# TWO CRITICAL ERRORS
# IN THE STUDY OF BEN JONSON'S NONDRAMATIC POETRY

by

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# ABSTRACT

This essay argues that two influential accounts of Ben Jonson's nondramatic verse are mistaken. The first account, shared by several critics, claims that Jonson feigns a commonwealth in his poetry. The second account, put forward by Stanley Fish, argues that Jonson hints at and engenders a community of the same in his poetry of praise. Both accounts suffer from a failure to carefully attend to Jonson's words. The first account fails to consider the meaning of Jonson's phrase “feign a commonwealth.” The meaning of that phrase, as used by several other Renaissance writers, suggests that Jonson does not feign a commonwealth. In the second account, Stanley Fish offers several tendentious interpretations of Jonson's poetry, and, on occasion, disregards the integrity of the texts of Jonson's poems. Combined with his deliberate equivocation and obfuscation, these flaws undo his argument that Jonson gestures at a community of the same. The essay concludes with a call for greater philological probity and sensitivity in the study of Jonson's nondramatic verse.

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# INTRODUCTION

This essay on Ben Jonson's nondramatic verse falls short of the ideal. An ideal essay would present a clear and comprehensive view of Jonson's poetry, enabling the attentive reader to understand Jonson's poetry. The author would guide the reader to an understanding of Jonson's verse, but he would not initiate the reader into the disputes of the academy. Although he would have sharpened his perception through engagement with critical and scholarly disputes, he would relegate any discussion of those disputes to the notes. His style would be calm and masterly. If he could not write *sub specie aeternitatis*, he would write as a *magister*. In short, he would approach the style of Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis,* but he would have freely chosen his style, rather than having it forced on him by the necessities of exile.

My essay, however, does not approach the magisterial ideal. Although I have read and learned from many perceptive pieces of Jonson criticism, I have found some that have obstructed my understanding of his verse. This essay seeks to remove some of those obstructions, in order to prepare the ground for a clear view of Jonson's poetic art. Thus, my essay primarily discusses the work of other literary critics, making it more disputatious than is customary in literary criticism. In defense of this practice, I can do no better than to cite the *credo* of another distinguished German romance philologist, Leo Spitzer:

> I believe that *discussion* of a given theory of a particular critic by fellow critics, detailed criticism of a specific piece of work—a habit that in our days of anarchy, spiritual isolation, and private language tends more and

> more to disappear from our scholarly journals—can give as valuable results as in strictly linguistic matters. The *consensus omnium* is as much an ideal for the explanation of poetry as it is for etymological investigation. (204-205)

With Spitzer's *credo* in mind, I discuss two of the most influential theories in Jonson criticism. The first, found in the work of several critics, is that Jonson feigns a commonwealth in his nondramatic poetry. The second, put forward by Stanley Fish, is that Jonson engenders and hints at a community of the same in his poems of praise. Although these claims originated several decades ago, both continue to influence critical appreciations of Jonson's poetry, finding their way into introductory works, such as *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*. But despite an influence which suggests widespread critical agreement, both claims are mistaken. It is the task of this essay to demonstrate that assertion.

In the first chapter, I argue that Jonson does not feign a commonwealth in his nondramatic verse. The claim that he feigns a commonwealth seems to result from the laudable desire to interpret a poet through his own words. In *Discoveries,* Jonson writes, in part, that "he which can feign a commonwealth . . . is the poet." Critics cite this passage to describe Jonson's poetry as a feigned commonwealth. By citing Jonson's own words, they further suggest that Jonson understood his own art in terms of a feigned commonwealth. But a survey of English Renaissance literature reveals that Renaissance authors usually apply the the notion of a feigned commonwealth to either Plato's *Republic* or Sir Thomas More's *Utopia.* But whereas Plato and More write prose

dialogues concerning the division of labor, the education of children, the practice of religion, and the form of government of two imaginary societies, Jonson typically writes short poems to and about real people, whether in commendatory, satirical, or epistolary verse. It is therefore misleading to claim that Jonson feigns a commonwealth in his nondramatic verse.

In the second chapter, I turn my attention to Stanley Fish's article “Authors-Readers: Jonson's Community of the Same.” Fish famously argues that Jonson hints at and creates a community of the same in his poems of praise. Furthermore, he asserts that Jonson's poetry of praise is nonrepresentational and, thus, that the people in Jonson's poetry are interchangeable. Although some critics, namely Ian Donaldson and A. D. Cousins, have expressed doubts about Fish's criticism, no one has yet challenged his theses directly. I argue that Fish's criticism fails to accurately characterize Jonson's poetry. I also point out the sophistical nature of many of Fish's arguments, especially his equivocation with key words and his disregard for Jonson's text. In effect, the second chapter is my attempt to remove a great stumbling block in the way to appreciating Jonson's poetry.

As can be seen from this brief summary, I argue that both theories rest on misreadings. Nietzsche once wrote that “philology is, in a very broad sense, the art of reading well—of reading facts without falsifying them by interpretation, without losing caution, patience, delicacy, in the desire to understand” (635). If so, the theories I discuss are marked by bad philology. Critics precipitously claim that Jonson feigns a commonwealth, without cautiously investigating the meaning of Jonson's own words.

And in his argument that Jonson hints at a community of the same, Stanley Fish often recklessly perverts the sense and, occasionally, the very text of Jonson's poetry. By exposing these critical missteps, this essay removes some of the obstructions that prevent a proper understanding of Jonson's poetry. More positively, this essay begins to prepare the way for a comprehensive account of Jonson's nondramatic verse, one which takes into account the lessons learned from the errors of the theories discussed.

# CHAPTER ONE

## On Jonson and the Feigned Commonwealth

In *Discoveries*, Ben Jonson writes, “I could never think the study of wisdom confined only to the philosopher, or of piety to the divine, or of state to the politic. But that he which can feign a commonwealth (which is the poet) can govern it with counsels, strengthen it with laws, correct it with judgements, inform it with religion and morals, is all these.” Several critics have seen this passage as a way to understand, or at least explicate, Jonson's nondramatic poetry. Some critics, including Charles J. Summers, Ted-Larry Pebworth, and Anthony Mortimer, claim that Jonson feigns a commonwealth in his nondramatic verse. Other critics, including Ian Donaldson and A. D. Cousins, only claim that Jonson feigns a commonwealth in *Epigrams*. Each of these critics cites the quoted passage from *Discoveries* to make his claim; however, none interprets the passage (especially the key phrase “feign a commonwealth”) before applying it to Jonson's nondramatic verse. However, interpreting what it means to “feign a commonwealth” within the context of the English Renaissance shows that the claim that Jonson feigns a commonwealth in his nondramatic verse is inaccurate.

Part of the motivation for claiming that Jonson feigns a commonwealth presumably comes from the fact that Jonson often casts himself as someone who can govern a commonwealth with counsels, strengthen it with laws, correct it with judgments, and inform it with religion and morals. Jonson recorded in *Discoveries* that “the good counsellors to princes are the best instruments of a good age. For though the prince himself be of most prompt inclination to all virtue, yet the best pilots have need of

mariners, beside sails, anchor, and other tackle" (890-93). For "no man is so wise but may easily err, if he will take no other's counsel but his own" (13-14). Jonson was willing to counsel the king. William Drummond noted that Jonson "hath a mind to be a churchman, and so he might have favour to make one sermon to the King, he careth not what thereafter should befall him; for he would not flatter, though he saw death" (254-56). Indeed, Jonson believed that a special relationship obtained between a king and a poet, for they are both extremely rare. Praising James as the best of kings and the best of poets, Jonson writes, "But two things, rare, the Fates had in their store, / And gave thee both, to show they could no more" (*Epigrams* 4, 3-4). At the conclusion of "A Panegyre, on the Happy Entrance of James, Our Sovereign, to His First High Session of Parliament in This Kingdom, the 19 of March, 1603" Jonson affixes a Latin phrase from Florus: "Solus Rex, et Poeta non quotannis nascitur," "Only kings and poets are not born every year." The phrase became one of Jonson's favorites. He records it again in *Discoveries*: "Every beggarly corporation affords the state a mayor or two bailiffs yearly, but *solus rex aut poeta non quotannis nascitur*." In *The New Inn*, Jonson offers a variation: "But mayors and shrieves may yearly fill the stage; / A king's or poet's birth do ask an age." But kings and poets are not only rare; their special relationship extends further. In "The Humble Petition of Poor Ben to the Best of Monarchs, Masters, Men, King Charles," Jonson reminds Charles that "your royal father, / James the blessed, pleased the rather, / Of his special grace to letters, / To make all the muses debtors / To his bounty" (1-5). In another poem, "To King Charles for a Hundred Pounds He Sent Me in My Sickness," he again emphasizes the relationship between poet and king:

Great Charles, among the holy gifts of grace

Annexed to thy person, and thy place,

'Tis not enough (thy piety is such)

To cure the called King's evil with thy touch;

But thou wilt yet a kinglier mastery try,

To cure the poet's evil, poverty. (1-6)

Jonson fully believed that a special relationship should obtain between a king and a poet, and that this relationship was profitable to the state, since the poet could provide counsel. Indeed, Jonson frequently depicts ideal societies as ones in which poetry is highly esteemed. When invoking an ideal society, Jonson occasionally uses the phrase "golden age." During the golden age, Jonson stresses, poetry was admired. In "To the Same [Robert, Earl of Salisbury]," Jonson writes that he brings "these early fruits / Of love, and what the golden age did hold / A treasure, art." (*Epigrams* 64, 2-4). Similarly, in "Epistle to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland," Jonson writes that

whilst gold bears all this sway,

I, that have none (to send you) send you verse.

A present, which (if elder writs rehearse

The truth of times) was once of more esteem,

Than this, our gilt, nor golden age can deem. (18-22)

For Jonson, poetry occupies a privileged place in an ideal society. It fits then, that ideally the ruler of a society should have a special relationship with a poet. Believing that an ideal relationship existed, or should exist, between a king and a poet, Jonson did counsel

the king, whether it was James or Charles, in his verse. A good example of this is "A Panegyre." In that poem, Jonson warns James:

> He knew that princes, who had sold their fame
> To their voluptuous lusts, had lost their name;
> And that no wretch was more unblessed than he,
> Whose necessary good 'twas now to be
> An evil king: and so must such be still,
> Who once have got the habit to do ill. (113-18)

As an alternative to an evil reign, Jonson counsels gentleness and rule by example, rather than force:

> He knew, that those, who would, with love, command,
> Must with a tender (yet a steadfast) hand
> Sustain the reins, and in the check forbear
> To offer cause of injury, or fear.
> That kings, by their example, more do sway
> Than by their power; and men do more obey
> When they are led than when they are compelled. (121-27)

Although "A Panegyre" is an occasional poem, Jonson returned to the importance of rule by example in *Epigrams.* In "To King James" (*Epigrams* 35), Jonson praises James for ruling by example: "Who would not be thy subject, James, t'obey / A prince, that rules by example, more than sway? / Whose manners draw, more than thy powers constrain" (1-3). Jonson picks up the same theme in a later poem to Charles, stressing the example or

“precedent” that is his life:

> Indeed, when had great Britain greater cause
> Than now, to love the sovereign, and the laws?
> When you that reign, are her example grown,
> And what are bounds to her, you make your own?
> When your assiduous practice doth secure
> That faith, which she professeth to be pure?
> When all your life's a precedent of days,
> And murmur cannot quarrel at your ways? (7-14)

Although his counsel is not explicit, Jonson advises a prince through praise. By reminding Charles and James that their lives are good and worthy of imitation, he reminds them that they *should* live good lives worthy of imitation.

