William W. E. Slights. *Ben Jonson and the Art of Secrecy*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1994. Pp. ix, 241.

In *Ben Jonson and the Art of Secrecy*, William Slights argues that "the tension between concealment and revelation affords a model for the poise that sustained Ben Jonson in the intricately linked worlds of royal court and commercial theatre during the middle years of his career" (p. 1). He is led to his topic by the playwright and his times, the playwright whose plots regularly depend upon keeping and not keeping secrets, and times marked by the covert schemes both of state spies and of criminal and seditious conspirators. Secrecy also informed the reading and writing of texts, which protected from the ignorant the more removed mysteries of politics, science, and religion, but also stirred the suspicions of the censors, who investigated texts for hidden meanings that might prove dangerous to Jacobean authorities.

Having considered (largely on the basis of Shakespeare's works) secret places and secret selves, the language of secrecy and the dramaturgy of it, Slights addresses himself to his main subject. He accepts Anne Barton's claim that *Sejanus* marked a formal liberation that made this group of plays possible, and goes further, arguing that intellectual, social, and economic changes — "those most conducive to creating spectacle in the theatre," those "promulgated under a cloak of secrecy" (p. 13) — caused Jonson to produce this distinctive set of plays: *Sejanus* (1603), *Volpone* (1606), *Epicoene* (1609), *The Alchemist* (1610), *Catiline* (1611), and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), plays that "relentlessly uncover the ways that people devise covertly to exploit one another" (p. 173). Slights proceeds chronologically, devoting a chapter to each play and building in each chapter a coherent case for the centrality of secrecy in the play under consideration.

Though straightforward in structure, *Ben Jonson and the Art of Secrecy* remains a complex and difficult book. Because Jonson's exploration of the topic took various forms, Slights's analysis sets forth an increasingly complex sense of the phenomenon. In *Sejanus*, the play which "maps the territory of Jonson's interrogation of institutional as well as personal secrecy" (p. 32), secrecy is registered in concrete particulars of staging: coded language, whispered exchanges, the conspiratorial huddle. In his next chapter, Slights shifts his ground somewhat to the social functions of secrecy, seen as central not only "to the planning of every form of injury to human beings" but also to "the complementary, sometimes conflicting desires for self-protection and self-publication" (p. 58). While secrecy operates in these ways in the plots of *Volpone*, the impact of the play depends also on its historical moment. Written and performed in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, *Volpone* becomes an illustration of Jonson's use of art to "co-opt, comically diminish, and hence discredit the bias toward secrecy in a culture being propelled by its collective anxiety, in particular by its xenophobic anti-Catholic hysteria" (p. 60). In *Epicoene*, Jonson himself is the keeper of the crucial

secret, one he keeps even from his audience. When he strips away the transvestite disguise, he confirms the anxiety about sexual identities which upsets the traditional social order associated with comic closure. Having refocused on the artistic project Jonson undertakes in *Epicoene*, Slights has to redefine the way in which social history is relevant to the play, so that the interpretive problem becomes “not identifying the homologous actions that link the world of Jonson’s play to early modern social customs but rather determining what kinds of social work are performed by the importation of custom [in this case, charivari] into this particular play” (p. 94). Slights goes on to examine in *The Alchemist* “the cozening tactics of Jacobean con-artists” (p. 105) who deploy the seductive power of secret knowledge; in *Catiline*, aristocratic conspiracies and counter-conspiracies that undermine the *arcana imperii*, the authority upon which the state depends; and in *Bartholomew Fair*, the ridiculous practices of “an entire cast of London citizens greedily sniffing their way toward the unsavoury misconstruction of a supposed hidden truth” (p. 148), which “truth” would licence each one to satisfy his/her peculiar desires.

Noting the subject matter of Slights’s chapters as I have done in the last paragraph is unfair, for his analysis of Jonson’s works, an analysis informed by new historicism and post-structuralism, is searching, detailed, and conscientious. He weaves unifying threads throughout the book, returning as he does in each chapter to the plays’ engagement of social history, the status and roles of female characters, the distinguishing features of the author’s middle period, Jonson’s critique of a secrecy-ridden society, and his vision of a better one. Because secrets are most tantalising when secret, or, rather, when hastily whispered and half-heard, *Ben Jonson and the Art of Secrecy* necessarily produces some disappointment, for the very project requires not only the revelation of secrets, but also their explication, and that explication finds expression in now-familiar discourses of critical theory.

Slights writes with enthusiasm for his subject and a flair for both metaphor and bardolatrous allusion. In *Ben Jonson and the Art of Secrecy*, he has certainly achieved what he says would satisfy him, that is, to “have hit upon a few nonce truths in relation to the theatrical, sexual, and political hermeneutics of secrecy in Jonson’s fine middle plays” (p. 177).

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