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Significant Others: On the Comparison of Shakespeare and Jonson

James Loxley & Fionnuala O'Neill Tønning

By the end of the 1700s, Jonas Barish observed some fifty-five years ago, “the luckless Jonson was yoked to Shakespeare in an odious tandem from which two centuries of subsequent comment would scarcely suffice to extricate him” (Barish, 1). Barish’s view of the iniquities that result from this pairing of the two playwrights has been echoed, rather than qualified, by subsequent commentators. In the preface to his 1983 collection of essays on *Jonson and Shakespeare*, Ian Donaldson felt the need to explain why it was worth wheeling out the old tandem again, differentiating the comparative work undertaken by his own contributors from the prior uses of the pairing. “Since the time of Dryden”, he noted, “it has been a familiar literary game to match Shakespeare and Jonson against each other in order to praise the one and express critical reservations about the other” (Donaldson, vii-viii). Yet it was precisely the lengthy, if disreputable, pedigree of the comparative venture that required critics to revisit it now:

It is therefore possible to return today with new sensitivities and new intentions to compare Jonson’s work and Shakespeare’s: not in order to perpetuate old myths, nor to punish Jonson for the crime of not being Shakespeare, nor to repudiate the premises on which Jonson’s art is based, ... but to attempt rather to reveal through more detailed and informed

comparison something of the characteristic manner and achievement of both writers, the two great dramatists of the English theatre. (x)

So how's that working out? There has been subsequent critical work in a not dissimilar vein – we might just note here Russ McDonald's 1988 monograph, which neatly redraws some of the inherited generic distinctions between these "two great dramatists" – but for the most part, critics have not felt as sanguine as Donaldson about the prospect of revivifying the comparison. Which is not, of course, to say that it has continued in odious vein – rather, developments in the study of both playwrights, and of early modern drama and culture more generally, have made it seem less helpful in revealing the "characteristic manner and achievement" of both writers than might have seemed plausible in the early 1980s. This is not the place for a detailed account of such developments even as they affect the study of Jonson, but we might note the revival of interest in him as a theatrically curious playwright indicated – if not spurred – by Anne Barton's *Ben Jonson: Dramatist*, which was published the year after Donaldson's collection, and Peter Womack's still scintillating volume in the Blackwell Rereading Literature series from 1986; the explosion of interest in his masque writing, which has served to recast what had long looked like disreputable sycophancy as a much more delicate and finely judged business of courtly negotiation; the publication of no fewer than four biographies, each with new light to shed; and, finally, a series of new archival discoveries, large and small, all of which serve to reconfigure our picture of the man and his work in ways that simply evade the terms usually enforced by the odious tandem. Our developing awareness of Shakespeare as both literary dramatist, to echo the title of Lukas Erne's justly influential book, and as a collaborative author involved in negotiations of his own, has similarly shifted our picture of him away from that

customarily sketched in opposition to Jonson (see Erne and Vickers). Decades of vigorous historicist criticism have reconnected Shakespeare to the early modern moment of cultural production; together with acute criticism of his ideological repurposing down the centuries, this has helped us see beyond the bad transcendence conferred on him in opposition to Jonson's antique topicality (historicism and presentism here riding a rather nifty tandem of their own).

What's more, Donaldson's secure sense that Shakespeare and Jonson are "the two great dramatists of the English theatre", which would be sufficient to justify a primarily binocular concern with them alone, is no longer quite so widely shared. It's not just that the explanation or exposition of greatness isn't quite the thing it once was (though it wouldn't do to underestimate its persistence as critical motive in Shakespeare studies); it's also that there have been significant moves to challenge Shakespeare's dominance by decentering the figure of the "great dramatist" which equally apply to any attempt to single out Jonson as his only significant other. As well as the boundary-blurring alertness to collaborative authorship, we have found other ways of organising dramatic production into meaningful units – for instance, making playing companies, rather than authors, our focus (see, for example, MacLean and McMillin and Walsh). We have also witnessed the analytical mobilisation of a more encompassing binary, which places Shakespeare in some kind of oppositional (even if dialectical) relation to "Not Shakespeare", within which Jonson is now simply subsumed. Yet this is identified only in order for the threat of its hypostatisation to be averted – Jenny Sager, for example, invokes the Derridean (quasi-)logic of the *supplément* to depict the mobility and complication of the opposition (Sager, 3-5). All of which might be thought to render the revival of a specifically comparative approach to

Jonson and Shakespeare a peculiar ambition. What can the comparison now have to offer, given all that has happened in recent decades?

