Ben Jonson,
Catholic Poet

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Résumé : *Cet article considère les éléments biographiques portant sur le Catholicisme déclaré de Jonson et propose que cette religion encadrait et infléchissait sa poésie. Maintenu à travers ses années de production littéraire les plus importantes, le Catholicisme de Jonson met son art sous une lumière révélatrice. Sa poésie reflète des sympathies et des croyances catholiques autant en panégyrique qu'en satire. Elle met l'accent de façon surprenante sur les bonnes actions et la sainteté de la vierge Marie. Elle représente le monde hostile dans lequel vivaient les Catholiques anglais, assujettis à la trahison et à la persécution. Le Catholicisme offrait à Jonson un cercle d'amis, des traditions d'érudition et de cérémonie, une esthétique de la beauté et de l'image et une gamme de croyances et pratiques dévotionnelles.*

“Imprisoned, and almost at the gallows” for the murder of Gabriel Spencer in a duel, Ben Jonson, astonishingly, converted to the forbidden religion, Roman Catholicism: “Then took he his religion by trust of a priest who visited him in prison. Thereafter he was twelve years a papist” (*Conversations*, 203–5).¹ The priest may have been Thomas Wright, a loyalist, anti-Spanish Jesuit imprisoned at this time,² and Jonson may have explained his reasons for converting and reconverting back later in *Motives* (1622), a work that unfortunately has disappeared. But one thing is certain: the conversion to Catholicism was inexpedient, even reckless, from a worldly, political point of view. After all, one of Jonson’s interrogators in a 1597 bout with the law over *The Isle of Dogs* had been Richard Topcliffe, the savage priest-hunter who regularly tortured his victims. And the church/government of early modern England eyed Catholics suspiciously, compelled them to attend state services, spied upon them, interrogated, charged, and punished

them, and, on occasion, executed them for treason. Jonson's *Sejanus* (1603, pub. 1605), it seems, landed him in exactly this kind of trouble with the authorities: one of Jonson's enemies, Northampton, summoned him before the Privy Council for writing *Sejanus* and accused him "both of popery and treason" (*Conversations*, p. 273). Since Drummond's notice is tantalizingly brief and since the earliest surviving copy of the play, the 1605 quarto, embodies substantial revision, the charge remains mysterious. The Revels editor, Philip J. Ayres, reasonably conjectures that the original treason trial in *Sejanus* mirrored the sensational trial of Raleigh just months before, thus angering Northampton, one of Raleigh's chief persecutors. Jonson's perceived sympathy for Raleigh could be construed as treasonous and popish because the brief against Raleigh included conspiracy to depose the king and "to alter religion, to bring in the Roman superstition."³ Whether Jonson's *Silius* reflects Raleigh or not, that character, when accused of treason, certainly echoes the protests of Catholics about "the execution of justice in England," to use the infamous phrase of William Cecil, Lord Burleigh:⁴

Alas, I scent not your confederacies?
Your plots, and combinations? I not know
Minion Sejanus hates me; and that all
This boast of law, and law, is but a form,
A net of Vulcan's filing, a mere engine,
To take that life by a pretext of justice
Which you pursue in malice? (3.241–47)

Jonson's professed Catholicism involved him subsequently with state authorities. Two days after the discovery of the Gunpowder plot on 5 November 1605, he received a warrant from the Privy Council to convey a promise of safe passage to an unnamed priest. Failing to find the man, Jonson began his letter to Salisbury the next day, 8 November, by protesting both his labor and sincerity "in the discharge of this business, to the satisfaction of Your Lordship and the state." He closes the letter offering to "make further trial" and again asserting his integrity and loyalty (*HS* 1: 202).⁵ The details remain unclear but the incident reveals Jonson nervously operating in the uncomfortable middle-zone between the government and its enemies. On 10 January 1606 the Consistory Court cited Jonson and his wife Anne for absenting themselves from communion "as far as we can learn ever since the king came in" (1603); "he is a poet," the citation continues, and "by fame a seducer of youth to the popish religion" (*HS* 1: 220). Four similar citations followed that year. Jonson paid recusancy fines but repeatedly denied the charge of persuading young people to Catholicism. Moreover, he refused to take communion, according to the citation for April 26, "until he shall be

resolved either by the minister of the parish or some other in the scruple he maketh therein" (*HS* 1: 221). The court assigned him such "learned men" as he requested, including the Dean of Paul's and the Chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury, no less. Jonson had to confer with some of these tutors twice a week and report to the Court on the last day of the following term. Jonson later recalled his reconversion to Protestantism (1610) and, "in token of true reconciliation," his draining of the communion cup (*Conversations*, pp. 261–63). Both the late date of the reconversion and the mockery implicit in the gesture suggest that the poet proved a most refractory pupil to the good doctors. Even after this time Jonson attended a Paris debate about the nature of the Eucharist, in 1612.⁶ Jonson could speak of his religious allegiance cavalierly, claiming that he was "versed in both" faiths (*Conversations*, p. 613); and he was certainly capable of using anti-Catholic discourse in his poetry and plays.⁷ But Jonson paid penalties for his Catholicism and took considerable risks to maintain it. His final reconversion elicited harsh judgment from at least one eulogist, Thomas Willford: "The last act did disgrace the first; / His part he played exceeding well, / A Catholic, until he fell / To sects and schisms" (*HS* 11: 493).