Since Jonson does offer counsel to kings, the *Discoveries* passage appears important to understanding Jonson's self-conception as a poet. In that passage, Jonson writes, “But that he which can feign a commonwealth (which is the poet) can govern it with counsels, strengthen it with laws, correct it with judgements, inform it with religion and morals, is all these.” Since we know that Jonson does counsel kings, it becomes tempting to say that therefore, Jonson, if he is consistent, believes that he feigns a commonwealth in his nondramatic poetry. However, this is a misreading. Jonson does not claim that a person must feign a commonwealth before he can govern it with counsels. He only claims that a person who can feign a commonwealth can govern it with counsels. It is the ability rather than the performance that counts. (Strictly speaking, Jonson does

not require that a person be able to feign a commonwealth in order to advise a state. Since the converse of a proposition is not logically equivalent to the proposition, "he which *cannot* feign a commonwealth *cannot* govern it with counsels" cannot be validly derived from Jonson's sentence.) Jonson claims that he who has the ability to feign a commonwealth is a poet. Therefore, Jonson's claim is that a poet can govern the commonwealth with counsels, whether or not the poet actually feigns a commonwealth. Furthermore, he does not here specify that the poet must provide counsel through his poetry. Elsewhere, Jonson writes that the "best counsellors . . . are books," but here Jonson ignores the poet's work and stresses that the poet himself can provide counsel. That Jonson attempts to counsel kings does not entail that he believes that he feigns a commonwealth. Realizing this fact reduces the need to describe Jonson's poetic project in terms of a feigned commonwealth.

Although it is not required for consistency's sake to claim that Jonson feigns a commonwealth in his nondramatic verse, it may still be an accurate description of Jonson's poetry or of Jonson's understanding of his poetry, or both. To determine whether "feign a commonwealth" aptly characterizes either of these, it must first be established what Jonson meant by "feign a commonwealth." The meaning of a word or a phrase depends on how it is used. Unfortunately, there is little in the *Discoveries* passage that indicates what Jonson means by "feign a commonwealth." Jonson does not provide a definition of the idea. Furthermore, his interest in the passage from *Discoveries* is not in feigning a commonwealth, but in the abilities of the poet. He cites feigning a commonwealth as one of those abilities, an ability which is indicative of other abilities,

such as governing a commonwealth with counsels. As such there is little in *Discoveries* to help determine what Jonson means by “feign a commonwealth.”

The critic Anthony Mortimer, however, has attempted to ascertain the meaning of “feign a commonwealth.” Concerned with the “aura of insincerity” that gathers around Jonson's commendatory verse, Mortimer turns to *Discoveries* to argue:

> There is, however, nothing in this [breadwinning aspect of Jonson's verse] that prevents the commendatory poem from functioning simultaneously as a moral and ethical ideal. An approach along such lines can, I think, be convalidated and clarified by reference to the idea of a feigned commonwealth as defined in *Timber*: “I could never thinke the study of Wisdome confin'd only to the Philosopher: or of Piety to the Divine: or of State to the Politicke. But that he which can faine a Commonwealth (which is the poet) can gowne it with Counsels, strengthen it with Lawes, correct it with Judgments, informe it with religion, and Morals; is all these. Wee doe not require in him meere Elocution; or an excellent faculty in verse; but the exact knowledge of all vertues; and their Contraries; with ability to render the one lov'd, the other hated, by his proper embattling them.” The feigned commonwealth is obviously something more than the vision of an ideal society. It is not so much a Utopia as a poetic framework to facilitate the making of clear moral and ethical distinctions. (70)

This is the extent of Mortimer's argument regarding the meaning of “feign a commonwealth.” It is the most thorough argument about “feign[ing] a commonwealth” in

the literature, and it leaves much to be desired. First, it is not obvious that a feigned commonwealth is something more than the vision of an ideal society. It could be something more, but it could also be something less. A person can imagine a corrupt commonwealth as easily as an ideal one, as attested by the popularity of dystopian fiction. To determine what Jonson means by “feign a commonwealth” requires further argument. Second, it seems unlikely that feigning a commonwealth is the same as establishing a framework for making ethical distinctions, and Mortimer does not explain why Jonson would write “feign a commonwealth” as a metaphor for “establish a framework.” Third, feigning a commonwealth seems more directly relevant to governing a state than does creating a poetic framework for making ethical distinctions. Feigning a commonwealth may not be more relevant, but Mortimer does not elaborate. Mortimer's perfunctory interpretation of “feign a commonwealth” shows how difficult it is to determine the meaning of the phrase from *Discoveries* alone.

Fortunately, there are other Renaissance texts that use the idea of feigning a commonwealth which provide a context for understanding the phrase. The most important of these is Jonson's probable source for the phrase—Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*—but there are others as well, including Spenser's *Letter to Raleigh*, Sir Thomas Smith's *De republica Anglorum*, and George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesy.* These works illustrate that during the English Renaissance, the notion of feigning a commonwealth alluded to two important works in the history of political philosophy: Plato's *Republic* and Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*. Jonson probably had at least one of the two in mind as he wrote in *Discoveries*.

Jonson's principal source for the *Discoveries* passage is Quintilian's *Institutes*. But the phrase “feign a commonwealth,” as Lorna Hutson points out, is “not in Quintilian, whose topic is the orator, not the poet” (535). Rather, according to Lorna Hutson, the phrase most likely comes from Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*. In the *Defence*, Sidney writes, “But even in the most excellent determination of goodness, what philosopher's counsel can so readily direct a prince, as the feigned Cyrus in Xenophon; or a virtuous man in all fortunes, as Aeneas in Virgil; or a whole commonwealth, as the way of Sir Thomas More's Utopia?” (222). Here Sidney associates the notion of feigning a commonwealth with the *Utopia* of Sir Thomas More. Since the *Defence* is the likely source for Jonson's phrase “feign a commonwealth,” it is likely that that allusion is in effect in *Discoveries*.

The likelihood that Jonson was aware of and intended this allusion is strengthened by the frequent pairing of “feigning a commonwealth” and either More's *Utopia* or Plato's *Republic*, which was More's principal model. A search of *Early English Books Online* reveals that each time a writer (before 1637) mentions a feigned commonwealth, that writer also discusses either *Utopia* or the *Republic*. For example, in the conclusion of his posthumously published *De republica Anglorum* (pub. 1583), Sir Thomas Smith writes:

> I have declared summarilie as it were in a chart or mappe, or as Aristotle termeth it ὡς ἐν τύπῳ the forme and manner of gouernement of Englande and the policie thereof, and sette before your eies the principall pointes wherein it doth differ from the policie or gouernement at this time used in Fraunce, Italie, Spaine, Germanie and all other Countries, which do follow

> the civill Law of the Romanes compiled by Iustinian into his pandectes and code: not in that sort as Plato made his commonwealth, or Xenophon his kingdome of Persia, nor as Sir Thomas More his vtopia being fayned commonwealths, such as neuer was nor neuer shall be, vaine imaginations, phantasies of Philosophers to occupie the time, and to exercise their wits: but so as England standeth, and is governed at this day the xxviij. of March Anno 1565.

Although he does not express the respect for More's *Utopia* that other writers express, Smith explicitly calls *Utopia*, along with Plato's *Republic* and Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, feigned commonwealths.

George Puttenham, although he never uses the phrase "feigned commonwealth," relies on the notion of a feigned commonwealth in his discussion of historical fiction in *The Art of English Poesy*:

> Again, as ye know, more and more excellent examples may be feigned in one day by a good wit, than many ages through man’s frailty are able to put in ure, which made the learned and witty men of those times to devise many historical matters of no verity at all, but with purpose to do good and not hurt, as using them for a manner of discipline and precedent of commendable life. Such was the commonwealth of Plato and Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*, resting all in device, but never put in execution, and easier to be wished than to be performed . . . Also, as Thucydides wrote a worthy and veritable history of the wars betwixt the Athenians and the

> Peloponnesians, so did Xenophon, a most grave philosopher and well-trained courtier and counselor, make another (but feigned and untrue) of the childhood of Cyrus, king of Persia, nevertheless both to one effect, that is, for example, and good information of the posterity. (129-30)

Again, the triumvirate of the *Republic*, *Cyropaedia*, and *Utopia* is invoked to discuss feigning poetry, although here only the *Republic* and *Utopia* are given as examples of feigned commonwealths. Puttenham distinguishes between them and the *Cyropaedia*, which he classifies as a feigned history.

Edmund Spenser provides the last example. In his “Letter to Raleigh,” Spenser defends his allegorical poem by contrasting the feigned commonwealth of Plato and the fictionalized Cyrus of Xenophon:

> To some I know this Methode will seeme displeasaunt, which had rather haue good discipline deliuered plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they vse, then thus clowdily enwrapped in Allegoricall deuises. But such, me seeme, should be satisfied with the vse of these dayes, seeing all things accounted by their shows, and nothing esteemed of, that is not delightfull and pleasing to commune sence. For this cause is Xenophon preferred before Plato, for that the one in the exquisite depth of his iudgement, formed a Commune welth such as it should be, but the other in the person of Cyrus and the Persians fashioned a gouernement such as might best be: So much more profitable and gratious is doctrine by ensample, then by rule. (716)

Although Spenser omits More's *Utopia*, he associates the idea of a feigned commonwealth with Plato's *Republic*. But Spenser makes a stronger contrast between the *Republic* and the *Cyropaedia* than Puttenham makes. He claims that Xenophon is preferred before Plato because Xenophon teaches by example rather than rule, since instruction by example being "more profitable and gratious" than instruction by rule. This distinction is important for understanding why Jonson's nondramatic verse does not constitute a feigned commonwealth. I will return to this point. For now, the evidence strongly suggests that Jonson derived his phrase "feign a commonwealth" from Sir Philip Sidney, and that this phrase, in Sidney and in other Renaissance writers, recalls Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and Plato's *Republic*. Given the consistent connotations of the phrase, to “feign a commonwealth” in Jonson's *Discoveries* is most plausibly interpreted to mean “to do as Plato and More do in the *Republic* and *Utopia*.” This further investigation shows that Mortimer's interpretation of Jonson’s phrase is probably incorrect: for Jonson, a feigned commonwealth is, more or less, a Utopia.

Readers of Plato, More, and Jonson will realize that Jonson does not feign a commonwealth in the sense that Plato and More feign commonwealths. Moreover, nothing in Jonson's work implies that he thinks of himself as feigning a commonwealth in that way. But the differences between the feigned commonwealths of Plato and More and the nondramatic poetry of Jonson can be further delineated, providing more evidence that Jonson does not feign a commonwealth.

Both the *Republic* and *Utopia* do much more than feign commonwealths, and they also differ from each other. But in their approach to feigning commonwealths, they share

many of the same characteristics. In the *Republic* and in *Utopia*, Plato and More have written prose dialogues concerning the division of labor, the education of children, the practice of religion, the form and function of government, and the history of an imaginary commonwealth. They also approach these tasks at a moderate level of abstraction, i.e., they talk about general customs, rules, or types, rather than the idiosyncratic features of individuals. There are four elements of this description of Plato and More's approach that distinguish their feigned commonwealths from Jonson's nondramatic verse. First, they write prose dialogues, while Jonson writes in a variety of short verse forms. Second, they write at a higher level of abstraction than Jonson, who is much more likely to treat the idiosyncrasies of individual people. Third, they write about imaginary commonwealths—vain imaginations as Sir Thomas Smith put it—rather than about existing members of a real commonwealth. Fourth, they discourse on the general customs and practices of their imaginary societies—the division of labor, the education of children, etc. Jonson, on the other hand, writes occasional pieces about specific attributes or events addressed to particular individuals. I will demonstrate each of these differences in turn, providing examples from *Utopia* and Jonson's nondramatic verse.

(1) The first difference between the feigners of commonwealths and Jonson is that Plato and More write prose dialogues and Jonson writes in verse. But according to Renaissance thinking, this difference is more apparent than real, for during the Renaissance poetry could encompass both prose and verse forms. In the *Defence of Poesy*, Sidney relates the well-known etymology of “poet” from the Greek: “The Greeks called him a 'poet', which name hath, as is the most excellent, gone through other

languages. It cometh of this word *poiein*, which is, to make: wherein, I know not whether by luck of wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him a maker" (215). This etymology suggests that any verbal artifact, whether in verse or prose, constitutes a poem. Sidney adopts this suggestion in his considered definition of poesy: "Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*—that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture—with this end, to teach and delight" (217). Sidney makes no distinction between verse and prose forms; he defines poetry as a verbal, imitative art that teaches and delights. Operating with this definition of poetry, Sidney argues that "verse [is] but an ornament and no cause to poetry, since there have been many most excellent poets that never versified" (218), including Plato: "And truly even Plato whosoever well considereth shall find that in the body of his work, though the inside and strength were philosophy, the skin, as it were, and beauty depended most of poetry" (213).
It is obvious that, for Sidney, meter is not constitutive of poetry. And so the prose *Utopia* is a poem, since it verbally counterfeits a commonwealth in order to delight and teach.

