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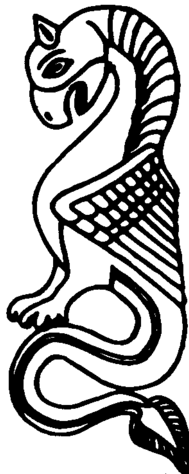

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THE "STRANGENESS" OF BEN JONSON'S *THE FOREST*

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(i)

The publication of Jonson's folio volume of *Works* in 1616 is mainly remembered as an important event in the history of English drama, for by issuing carefully prepared texts of stage plays in such dignity Jonson was challenging the established view of plays as vulgar and sub-literary. More specifically, he was claiming that his plays (or at least the ones he chose to print) were of permanent value and were to be distinguished from texts presented in ephemeral, often pirated and inaccurate quartos. But however concerned Jonson was for his own work the 1616 folio made claims for stage drama that went well beyond the individualistic. Also, the folio contained non-dramatic poetry, and the association of plays with poems is itself an assertion that the former are to be seen as of equivalent status to the latter. There are two collections of poems here: *Epigrams* and *The Forest*. We are told that the collection of epigrams is "1 Booke" (= "Volume 1") but Jonson never issued another volume and the folio group represents the fullest attempt up to 1616 to establish in English the epigram as developed in Latin by Martial. As such it is a significant effort to influence the course of English poetry. It is, however, with *The Forest* that this essay is concerned.

The title translates Latin "silva" and Jonson was fond of the analogy between trees and writings. Another collection of his is called *Underwoods* (1640) and the alternative title for *Discoveries* (also 1640) is "Timber". In the note "To the Reader" for *Underwoods* Jonson says that "the ancients called that kind of body *Sylva* or *Hule*, in which there were works of diverse nature, and matter congested; as the multitude call timber-trees, promiscuously growing, a wood, or forest",[1] while his head-note for *Discoveries* is very similar (ed.cit., p.373). *The Forest*, although containing only fifteen poems, is indeed a work of "diverse nature, and matter congested", including lyrics (one of these religious), Country House poems, an ode, satirical epistles and verse meditations. Moreover, the collection is not just a sampler of recent work but contains poems which go back at least to 1600. If we see the plays in the folio as Jonson's choice of what he regarded as his permanently valuable dramatic writing up to 1616, we can see in *The Forest* and *Epigrams* his selection from two decades of writing non-dramatic verse. As a miscellany *The Forest* is also a showcase, a way of displaying the range and quality of the poet's talents. Moreover, what

Jonson claims he can do is to be seen as unusual:

> . . . my strange poems, which as yet,
> Had not their form touched by an English wit.[2]

Why this claim, and what does it mean?

(ii)

Literary history tends to be tyrannised by century-turns and reign-endings. Elizabeth I died in 1603, which is close enough to the turn of a century for the commonly-offered dichotomy between Elizabethan and Jacobean to be seen as essentially the same as that between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. So it is commonplace, in the history of English poetry, to see Donne and Jonson as reforming and refreshing English verse by turning away from Spenserianism around the turn of the century. But this view is more a convenient hindsight than anything which fits chronological accuracy. Donne's secular verse was almost entirely unpublished in his lifetime and, although he was certainly known to be a poet by the turn of the century,[3] he was not, it seems, known as a lyric writer until well into that century.[4] It is, of course, upon his lyrics that much of the case for Donne reforming English verse at the turn of the century depends. For his part, Jonson did not publish a volume until 1616 and when the folio came out it was into a climate which, at least in public poetic terms, was still essentially Elizabethan. The anthologies *England's Helicon* (1600; reprinted 1614) and *A Poetical Rhapsody* (1602; four editions by 1621) summarize the Elizabethan lyric achievement for early seventeenth-century consumption. *The Shepherd's Pipe* (1614; by Browne, Brooke, Davies and Wither) is a reminder that pastoral is a dominant mode of the seventeenth century rather than an enervated left-over. Drayton and Campion are often seen as quintessentially Elizabethan poets, but Campion, who died in 1620, published his third and fourth books of "ayres" in 1617, the year in which Donne's wife died and Buckingham was created earl, while Drayton was publishing new and revised work up to his death in 1631, by which time Charles I's personal rule was well under way. It is worth adding that 1631 is also the year of Donne's death and of Dryden's birth. Although insiders would have been aware of what Donne and Jonson were doing with English poetry the revolution we associate with the early years of the seventeenth century would have been invisible, even by 1616, to many readers. In fact, by 1616 the mood of nostalgic reminiscence which does so much to establish the idea of the Golden Age of Elizabeth seems to have become widespread as a response to disillusionment with James I.[5]

Obviously, what any contemporary reader felt when he or she looked at *The Forest* would very much depend on what such a reader was accustomed to, and I am suggesting that the impact of a first encounter with this volume, or with Donne's lyrics, might have been as much of a shock around 1616 as there clearly was for many readers when they looked at Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1922. Given the

literary context sketched above it is possible to see some reasons why the poems of *The Forest* might seem "strange" in 1616, and I want to emphasize two such reasons.