Jonson's Catholicism conditioned and inflected his "wit's great over-plus," the phrase of friend and fellow poet Robert Herrick, as criticism is beginning to recognize. T. Wilson Hayes (1991) situates Jonson among a group of dissident Catholic intellectuals. A. W. Johnson (1994) notes the possible influence of Thomas Wright and the operation of a Catholic aesthetic in the structuring of the poetry. Taking the conversion to Catholicism seriously, James P. Crowley (1996) discerns a coherent religious ethic throughout Jonson's poetry. Observing that Jonson's years as a professed Catholic, 1598 to 1610, coincide with the period of his greatest literary production, Ian Donaldson (1997) discusses Jonson's Catholicism as necessitating a kind of duplicity throughout his career. Reviewing the evidence of Jonson's Catholic faith and the critical neglect, Richard Harp (1999), co-editor of the *Ben Jonson Journal*, calls for a full study of Jonson and religion.⁸ Such reevaluation must recognize at the outset that Jonson, like many English Catholics, lived and died loyal to crown and country. There is no reason to read dissimulation in the poems celebrating the king's preservation from treason and praising Lord Monteagle for uncovering the Gunpowder plot (*Epigrams*, 35, 51, 60), or, for that matter, in the masques.⁹ Such reevaluation must also acknowledge that both Catholicism and anti-Catholicism evolved during the long period of Jonson's life, taking many shapes and offering varying capacities for compromise and co-existence.¹⁰ These things being granted, Jonson's Catholicism offers an illuminating angle of vision into his art, especially his poetry, early and late. The verse

reflects Catholic sympathies and beliefs, as it runs, characteristically, to panegyric and satire. The poetry occasionally has doctrinal implications, exhibiting a surprising emphasis on good works and a recurrent devotion to the Virgin Mary. Moreover, Jonson's poetry depicts the hostile world in which the early modern Catholic lived, prey to spies and betrayal, reliant on conscience and a community of the faithful.

Most immediately, Jonson's poetry of praise attests to his relations, literary and personal, with fellow Catholics in early modern England. Jonson wrote a prefatory poem to *The Sprite of Trees and Herbs* (1598–99), an unpublished botanical emblem-book by Thomas Palmer, the Oxford don deprived of his post because of his Catholicism and persecuted in retirement. In the poem Jonson admires all the plants that thrive "in spite of storms and thunder" (l. 7). Jonson supplied an allegorical ode to preface *Pancharis* (1603) by Hugh Holland,¹¹ a poet who, like Jonson, studied at Westminster School and converted to Catholicism. Holland returned the favor soon after, supplying two prefatory poems to *Sejanus*, one of which asserts the author's innocence of all crimes represented in the play. At about this time Jonson also contributed a prefatory poem to Thomas Wright's *The Passions of the Mind*.¹² A Jesuit who taught in several colleges on the Continent, Wright had also written *A Treatise Showing the Possibility and Conveniency of the Real Presence of our Saviour in the Blessed Sacrament* (1596), which may have contributed to Jonson's scruples about communion.¹³ Jonson also wrote commendatory verses on the poems of his "honoured friend," John Beaumont, a Catholic born at Grace-dieu, the former priory, brother of the more famous Francis Beaumont. John Beaumont's collection of sacred and secular poems, *Bosworth Field* (1629), Jonson says, resists attack and "makes his muse a saint" (l. 22).

In addition to these prefatory poems, Jonson wrote more pointed panegyrics. He thanks in verse his Catholic host and patron Esmé Stuart, Lord Aubigny, dedicatee of *Sejanus*, who "lent timely succours, and new life begot" (*Epigrams*, 127, 8). Several poems cautiously praise Catholics associated with active resistance to the national religious settlement. The "Ode to James, Earl of Desmond" (*Underwood*, 25) lauds the son of "the rebel earl," Gerald Fitzgerald, an Irish Catholic who led Irish and papal armies against English Protestants. Jonson's poem celebrates the virtue of James Fitzgerald, Earl of Desmond, who suffered imprisonment in the Tower of London from 1579 to 1601; the poem exhorts Fitzgerald not to think himself "unfortunate / If subject to the jealous errors / Of politic pretext" (ll. 27–29) and exclaims, "O glad innocence, / Where only a man's birth is his offence" (ll. 31–32). The poet hopes for new light upon those places "Where darkness with her gloomy-sceptred hand / Doth now command" (ll. 61–62). Here