Jonson largely shares Sidney's definition of poetry and poets, although Jonson seems to consider meter ("measure") as a constitutive aspect of poetry. In *Discoveries*, Jonson writes:

> A poet is that which by the Greeks is called κατ᾽ ἐζ᾽οχὴν, ὁ Ποιητὴς, a maker, or a feigner; his art, an art of imitation, or feigning; expressing the life of man in fit measure, numbers, and harmony, according to Aristotle: from the word ποιειν, which signifies to make or feign. Hence he is called

> a poet, not he which writeth in measure only, but that feigneth and formeth a fable, and writes things like the truth. For the fable and fiction is (as it were) the form and soul of any poeticall work or poem. (1665-71)

Although Jonson includes meter as a necessary part of poetry, he emphasizes that the “fable and fiction” are the “form and soul” or a poem. For Jonson, meter is not a sufficient condition for poetry. One imagines that, on this definition, Jonson would deny that a didactic, non-fictional, verse work such as Thomas Tusser's *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* is a poem. Strictly speaking, he should deny that *Utopia* is a poem since it lacks measure and numbers. But he would probably grant that *Utopia* possess the form and soul of a poetical work, given that it is a fable and fiction. He may even express sympathy with Edward Phillips’s much later remark in 1675 that “*Utopia*, though not written in verse, yet in regard of the great fancy, and invention therefore, may well pass for a poem” (qtd. in More 247). Whether or not he would, it seems unlikely that Jonson would think that he and More were pursuing radically different projects, simply because More wrote *Utopia* in prose and Jonson wrote in verse. In short, it is false to claim that Jonson does not feign a commonwealth simply because More wrote in prose and he wrote in verse.

(2) A second difference. More and Jonson write at different levels of abstraction. More is more likely to write about the customary behavior of groups of people, especially the citizens of Utopia. Jonson is more likely to write about the behavior of an individual person. Jonson only rarely addresses people as a group. In *Epigrams*, he devotes only five poems to groups of people. In each case, the purpose is satirical. Once he satirizes the

pretensions of alchemists: “If all you boast of your great art be true; / Sure, willing poverty lives most in you” (*Epigrams* 6, 1-2). In another poem, he criticizes usurers by equating them with bawds: “If, as their ends, their fruits were so, the same, / Bawdry, and usury were one kind of game” (*Epigrams* 57, 1-2). The manners of parliament come under censure, too: “There's reason good, that you good laws should make: / Men's manners ne'er were viler, for your sake” (*Epigrams* 24, 1-2). Jonson abhorred spies, and roundly contemns them: “Spies, you are lights in sate, but of base stuff, / Who, when you have burnt yourselves down to the snuff, / Stink, and are thrown away. End fair enough” (*Epigrams* 59, 1-3). In the much longer “The New Cry,” Jonson chastises those newspaper readers who pretend to a great knowledge of political affairs, much like Sir Politic Would-Be in *Volpone.*

These examples are unusual. Jonson typically writes about individuals. Sometimes he writes about named individuals, such as Lucy, Countess of Bedford. At others, he omits a name, but scholars have identified the likely subject of the poem. For example, “On the Town's Honest Man” is probably about Inigo Jones. At other times, Jonson writes about individuals who seem to be types for a class of people. These types can be positive, as in “To the Learned Critic”:

> May others fear, fly, and traduce thy name,
>
> As guilty men do magistrates: glad I,
>
> That wish my poems a legitimate fame,
>
> Charge them, for crown, to thy sole censure high.
>
> And, but a sprig of bays, given by thee,

> Shall outlive the garlands, stol'n from the chaste tree.
>
> (*Epigrams* 17, 1-6)

But Jonson more commonly reserves this use of a type character for satirical purposes. In the companion piece to “To the Learned Critic,” Jonson targets critics who judge his epigrams based on their acquaintance with English, rather than Latin models. Yet he casts his poem as if it were addressed to a single recipient, “My Mere English Censurer.” It is possible that Jonson wrote these poems with particular individual people in mind. It is also possible that he was thinking of groups of people and wrote his poem as if he were concerned with a single individual, by using a type character. In either case, for the purposes of this argument, Jonson writes as if he is addressing specific, individual people. He writes as if he is concerned with the idiosyncratic behavior of individuals rather than the customary behavior of groups. He is concerned with the example, rather than the rule.

A telling example of this is the epigram “On Something, that Walks Somewhere.” Presumably there were many lords who lived little lives. Certainly Jonson had little respect for people simply because they were titled. As Drummond recorded “He never esteemed of a man for the name of a lord.” Yet Jonson takes his general disgust with a widespread phenomenon and transmutes it into a specific encounter between a lord and the speaker:

> At court I met it, in clothes brave enough,
>
> To be a courtier; and looks grave enough,
>
> To seem a statesman: as I near it came,
>
> It made me a great face, I asked the name.

> A lord, it cried, buried in flesh, and blood,
>
> And such from whom let no man hope least good,
>
> For I will do none: and as little ill,
>
> For I will dare none. Good lord, walk dead still. (*Epigrams* 11, 1-8)

Rather than upbraiding the multitude of those tepid, titled spirits, Jonson composes a little scene with two characters and dialogue. The scene is court, the two characters are the speaker and the lord, who is dressed ostentatiously and who wears a statesman's face. Yet, the appearance of grandeur masks a timid soul who, though nominally alive, is, by Jonson's lights, normatively dead. Jonson could have written about the customary behavior of this sort of men, but Jonson transforms that concern into a vivid poem about the behavior of an individual man.

More, on the other hand, is more concerned with the customary behavior of the Utopians, rather than with the behavior of individual Utopians. In fact, the only Utopian whom Raphael Hythloday mentions is King Utopus, the founder of Utopia. This is a marked contrast from Jonson, who in the *Epigrams* alone mentions some thirty-five odd people by name. But More is not interested in the behavior of individual Utopians. His concern is with the rule, rather than the example. This may be seen by his frequent use of the third person plural. Rather than discussing the habits of the individual Utopians, he discusses their aggregate habits. For example, Raphael observes that “They set great store by their gardens” (67); “After supper they bestow one hour in play” (72); “They gather also pearls by the sea-side, and diamonds and carbuncles upon certain rocks and yet they seek not for them, but by change finding them, they cut and polish them, and therewith

they deck their young infants" (87); "They embrace chiefly the pleasures of the mind" (100). More's emphasis on general, rather than individual, behavior can also be seen by his common use of the word *all*. "In this hall," Raphael reports, "all vile service, all slavery and drudgery, with all laborsome toil and base business, is done by bondmen" (80). Again, "Husbandry is a science common to them all in general, both men and women, wherein they be all expert and cunning" (70). The word *every* also signals More's concern with general rule rather than specific example: "Besides husbandry, which (as I said) is common to them all, every one of them learneth one or other several and particular science as his own proper craft" (70). One further linguistic marker of More's concern with general practice is his use of, for lack of a better phrase, exhaustive conjunctions. Raphael wishes to thoroughly explain the general customs of the Utopians, so he exhaustively catalogs extensions and variations of customs. Raphael relates that "of gold and silver they make commonly chamber pots and other vessels that serve for most vile uses, *not only in their common halls but in every man's private house*" (86-87). By including the italicized phrase, Raphael tells his audience the extent of the use of gold and silver chamber pots in Utopia. Rather than concerning himself with a particular use of a gold chamber pot, he demonstrates an interest in the custom as a whole: the Utopians use gold *or* silver chamber pots, both in common halls *and* private houses. More's use of the third person plural, the universal quantifiers "all" and "every," and exhaustive conjunctions, show that More is interested in the customary behavior of a group of people, unlike Jonson, who manifests an interest in the behavior of individual people.

More's description of the Utopians' dining habits and Jonson's "Inviting a Friend

to Supper" exemplify this difference. The differences between the two pieces of writing are due to each author's particular emphasis—More stressing the customary behavior of the Utopians, while Jonson writes about a specific dinner to a specific, albeit unnamed friend, from an idiosyncratic point of view—rather than in fundamental differences in outlook between the two. In fact, much of their descriptions of supper are strikingly similar. For example, both the Utopians and Jonson have books read at supper. More says of the Utopians that "they begin every dinner and supper of reading something that pertaineth to good manners and virtue, but it is short, because no man shall be grieved therewith" (82). Similarly, Jonson promises his friend that his "man / Shall read a piece of Virgil, Tacitus, / Livy, or of some better book to us" (*Epigrams* 101, 20-22). But even in this similarity, the differences between the two authors are apparent. More includes the third person plural "they" and the universal quantifier "every" that indicates he is interested in the customary behavior of the Utopians. Furthermore, More indicates only that the Utopians read morally edifying works before supper, those that pertain to "good manners and virtue." Jonson is much more specific, promising that Virgil, Tacitus, Livy, or something even better than those, will be read. (This may suggest the Bible, or it may be of a piece with Jonson's other exaggerated promises. "I'll tell you of more, and lie, so you will come," he writes his friend as he promises a flock of comestibles and glasses of life-preserving wine. Promising something better than Virgil, Tacitus, or Livy may be another playful, exaggerated promise.) Although More and Jonson are writing about a similar phenomenon—the reading of good books at supper—their treatments are different from one another.

There are deeper similarities between the two treatments of supper than the practice of reading. Both More and Jonson value honest and free conversation at supper. As Sara J. van den Berg and Victoria Moul have shown, Jonson's praise of free and honest conversation has roots in the Horatian ideal of *libertas*. Furthermore, as van den Berg has persuasively argued, Jonson relies somewhat on Erasmus's *Colloquies* in "Inviting a Friend to Supper" in his portrayal of free and honest conversation. Jonson's enjoyment of that sort of conversation is apparent in his conclusion:

> Of this [wine] we will sup free, but moderately,
> And we will have no Pooly, or Parrot by;
> Nor shall our cups make any guilty men:
> But, at our parting, we will be, as when
> We innocently met. No simple word,
> That shall be uttered at our mirthful board,
> Shall make us sad next morning: or affright
> The liberty, that we'll enjoy tonight.

More, Erasmus's great friend, also values this sort of open conversation. After the Utopians have a short, edifying passage read,

> the elders take occasion of honest communication, but neither sad nor unpleasant. Howbeit, they do not spend all the whole dinnertime themselves with long and tedious talks, but they gladly hear also the young men, yea, and purposively provoke them to talk, to the intent that they may have a proof of every man's wit and towardness or disposition to

> virtue, which commonly in the liberty of feasting doth show and utter itself. (82)

The similarities are apparent. Both More and Jonson value the freedom to speak honestly and virtuously, avoiding the unpleasant and sad for that which is mirthful. But those markers of the differences between More's concern with customary behavior and Jonson's concern with individual behavior on a specific occasion are equally apparent. More again uses the universal quantifier “every” and the third person plural “they.” Here More does distinguish between the elders and the young men, but that is the extent of his specificity. Furthermore, he makes it clear that he is speaking of the customary dinner behavior of the Utopians, rather than their behavior on any specific occasion. Jonson, on the other hand, writes of “we,” i.e., those members of his dinner party, and refers directly to a specific night's entertainment: “Tonight” Jonson and his friend will enjoy such mirth that will not be regretted “next morning.” Even More's and Jonson's approach to the liberty that their subjects enjoy is different. More writes of the Utopians’ interest in provoking the young men to shows of good virtue, which “commonly” shows itself in the liberty of feasting. Again, his concern is what typically happens at Utopian suppers. Jonson, on the other hand, suggests that the liberty that he and his guest will enjoy is something unusual. Jonson is all too aware that immoderation in one's “cups” can make men guilty and affright the liberty they would otherwise enjoy. Beyond that human weakness, there is the further threat of spies infringing on their liberty, of which Jonson was also aware. Drummond records that during one of Jonson's terms in prison “they placed two damned villains to catch advantage of him, with him, but he was advertised by his keeper; of the

spies he hath an epigram," which we have already seen. It is typical of Jonson's interest in the behavior of individual people that Jonson particularizes this threat against his liberty through antonomasia: "we will have no Pooly, or Parrot by" (Pooly was a government spy).