There is, in the first place, a striking sobriety of voice. The elaborate foregrounded rhetorical patterns of much Elizabethan verse have been replaced by a more direct and more conversational style, as in these opening lines of "Why I write not of Love":

> Some act of Love's bound to rehearse,
> I thought to bind him, in my verse:
> Which when he felt, Away (quoth he)
> Can poets hope to fetter me? (*The Forest*, I: 1-4)

In this brief lyric the myth of Mars and Venus is used, but used without decoration, and it is striking how clear and economical the poem is; an unfussy narrative with little colour or obvious complexity. The slight nature of the story is not disguised. It is allowed to carry its natural weight and no more, while the clarity and economy point to another prominent quality of the poems of *The Forest* - the use of confident generalisation, as in the assurance of the opening of "Epode":

> Not to know vice at all, and keep true state,
> Is virtue, and not Fate. (*The Forest*, XI: 1-2)

There is the same confidence at the start of "Epistle. To Katherine, Lady Aubigny":

> 'Tis grown almost a danger to speak true
> Of any good mind, now: there are so few.
> (*The Forest*, XIII: 1-2)

This generalising voice is not anonymous, the discriminations and qualifications giving it character, but the character is itself available, public, rather than individualistic. What this means is perhaps most evident in "To Heaven" (*The Forest* XV) where Jonson uses a first-person figure which is simultaneously singular and yet typical of the believer-at-large, in a way which suggests George Herbert. The question "Good, and great God, can I not think of thee, / But it must, straight, my melancholy be?" (1-2) is worked out and resolved without the almost neurotic personalism of Donne. It shows instead much of Herbert's calm, representative, finally reassuring reasonableness. There are, of course, various voices within *The Forest* as, given the variety of types of poem represented, we should expect, but sturdy directness and reasonableness remain characteristic, even while the exact form these take varies from satiric distress to erotic playfulness, to ethical gravity and to dignified praise. It is this direct, reasoning voice which gives individuality to the second "strangeness" I want to stress. For the poems of *The Forest* are much taken up with the discriminating presentation of social ethics (complementing the emphasis on the individual which we find in *Epigrams*). Such presentation is basic in "To Penshurst" (*The Forest* II) where everything works towards

the final "their lords have built, but thy lord dwells" and in "Epode", where the whole poem is an elaboration of the opening statement already quoted. What is unusual, however, is not so much the ethical stress itself as its fusion with a voice which is neither anonymous nor idiosyncratic, but that of the moderate, thoughtful, socially responsible individual.

In these respects *The Forest*, taken as a whole, stands apart from, say, the decorative eroticism in *England's Helicon*, the pastoralism of *The Shepherd's Pipe*, Campion's more obviously musical lyricism and the religious ethics of a poet like George Wither. It may be briefly noticed that this "strangeness" of *The Forest* can be linked with Jonson's familiarity (which amounts to inwardness) with classical Latin writing, and in particular with Catullus' sophisticated naturalness and Horace's stress on social ethics. Jonson's classicism, however, is less a matter of obvious allusion (although the weaving of allusions may occur for good functional reasons, as in "Epistle to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland" - *The Forest* XII) than of the incorporation of classical material to reinforce or authorise key points in the poems. So, at the end of "To Heaven", Jonson makes use of Ovid's "sic ego continuo Fortunae vulneror ictu / vixque habet in nobis iam nova plaga locum" (*Ex Ponto* II.vii. 41-2), adapting this as "I feel my griefs too, and there scarce is ground, / Upon my flesh to inflict another wound" (21-2). This is followed at once by a signalled reference to Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* (vii.24) - "O wretched man, that I am: Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Classical and biblical allusions are here made to generalise the particular experience suggested by the poem's "I". A simpler example is the use and placing of a "sentence" from Seneca's *Phaedra* as the last line of "Epode":

> Man may securely sin, but safely never.
> (Scelus aliqua tutum, nulla securum tulit. *Phaedra* 1.164)

This kind of assimilation of reference to give authority is something which can be linked with the widespread Elizabethan and Jacobean habit of buttressing ideas with the authority of earlier writers and thinkers, but Jonson is unusual in the degree to which the allusions are embedded in his texts and are so often expressions of social and ethical ideas. The specific use made of allusion, and particularly classical reference, is part of the "strangeness" of these poems.