praise of Desmond accompanies criticism of “politic pretext” and the regnant forces of “darkness” that persecute Catholics. Conservative as ever, Jonson advocates “patience” (l. 47), not fury, finally urging the Earl to stand “As far from all revolt, as you are now from fortune” (l. 65). Jonson also celebrated the virtue of Sir Ralph Sheldon (*Epigrams*, 119), a wealthy recusant possibly implicated in a plot against Elizabeth (1594) and later knighted (1607). His poem first rejects those who are good from necessity or discomfort, those who fly the court for want of clothes, or quit gambling because of losses; Sheldon, by contrast, acts “out of judgement, not disease” (l. 8); he lives “to conscience, not to show” (l. 14). The appeal to conscience echoes the standard Catholic defense for the practice of a prohibited religion. Once again, Jonson sounds notes of caution in his admiration: Sheldon “with safe skill” (l. 9) acts prudently, looking for the best but sometimes choosing “the least ill” (l. 10), “treading a better path, not contrary” (l. 12). Jonson also wrote an epigram (*Underwood*, 78) to his muse, Lady Digby, and her husband Sir Kenelm Digby, Catholic adventurer, philosopher, scientist, diplomat, and Jonson’s literary executor. The poet praises this son of a convicted (and executed) conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot: “He’s prudent, valiant, just, and temperate; / In him all virtue is beheld in state” (ll. 5–6). And, finally, not in verse but in *Conversations with Drummond* (pp. 145–46), Jonson recorded his admiration for the poet Robert Southwell, a Jesuit executed for treason at Tyburn: “That Southwell was hanged; yet so he had written that piece of his ‘The burning babe,’ he would have been content to destroy many of his.” Jonson shows awareness of the tragic fate of his fellow Catholic and admiration for the poem that best exemplifies the Catholic Baroque — profuse in symbolic imagery, abundant in theatrical emotion, and rich in intellectual energy.

The implied criticism of the reformist regime that sounds lightly in the praise poems recurs more forcefully in “Panegyre” (1603), Jonson’s celebration of James’s entrance to his first session of Parliament. This poem, influenced, ironically enough, by Thomas More’s panegyric celebrating Henry VIII,¹⁴ features Themis, the mythological mother of peace, order, and justice, who orients the new king to his land, showing him the good and, more to the point, the evil:

Where laws were made to serve the tyrant will;
Where sleeping they could save, and waking kill;
Where acts gave licence to impetuous lust
To bury churches in forgotten dust,
And with their ruins raise the pandar’s bowers. (ll. 99–103)

The lines pay tribute to their ghostly progenitor, Thomas More, by expressing a Catholic view of the English reformation, which began with King Henry VIII's "tyrant will," his lust for Anne Boleyn and for power, and proceeded through enforced conformity on pain of death (the notorious executions of Fisher and More). The ensuing legislation resulted in the stripping of the altars, as Eamon Duffy famously put it,¹⁵ and the confiscation of church properties. Catholics saw the Reformation as a pretext for unbridled greed and outright robbery ("impetuous lust"). By Jonson's day, abandoned churches dotted the landscape, "bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang" (Shakespeare, Sonnet 73). The churches buried in forgotten dust, Catholics argued, supplied every kind of greed and base self-gratification, the "pandar's bowers."

More than mere nostalgia, this Catholic view of the Protestant Reformation at times fuels Jonson's satire. Puritans are natural targets, as witness *Epigrams*, 75:

I cannot think there's that antipathy
 'Twixt Puritans and players as some cry;
 Though Lippe, at Paul's, ran from his text away
 To inveigh 'gainst plays, what did he then but play?

Railing against plays from the pulpit of Saint Paul's church, Lippe himself merely acts out a performance, plays a prescribed role; he is a hypocrite, a moral fraud and, in the original Greek sense, an "actor." As Jonson wrote in *Discoveries* (p. 61), *Puritanus hypocrita est haereticus*, "A Puritan is a heretical hypocrite." The Church of England, of course, regularly battled Puritans in this period as well, but the *haereticus* pointedly recapitulates the familiar charge of Catholics against Puritan reformers. Lippe gets his come-uppance at the end of *Bartholomew Fair*, when the Puritan Zeal-of-the-Land Busy loses the debate on playing to the Puppet Dionysius. A hypocrite who gorges himself on roast pig then condemns the carnality of the fair, Busy expresses himself in language explicitly coded as anti-Catholic: he berates the ginger-bread woman, "Hence with thy basket of popery, thy nest of images" (3.6.72–73). He attacks "the merchandise of Babylon," "the peeping of popery upon the stalls," "the profane pipes, the tinkling timbrels," the "shop of relics," "this idolatrous grove of images," "this flasket of idols" (3.6.91–96). He reviles "those superstitious relics, those lists of Latin, the very rags of Rome, and patches of popery" (4.6.105–6). Jonson depicts Busy's brethren in *The Alchemist*, the sanctimonious Tribulation and Ananias, who mouth pieties but seek profits. They collect the sureties on loans one day overdue, excusing their practices by attributing their newfound wealth to Providence and predestination (3.2.72–73). Again, Jonson's Puri-

tans deploy the conventional rhetoric of anti-Catholic slander: Tribulation contrasts his “beauteous discipline” with “the menstruous cloth and rag of Rome” (3.2.32–33), *i.e.*, the Whore of Babylon. In a fit of zeal Ananias exclaims, “I hate traditions; I do not trust them. . . . They are Popish, all!” (3.2.106–7).¹⁶