Jonson's treatment of the menu is vastly different from More's. More nowhere sets out a complete menu of the diet of the Utopians, but a decent idea can be worked out from various passages. The Utopians do not drink beer, for "they sow corn only for bread. For their drink is either wine made of grapes, or else of apples or pears, or else it is clear water, and many times mead made of honey or licorice sod in water" (65). They presumably eat chicken or eggs, for they raise "a great multitude of pullen" in such a way that the chicks "follow men and women instead of the hens" (65). But chicken is not their only meat. They also have "meat markets, whither be brought not only all sorts of herbs and the fruits of trees, with bread, but also fish and all manner of four-footed beasts and wild fowl that be man's meat" (78). This treatment of the Utopians' diet differs from Jonson's elaboration of his menu. First, whereas More gives the typical diet of the Utopians in all seasons, Jonson expresses concern over the availability and cost of food. He promises his guest "a short-legged hen, / If we can get her" (11-12). Similarly, "a cony / Is not to be despaired of, for our money" (13-14). And, finally, "though fowl, now, be scarce, yet there are clerks, / The sky not falling, think we may have larks" (15-16). He also mentions the specific tavern, the Mermaid, from which he will buy "rich canary wine" (29-30). Jonson is also much more specific about the menu than More. Besides a hen "full of eggs," a cony, larks, and wine, Jonson offers "an olive, capers, or some better

salad / Ush'ring the mutton" (12, 10-11). There will also be "lemons, and wine for sauce," "pastry," and "Digestive cheese and fruit" (13, 26, 27). But Jonson most expresses delight in the variety of fowl he pretends to offer. More simply records that the Utopians eat "all manner of four-footed beasts and wild fowl that be man's meat"; Jonson indulges in a gustatory fantasy and catalogs each wildfowl on imaginary offer:

> I'll tell you of more, and lie, so you will come:
>
> Of partridge, pheasant, woodcock, or which some
>
> May yet be there; and godwit, if we can:
>
> Knat, rail, and ruff, too. (17-20)

In each of these cases, Jonson makes particular what More treats generally.

(3) Taking *Utopia* as the representative case of a feigned commonwealth, Jonson cannot be said to feign a commonwealth because he largely does not *feign* a commonwealth. More obviously creates a fictitious society. The very name Utopia means "no place." But Jonson writes about and to real members of his own English society. He does not have to feign their existence and he often writes about or in response to their real attributes. In "To John Donne" (*Epigrams* 96), Jonson writes to Donne as a poet, which was, of course, one of Donne's chief roles:

> Who shall doubt, Donne, where I a poet be,
>
> When I dare send my epigrams to thee?
>
> That so alone canst judge, so alone dost make:
>
> And, in thy censures, evenly, dost take
>
> As free simplicity, to disavow,

As thou hast best authority, to allow.

Read all I send: and, if I find but one

Marked by thy hand, and with the better stone,

My title's sealed. Those that for claps do write,

Let puisnees', porters', players' praise delight,

And, till they burst, their backs, like asses' load:

A man should seek great glory, and not broad. (1-12)

In this poem, Jonson writes directly to a member of his society, John Donne. He also references Donne's special role as a poet. He praises Donne for having “best authority” in matters poetical; he further intimates Donne's authority in the final line, “A man should seek great glory, and not broad.” As a poet who makes and therefore can judge, Donne has particular authority. Since he has that authority, his praise is worth more than the praise of those without that authority, despite how many of them there may be. Jonson submits his poems to Donne as an instance of a man seeking great, rather than broad, glory.

More does nothing like this in *Utopia*. First, as I have already shown, More's interest is in the customary behavior of the Utopians, rather than the particular role of a specified individual. Second, More does not write to or about really existing members of his society, except in the dedicatory epistle. However, the dedicatory epistle does not pertain to More's feigned commonwealth; it deals with the book *Utopia* rather than the commonwealth Utopia. This distinction between Jonson's and More's practices further suggests that their projects are not the same, and that Jonson cannot be accurately

described as feigning a commonwealth.

Jonson does write purely fictitious pieces. “On Giles and Joan,” for example, shows no indication of being anything more than a witty, fictitious poem about a couple who are so at odds with one another that they are in perfect agreement: they both wish they had never married, they both desire to be out of each other's company, they would both rather be blind than look at the other, they both deny the husband’s role in the begetting of their children. “If, now, with man and wife, to will, and nill / The selfsame things, a note of concord be: / I know no couple better can agree!” (16-18). But that Jonson occasionally writes fictitious verse does not indicate that he feigns a commonwealth. Besides, those who claim that Jonson feigns a commonwealth often point to the poems addressed to real people as examples of that feigning.

In some sense, it can be claimed that Jonson feigns in the poems to named people. First, he certainly does not present well-rounded portraits as we might expect from nineteenth-century novelist, or even a seventeenth-century playwright. The poem to Donne, for example, may agree with Jonson's opinion, recorded by Drummond that Jonson “esteemeth John Donne the first poet in the world, in some things” (*Informations* 80). But it gives no indication that Jonson thought “That Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging” or “That Donne himself, for not being understood, would perish” (*Informations* 34, 147).This lack of what might be called full disclosure is also evident in Jonson's epigrams on Robert, Earl of Salisbury. In “To Robert, Earl of Salisbury” (*Epigrams* 63), Jonson praises Salisbury for his “true worth,” but Drummond records the following anecdote that casts Salisbury in a bad light: “Being at the end of my

lord Salisbury's table with Inigo Jones, and demanded by my lord why he was not glad, 'My lord', said he 'You promised I should dine with you, but I do not', for he had none of his meat; he esteemed only that his meat which was of his own dish.” This anecdote and the juxtaposition of “To Robert, Earl of Salisbury,” “To the Same,” and “To My Muse” has led some critics to speculate that “the worthless lord” of *Epigrams* 65 is Salisbury. Whether or not this is true, the general point remains that Jonson does not fully represent the people he writes to or about.

In most of the cases in which Jonson names the subject or addressee of his poem, Jonson is writing epideictic verse. As Brian Vickers has observed, Jonson considers his *Epigrams* to be epideictic pieces. In the dedication to William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, Jonson writes:

> In thanks whereof, I return you the honour of leading forth so many good and great names as my verses mention on the better part, to their remembrance with posterity. Amongst whom if I have praised, unfortunately, anyone that doth not deserve, or if all answer not in all numbers the pictures I have made of them, I hope it will be forgiven me, that they are no ill pieces, though they be not like the persons. But I forsee a nearer fate to my book than this: that the vices therein will be owned before the virtues (though there I have avoided all particulars, as I have done names).

Commenting on this passage, Vickers observes that “Jonson's division of his subject matter into virtues and vices places the in the category *Epigrams* of epideictic rhetoric,

which, Aristotle observed 'either praises or censures somebody'" (176). Jonson's awareness of and interest in epideictic is revealed in the passage from *Discoveries.* After claiming that the poet can govern a state with counsels, he writes that "We do not require in him mere elocution, or an excellent faculty in verse, but the exact knowledge of all virtues, and their contraries; with ability to render the one loved, the other hated, by his proper embattling them" (743-45). Now since the goal of epideictic verse is to praise or blame, making vice hated and virtue loved, Jonson's own conception of his verse does not require him to produce fully realistic portraits of the people he addresses. That does not mean, however, that these portraits are fictional, i.e., that they represent entirely imaginary people. Rather, they are idealized portraits that praise (or blame) a really existing person. Jonson's poem "To Mary, Lady Wroth" provides a charming example of epideictic verse that seems unmoored from reality. Whatever the perfections and accomplishments of Lady Wroth might have been, surely she could not have been the condensation of all past glories:

Madam, had all antiquity been lost,
All history sealed up, and fables crossed;
That we had left us, nor by time, nor place,
Least mention of a nymph, a muse, a grace,
But even their names were to be made anew,
Who could not but create them all, from you?
He, that but saw you wear the wheaten hat,
Would call you more than Ceres, if not that:

And, dressed in shepherd's 'tire, who would not say:

You were the bright Oenone, Flora, or May?

If dancing, all would cry the Idalian queen,

Were leading forth the graces on the green:

And armed to the chase, so bare her bow

Diana alone, so hit, and hunted so.

There's none so dull, that for your stile would ask,

That saw you put on Pallas' plumed casque:

Or, keeping your due state, that would not cry,

There Juno sat, and yet no peacock by.

So are you Nature's index, and restore,

In yourself, all treasure lost of th'age before. (1-20)

Although Jonson's representation of Lady Wroth is highly idealized, it is not fictitious in the sense that *Utopia* is fictitious. Jonson's poem praises a real woman; it does not depict an imaginary one.

The poem “To Mary, Lady Wroth” shows Jonson at his most idealizing. Indeed, it is hard to discern what Lady Wroth is being praised for, unless it be a versatile beauty and demeanor that, when attired in the right fashion, conjures images of “all treasure lost of th'age before.” But Jonson writes other poems that, while equally epideictic, are more concerned with the substance of praise. In “To the Immortal Memory and Friendship of that Noble Pair, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison” Jonson informs us that:

Alas, but Morison fell young:

> He never fell, thou fall'st my tongue.
>
> He stood, a soldier to the last right end,
>
> A perfect patriot, and a noble friend,
>
> But most a virtuous son. (43-47)

In this poem, Jonson praises Morison for his excellence in his roles as solider, patriot, friend, and son. These are all intelligible claims about a recently deceased Englishman. Despite the idealizing tendencies of the poem—made more apparent in the second half of the stanza, which concludes "His life was of humanity the sphere" (52)—this poem bears some relation to the life of Morison. Other people could cogently deny that Morison "stood a soldier to the last right end" in a way that they could not deny that the Utopians "embrace chiefly the pleasures of the mind," because Morison existed and the Utopians do not. More's Utopia constitutes the Utopians; Jonson's writing about named people responds to them, but it does not constitute them. Where More feigns a commonwealth, Jonson writes about, albeit in idealized form, really existing people in his society.

(4) In *Utopia*, More, following his model Plato, discourses on the division of labor, the education of children, the practice of religion, the form and function of government, and the history of Utopia. Jonson, on the other hand, does not concentrate on these aspects of society, although he occasionally mentions them. More gives a fairly detailed account of the education of the Utopians. We learn that the Utopians each learn husbandry, that "besides husbandry . . . every one of them learneth one or other several and particular science as his own proper craft," whether clothwork, masonry, smithwork, or carpentry, that a Utopian may learn whatever science that he desires, that a Utopian

may attend free morning lectures if he wishes, that a Utopian may be granted “a perpetual license from labor to learning,” but that “all in their childhood be instructed in learning,” including literature, music, logic, arithmetic, geometry, along with natural and moral philosophy (70, 74, 90). Jonson simply does not write about education in this discursive manner. Rather, he occasionally notes the education of a particular person or family. In “To Penshurst,” Jonson briefly comments on the education of the Penshurst children:

> They are, and have been taught religion: thence
> Their gentler spirits have sucked innocence.
> Each morn, and even, they are taught to pray,
> With the whole household, and may, every day,
> Read, in their virtuous parents' noble parts,
> The mysteries of manners, arms, and arts. (93-98)

Jonson observes that the children have been taught religion and they may imitate their parents' behavior and accomplishments. But this brief mention of education is far from the much more elaborate, discursive account of the Utopians' education provided by More.  Likewise for the other aspects of More's feigned commonwealth. Jonson does not discourse (in his poetry) on the division of labor, the form and function of government, the religion and the history of England. Since it is tedious to continue to point out all that Jonson does not do—and what evidence can be adduced that he does not do something?--I will not belabor this point. But I hope that the example of education makes it clear that More's discursive approach to important aspects of a feign commonwealth differs greatly from Jonson's largely incidental acknowledgement of those same aspects.

