thought and activities of the age of Thomas More.

Notes

- 1 *Radical Reform*, p. 42, footnote 93; the passage from which Fleisher derives his information is from the *Responsio ad Convitia Martini Lutheri* in More's *Omnia Opera*, Louvain, 1565, p. 80.
- 2 More's ultimate refusal to obey the king was, Fleisher thinks, a matter of priorities, and does not bely his position as one reluctant to contravene authority.

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William Blissett, Julian Patrick, R.W. Van Fossen, editors. *A Celebration of Ben Jonson*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1973. Pp. xiii, 194. \$8.50.

This handsome little volume is a gathering of six papers presented at the 1972 Toronto conference marking the 400th anniversary of Jonson's birth. The names of the authors guarantee their professional excellence. In addition to the six printed here, the conference heard a number of other papers which we can find in various journals. Introduced by Professor William Blissett, who had the chief responsibility for this book, the volume concludes with a listing of members of the conference. The University of Toronto, which sponsored this celebration, is to be commended for the style with which it manages such things; and we who were not there can only regret our absence.

The essays begin with a provocative piece on "The Incredibility of Jonsonian Comedy." In it Clifford Leech notes that for all their firmly didactic purpose and realistic trappings, the careful craftsmanship of the plays—their "narrow restriction of time and place" and characterization which "stretches our capacity for belief" (p. 21)—leads us to admire rascals and compels us to believe the unbelievable. He calls our attention to a central paradox of Jonsonian comedy which is "inherent in the 'mainstream' of comedy" itself (p. 22). Jonson "loved to play tricks" (p. 7), for he "belongs in the theatre" (p. 24). The comedy is "outrageous" because it "simultaneously demands and defies belief" (p. 23), proclaims high moral purpose and celebrates scoundrels, all within the deliberate artificiality of the stage. Jonson's craft is so great that he makes us accept the unacceptable.

In the second essay, Jonas A. Barish discusses "Jonson and the Loathed Stage." He writes, "it is hard not to feel, at times, that Jonson's vocation [as dramatist] goes against the grain" (p. 27); and that Jonson frequently thinks of his plays as "reading experience rather than a theatrical experience" (p. 33). Apparently Jonson really wanted another line of work—though he is of course not the only master to complain about the hard terms of his craft. In this essay Barish is in danger of pouring out the baby with the bathwater. To see the most skillful manipulator of plot in English drama as essentially "anti-theatrical" is to define "theatrical" in a sophisticated, if not sophistical, fashion. One's common sense is challenged. Jonson assuredly distrusts "theatricality, particularly as it manifests itself in acting, miming, or changing" (p. 49) outside the theatre—for perfectly obvious moral reasons. But within the theatre, these are the qualities on which he places his dramaturgical reliance. Like Leech's preceding essay, this one is based on paradox. Its paradox is the kind with which academics love to play.

In the third essay, by G.R. Hibbard, "Ben Jonson and Human Nature," we are asked

to notice how Jonson emphasizes "those things which man shares with the rest of animal creation. . . the dirt, the squalor, and the mess of which human life is so largely made up" (p. 59). In the major plays "failures of perception" result from the fact that passions, the outgrowth of "idées fixes," intrude themselves between the information brought by the senses and the reason which should judge the facts dispassionately. There is "a deliberate, self-willed refusal to look at the truth, even when it presents itself in an undeniable form" (p. 68). The characters see what they want to see, deceiving themselves. Like the celebrated hedgehog, Jonson, "by the time he had finished *Sejanus*, knew 'one big thing.' For the next thirteen years, right down to his completion of *The Devil is an Ass* in 1616, he was to continue exploring the possibilities and the implications" (p. 62). Hibbard illuminates all the major plays as he reviews them in light of this "one big thing," the human propensity to limit one's perception willfully.

D.F. McKenzie considers "'The Staple of News' and the Late Plays" in an excellent if overlong essay next. After *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson exhibits a basic distrust in the independent judgment of his audience. The Chinese-box-like structure of these late plays, primarily *The Staple of News*, "suggests that he has little faith in man's capacity even to see the light, let alone follow it" (p. 106). By 1624 the stage had ceased to be the popular forum for ideas and issues, and though he made great efforts to write for his own times, with elaborate dramatic innovations and resurrections, like the drama of the time "his movement is ineluctably elitist and escapist" (p. 112). In theme and structure alike, he is thoroughly reactionary. "*The Staple of News* marks the end of theatre as the only secular mass medium, the end of the playhouse as the principal forum of public debate, the end of the actors' popular function as the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time. The dramatic poet, as rhetor in the truest sense, had lost his vocation to a journalist" (p. 126).