Jonson continues his satire on the “godly” in *Epigrams*, 92, “The New Cry,” where they have prevailed upon the new breed of statesman in London, shallow, pretentious, and ignorant. Like their Puritan mentors, such statesmen engage in a fashionable anti-Catholicism:

And of the Powder Plot they will talk yet.
At naming the French king, their heads they shake,
And at the Pope and Spain slight faces make. (ll. 32–34)

The new statesmen still talk of the Gunpowder Plot, which set off a wave of anti-Catholic legislation, including the Oath of Allegiance (1606). They shake their heads at King Henri IV (1589–1610), who famously converted to Catholicism (1593) and issued the Edict of Nantes (1598), which made Catholicism the official religion of France. They make faces at Pope Paul V (1605–21), who urged toleration of loyal Catholic subjects and condemned James’s Oath of Allegiance in two Briefs (1606, 1607), and at Spain, the traditional Catholic enemy. The new statesmen condemn those, the poem concludes, “That know not so much state, wrong, as they do” (l. 40). In *The Staple of News* Jonson again satirizes trendy anti-Catholic bigotry. In Act 3, Scene 2, Thomas tries to sell a “she Anabaptist” (151) news of the Turkish Sultan turning Christian; “and to clear / The controversy ‘twixt the Pope and him, / Which is the Antichrist,” the report continues, the Sultan plans to visit the Puritan Church at Amsterdam and “quit all marks o’ the beast” (142–46). The clever pamphleteer exploits Puritan hatred of Catholicism and fear of the other infidel, the Turk, to create an apocalyptic, self-congratulatory (and profitable) bulletin. Also looking for cheap thrills but of a different sort, a second customer asks, “Any miracles / Done in Japan by the Jesuits, or in China?” (153–54). Anti-Catholic discourses, the poem and the play suggest, feed on an insatiable appetite for sensational story and self-aggrandizement.

Providing a complex of sympathies, antipathies, and beliefs that inflect the poems, Jonson’s Catholicism also on occasion contributes doctrine. The poet took an active interest in Catholic theology throughout his life. In addition to his attendance at the 1612 Eucharist debates noted above, Jonson acquired books of Catholic theology and polemics. McPherson’s *Catalogue* for his library lists a copy of the Vulgate, *Biblia sacra* (Antwerp, 1599); works by Gregory of Nyssa and Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus; attacks on Calvin by Jerome Bolsec, *De Ioannis Calvini* (Cologne, 1580) and Colum-

banus Vrancx, *Malleus Calvinistarum* (Antwerp, 1590); Thomas Stapleton's *Tres Thomae* (Douai, 1588), an account of the apostle, Beckett, and More; Stanislaus Crstanovic's *Examen catholicum edicti Anglicani* (Paris, 1607), a protest against the anti-Catholic legislation of the 1606 Parliament; John Sweet's *Monsigr. fate voi. Or, A discovery of the Dalmatian Apostata* (Saint-Omer, 1617), interestingly, a condemnation of the apostasy of Marc'Antonio De Dominis, Archbishop of Dalmatia, who joined the English Church and became Dean of Windsor in 1617; John Barnes's *Dissertatio contra aequivocationes* (Paris, 1625), a treatise against equivocation written from the viewpoint of a loyalist Catholic; and Girolamo Savonarola's *Triumphus crucis* (Leyden, 1633), a defense of the faith by the reformer. Compiling a revised catalogue for the forthcoming Cambridge edition of Jonson, H. R. Woudhuysen adds six titles to this list: a copy of the Louvain edition of More's Latin works (1566); Jacobus Simancas' handbook against heresies, *Enchiridion* (Antwerp, 1573); the works of Tertullian (*Opera Omnia*, Antwerp, 1598), Saint Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, Douai, 1614), and Saint Gregory (*Opera Omnia*, Paris, 1615); a Roman Catholic book of ritual, *Processionale* (Antwerp, 1620).¹⁷ There must have been others: in "An Execration upon Vulcan," written about the fire that destroyed his library in November 1623, Jonson laments the loss of "three books not afraid / To speak the fate of the Sicilian maid / To our own ladies," (ll. 95–97), *i.e.*, his partial translation of John Barclay's *Argenis* (1621), commissioned by James himself in 1622. Barclay was a Catholic whose remarkably popular and influential romance, *Argenis*, satirized Jesuits and Puritans, as well as the reformist doctrine of predestination. Jonson continues the inventory:

And twice twelve years' stored-up humanity,
 With humble gleanings in divinity,
 After the fathers, and those wiser guides
 Whom faction had not drawn to study sides. (ll. 101–4)

He mourns here his theology collection, begun about the time of his 1598 conversion, specifically the works of the church fathers, the architects of Catholic dogma, and the "wiser" guides, those who wrote freely and unpolemically before the Reformation. In *Epigrams*, 80 Jonson's interest in Catholic theology takes the form of doctrinal assertion:

"Of Life and Death"
 The ports of death are sins; of life, good deeds
 Through which our merit leads us to our meeds.
 How wilful blind is he, then, that would stray,
 And hath it in his powers to make his way!