As I have shown, Jonson does not feign a commonwealth in the sense that he would have most likely have understood the phrase, i.e., as More feigns a commonwealth in *Utopia*. Jonson writes about the specific rather than the general; he writes to and about existing people rather than about a fictional society; he does not treat those major themes of the division of labor, education, form and function of government, etc. that are associated with Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia*. Thus to claim that Jonson feigns a commonwealth is either ignores the Renaissance connotations of the phrase “claim a commonwealth” in order to make it tally with Jonson's concern with the individual, or it is to occlude Jonson's interest in the idiosyncratic behavior of really existing people behind an impression that Jonson's primary interest is in society. One critic to make the first error is Ian Donaldson. Donaldson applies the passage from *Discoveries* to Jonson's *Epigrams* as he acknowledges Jonson's interest in the virtues of individual people. For consistency's sake, Donaldson ignores the contextualized meaning of “feign a commonwealth.” He ignores that it most likely refers to the practice of Plato and More, i.e., that it connoted a prose work that discussed the customary behavior, customs, and practices of an imaginary commonwealth. Instead, he reinterprets the phrase to indicate Jonson's interest in the behavior of really existing individual humans. Donaldson writes:

> Jonson creates in the *Epigrams* a kind of pantheon of national worthies, men and women whose virtues are deserving of commendation. The poet, wrote Jonson in *Discoveries* is one who “can feign a commonwealth . . . can govern it with counsels, strengthen it with laws, correct it with judgments, inform it with religion and morals.” In the *Epigrams* Jonson

> "feigns" a commonwealth of exemplary individuals in much this way—statesmen, scholars, soldiers, writers, artists—"leading forth so many good and great names as my verses mention on the better part, to their remembrance with posterity." The 1616 folio, sometimes viewed as the product of Jonson's personal ambitions, was an apt vehicle for this grand celebratory project, and the men and women it sets out publicly to honor. (125)

Because Donaldson ignores the contextualized meaning of "feign a commonwealth," this may be bad philology. But at least it correctly asserts Jonson's abiding interest in the behavior of individual, existing human beings.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Jonson and the Community of the Same

Stanley Fish's “Authors-Readers: Jonson's Community of the Same” remains one of the most significant attempts to understand Ben Jonson's nondramatic poetry. Published in 1984, Fish's article has been and remains influential. Surveying scholarship on Jonson's nondramatic poetry in 1993, Richard Helgerson observes that, along with Thomas M. Greene's “Ben Jonson and the Centered Self” and Arthur F. Marotti's “All About Jonson Poetry,” Fish's study has been “particularly influential” (169). More recently, in her negative appraisal of Jonson's poetry, “Ben Jonson and the Loathed Word,” Linda Gregerson records her “extensive” debts to Fish's “superb essay” (108). Most significantly, Ian Donaldson cites Fish in his discussions of Jonson's *Epigrams* in his essay on “Jonson's Poetry” in the *Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson* and in his biography *Ben Jonson: A Life*. In fact, Fish is the only critic that Donaldson discusses in those two accounts of *Epigrams*. Because students new to Jonson are likely to turn first to the Cambridge companion and the biography, the prominence that Donaldson allots to Fish suggests that Fish's influence is likely to continue.

Donaldson, however, does have a few reservations about Fish's account of Jonson's nondramatic verse. But before attending to those reservations, let us look briefly at Fish's argument. Donaldson provides a good overview:

> Stanley Fish has suggestively described the manner in which Jonson's poems create an implied audience of like-minded readers and recipients, an elite but egalitarian discipleship, a “community of the same” who

> intuitively recognize and understand the central values (of friendship, loyalty, steadfastness, and so on) which the poems celebrate. Such values and such people are hailed but seldom described in detail; their deeper qualities, it is implied, will be known instantly to those worthy of reading the poems. Amongst true friends, friendship requires no explanation; to the virtuous, the nature of true virtue will be at once apparent . . . There is often thus a curious absence at the heart of Jonson's poems, Fish argues, as the very qualities which the poems appear most profoundly to commend are summarily noted, or merely gestured at; the richer and more detailed description being reserved for satirical denunciation of their opposites, what such virtuous and such people emphatically are *not*. (“Jonson's Poetry” 123)

Although obviously influenced by Fish's account, Donaldson implicitly distances himself from Fish's stronger claims. Fish “has *suggestively* described” Jonson's poetry; Fish “argues” that there is an absence at the heart of Jonson's poems. Donaldson avoids implying that he assents to Fish's claims; he does not write that Fish *demonstrates, establishes, accurately describes*, or *conclusively argues.* In addition, he raises an explicit objection to Fish's account. His first objection is that Fish does not take the fact that Jonson published his poems into account:

> Fish's concept of “the community of the same” greatly illuminates one aspect of Jonson's poetry and of the *Epigrams* in particular: their sense of exclusivity and private exchange. What it does not explain is why Jonson

> also wished to place his poems in the public domain; why, despite his deep distaste for the activities of the marketplace, he should have entrusted these works to his bookseller. To repeat a central question that Pope was later to ask of himself while tracing and testing his own profess as a poet: "*But why then publish?*" (123)

Donaldson's objection is good as far as it goes. It reveals an aspect of the partiality of Fish's account. However, it is primarily an objection that Fish's account is incomplete, not that it is mistaken.

A. D. Cousins has more forcefully contested the notion that Jonson's poetry gestures towards a "community of the same." Cousins charges that Fish ignores Jonson's intellectual precursors. He notes that Fish has identified manifestations of Jonson's neo-stoicism in his verse, especially in Jonson's depictions of the Stoic sage. Fish, however, has ignored the sources of Jonson's neo-stoicism. Those sources are, in particular, the works of Seneca and Justus Lipsius. Both Seneca and Lipsius stress the Stoic virtue of constancy and both find its source in the divine. But unlike Seneca, Lipsius identifies the Christian god as the source of constancy. He also associates the Christian virtues of patience and humility with constancy, something foreign to Seneca. Noting the discrepancies in Jonson's sources, Cousins writes, "the Lipsian and Senecan formulations of constancy . . . imply that what constitutes [Jonson's] community of national heroes as imaged throughout Epigrams needs to be looked at afresh: that his 'feigned commonwealth of exemplary individuals' cannot simply be called a 'community of the same'" (20). Given the discrepancies in Jonson's sources for the Stoic sage, Cousins

suggests, it is unlikely that his depictions of the Stoic sage are the same. Thus, Cousins and Donaldson both argue that Fish ignores relevant historical facts that do not tally with his account of Jonson's verse.

Donaldson's and Cousins's objections usefully point out some of the shortcomings of Fish's article. Fish's account, however, has several more flaws that Donaldson and Cousins do not mention. So a stronger rebuttal can, and, given the influence of Fish's article, should be offered. But before proceeding with an evaluation of Fish's arguments, I would like to comment on the way in which Fish frames his article. Fish presents his article as an answer to the question, “How can someone whose work seems indistinguishable from the network of patronage maintain a belief in its independence and therefore in the independence of his own worth and virtue?” (27). He proposes “to ask that question by taking up the case of Ben Jonson, whose every title would seem to mark him as a man dependent not only for his sustenance but for his very identity on the favor and notice of his social superiors” (27). However, very little in the subsequent article directly addresses that main research question. One way to approach Fish's article is to ask, what would an acceptable answer to Fish's research question look like? It seems to me that, in the case of Ben Jonson, an answer would have to include, first, an account of his patronage relations coupled with evidence that Jonson, consciously or otherwise, sought to maintain his independence. Then, it would have to cite evidence drawn from the range of Jonson's life and works that illustrates how Jonson maintained his independence. Fish does very little of any of this. As Donaldson and Cousins point out, Fish ignores relevant biographical and historical facts. He does not provide an account of

Jonson's patronage relations, nor does he provide evidence that Jonson sought to maintain his independence. So, although Fish frames his article with a research question, his article does very little to actually address that question. Instead, his central focus is, as he phrases it, to offer “a revisionary account of Jonson's poetic strategies” (27). Fish's article should be judged primarily on the quality of that revisionary account.

In his account, Fish cites and comments on poems from each of Jonson's poetic collections—*Epigrams*, *The Forest*, *The Underwood*, and the ungathered or miscellaneous verse. Within these collections, Fish focuses on Jonson's poems of praise, blame, and friendship. Although this focus neglects some of Jonson's best poems—“On My First Son,” the songs to Celia, “A Celebration of Charis”—, it allows Fish to plausibly generalize from a relatively small number of Jonson's poems to the bulk of Jonson's poetic output. From a study of thirty-three of Jonson's poems, Fish proposes four theses:

1) Jonson's poetry of praise hints at a community in which everyone is the same;
2) Jonson's poetry of praise is nonrepresentational, and his poetry of blame is representational;
3) Jonson's poems and the members of the community mentioned in them are largely interchangeable;
4) Jonson writes nonrepresentational poetry of praise in which everyone is the same in order to maintain his independence in a patronage society.

But these four theses are false. Fish's arguments for the first three theses are seriously flawed by faulty logic, tendentious readings, deliberate obfuscation, and sloppy

scholarship. Since the fourth thesis explains the first two, it loses its relevance once the first two are shown to be false.

Jonson's Community of the Same

Stanley Fish argues that Ben Jonson's nondramatic poetry testifies to, restricts access to, and at the same time generates a “community of the same.” The community, according to Fish, includes Jonson and those people to whom Jonson addresses his poetry. This community does not include readers who are not mentioned in the poetry, including us. It only includes “intended readers, who are also [the poems'] addressees” (40). Furthermore, Jonson's community does not include those nameless characters whom Jonson criticizes in his poetry. Rather, these unsavory characters are intentionally excluded from the community. In short, according to Fish, the community consists of those people Jonson names in his poetry, including, for example, King James, the Countess of Bedford, the antiquarian William Camden, the actor Edward Alleyn, and the poet John Donne. Those people mentioned in Jonson's poetry, according to Fish, constitute a community of the same. Unfortunately, Fish is unclear on what he means by a “community of the same.” He frequently writes as if the members of this community are identical to one another: “The only true relationship between members of a Jonson community is one of identity” (38). Nowhere does Fish define what he means by identity. It seems reasonable to assume the intuitive sense of identity as formulated by Leibniz: things are identical if and only if they are indiscernible. More rigorously, two objects are identical if and only if for every property, either both objects have that property or neither object has that property. Fish often discusses members of a Jonson community as if they

were identical in just this Leibnizian sense. Discussing Underwood 14, “An Epistle to Master John Selden,” Fish comments that, in the poem, “Jonson and Selden are the same; and because they are the same, their intentions are shared, already known to one another, and need not be communicated” (52). Because Jonson and Selden are the same, they have the same intentions. If they did not have the same intentions, they could not be the same. Similarly, in his reading of Underwood 45, “An Epistle to Master Arthur Squib,” Fish writes that Jonson and Squib are “indistinguishable,” suggesting that they are, in fact, identical (48). According to Leibniz, if things are indistinguishable, then they are identical, and this usage tallies with Fish's claim, already mentioned, that “The only true relationship between members of a Jonson community is one of identity” (38).

However, in other passages in his essay, Fish manifests uneasiness with this commonsense use of the idea of identity. The uneasiness is already manifest in the sentence just quoted. Fish specifies that identity is the “only true” relationship between members of a Jonson community, rather than simply stating that the only relationship is one of identity. Fish leaves open the possibility that there are (non-true) relationships between members of a Jonson community other than that of identity. In another passage, Fish talks of the members of a Jonson community as being the same “in a very strong sense” (45). Despite its vagueness, the phrase indicates two things about Fish's use of the notions of sameness and identity. First, identity and sameness have, in Fish's usage, weaker and stronger senses. Second, Fish may not be using sameness (or identity) in its strongest sense, since he avoids the superlative. Although he does not detail the various senses of these ideas, the strongest sense of sameness and identity would probably be the

Leibnizian sense, in which two things are the same if and only if for any property either both things have that property or neither has that property. On the other hand, things may be called the same in a much looser sense if they share essential features. For example, readers may loosely say that two distinct but highly conventional romance novels are the same, because they have similar characters and plot. Does Fish, then, claim that members of a Jonson community are identical in a strong or a weak sense?