Hugh Maclean in an essay entitled "'A More Secret Cause': The Wit of Jonson's Poetry" is concerned with an extended meaning of decorum. Jonson's poetry "wittily displays his command of variously decorous expression" (p. 115); but because a poet must be a good man proclaiming highest virtue, it places the human action it discusses within a larger, hierarchical context. Through the examination of the poem, Jonson's auditor is presumably "drawn on to perceive the degree to which his own 'powers of wit, and soule' may have been perverted or quite neglected" (p. 135). We are invited to see not only our place in society but our place in nature and time. After a general discussion of Jonson's poetic principles, Maclean examines a number of poems to show how the "wit of Jonson's poetry" operates in specific examples. The explications are useful independently, and they all elucidate the thesis.

The last essay in the book is by L.C. Knights, and concerns "Ben Jonson: Public Attitudes and Social Poetry." In it Knights sets himself to define "a particular social mode of verse-writing" (p. 168) for, as many have recognized, Jonson's are public poems. He notes that "the best of Jonson's poems—even the more directly personal ones—seem to be the expression of something already formed: they do not explore the more obscure hinterland from which thought emerges" (p. 173). Their logic is not psychological but rational, not expressionistic but declarative. In these poems "we are in contact with the mind of a man who stands for social-moral attitudes, for shared, traditional norms" (p. 184). This is "an individual, powerful, and distinctive mind—with its own privacies" (p. 185), but it is a profoundly conservative one.

If the editors of this volume had elected to give it a more extended introduction,

they might have found a unity worth discussing among these six essays. Not only do they collectively provide a critical survey of the total body of Jonson's work, but nearly all of them touch on a single unifying theme. Speaker after speaker considers the relation of appearance to reality, illusion to reality. Again and again we are told that Jonson wants us to distinguish between the temporal dress of things and its essential nature. "As carcass to spirit, so body to soul. In the poetic kernel of the masque lies its abiding essence, in the theatrical vesture only a disposal shell," Barish writes (p. 37). Hibbard writes, "The plays—the great plays—are, of course, about the many, who abandon the realities of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty for their shadowy, insubstantial opposites. . ." (p. 80). McKenzie asks us to consider Jonson's preoccupation with "appearance" especially in the late plays, and Maclean in his discussion of Jonson's concern for decorum wants us to note the relationship of form to attitude. Through such recurring themes the six papers are connected, and what might have been a volume of miscellaneous pieces is finally a unified study.

And yet for all its excellences, I am myself not finally comfortable with it. These pieces are altogether too "professional" in that narrow sense which Jonson repeatedly satirized. I have been amusing myself trying to imagine how Jonson would react to such a volume as this, even one constructed to celebrate his own work. As one reads through these essays, one is struck by how close, how tight, how in-bred these Jonsonians are. These writers quote one another, refer to works by one another and in general conduct themselves very much like any professional in-group, as the sociologists say. Names are dropped on every page. Perhaps that is the result of the fact that the papers were written and read at a closed specialized conference.

But when, at last, L.C. Knights says quietly that it will be his purpose "to say as simply as possible what there is in the poems that is capable of nourishing our minds, not as scholars but simply as men. . ." (p. 168), I feel as though I had come out of the seminar room into the open air. Several of the seminarians speak of possible productions of Jonson's plays, especially the late, less well-known comedies. It is hard to imagine the Joe Papps of the world being inspired to invest time, talent, and money after perusing this volume. This collection is clearly by the already-converted for the already-converted. As such is it really necessary? A harder task is recruitment. Why can't these gifted, learned scholars reach a world out there? I don't know that I smiled a single time while I read these pieces, and certainly I did not laugh aloud. If I had not known that *The Alchemist* and *Volpone* and *Bartholomew Fair* were outrageously funny, I could hardly have learned it from these pages. The scholars found them profound, tightly organized, witty, and shrewd. But funny? Few persons give evidence that it was important that anybody should notice. Their solemnity may be funny, but that is another matter.

This is a good book. The question it raises is a central one. Is this kind of thing necessary? Is this the best way to serve Jonson's art? I for one rather doubt it. It is all too solemnly sad, too professional, at least for one man who responds, and would like others to respond, to the gaiety, the high spirits, the sense of life, and the continuing zest and courage represented in the comedies of Ben Jonson.

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