This world death's region is, the other life's;
 And here it should be one of our first strifes
 So to front death, as men might judge us past it:
 For good men but see death, the wicked taste it. (ll. 1–8)

Again glancing critically at the reformist belief in predestination, Jonson here affirms the autonomy of free will: humans choose between the gates of death and life, between sins and good deeds. So saying, the poet endorses the Catholic doctrine of good works, “through which our merit leads us to our meeds” (l. 2). Luther, Calvin, and those who came after, of course, emphatically rejected this doctrine, arguing that one could be saved by faith alone, *ex sola fide*, not by any action or merit of his or her own choosing and doing. Catholic theology here supplies this brief exhortation to holy living and holy dying.

Jonson's poetry more pervasively draws upon Catholic doctrine concerning the Virgin Mary and traditional reverence for her as an icon of human perfection and holiness. Reformers repeatedly condemned Marian doctrine and devotion as the prime examples of papist idolatry. The controversy sheds light on Jonson's oft-quoted criticism of Donne's *Anniversary*: “profane and full of blasphemies . . . he told Mr. Donne, if it had been written of the Virgin Mary it had been something” (*Conversations*, pp. 32–34). Usually remembered for Donne's response, “he described the idea of a woman, and not as she was” (pp. 34–35), the criticism reveals more about Jonson, particularly his reverence for Mary, peerless among mortal women. To attribute to anyone else praise belonging to her constitutes blasphemy for Jonson. This devotion to Mary empowers one of Jonson's most moving poems, the elegy “On My First Daughter”: “Here lies, to each her parents' ruth, / Mary, the daughter of their youth” (ll. 1–2). After six months the baby died,

Whose soul heaven's Queen (whose name she bears),
 In comfort of her mother's tears,
 Hath placed amongst her virgin train. (ll. 7–9)

Jonson deploys specifically the Catholic conceptions of Mary as Queen of Heaven and as the merciful mother who responds to the cries of suffering humanity. These ideas appear encapsulated, for example, in the first lines of the immensely popular medieval hymn, *Salve, Regina*, “All Hail, O Queen”:

Salve, regina, mater misericordiae. Vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve. Ad te clamamus, exules filii Evae. Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes in hac lacrymarum valle. Eia ergo advocata nostra illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte.

All hail, O Queen, mother of mercy, life, sweetness, and our hope, all hail. We exiled the sons of Eve do cry unto thee. To thee we sigh, groaning and weeping in this vale of tears. Therefore, O thou our advocate, turn those thy merciful eyes unto us.¹⁸

Rejecting such devotion, Luther said that Mary was not his consolation or his life; he specifically discouraged the use of honorific epithets like “Queen of Heaven.” In 1538 John Hollybush published a refutation of the hymn, condemning it for blasphemy, and providing an alternate version, which substituted Christ for Mary.¹⁹ But Marian devotion, including even the popular iconography of Mary crowned in heaven, attended by a train of virgin souls, here supplies Jonson’s personal lament.

The Virgin Mary, and the propriety of earthly comparison to her, furnish a late poem to the Catholic Henrietta Maria, *Underwood*, 66, “An Epigram to the Queen, then Lying in, 1630”:

Hail Mary, full of grace! it once was said
And by an angel, to the blessed’s maid,
The mother of our Lord: why may not I
Without profaneness, yet, a poet, cry
Hail Mary, full of honours! to my queen,
The mother of our prince? (ll. 1–6)

The poet may licitly invoke Mary for praise of an earthly woman so long as he observes necessary proprieties and distinctions. Queen Mary, full of “honours,” not “grace,” gives birth to a prince who brings safety to the “realm,” not to “mankind” (ll. 5, 1, 14, 8). “Let it be lawful so / To compare small with great, as still we owe / Glory to God” (ll. 11–13). Jonson’s devotion to Mary culminates in “The Garland of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” prefacing Anthony Stafford’s *The Female Glory* (1635). The “garland” is the poem itself, which glosses an emblematic picture of Mary or a pendant on the Bridgettine rosary.²⁰ The poem matches the letters of “Marie” with symbolic flora — myrtle, almonds, rose, ivy, eglantine:

Thus love and hope and burning charity
(Divinest graces) are so intermixed
With odorous sweets and soft humility,
As if they adored the head whereon they’re fixed. (ll. 25–28)