On this important point, Fish equivocates. Although Fish often writes as if members of a Jonson community are identical (according to the standard formulation), he more frequently claims that members of a Jonson community are the same insofar as they share an essential feature—virtue. In discussing "To Robert, Earl of Salisbury" (*Epigrams* 63), Fish observes that according to Jonson: "That recognition [of Salisbury's merit] can only be given by those who are themselves meritorious, who are able to praise Salisbury because they are the same" (43). Likewise, in his treatment of "An Epistle to Sir Edward Sackville, now Earl of Dorset" (*Underwood* 13), Fish observes that "in the context of Jonson's world, the phrase 'same mind' has an even more literal meaning and refers to the identity of the two parties . . . . Jonson and Sackville are alike manifestations of the virtue that informs them" (50). More explicitly, Fish writes that Jonson "invokes the distinctions that structure (or at least appear to structure) his material existence—distinctions of place, birth, wealth, power—but then he effaces them by drawing everyone he names into a community of virtue in which everyone is, by definition, the same as everyone else" (38). In short, Fish claims that all the members of a Jonson community are the same because they are virtuous, and Fish often uses "community of

the same" and "community of the virtuous" as synonyms. But Fish's argument here is a non sequitur. Two people may both be virtuous and yet not be identical, differing in innumerable other ways. Although Fish claims that Jonson draws "everyone he names into a community of virtue in which everyone is, by definition, the same as everyone else" (38), he offers no definition of a "community of virtue" according to which the members of the community must be identical, nor does he excavate any such definition from Jonson's poetry. He simply asserts that the virtuous must be identical. By failing to distinguish between virtue and identity, Fish makes it difficult to properly interpret his thesis.

Fish's equivocation about his central thesis leaves two possibilities for the interpretation of that thesis. The first interprets Fish's essay to be arguing that the members of a Jonson community are identical in the standard sense. The second interprets the essay to be arguing that the members of a Jonson community are all virtuous. The first would take Fish at his word, ignoring his qualifications, equivocations, and non sequiturs. The second would take into account the doubts raised about the stronger thesis, but would make Fish's central thesis weaker and much less provocative. That Jonson treats all the disparate people in his poems as if they were identical is nearly incredible, but that the objects of panegyric poetry should all be presented as virtuous is relatively uninteresting.

Fish first elucidates the idea of identity in his study of Jonson's dedicatory sonnet to Nicholas Breton's *Melancholic Humours,* "In Authorem." Since this study serves as the basis for much of Fish's argument, it must be thoroughly analyzed if Fish is to be

properly understood. Fish cites an original-spelling version of the poem:

In Authorem

Thou, that wouldst finde the habit of true passion,

And see a minde attir'd in perfect straines;

Not wearing moodes, as gallants doe a fashion,

In these pide times, only to shewe their braines,

Look here on Bretons worke, the master print:

Where, such perfections to the life doe rise.

If they seeme wry, to such as look asquint,

The fault's not in the object, but their eyes.

For, as one comming with a laterall viewe,

Unto a cunning piece wrought perspective,

Wants facultie to make a censure true:

So with this Authors Readers will it thrive:

Which being eyed directly, I divine,

His proofe their praise, will meete, as in this line.

Ben: Jonson

Throughout his reading of the poem, Fish pays close attention to ambiguous words, especially those that suggest a struggle between appearance and reality. For example, in the first two lines, he notes that *habit*, *attir'd*, and *straines* all prompt questions about what the reader of Breton's verse can actually see. He notes that *habit* “means both 'characteristic form' and 'outward apparel'” and that these two meanings are

at odds with one another: “The claim of the one is to be presenting the thing itself while the claim of the other is limited to the presentation of a surface, and since that surface is a covering there is a suggestion . . . that what covers also hides and conceals” (29). The use of *habit* prompts Fish to ask, “Can we truly see true passion if what we see is its habit?” Likewise, prompted by the word *attir'd,* he asks, “can a mind perfectly seen also be 'attir'd? Is the perfection we are asked to admire the perfection of the mind or of the dress that adorns it and therefore stands between it and our line of vision?” (29). Fish further notes, “The ambiguity of 'habit' reappears in 'straines' which, in addition to being an obvious reference to Breton's verse, carries the secondary meaning of pedigree or lineage. Is the perfect strain a perfect verbal rendering, i.e., a representation, or it is [sic] a perfect progeny, the direct offspring of the truth and therefore a piece of the truth itself?” (29). Through his close reading, Fish finds epistemological questions to be at the heart of the poem, revolving around the distinction between appearance and reality, or, as Fish, prefers, between representation and the truth (and later, as we will see, the virtuous).

Fish thinks he finds Jonson's answer to those epistemological questions in the third quatrain of the poem. Fish uses that answer, which includes a clever invocation of the concept of identity, to interpret the larger part of Jonson's poetry. Since his reading of this quatrain is central to his interpretation of Jonson's poetry more generally, I will treat his argument at length. Fish claims that the quatrain is to be interpreted in the context of the court masque, “a perspectival form at whose center is the figure of the monarch, at once audience and subject” (30). (Fish does not provide an argument to support his contention that “a cunning piece wrought perspective” refers to a masque, rather than a

piece of two-dimensional art or a perspective box. Fish thus unduly limits the scope of his interpretation.) Fish notes that “In the theater presided over by Jonson and Inigo Jones, the king's chair occupies the only point in the hall from which the perspective is true” (30-31), and concludes two things: first, that the king is “the chief observer” and, second, that “he is what is being observed both by the masquers who direct their actions at him, and by the other spectators who must strive to see the presentation from his position if they are to 'make a censure true'” (31). The facts Fish adduces about the spatial arrangement of the court masque make his first conclusion probable; if Jones designed the perspective to be seen from the king's position in the hall, then the king is the chief observer. However, the second conclusion does not follow from those facts. (And, strangely, Fish does not cite the fact that Jonson’s masques typically conclude with an address to the king, although I do not think that addressing the king at the end of the masque constitutes the sort of observing that Fish has in mind.) Although a performance of a masque is directed at a king, it does not follow that the masquers observe the king, especially to the extent which Fish's phrase “he is what is being observed” implies. The masquers are oriented toward the king; they do not necessarily observe him. Consider a hiker at rest in an open field who decides to walk towards a distant tree. As he walks he looks at the ground so that he doesn't trip or step on a snake. Occasionally, he looks up to make sure he is still walking towards his chosen tree. The hiker is oriented towards the tree, but he spends most of his time observing the ground. Likewise, a masquer may occasionally look at the king, but he may spend most of his time observing his fellow masquers, hitting his marks, remembering and delivering his own lines, and glancing at a

particularly welcome member of the audience. In fact, a masquer would not have to observe the king at all. Unlike the hiker, who orients himself by looking at a distant tree, the masquer is oriented by the stage and the 'directors.' This can be seen in modern theatrical productions. They are also oriented towards the spectators, but they are often performed in theaters lit in such a way that the audience can scarcely be seen by the actors. The performance is oriented towards the audience (much as the masque is more specifically oriented towards the king), but the players cannot observe the audience. To repeat: the masquers are oriented towards the king; they may not observe him.

A similar objection undoes Fish's argument that the king "is what is being observed . . . by the other spectators who must strive to see the presentation from his position if they are to 'make a censure true'" (31). In order to gain a better sense of the effect of the masque's perspective, the spectators could try to imagine the performance from the king's position. To do so, they must imaginatively orient their field of vision from the king's position. Since what is crucial is the king's position, rather than the king himself, they do not have to actually observe the king. In fact, they could as equally well execute their effort of spatial imagination without the king being present at all. Moreover, if the spectators spent their time observing the king, they would miss the masque, disqualifying them from making a "censure true." Fish's argument that the king is "what is observed" during the performance of a masque falls apart.

Fish's reading of the third quatrain continues: "Moreover, since the masque is itself a celebration of the king's virtue, what he watches is himself, and insofar as his courtiers, in their efforts to align their visions with his, reproduce the relationship

courtiers always have to a monarch, they are also at once the observers of an action and the performers of what they observe." This sentence comprises two arguments. The first argument claims that a king watches himself in the performance of a masque, because the masque is a celebration of the king's virtue. This argument, though, conflates three distinct things: self, virtue, and celebration. Fish provides no arguments for believing that Jonson believes that virtue is identical with the self. So, even if the king were to observe his own virtue, it could not be said that he is observing himself. But Fish claims that the king observes himself, because he is observing a celebration of his virtue. A celebration of a thing, however, is distinct from that thing. A celebration of tenure is not tenure. The celebration of virtue is not virtue. And if virtue cannot be identified with the self, the celebration of virtue certainly cannot be so identified. Fish's argument does not support his conclusion that the king observes himself in the performance of a masque.

The sentence's second argument is more difficult to analyze: "insofar as his courtiers, in their efforts to align their visions with his, reproduce the relationship courtiers always have to a monarch, they are also at once the observers of an action and the performers of what they observe" (31). As the next sentence makes clear, the courtiers that Fish has in mind are spectators, and not performers in the masque. The action that these courtiers both perform and observe, and at the same time, however, is unclear. It cannot be their effort to align their vision with the king's, for they would not have to observe that effort as they undertook it. Fish's idea, I think is this: by aligning their vision with the king's, the courtiers take on the king's virtue, so that when the courtiers observe the celebration of the king's virtue in the masque, they observe a celebration of their own

virtue. But this remains an unsatisfactory argument; to imaginatively adopt someone else's vision, does not entail adopting their character. The next step in Fish's argument suggests, however, that Fish has something of the kind in mind: “One can no longer say then that the spectators are taken in or deceived by a contrived illusion, for they are themselves the cause of what they see, and in order to make a 'censure true' they need only recognize themselves” (31). Strangely, given what he has written about the courtiers being both the performers and the observers of an action, Fish speaks of them as if they were only the cause of what they see, rather than that which they see. And, for the sake of his argument, Fish must mean that “the spectators themselves are what they see,” rather than “the cause of what they see.” For someone can cause some effect, but remain deceived by it. Notwithstanding Fish's imprecision, the crucial claim Fish makes here is that the spectators of a masque “need only recognize themselves” in order to make a correct judgment. The courtiers are to recognize themselves in the celebration of the king's virtue. In recognizing themselves, “There is no distance between them and a spectacle or representation of which they are the informing idea. The relationship between viewer and presentation is not one of subjection and control, but of identity; they are, in essence, the same” (31). Here Fish observes an evasion of that distinction between appearance and reality, or between representation and truth, which he found in the first two quatrains of the poem. Fish argues that this quatrain shows that, in the context of the masque, there is no representation at all. The viewer does not perceive a presentation of something; instead, he recognizes himself, because the viewer and the presentation are “in essence, the same” (31). Fish concludes: “It is here in the notion of an observer who

is both indistinguishable from what he sees and its cause that the ethical and epistemological dilemmas of representation are resolved or at least bypassed" (31). Fish's argument, however, does not warrant this conclusion. In his analysis of the masque imagery of the third quatrain, Fish does not establish that the king and the other spectators are indistinguishable from, or identical with, the masque itself. Every argument that Fish constructs for the identity of the observer and the observed, whether it be the king or the spectators, fails. Unfortunately for Fish's larger argument, his conclusion that Jonson relies on a "notion of an observer who is both indistinguishable from what he sees and its cause," a notion that evades "epistemological dilemmas of interpretation," plays a key role in his interpretation of "In Authorem" and, more generally, of Jonson's poetry of praise.