Yet it is important to be clear that such newness is far from absolute. This is so in three main ways. Firstly, Jonson's is *a* new poetry, not *the* new poetry, and we are aware with hindsight that John Donne provides an alternative newness, even if few in 1616 could have known this. Secondly, the newness does not immediately obliterate that which it challenges: other and earlier manners persist, as we have seen, and as is also immediately obvious to any readers of Quarles and Wither, or of the brothers Fletcher. Thirdly, and most importantly, the achievement of *The Forest* is not so much one of radical innovation as of the redefinition and restatement of sixteenth-century plain style. That style is often (most clearly in

Googe and Turberville) anonymous in its effect, seeming the voice of a type rather than an individual. In *The Forest* such anonymity is given character, and the attractive quiddity of George Gascoigne is made representative, while remaining individual. Similarly, neither Jonson's emphasis on social ethics nor his use of classical Latin models is in itself novel, but the particular stress and its careful, consistent organisation as a critique of contemporary society are new. Risking paradox, I now want to argue that it is precisely this union of tradition and novelty that makes *The Forest* importantly "strange".

There is good reason to be suspicious of claims that this or that represents an abrupt newness, especially when such things are linked with some single event (the turn of a century, the death of a monarch, the publication of a book). Indeed, at any given time, the absolutes "new" and "old" are likely to be misleading, with the "old" surviving in unexpected places, the "new" perhaps being found in cracks and at edges rather than consciously or in foregrounds. The relationship between "new" and "old", therefore, may best be seen in terms of dialectics.[6] Yet, while bearing this in mind, it is possible to observe tendencies in years and events: I think that the publication of *The Forest* in 1616 is an important part of a tendency.

Jonson himself was to live on for two decades after the publication of his folio and he produced significant work, especially in the masque, after 1616. Yet this remains an important year for him because the folio's publication is a formal statement of his claim to be the author of a body of work (stage plays and all) which makes him a major literary figure, the creator of permanently valuable art, the claim being the more striking when we recall that Jonson had few advantages of either birth or education. A thoroughly self-conscious creator, Jonson was aware of his individuality or "strangeness": both the plays and the poems of the 1616 volume support this claim, and the poetry, in particular, was, as we shall see, prescient, while the influence of the plays is marked by Jonson's popularity as a dramatist deep into the period of the Restoration. By contrast, the deaths of Hakluyt and Shakespeare in 1616 can be seen as symbols of the slow passing of Elizabethanism, even while publication of the second volume of William Browne's *Britannia's Pastorals* in that year is evidence of pastoral's continuing vitality, a tribute to Spenser and a reminder that the cult of Elizabeth is a potent literary and political fact in the reign of James I.[7] Also in 1616 John Donne preached his first court sermon. So Donne finally makes it to Court, although scarcely in the role he probably envisaged when he took up his post as a secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton towards the end of 1597. 1616 represents confirmation of Donne's commitment to a new career.

This is also the period of significant changes at the political level. In France Richelieu's appointment as Secretary of State was to have major implications for absolutism in that country and for Franco-British relations. The trial of Robert Carr, first earl of Somerset, and his wife Francis Howard, former countess of Essex, for the murder of Sir John Overbury in the Tower confirmed the fall

of James' first major favourite and facilitated the rise of his second, George Villiers, who in 1616 became Master of the Horse (a post made significant in the history of favourites by Elizabeth's Leicester), Lord Lieutenant of Buckinghamshire and a knight of the Garter. The rise of Villiers, of course, was to be highly significant not only for the shape of the rest of James' reign but also for that of his son, Charles I, arguably as much so after Felton assassinated Villiers in 1628 as before.[8]

Such events, of course, do not make a single year or a small group of years unique. Similar catalogues of events could be made for other, perhaps all, years, and the events just mentioned are parts of processes rather than autonomous phenomena. The Overbury trial, for instance, relates to the Carr/Howard marriage of 1613 and to the divorce between Frances and Robert Devereux, third earl of Essex, in the same year, events which link the rise of Villiers after 1616 with the fall of the Devereux family. Similarly, Richelieu's appointment can be seen as an effect of absolutism as much as a cause, while Donne's court sermon is a product of years of struggle to survive and succeed - just as Jonson's folio is both a summary and a prediction.