The praise continues in the comments on the “reverse” of the emblem, echoing, as Bernard H. Newdigate noted, the Hours of the Virgin and the Litany of Loreto, this latter a poetic series of epithets formally approved as a Catholic devotion by Sixtus V in 1587.²¹ Jonson’s appropriations from the Litany attribute to Mary the very reverence and power that reformers objected to as idolatrous:

Sweet tree of life, King David’s strength and tower,
The house of gold, the gate of heaven’s power,
The morning star, whose light our fall hath stayed. (ll. 38–40)

Among other echoing phrases, Jonson here freely translates *Turris Davidica*, “Tower of David,” *Domus aurea* “Golden House,” *Ianua caeli*, “Gate of Heaven,” *Stella matutina*, “Morning Star.” Elsewhere he adapts *Sancta virgo virginum*, “Holy virgin of virgins” and *Mater castissima*, “Most chaste mother,” into “Most holy and pure virgin” (l. 37); *Causa nostra laetitiae* appears straightforwardly as “cause of all our joy” (l. 42), as do *Sedes sapientiae*, *Mater amabilis*, and *Mater admirabilis*: “The seat of sapience, the most lovely mother / And most to be admirèd of thy sex” (ll. 45–46). Jonson’s praise of Mary as “daughter, mother, spouse of God!” (ll. 33, 56) exhibits both the devotion to the Virgin and the love of paradox that marks the work of early modern Catholic poets like Robert Southwell, Henry Constable, and Richard Crashaw.

Finally, Jonson’s poetry affords glimpses of the hostile world in which English Catholics lived, subject to the constant danger of denunciation. Jonson’s adaptation of Martial (5.78, 10.48, 11.52), “Inviting a Friend to Supper” (*Epigrams*, 101), wittily replaces prospective Roman delights with an English menu and native entertainments; the wine he offers will make tobacco (considered a drink), nectar, and the Thespian spring “all but Luther’s beer” (l. 34) by comparison. Jonson’s association of weaker, continental beer with Martin Luther gibes at the arch-reformer and his doctrine, a diluted, inferior form of Catholicism. Jonson’s “Nor shall our cups make any guilty men” (l. 37) echoes Martial’s *nec faciunt quemquam pocula nostra reum* (10.48.24), “my cups do not make anyone a defendant”; but the line preceding again makes reference to the contemporary political situation, “And we will have no Poley or Parrot by” (l. 36). Robert Poley was a government spy who betrayed the Catholic Babington in 1586, witnessed the murder of Marlowe at Deptford after supper, and remained active in the late 1590s. In 1598 Parrot, another informer, gave evidence against a Benedictine monk, Mark Barkworth.²² The references to anti-Catholic spies give the conventional ending personal relevance and dark immediacy. Jonson himself encountered spies during one of his imprisonments, “two damned villains to catch advantage of him” (*Conversations*, p. 212); these became the subject of *Epigrams*, 59, “On Spies”: “Spies, you are lights in state, but of base stuff, / Who, when you’ve burnt yourselves down to the snuff, / Stink and are thrown away. End fair enough” (ll. 1–3). Though Jonson does not specify a reason for the use of informants against him, his poetry certainly reflects the animosity of early modern English Catholics toward spies. For such Catholics gatherings at supper, when vigilance might be relaxed, or at Eucharist were extremely dangerous. At a dinner party in 1583, for example, John Hardy disagreed with the preacher Peter German about the construction of a Latin passage in Eusebius. Since the passage, in

Hardy's view, suggested the autonomy of the bishops *vis-à-vis* the emperor, German reported Hardy to the authorities, who imprisoned and interrogated him.²³ That Jonson dined with Catesby and the other conspirators several weeks before the Gunpowder plot probably aroused the suspicion of government agents.

Jonson's "Epistle to Katherine, Lady Aubigny," written to the wife of his Catholic patron and host,²⁴ further depicts the plight of the Catholic in a menacing Protestant world: "What if alone, / Without companions? 'Tis safe to have none. / In single paths dangers with ease are watched; / Contagion in the press is soonest caught" (ll. 55–58). The isolation of the Catholic household is one guarantor of its safety; traffic with the crowd brings peril and plague, spiritual contagion. The "turning world" (l. 63), "giddy with change," "cannot see / Right the right way" (ll. 67–68), the poet continues; therefore, "must your comfort be / Your conscience" (ll. 68–69). Here again the individual conscience must stand against the dictates of the world, *i.e.*, the state that mandates religious belief and persecutes non-conformity. As before, Jonson goes on to celebrate the lady's impending childbirth with an allusion to Mary, specifically, an echo of the *Ave Maria*: "you worthy are the glad increase / Of your blessed womb, made fruitful from above" (ll. 94–95). The compliment is justified by the larger context of the epideixis, which concludes in praise for a mind that remains, and will remain, constant and unchanged.