Fish locates the notion of an "observer who is both indistinguishable from what he sees and its cause" and who thus bypasses "ethical and epistemological dilemmas of representation" in the "concluding lines of the third quatrain: 'So with this Authors Readers will it thrive" (31). Fish mentions two possible interpretations. First, there is the "perfectly reasonable" interpretation that "the readers of Breton's work will judge it correctly to the extent that their line of vision is direct rather than oblique" (31). Fish does not comment further on this reasonable interpretation. Instead, he interprets it within the context of the "masque experience" (31). In that context, Fish states, "a truly direct vision is the consequence of having recognized oneself and therefore of having become the reader of one's own actions—having become, in short, an author-reader" (31). Fish claims to find this idea of an "author-reader" in the text itself. Yet his rendering of

“Authors Readers” as a “composite noun” is dubious (31). It seems to me that in the phrase “Authors” is a possessive. It is suggestive that “In Authorem” is one of only two poems that Fish cites in the original spelling, presumably so he would not have to contend with a modern editor's punctuation. More damaging to his argument, however, is that Fish relies on his earlier (faulty) interpretation of the masque experience to ignore a “perfectly reasonable” interpretation in order to present a more provocative one: that the reader of the Breton's work is identical with the work itself. With this interpretation, he sums up many of the themes he has already addressed:

> Insofar as the problem of the poem has been to find a position from which a reader of Breton's work can correctly judge it . . . that problem is solved by the assumption of an author-reader; that is, of a reader whose mind is attired with the same perfections as the mind informing the book. Judgment for such a reader will not even be an issue, since the act of judging implies a distance or a gap that has already been bridged by the identity, the sameness, of the censuring mind and its object. In this felicitous epistemology, perception is not mediated or 'asquint' because it is self-perception; there is no obstruction between the eye and its object because there is literally nothing (no thing) between them. The dilemma of representation—its inability to be transparent, to refrain from clothing or covering—is no longer felt because representation is bypassed in favor of the instantaneous recognition, in another and in the work of another, of what one already is. (31)

There are at least two problems with this interpretation, besides its reliance on Fish's interpretation of the masque experience. The first is the uncritical conflation of the product of a mind and the mind itself. Fish argues that Jonson presents the reader and Breton as being possessed of identical minds, and, so, argues Fish, the “censuring mind and its object” are identical (31). To say that a single poem, or even set of poems, is identical to a human mind sets severe and peculiar limitations on that mind. Again, Fish plays loosely with the meaning of identity. Also, Fish argues that the perception of the author-reader is “not meditated or asquint because it is self-perception,” an “instantaneous recognition . . . of what one already is” (31). Fish, however, does not take into account that people may be wrong about their perceptions of themselves. People are often deluded or mistaken about their own natures, desires, virtues, vices, characters. There is something that may mislead a person, even in a moment of self-perception. A person may attribute his own alms-giving to generosity, rather than vanity; he may deceive himself. But Fish ignores this possibility of self-deception. Fish's effort to establish that Jonson writes in accordance with an epistemology in which members of a community are the same, or in which an observer is identical with the observed, is wasted.

## Jonson's Nonrepresentational Poetry of Praise

In his claim that members of a Jonson community are the same, Fish finds the key to understanding Jonson's poetic style. Because members of Jonson's community are the same, they instantaneously recognize each other and each other's merits. Because of this instantaneous recognition, the members do not need to communicate via representation.

Indeed, they do not need to communicate at all. Each person, his thoughts, and his virtues are immediately apparent to each other. And this, in Fish's diagnosis of Jonson's poetic art, leaves Jonson with a problem: the poems he writes for the members of his community are superfluous. As Fish asks of “In Authorem,” “If what the fit reader would see in Breton's work is already in his mind, while others simply 'want facultie,' what is there left for the work to do? What could it do? And insofar as these questions apply to Breton, so do they apply equally to Jonson . . . Isn't its work as superfluous as the work it purports to praise? Isn't its reader, its author-reader, directed to look at something he already is?” (32). Fish's answer to these last to questions is “yes.” Fish argues that Jonson's poetry of praise is superfluous. Furthermore, he argues that because Jonson writes according to this epistemology, his poetry of praise is nonrepresentational.

That Jonson's poetry of praise is nonrepresentational is Fish's second major thesis. Since, according to Fish, representation plays the same role to truth as appearance does to reality, and since Jonson's epistemology renders representation superfluous, Jonson cannot represent anything without lying. Therefore, Jonson must find a way to write poems of praise without representing anything. Fish writes, “Given an epistemology that renders it at once superfluous and presumptuous . . . a Jonson poem always has the problem of finding something to say, a problem that is solved characteristically when it becomes itself the subject of the poem, which is then enabled at once to have a mode of being (to get written) and to remain empty of representation” (34). Since the goal of Jonson's poetry, in Fish's argument is to “remain empty of representation,” Fish argues that “Representation is the line of work that Jonson's poetry are almost never in, except

when their intention is to discredit; and indeed it is a discreditable fact about any object that it is available for representation, for that availability measures the degree to which it is not 'kin to heaven' and therefore can be described" (34). Fish restates this thesis thus: "What we have then in Jonson's esthetic are two kinds of poetry: one that can take advantage of the full resources of language in all its representational power, although what it represents is evil; and another which must defeat and cancel out the power of representation, because what it would celebrate is one of epistemological immediacy and ontological self-sufficiency" (35). Fish argues that Jonson must write nonrepresentational poetry, because Jonson is celebrating members of the community, who are known to one another without mediation or representation. (I ignore "ontological self-sufficiency," since Fish does not speak to this notion elsewhere.) Although the theses support one another, they remain distinct and the truth or falsity of one cannot establish the truth or falsity of the other. Fish offers his thesis about Jonson's epistemology as an explanation of Jonson's nonrepresentational poetry. But even if Jonson does not practice the epistemology Fish attributes to him, he may write nonrepresentational poetry. He could do so out of a lack of skill, for example. Similarly, if Jonson writes representational poetry of praise, he may believe in the epistemology Fish attributes to him. In this case, he could write representational poetry out of carelessness or disregard for the purported facts of the matter. Although I have shown that Fish's arguments regarding Jonson's epistemology do not succeed, his contention that Jonson's poetry of praise is nonrepresentational deserves separate consideration.

Through the course of his argument, Fish employs several synonyms for

representation. He often uses description as a synonym for representation. That which can be represented can be described. “An object that is available for representation . . . can be described” (34). The Town's Honest Man (of *Epigrams* 115) is available for representation, because “he is the exact opposite of those (like Pembroke and Lady Bedford) who can be named, but not described, because description can only 'catch' surfaces and covering, and is itself a covering” (34). Similarly for values. Fish writes that “the concept of an inner moral equilibrium escapes Jonson's verse which is always citing the concept as its cause, but never quite managing to display or define it” (39). And “although friendship is the constant subject of this poetry, it is a subject that is more invoked than described. Like Jonson's other master values, it is present largely as what cannot be presented or re-presented” (34). For Fish, representation is largely description. In other passages, however, Fish argues that Jonson's poetry does not even communicate, suggesting that he has something stronger in mind than mere description or representation. Commenting on Jonson's poetry of praise, Fish asks, “Obviously, the question is how does one justify a poetry so described, a poetry that is committed to not asserting, to not communicating, to not being about anything?” (40). He believes that “To Robert, Earl of Salisbury” (*Epigrams* 63) “fails as communication” because “it imparts no information” (42). As Fish's claim that Jonson's members of the same are identical is ambiguous, so is his claim that Jonson's poetry of praise is nonrepresentational. At times, Fish claims that Jonson does not describe anything in his poetry; at other times, Fish claims that the poetry does not communicate anything. But since Fish defines communication as imparting information, the two notions largely overlap.

To arrive at a better understanding of Fish's position, I will examine his treatment of “To Robert, Earl of Salisbury” (*Epigrams* 63) which, as just mentioned, he gives as an example of a poem that “imparts no information” (42). Fish finds a double movement in the poem: its first eight lines appear to ask one question, while the ninth line shows it to be asking a different question. Here are the first eight lines as Fish prints them:

> Who can consider they [sic] right courses run,
> With what thy virtue on the time hath won,
> And not thy fortune, who can clearly see
> The judgment of the king so shine in thee;
> And that thou seek'st reward of thy each act
> Not from public voice, but private fact;
> Who can behold all envy so declined
> By constant suffering of thy equal mind?

On Fish's reading, the poem “begins as if it were surveying the landscape in search of a class of a certain class of persons” (41); the lines ask “who is discerning enough to judge you, Salisbury, by inner rather than outer criteria?” (41). But Fish's subjunctive “as if it were” signals that he does not think that the poem is searching for a certain class of persons. Instead, Fish observes that, “at line 9 the poem takes a turn that completely changes our understanding of what it is doing, or, to be more precise, is not doing: 'And can to these be silent, Salisbury?'” (41). This new line, Fish argues, reveals that “the poem is not, as it first seemed, an inquiry into the identity and whereabouts of persons of judgment; rather, the existence and constituency of these persons is assumed, and the

poem is revealed to be asking a question about their behavior: 'who is that would be capable of recognizing your virtue Salisbury, and yet remain silent?" On Fish's reading, Jonson already knows the answer to the first question "who is discerning enough to judge you, Salisbury, by inner rather than by outer criteria," because he assumes that such discerning people already exist by asking a question about their behavior. Yet, Fish argues, Jonson also already knows the answer to the second question "who is it that would be capable of recognizing your virtue, Salisbury, and yet remain silent?," because Jonson's question is merely rhetorical: "But, of course, this question is no more seriously entertained than the question it displaces. It is a rhetorical question whose directed answer is 'no one': 'No one could discern you for what you truly are, Salisbury, and not respond with praise'" (41-42). Yet these answers render the poem pointless: "But if that is the answer to the poem's 'real' question, the poem itself has lost its point, twice: for not only have the persons of judgment already been identified, but they have already and necessarily (they cannot remain silent) given the response for which the poem supposedly calls" (41-42). Given this, Fish concludes, "The entire performance has been circular, moving from the title—"To Robert, Earl of Salisbury"—through nine circuitous and misleading lines back to the title, to the name "Salisbury" (9) which now sounds as an invocation and as the only assertion the poem is willing to make" (41-42). Since the the only assertion the poem is willing to make is the name Salisbury, "the poem fails as communication (it imparts no information)"; since those who recognize Salisbury's merit cannot remain silent, the poem "is superfluous as an exhortation (Salisbury has already been given his due)," but, Fish argues, the poem "succeeds and has significance as

testimony, as evidence that Jonson is no more able to remain silent than those whose praise he praises, and will therefore escape the curse of the closing couplet: 'Cursed be his muse that could lie dumb or hid / To so true worth, though thou thyself forbid.'" (42).

Fish's reading of this poem, however, and the conclusions he draws from it, are flawed. First, Fish is careless with the poem's text. Fish supposedly uses Donaldson's 1975 edition of Ben Jonson's *Poems* for the text of *Epigrams* 63, but the versions are not identical. Fish, unfortunately, prints *they* for Donaldson's (and Jonson's) *thy*. Fish also uses the American spelling *judgment* rather than Donaldson's English *judgement*. These are only minor, inadvertent differences. But Fish also manipulates the punctuation of the poem to serve his interpretation. After the eighth line, he substitutes a question mark for Donaldson's semicolon, which follows Jonson's usage. By changing the punctuation, Fish transforms the meaning of the sentence, making the first eight lines seem as if there were asking "who is discerning enough to judge you, Salisbury, by inner rather than outer criteria?" (41). But as Fish well knows, this is not what the poem is asking. As he himself suggests, these lines, "taken by themselves," are misleading; the poem begins only "as if it were" doing something that it is not (41). But by placing the question mark where he does, Fish presents the ninth line as fundamentally altering the meaning of the poem: "but at line nine 9 the poem takes a turn that completely changes our understanding of what it is doing, or, to be more precise, is not doing" (41). For a patient reader who at least waits for a terminal punctuation mark to consider the meaning of sentence, the ninth line precipitates no such dramatic change in understanding. The dramatic change is caused by Fish, who, having willfully placed the question mark in line eight, moves it to line nine:

"And can to these be silent, Salisbury?" (41).

