s writings. It is right to point out, as Gilchrist does, that Jonson’s alleged offensive attitude to Shakespeare is not supported by Theobald, Warburton or Dr. Johnson (7) or even Farmer himself quoted by Gilchrist (16).²⁵ On page 59-60 he writes:

One circumstance in the history of Jonson’s life is too illustrative of the friendly ardour to be omitted here. When in his [forty]seventh year, he undertook a journey on foot into Scotland for the express purpose of visiting the poet of Hawthornden. Ben appears to have dealt with fond remembrance on the occurrences of this excursion and had formed them into a narrative which perished by fire; I say unfortunately, for had it been preserved we could then have contrasted the rough and manly generosity of Ben towards Drummond with the posthumous libel with which that testy sonneteer has disgraced himself and traduced the memory of his friend. In their conversations Drummond drew from the blunt and unreserved mind of Ben the censure of the poets his contemporaries; which he gave with candour,

and which are for the most part, just; not suspecting that Drummond (“the acute and amiable Drummond” as Mr. Chalmers [George Chalmers, 1742-1825²⁸] calls him, who was anything but acute, and then anything but amiable) was treasuring these overflowings of the poet’s mind for the unworthy purpose of slandering the memory of Ben when he was numbered with the dead: – to his own eternal shame, and the reproach of hospitality.

These conversations are found in a worthless edition of Drummond’s works. Printed in Edinburgh in folio in 1711: and *if the relation is genuine* it will leave an indelible stamp of disgrace on the reputation of the recorder ...

As a footnote, Gilchrist writes (60),²⁵ ‘A contemporary [who, thanks to the internet can be identified as the Rev. Nathaneel Whiting 1617-82] who knew Drummond a little better than Mr. Chalmers calls him, “Testy Drummond” in a defence of poesy appended to “The most Pleasing Historie of Albino and Bellama” 8vo 1639.’

George Saintsbury suggests that Whiting’s opinions of 1640 ‘taste’ are not quite worthless, and while the absence of Jonson is noteworthy, the presence of Drummond is almost equally so, as well as the mention of that ‘testiness’, which certainly does appear in the poet of Hawthornden?²⁹

Gilchrist is supported by the critic William Gifford (1756-1826) who writes,³⁰

It is my fixed persuasion, not lightly adopted ... that Jonson and Shakspeare [sic] were friends and associates till the latter finally retired; – that no feud, no jealousy ever disturbed their connection; – that Shakspeare was pleased with Jonson, and that Jonson loved and admired Shakspeare.

I note that there was a question mark in Gilchrist’s mind about the authenticity of the *Drummond Conversations* even before the longer manuscript version dated to 1702 was found in the 1830s, which only multiplies problems for Jonson biographers, and gave Stainer and me much more ammunition.

I dare hope that there will appear a new biography of Jonson discarding the *Drummond Conversations* and re-establishing the devotion of Jonson to

Shakespeare in mainstream scholarship, but I have to note Schoenbaum's sympathetic summary (97),²⁰ 'Nevertheless, dark suspicions of Jonson's evil eye would not so easily succumb to rational scorn'. Anyway Donaldson (24) is happy to write, '[*Drummond Conversations*] form the richest single primary source of information about Ben Jonson's life, the basis on which all modern biographical accounts *necessarily* [my emphasis] depend'. My essay above cannot expect to receive any 'orthodox' criticism in depth, because Donaldson owns greater sway in Jonsonian study circles than Wells and the Stratford Birthplace mob have for the Stratford man's.

But in summary: wrong, 180° wrong.

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