Ben Jonson's Catholicism appears to have been a serious, well-considered choice, not a youthful indiscretion or an empty gesture. Versed in both confessions, Jonson, to be sure, occasionally echoed reformist doctrines in his poetry: the "Elegy" on Venetia Digby (*Underwood*, 84), for example, envisions her in heaven, "By sure election, and predestined grace" (l. 198). And certainly the complex balances between the faiths continually shifted in the man as in the culture, responding to the pressures of internal change and external event. But the influence of Catholicism on Jonson's poetry runs deep, persisting long after reconversion to the state religion in 1610. Catholicism offered Jonson a circle of friends and acquaintances, time-honored authority, long traditions of learning and ceremony, a coherent aesthetic of beauty and image, a range of beliefs and evocative devotional practices. Even if every one of those gifts proved, at times, problematic, flawed, or unwanted, they were substantial and well received.

Notes

1. For references to Jonson's poetry, *Discoveries*, and *Conversations with Drummond* (hereafter *Conversations*), I cite Ian Donaldson, ed., *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), although I emend "goods" to "good" in *Epigram* 80, cited below. Unless otherwise noted, all other references are cited from C. H. Hereford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, eds., *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–52), hereafter *HS*, but with spelling and punctuation modernized. Attempting to explain Jonson's conversion, David Riggs offers a cartoon version of Catholic beliefs: "the Catholic priest . . . had the power . . . to absolve him of his sins. Unlike his Protestant counterpart, the priest would not have required Jonson to feel remorse over his crimes as such or to believe that God had pardoned him" (*Ben Jonson: A Life* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989], p. 52). Catholics hold that the priest dispensing sacraments always acts as God's agent, never as a substitute; and Catholic doctrine has always required contrition for sin. See, to begin with, "Priesthood" and "The Sacrament of Penance" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v.; *The Council of Trent*, Session 14; James P. Crowley, "'He took his religion by trust': The Matter of Ben Jonson's Conversion," *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* ns 22.1 (1998): 53–70.
2. See Theodore A. Stroud, "Ben Jonson and Father Thomas Wright," *ELH* 14 (1947): 274–82, and "Father Thomas Wright: A Test Case for Toleration," *Recusant History* 1 (1951): 189–219, with an addition by B. Fitzgibbon, SJ, and a bibliography by D. M. Rogers (pp. 261–80); William Webster Newbold, "General Introduction," in *The Passions of the Mind in General*, by Thomas Wright (New York: Garland, 1986), esp. 61–62; and Thomas M. McCoog, SJ, *English and Welsh Jesuits 1555–1650*, *Catholic Record Society Publications*, 2 vols. (London: Catholic Record Society, 1994–95), 2 (no. 75): 340.
3. Philip J. Ayres, ed., *Sejanus His Fall*, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 22. The quotation below is cited from this edition.
4. Lord Burleigh's official defense of civil procedures against Catholics, occasioned by widespread outrage over the torture and execution of Edmund Campion, appeared in 1583 as *The Execution of Justice in England, for maintenance of public and Christian peace, against certain stirrers of sedition and adherents to the traitors and enemies of the realm, without any persecution of them for questions of religion, as is falsely reported and published by the fautors and fosterers of their treasons*. Translated into Latin, French, Dutch, and Italian, the book drew a reply from William Allen and touched off a heated controversy. See Peter Milward, *Religious Controversies of the Elizabethan Age: A Survey of Printed Sources* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), pp. 68 ff. Discomfort with the religious policies did not preclude Jonson's admiration for the man (*Underwood*, 30) and for his son and successor, Robert (*Epigrams*, 43, 63).
5. Frances Teague argues that the priest was Thomas Wright and that Jonson carried out his commission later ("Jonson and the Gunpowder Plot," *Ben Jonson Journal* 5 [1998]: 249–52).
6. See *HS* 1: 65–67; Rocco Coronato, "Was it just an anecdote?: Ben Jonson and the Eucharist, Paris, 1612," *Ben Jonson Journal* 4 (1997): 35–46.
7. Barbara N. De Luna reads *Catiline* as a post-Gunpowder plot assertion of loyalty, but argues implausibly that Jonson's Catholicism was short-lived and that he merely pretended to persist in that faith (*Catiline, Jonson's Romish Plot: A Study of "Catiline"*

and its Historical Context [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967]); Alizon Brunning contends that *Volpone* allows Jonson to satirize aspects of Catholicism but to resist rejecting his Catholic faith ("Jonson's Romish Foxe: Anti-Catholic Discourse in *Volpone*," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 6 [2000]: 1–32); Julie Maxwell demonstrates that *The Magnetic Lady* (1632) and *The Tale of a Tub* (1633) use anti-Catholic rhetoric and stereotypes to satirize some aspects of Laudianism ("Ben Jonson among the Vicars: Cliché, Ecclesiastical Politics, and the Invention of 'Parish Comedy,'" *Ben Jonson Journal* 9 [2002]: 37–68).