Newness is often a matter of synthesis and application. It may also be a matter of prescience, although it is probably less a matter of conscious prophecy than a complex subconscious participation in flux. In publishing *The Forest* Jonson was aware of attempting something new (as the reference to "my strange poems" suggests), and the feeling that new modes of expression were called for reaches back at least to the 1590s, with the development of erotic epyllion, verse satire and epigram as alternatives to Spenserianism and the Sidneyan. But, as we have seen, newness is seldom either pure in itself or devastating in its immediate effects. Elizabethanism gives ground slowly and the interaction of new with old throws up novel syntheses, which themselves interact with further developments. A fine example is the combination in the lyrics of Thomas Carew of Sidneyan humour, Donne's scepticism and Jonson's clean lines. With *The Forest* Jonson is not so much prophesying the future course of English poetry as making an intervention which proved to be significant for reasons which combine social factors with Jonson's literary prestige, which the 1616 folio did a lot to establish.

So-called Cavalier lyric, for example, is a curious mixture of the platonic and the cynico-sensual, with both elements often found within the same poet. The latter element is the better known and is associated particularly with Sir John Suckling. Its obvious literary reference point is the Donne of the elegies and some of the *Songs and Sonnets*, while socially it has to be seen as a furtive counter to the platonism of the Caroline court, especially as centered in the figure of the queen.[9] But this platonism is most marked in the public lyricism of Abraham Cowley; and its poised, assured games, in which sexual relationships are socialised and tamed, is one of Jonson's legacies, as the lyrics of *The Forest* bear witness. More broadly, Jonson's establishment of a reasoning, moderate, ethic-orientated voice is highly important in the

development of public, social poetry as the dominant mode of the seventeenth century. This is scarcely surprising since the century is dominated by socio-religious conflicts of the most extreme and public kind, involving civil war, the execution of one king, the establishment of a republic, the deposition of another king - and always the tension between desires for religious uniformity and religious freedom. Under extreme pressure, satire, most notably in Cleveland, turns to the violence of the Elizabethan experiments of Donne, Hall and Marston, but more commonly it takes its tone from Jonson. His sober, civilised voice is developed by Dryden, whereby English satire becomes a means of criticism from the centre rather than from the fringes. Further, the judicious voice of Jonson's verse epistles in *The Forest* clearly appealed to many later poets, sustaining, as these poems do, ideas of settled and harmonious hierarchical societies at times when such ideas seem most threatened. Arguably, it is here Jonson's own awareness of factors pulling against harmony which makes his visions of unity and peace so appealing, and different unions of the dialectic between harmony and chaos can be seen in Marvell (especially in "Upon Appleton House"), in Lovelace ("The Grasshopper") and in Charles Cotton. What is important, however, is to see how much of this leads back to the "strange" poems of *The Forest*.

This formal influence upon later verse is one kind of prescience, but in describing it I have already given the formal the sketch of a social context, and I now want to suggest that *The Forest* is interesting as an intervention at this level also.

Publication of *The Forest* in 1616 occurs in the period of the rise of Lionel Cranfield, a London merchant who became earl of Middlesex in 1622, only to be impeached two years later. Cranfield's rise is the result of his financial acumen applied to the desperate fiscal situation of James's court[10] - and so, for that matter, is his fall. His career points up several important features of Stuart England: the growing importance of the City in the nation's affairs, to be fully seen in the Civil Wars; social unease over "the rise of the merchant class";[11] the major part which royal finances play in the history of relationships between monarch and Parliament. Cranfield's career can also be seen as exemplifying the social strains, the confusion and loss of trust which mark the reigns of James I and Charles I.

As we have seen, one line out from *The Forest* is that of lyric, and Cavalier lyric exemplifies much of the inward-looking complacency of Charles I's reign, a complacency which seems to grow even as the reign comes nearer to breakdown, the major symbol being Davenant's *Salmacida Spolia* of 1640. Charles Carlton has stressed Charles' desire for friendship and approval, together with his inability to see that he might be wrong and that opponents might be other than traitors. Such traits help explain the nature of the Caroline court, with its development of the arts of flattery, its insouciance about events outside its boundaries, and its reliance upon slogans and amateur politics. Such commonplaces need to be qualified by noticing the element of critical intelligence in Carew and Van Dyke, the darkness in Suckling and the possibilities of