This special issue, in a year of quatercentenaries – of Shakespeare’s death, and of the publication of Jonson’s extraordinary first folio – is one attempt to suggest that there may yet be some merit in this particular conjunction. Together, the essays in this collection re-assess many of the entrenched dichotomies which have shaped previous critical appraisals of the pairing: Shakespeare as transcendent and universal versus Jonson as dated and time-bound; Shakespeare as versatile man of the theatre versus Jonson as obsessively literary dramatist; Shakespearean capacity for sharp-eyed political commentary versus Jonsonian pure entertainment.

In the opening essay Lucy Munro explores Jonson’s and Shakespeare’s engagement with the literary past via their deployment of old-fashioned Skeltonic poetic forms, arguing that Skeltonic styles enable “a renewed engagement with contemporary aesthetics and politics”. In doing so, the essay destabilises the critical narrative which identifies Shakespeare as historically transcendent at the expense of Jonsonian “datedness”. Instead, she shows that both engage in sophisticated connections between literary past, political present, and imagined futures. Exploring the “multiple moments” of reading and performance opened up by these Skeltonic styles also enables the essay to argue for a more nuanced interaction between historicist and presentist critical approaches to the Jonson-Shakespeare pairing; in this reading, *Lear* is neither as “untimely and future-oriented” nor Jonson as time-bound as such critical approaches have tended to conclude.

Text and performance, stage versus page, are also central to Jakub Boguszak’s analysis (following Palfrey and Stern) of Jonson’s use of actors’ parts. In recent years Lukas Erne’s work has revitalised critical understanding of Shakespeare as a “literary dramatist”,

carefully revising his texts for print. Boguszak's essay usefully complements this work, challenging the critical dichotomy which has lauded Shakespeare's capacity for theatre and performance while casting Jonson's literary ambitions as antitheatrical by contrast. Undertaking a series of close readings of Shakespeare's and Jonson's engagement with actors' parts allows Boguszak to argue for a reconsideration of Jonson as a dramatist who, like Shakespeare, actively engaged with contemporary rehearsal and performance practices.

Mark Robson has argued elsewhere that critical disregard of Jonson is partly due to his widespread neglect at the hands of new historicist criticism (Robson, 61). Lee Morrissey addresses this problem in his "archipelagic" approach to Jonson and Shakespeare, exploring questions of early modern British nationhood and inter-island identity via representations of the Irish in *Henry V* and *The Irish Masque*. Attentive to the changes in military and political context which had occurred by the date of Jonson's masque, the essay presents Jonson, as well as Shakespeare, as fully engaged with contemporary historical politics of nationhood, alert to current problems with James VI and I's project of Ulster settlement and the potential for ongoing fissures in a kingdom "in parts".

In the final essay, Christopher Orchard challenges the assumption that Shakespeare's critical reception since his death (itself partly shaped by Jonson) has always seen him placed above or even alongside Jonson. The essay achieves this by focusing on a specific episode in the history of that critical reception, arguing for Jonson's demonstrably greater popularity in the 1640s and 1650s: a fact mainly due to the impact of the contemporary political climate upon the world of the theatre. What Robson has elsewhere termed Shakespeare and Jonson's "co-dependency" (62) is thus, according to Orchard's reading, a more recent phenomenon.

Collectively, the four essays hope to show that posing these two influential, mutually shaping author-functions together can do something both other and more than the odious tandem of old achieved, and that there is illumination to be gained from a critically alert revisiting and reworking of Shakespeare and Jonson's co-dependency. The particular interest and involvement that each had in the works of the other – recently and succinctly documented by David Riggs – continues to show up even in conceptually and methodologically various approaches to their conjunction.

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