8. T. Wilson Hayes, "Ben Jonson's Libertine Catholicism," in *Praise Disjoined: Changing Patterns of Salvation in 17th-Century English Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 119–36; A. W. Johnson, *Ben Jonson: Poetry and Architecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 89–94; James P. Crowley, "The 'Honest Style' of Ben Jonson's *Epigrams* and *The Forest*," *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* ns 20.2 (1996): 33–56; Ian Donaldson, "Jonson's Duplicity: The Catholic Years," in *Jonson's Magic Houses: Essays in Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 47–65; Richard Harp, "The Catholic Ben Jonson," a paper contributed to a seminar at the Shakespeare Association of America conference, San Francisco, 1999.
9. Thomas C. K. Rist discusses the pro-Anglicanism and royal compliment of *The Irish Masque*, but unpersuasively elides both with anti-Catholicism ("Religious Politics in Ben Jonson's *The Irish Masque*," *Cahiers élisabéthains* 55 [1999]: 27–34). For a more judicious account of Jonson's religion, art, and politics, see David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 175–94. Norbrook discusses Jonson's conversion to Catholicism in the context of his aversion to Puritan apocalyptic enthusiasm and the doctrine of predestination, and his reconversion in the context of the rise of an anti-Calvinistic Arminianism. Also helpful is Joseph John Kelly, "Ben Jonson's Politics," *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* ns 7.3 (1983): 192–215.
10. Anthony Milton, for example, notes the ambivalences of the binary, two-confessional model in the early seventeenth century ("A Qualified Intolerance: the Limits and Ambiguities of Early Stuart Anti-Catholicism," in *Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism in Early Modern English Texts*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti [Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1999], pp. 85–115).
11. Hugh Holland, *Pancharis* (London: Valentine Simmes for Clement Knight, 1603).
12. Thomas Wright. *The Passions of the Mind*. (London: Valentine Simmes and Adam Islip for Walter Burre and Thomas Thorpe, 1604).
13. Thomas Wright, *A Treatise Showing the Possibility and Conveniency of the Real Presence of our Saviour in the Blessed Sacrament* ("Antwerp" [i.e., London], 1596).
14. On More's influence see Robert C. Evans, *Habits of Mind: Evidence and Effects of Ben Jonson's Reading* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1995), pp. 191–99.
15. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1500* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).
16. Peter Lake discusses the veracity of Jonson's Puritan caricatures in *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Alchemist* in *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists, and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 579–610.

17. David McPherson, "Ben Jonson's Library and Marginalia: An Annotated Catalogue," *Studies in Philology* 71 (1974): nos. 25, 28, 178, 46, 184, 18, 162. Prof. Woudhusyen graciously supplied the additional titles in a private communication.
18. I cite the text and translation from *The Primer, or Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. Richard Verstegan (Antwerp, 1599), sigs. D3^v–D4.
19. Juniper B. Carol, ed., *Mariology*, 3 vols. (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Co., 1955–61), 3: 425; Hollybush's refutation of the *Salve, Regina* appears at the end of Martin Luther, *An Exposition of the Song of the Blessed Virgin Mary called Magnificat*, trans. John Hollybush (Southwark, 1538), sigs. kiii–kv.
20. For an informative analysis of the poem see Paul M. Cubeta, "Ben Jonson's Religious Lyrics," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 62 (1963): 96–110, esp. 98–101; Cubeta also discerns the influence of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and Saint Ignatius in Jonson's religious poetry. Though the evidence is not conclusive, the initials "B.I." and other signs signal Jonson's authorship of the Garland poem (*HS* 11: 159–60); dissenting, Graham Bradshaw claims that the "negligent attribution" of such "bad poems" reveals "an alarmingly uncertain grasp of Jonsonian values," *i.e.*, the values of "Christian Humanism" ("Three Poems Ben Jonson Did Not Write: A Note on Jonson's Christian Humanism," *ELH* 47 (1980): 484–99, esp. 494). Subjective judgment ("bad") masquerades as textual argument, enabling the critic to dismiss poems he dislikes and critics he disagrees with; Jonsonian "values," apparently, do not include the Marian devotions evident elsewhere in Jonson's work, and "Christian Humanism" here excludes anything Catholic.
21. Bernard H. Newdigate, ed., *The Poems of Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), pp. 367–68. I quote the Litany and translation from John Sweetnam, *The Paradise of Delights* (Saint-Omer: English College Press, 1620), sigs. O5^v–O8^v.
22. Mark Eccles, "Jonson and the Spies," *Review of English Studies* 13 (1937): 385–97; see also Robert Cummings, "Liberty and History in Jonson's Invitation to Supper," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 40 (2000): 103–22. Cummings notes that Poley regularly met with the Babington plot conspirators for dinner, then reported on them: "every day, after these malign suppers, they were betrayed" (p. 113).
23. See John Hungerford Pollen, SJ, ed., *Unpublished Documents Relating to the English Martyrs, Vol. 1: 1584–1603, Catholic Record Society Publications*, 5 (London: J. Whitehead & Son, 1908), pp. 47–50.
24. On the possible implications of Jonson's stay in the Aubigny household, see Donaldson, "Jonson's Duplicity."