

Winter 2010

Review of Cousins, A. D. and Alison V. Scott, eds.
"Ben Jonson and the Politics of Genre,"
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Andrew Vorder Bruegge, *Winthrop University*

THE
**SIXTEENTH
CENTURY
JOURNAL**
The Journal of Early Modern Studies

Volume XLI, No. 4
Winter 2010



0361-0160(201024)41:4;1-G

Ben Jonson and the Politics of Genre. Ed. A. D. Cousins and Alison V. Scott. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 218 pp. \$90.00. ISBN 978-0-521-51378-4.

REVIEWED BY: Andrew Vorder Bruegge, Winthrop University

The editors assert that this volume of essays expands critical study of Jonson by examining his conscious choices of genre to address his political views to diverse audiences. These essays track Jonson's awareness of the potentially dangerous, self-destructive nature of his politics and then show how he shaped the expression of his views into palliative forms. Hence, Jonson's use of genre marks his successful management of the tensions among his own politics, the politics of his audiences and patrons, and the politics of the state. The editors conclude that these essays reveal Jonson as a hard-driving humanist who knew when to rein in his views.

Contributors include an international mix, including Americans Eugene Hill, Robert Evans, Richard Dutton along with Tom Cain and John Roe from United Kingdom, and Australians A. D. Cousins, Marea Mitchell, and Alison Scott. Evans, Mitchell, and Hill give important attention to elements of the Jonson canon that scholars have rarely investigated—*Timber*, or *Discoveries*. The text includes a comprehensive bibliography (ranging from the likes of Erving Goffman to the ubiquitous Stephen Greenblatt) and an index.

A. D. Cousins' "Feigning the Commonwealth: Jonson's *Epigrams*" and Tom Cain's "Jonson's Humanist Tragedies" together form the bedrock of the text. They convincingly show that Jonson's political views arose directly out of his classical orientation. Jonson yearned for the virtuous attributes of the Roman republic (liberality, constancy, self-sacrifice) and demanded freedom for all artists. Such freedom of speech would allow artists to present wise, classically supported arguments about the proper administration of the state (Horatian "teaching") through satiric ridicule of corruption and exaltation of utopian ideals of national heroism (Horatian "pleasing").

Alison Scott's "The Jonsonian Masque and the Politics of Decorum," Robert Evans' "The Politics (and Pairings) of Jonson's Country House Poems," and Richard Dutton's "Jonson's Metempsychosis Revisited: Patronage and Religious Controversy" probe further into Jonson's use of genre to modulate his always-fuming resentments toward the *status quo*. These writers all analyze various techniques Jonson used to dial down his rage. Scott extols his effective use of *kairos*, what she terms as a creative response to a given situation—in this case his masques. She notes Jonson's use of decorum in his rhetoric that counterbalances the substance of classical authority against the vulgar triviality of the overall theatrical event. Future scholarship might expand her thesis to a discussion of the decorous aesthetics of the theatrical world that embodies the rhetoric of any early seventeenth-century masque. There may be *gravitas* in the theatrical rhetoric equal to that of the discursive rhetoric. Evans suggests that Jonson is equally facile with panegyric or satire in his "country house" poems to make his point that political best practices arise from ethical and religious foundations. Dutton scrupulously catalogues Jonson's subtle use of classically based literary code in *Volpone* that allows him to mock specific political leaders and political events.

The volume considered as a whole strongly argues that Jonson worked consciously, relentlessly, and astutely to communicate his political views through the medium of poetry (in the broad, humanist meaning of that word). Each contributor shows how Jonson carefully chose his audience, carefully considered that audience's politics, carefully chose the best rhetorical genre to speak to that audience, and carefully employed every rhetorical/literary tool in his vast intellectual arsenal to persuade that audience. Nevertheless, as John Roe asserts in "Style, Versatility, and Politics of the Epistles," Jonson revealed himself to be selfish as often as he was genuinely earnest. Indeed, his own self-promotion or perceived

aesthetic snobbery would defeat his ambition. Moreover, his surgical precision as a rhetorician/artist meant that he would neglect or even alienate important demographics. Tom Cain observes in “Jonson’s Humanist Tragedies” that Jonson targeted one particular element—the intelligentsia and Inns of Court crowd—within the roiling, diverse, theatre audience of Jacobean London. While he made himself a cozy ally of like-minded and similarly educated antimonarchist peers, too many of his paying customers voted with their feet. Naturally, such a turn of events would only hasten the downward spiral of Jonson’s artistic fortunes. The essays in this text inspire the reader to marvel at Jonson’s courageous zeal to promote civic virtue, even if he might have been unaware of the damage he did to his own cause through his abrasive satiric tone, his alien continental tastes, or his provocative politics.

RON S. J. O’NEILL