criticism in drama recently examined by Martin Butler.[12] It is also important to remember that England did have peace (though perhaps because of disharmony rather than anything else) while the Continent was enduring the Thirty Years War, and that the so-called "Eleven Years of Tyranny" prompted no significant revolt and, indeed, a high level of co-operation with the king's policies of high taxation. Yet the complacency remains and the development from Jonson of a poised, polished and rather distanced lyric is a part of this, the development being seen in the adaptation of Jonson's individual voice to the needs of a social elite. But *The Forest* is not dominated by lyric, whereas Carew's fine *Poems* of 1640 has a marked lyric emphasis (the date being poignant), and the overall effect of Jonson's collection is not of complacency. What matters about "To Penshurst" and "To Sir Robert Wroth", above all else, is the poems' awareness of threats to stability, and here Jonson is both reflecting governmental concern over residence and hospitality and anticipating that concern with power, property and tradition which dominates the century. At the same time, the visions of corruption and decay which complicate praise in the Rutland and Aubigny epistles give those poems a sense of strain and tension which looks forward to the struggles of the 1640s and 1650s.

Again - and most revealingly - we encounter paradox. *The Forest*, here characteristic both of Jonson and his period, is simultaneously "strange" and conservative. Stylistically, classical and native plain style models are refurbished, to Janus-like effect. With one face the poems look back to Catullus, or Horace, or Gascoigne, while with the other they look forward to Lovelace, Dryden and Cotton. At the same time, Jonson's poems endorse old remedies for the ills of individuals and society: responsibility on the part of the ruling classes, obedience on the part of the ruled; a sense of place and a sense of fostering; endurance and self-knowledge. The art and the thought work persuasively together, even while Jonson's sensitivity to evidence of change and strain serves to destabilize both art and thought. The dominant current view among historians is that men went to war in 1642 with reluctance and for conservative reasons. The lines between the parties were blurred and often crossed (one of the king's own nephews declared for Parliament); both sides accused the other of "innovation"; and it is symbolically important that it was the king who declared war. Patrick Collinson has argued that the religious dimension (which finally fuses with the socio-political) is equally conservative.[13] Kingship was still the ideal of most of those who were in a position to care, even as an axe struck a king's neck.[14] Charles was not executed for being a king, but for being a bad king; Cromwell was offered a crown in 1657 and didn't find the offer offensive; Marvell praises the first anniversary of Cromwell's protectorate by making the protector in effect super-king. Arguably, the most striking feature of *The Forest* is what is absent. There is no sense of an alternative model to the hierarchy which worked progressively less well as the years passed between 1616 and 1642.[15] For even if Civil War broke out for conservative reasons it did so because the old model was failing. With the crisis of that failure comes the emergence of new possibilities, some tentatively articulated,

some stridently, and things were not the same after 1660,[16] the Restoration being another paradox.[17] In seeing something of all this, and in articulating how the past is the present and the future, Jonson's "strange poems" participate in history even as they help to make it.

NOTES

1. G.A.E. Parfitt (ed.), *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems* (London, 1975) p.22. All references to the poems are to this edition.

2. "Epistle to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland", *The Forest* XII: 81-2.

3. W. Milgate, "Early References to John Donne", *Notes and Queries* 195 (1950) pp.229-31, 246-7, 290-2, 381-3.

4. J. Carey, *John Donne - Life, Mind and Art* (London, 1981) p.91.

5. Camden's *The History of the most renowned and victorious Princess Elizabeth*, begun in 1608, is an important document in this process.

6. See F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London, 1981) passim.

7. See n.5. For the development of the iconography of the cult see R. Strong, *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth* (Oxford, 1963) and F. Yates, *Astraea* (London, 1975).

8. See C. Carlton, *Charles I, The Personal Monarch* (London, 1984) especially pp.96-110.

9. Carlton, pp.123-53.

10. See C. Russell, *The Crisis of Parliaments* (Oxford, 1974) pp.289-90.

11. On the merchants see K. Wrighton, *English Society 1580-1680* (London, 1982) pp.27-31.

12. M. Butler, *Theatre and Crisis 1632-1642* (Cambridge, 1985).

13. P. Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants* (Oxford, 1982), especially chapters 3, 4.

14. Fairfax, for example, remained a firm believer in monarchy, but not absolutism, despite his activity for Parliament. He was not unusual.

15. Carlton, op.cit., p.157.

16. L. Stone, "The Results of the English Revolutions of the Seventeenth Century", in *Three British Revolutions*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Princeton, 1980) pp.24-100.

17. In that the monarchy was restored but was not again to be monarchy as known before the calling of the Long Parliament.