Even here, though, the question mark is misplaced. Instead it belongs, as Jonson has it and as Donaldson has printed it, at the end of the tenth line: "Without his, thine, and all time's injury?" In his reading of the poem, Fish cites every line but this one, and this omission alters the meaning of the poem. As the original spelling version of The Cambridge Edition prints it, *Epigrams* 63 reads:

> WHo can consider thy right courses run,
>
> With what thy vertue on the times hath won,
>
> And not thy fortune; who can cleerely see
>
> The iudgement of the king so shine in thee;
>
> And that thou seek'st reward of thy each act,
>
> Not from the publike voyce, but priuate fact;
>
> Who can behold all enuie so declin'd
>
> By constant suffring of thy equall mind;
>
> And can to these be silent, *Salisburie*,
>
> Without his, thine, and all times iniurie?
>
> Curst be his *Muse*, that could lye dumbe, or hid
>
> To so true worth, though thou thy selfe forbid. (1-12)

With the restoration of question mark to its proper place, it is appropriate to ask, what are the first eight lines asking? Paraphrased, they ask, who can see Salisbury's merit and not praise him without injuring himself, Salisbury, and "all times"? (10). The answer to this question, like the answer to Fish's second question, is probably "no one." However, that

does not mean, as Fish would have it, that everyone who has recognized Salisbury's merit has in fact praised that merit. It means that those who do not praise his merit will suffer for it, along with Salisbury and “all times.” Presumably, the injury will be to each person's reputation: Salisbury's reputation will be hurt since his merit is unpraised; he who does not praise will have his reputation merited when it comes to light that he did not have the good sense to praise someone so worthy. (“All times” is obscure.) There may be those who recognize Salisbury's merit and fail to praise it. This interpretation of the poem gives Jonson's curse more bite. If no one could recognize Salisbury's merit and remain silent, then Jonson's curse applies to no one. Yet, if there are people who could remain silent, even though they recognized Salisbury's merit, Jonson's curse would apply to them. If this is the case, then Jonson's poem is not as pointless as Fish claims. Instead, by warning of the injuries that will harm those who do not praise Salisbury, whether they be the injuries to reputation or the injuries of the curse, Jonson exhorts everyone who has witnessed Salisbury's “true worth” to praise him. By including the tenth line and restoring Jonson's punctuation,we can see that the poem displays a specific rhetorical function: to exhort.

By concentrating on and misreading the first nine lines, however, Fish claims that Jonson's “entire performance has been circular, moving from the title—“To Robert, Earl of Salisbury”—through nine circuitous and misleading lines back to the title, to the name “Salisbury” (9) which now sounds as an invocation and as the only assertion the poem is willing to make” (42). As I have already suggested, the lines are not misleading. By altering the punctuation, Fish makes them seem misleading. With the inclusion of line

ten, however, the lines constitute a long, complex, but comprehensible question, that may be easily paraphrased. But in this passage, Fish makes a second claim. He claims that the poem makes no assertions beyond the name "Salisbury," and furthermore, that "the poem fails as communication" because "it imparts no information" (42). Considering the poem as a whole, this is obviously untrue. The closing couplet imparts the information that Jonson would curse those who "could lie dumb or hid / To so true worth" as that which Salisbury possesses" (11-12). Furthermore, the rhetorical question culminating in the tenth line informs the reader that a person who knows Salisbury's merit, but does not praise it, is injuring himself, Salisbury, and all times. Since Fish ignores the tenth line, he ignores this piece of information which the poem imparts. And since he does discuss the couplet, but holds that the poem does not impart any information, it is likely that Fish maintains that the poem imparts no information about Salisbury himself, especially in the first nine lines. But the first eight lines do impart several pieces of information about Salisbury. Salisbury has run "right courses"; he has succeeded due to "virtue" rather than "fortune"; the king's "judgment" "shine[s]" in him; Salisbury "seek'st reward" from "private fact" rather than "public voice"; "the equal suffering of [his] equal mind" "decline[s] "all envy." These are all assertions and they all inform. And so, contrary to Fish's claim, the poem does succeed as communication.

Interchangeability

That Fish's arguments fail can also be seen in his third thesis. If the members of a Jonson community are the same, Fish observes, the poems and the people in them are interchangeable. Fish offers this thesis in two formulations. The first formulation claims

that the members of a Jonson community are interchangeable: “despite the signs of specificity that are everywhere in the poetry, everyone in it is finally interchangeable” (38). The second formulation argues that “If the members of Jonson's community are (in a very strong sense) the same, it is not surprising to find a sameness in the poems addressed to them, poems which are often, except for the finally superfluous name, interchangeable” (45). In this context, Fish suggests that “To Robert, Earl of Salisbury” (*Epigrams* 63) is interchangeable with “To Thomas, Earl of Suffolk” (*Epigrams* 67). Unfortunately, Fish does not explain in what way these two poems are interchangeable; admittedly, the two poems do share some similarities. Both poems are addressed to men noteworthy for their virtue. Salisbury has succeeded through “virtue” rather than “fortune” (1-2); Suffolk, likewise, is noted for what his “virtues” have “wrought” (7). Jonson also presents both men as having been, in some way, graced by the king. The “judgement of the king . . . shine[s] in” Salisbury (4), while the people's judgment of Suffolk is “by no less confirmed than the king's choice” (11). But there are differences as well. By cursing those muses “that could lie dumb or hid / To so true worth” as Salisbury's, Jonson emphasizes those who may not praise Salisbury (11-12). In his poem to Suffolk, however, Jonson emphasizes that Suffolk has been acclaimed by the “people's voice” (12), and that Suffolk has a place in “men's wishes” and in “each good man's heart” (7, 10). In the one poem he challenges people to praise Salisbury; in the other he welcomes their praise as representing “God's . . . voice” (12). The difference suggests that the two poems are not interchangeable, i.e., that Jonson could not have written in the same way about Salisbury as he does about Suffolk.

Furthermore, to suggest that these poems are interchangeable ignores some of Jonson's poetic artistry. For example, Jonson tailors his poem to Suffolk by punning on his family name, Howard. William Camden had, in his *Remains Concerning Britain*, derived the name Howard from the phrase “High Warden or Guardian.” By repeatedly using the word *high*, Jonson shows that the poem is meant for Thomas Howard, Earl of Suffolk. Elsewhere, too, Jonson puns on his addressee's name. In two of his poems to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, he puns on the derivation of Lucy's name from the Latin *lux*, *lucis*. In *Epigrams* 76, he writes of the day-star's “lucent seat” (8) and, in *Epigrams* 94, he calls her the “brightness of our sphere” (1, 15). In addition, Jonson's use of “day-star” in *Epigrams* 76 and “morning star” in *Epigrams* 94 are puns on Lucy's name. As Ian Donaldson writes, “The planet Venus is called Lucifer ('light-bearing') when it appears in the morning before the sun” (*Ben Jonson Poems* 50). Similarly, in his “To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Mr William Shakespeare, And What He Hath Left Us,” Jonson puns on Shakespeare's name, perhaps in the phrase “shake a stage” (37), certainly in the phrase “shake a lance” (69). These puns indicate that Jonson was writing these poems with particular people in mind. If the poems to Lucy, Countess of Bedford and William Shakespeare were reassigned to other members of the community, they would lose some of their artistry, because the puns would no longer remain puns. I suggest that if a poem loses some of its merit through interchanging it with another, then the poems are not, in fact, interchangeable.

Besides poetic artistry, there are several poems whose “specificity” is such that Fish's assertion of interchangeability fails to persuade. Writing to William, Lord

Monteagle, who received the letter that revealed the Gunpowder Plot, Jonson remarks, "My country's parents I have many known, / But saver of my country thee alone" (*Epigrams* 60, 9-10). Praising Lord Chancellor Egerton, Jonson lauds his "weighed judgments," his "purest hands" (i.e., his refusal to take bribes), and his wisdom and skill "in the laws" (*Epigrams* 74, 1, 3, 6). Jonson also writes that King James is both a poet and the "best of kings" (*Epigrams* 4, 1); that Jonson owes "all that I am in arts, all that I know" to his William Camden (*Epigrams* 14, 2); that Edward Alleyn "Out-stripped" the ancient actors Roscius and Aesop (*Epigrams* 89, 10); that Clement Edmondes's "learned hand and true Promethean art . . . doth restore [Caesar's] life" (*Epigrams* 110, 17-21); that Alphonso Ferrabosco's songs prove all that can be claimed for music:

> To urge, my loved Alphonso, that bold fame
> Of building towns, and making wild beasts tame,
> Which music had; or speak her known effects:
> That she removeth cares, sadness ejects,
> Declineth anger, persuades clemency,
> Doth sweeten mirth and heighten piety,
> And is to a body, often-inclined,
> No less a sovereign cure than to the mind;
> To allege that greatest men were not ashamed
> Of old, even by her practice to be famed;
> To say indeed she were the soul of heaven,
> That the eighth sphere, no less than planets seven,

Moved by her order, and the ninth more high,

Including all, were thence called harmony:

I yet had uttered nothing on thy part,

When these were but the praises of the art.

But when I have said, The proofs of all these be

Shed in thy songs, 'tis true: but short of thee. (*Epigrams* 130, 1-18)

None of these people is interchangeable with any other member of Jonson's community. Camden is not the best of kings; Edmondes does not outstrip the ancient actors; Ferrabosco does not restore Caesar's life. These examples show the absurdity of Fish's claim that “despite the signs of specificity that are everywhere in the poetry, everyone in it is finally interchangeable” (38). But no poem reveals that absurdity more than Jonson's “To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare.” Besides punning on Shakespeare's name, the poem alludes to Avon (“Sweet swan of Avon!”), to Shakespeare's linguistic attainments (“small Latin, and less Greek”), to the theater (e.g. “buskin tread” and “socks”), and also contains Jonson's praise of Shakespeare's dramatic greatness:

For if I thought my judgement were of years

I should commit thee surely with thy peers:

And tell how far thou didst our Lyly outshine,

Or sporting Kyd, or Marlowe's mighty line.

And though thou hadst small Latin, and less Greek,

From thence to honour thee I would not seek

For names, but call forth thundering Aeschylus,

Euripides, and Sophocles to us,

Pacuvius, Accius, him of Cordova dead,

To life again, to hear thy buskin tread

And shake a stage; or, when thy socks were on,

Leave thee alone for the comparison

Of all that insolent Greece of haughty Rome

Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come. (27-40)

This poem could not be addressed to anyone but Shakespeare, nor could anyone but Shakespeare fit in this poem. Jonson does not treat Shakespeare as though he were Lucy, Countess of Bedford, or Thomas, Earl of Suffolk. These people, even in Jonson's poetry, are not the same.

# CONCLUSION

That finishes my examination of two common critical errors in the literature on Ben Jonson's nondramatic verse. Having excised those errors, we can more easily understand Jonson's poetry. Of course, demonstrating critical errors provides little understanding in itself. Although the task of understanding Jonson's poetry must wait for subsequent study, when I return to Jonson's poetry, I would do well to learn from the errors emphasized in this essay. For, in studying Jonson, the critic must observe how Jonson uses words, heeding the entire Jonsonian corpus and contemporary non-Jonsonian writings. As we have seen, a failure to do so results can results in erroneous claims, such as the claim that Jonson feigns a commonwealth in his nondramatic poetry. Furthermore, critics must incorporate relevant biographical and historical facts, especially about Jonson's creative process and his intellectual and literary sources. Again, as we have seen, Donaldson and Cousins accurately criticize Stanley Fish for ignoring relevant facts, which have damaging consequences for his arguments about Jonson's "community of the same." In addition, any attempt to understand Jonson must respect his literary texts, without willfully mishandling and misinterpreting them. As Stanley Fish's article illustrates, without that respect, misunderstanding is sure to follow. Reflecting on the collection of critical errors discussed in this essay, I conclude where I began, believing that any study of Ben Jonson's nondramatic verse should be grounded in, as Nietzsche says, "the art of reading well—of reading facts without falsifying them by interpretation, without losing caution, patience, delicacy, in the desire to understand."

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