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BEN JONSON'S RELATION TO DONNE

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Committee  
of the University of Missouri in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

BY  
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### INTRODUCTION.

To the English writers and critics of the eighteenth century and to Samuel Johnson in particular belongs the credit, - if credit it be, - for passing upon the poet Donne the judgment that has become the prevailing one. In his Life of Cowley Johnson criticised, at some length, the whole of the school which, following Dryden,<sup>1</sup> he called the metaphysical. In the writers of this school, among whom he assigned Donne a considerable importance, he could see nothing but insincerity and affectation; he considered them incapable of feeling or arousing emotion; their highest attribute, according to him, was their intellectual subtlety. The substance of Johnson's criticism is as follows:

"The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs and their subtlety

1 Dryden's Essay on Satire. p. 6 v. XIII: "He (Donne) affects the metaphysics not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign;"



surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased . . . . From this account of their compositions it will be readily inferred, that they were not successful in representing or moving the affections. . . . Their courtship was void of fondness, and their lamentation of sorrow. Their wish was only to say what they hoped had never been said before." <sup>1</sup> This judgment of Johnson's with regard to the so-called metaphysical poets met with general acceptance, and it became the conventional criticism of Donne's style. But had the critics of the period taken into consideration the fact that Ben Jonson, the literary dictator of Donne's age, a man who had little in common with the school to which Donne belonged, <sup>2</sup> regarded him

1 Life of Cowley, p. 25.

2 Johnson acknowledges this, while he links Jonson's name with Donne's. He says: "This kind of writing, which was, I believe, borrowed from Marina and his followers, has been recommended by the example of Donne, a man of very extensive knowledge; and by Jonson whose manner resembled that of Donne more in the ruggedness of his lines than in the cast of his sentiments."



as "the first poet in the world in some things," they might have examined into his merits more carefully. That Ben Jonson would not have given Donne even the slightest praise had he seen in him only affectation, it is needless to state. It is my opinion that Jonson's attitude toward Donne was that of modern critics. He condemned Donne's harshness, but he did not allow that quality of his verse to blind him to the fact that Donne had "a poetical nature", - a rare power of imaginative insight. Donne's use of figure upon figure he must have regarded as the natural expression of a mind wonderfully active and apt at seeing resemblances, not as the result of a conscious effort to bring unrelated ideas together. To determine more definitely what was Jonson's relation to Donne, and to account in some degree for the sympathy existing between the two poets will be the province of this paper.



## I.

Evidence of a Friendship between Jonson and Donne

Edmund Gosse in his Life and Letters of John Donne has speculated at some length about the personal relationship between Jonson and Donne. Upon the evidence before him, however, Gosse hesitates to assume that this relationship was one of intimate friendship. But meagre as the evidence is, there can be no doubt that some degree of friendship existed between the two poets; for even on Donne's part there are distinct indications of the truth of this supposition. Calling attention to the fact that, because of his resolute isolation from the writers of his day, any slight notice from Donne of one of his contemporaries, takes on a great degree of significance, I shall present the evidence about which I have spoken.

Probably the most important indication on Donne's part of a friendly relation with Jonson is the verse Letter To Ben Jonson, 9 Novembris, 1603. At this time Donne was threatened by a lawsuit, and in these verses he freely tells Jonson his feelings in the matter. The letter, distinctly



personal in tone, is as follows:

"If great men wrong me, I will spare myself;  
 If mean I will spare them, I know the pelf  
 Which is ill-got the owner doth upbraid;  
 It may corrupt the judge, make me afraid,  
 And a jury; but 'twill revenge in this,  
 That, though himself be judge, he guilty is.  
 What care I though of weakness men tax me?  
 I had rather sufferer than doer be  
 That I did trust it was my nature's praise,  
 For breach of word I knew but as a phrase.  
 That judgment is, that surely can comprise  
 The word in precepts, most happy and most wise.  
 What though? Though less, yet some of both have we,  
 Who have learned it by use and misery.  
 Poor I, whom every petty cross doth trouble,  
 Who apprehend each hurt that's done me, double,  
 Am of this, though it should sink me, careless;  
 It would but force me to a stricter goodness.  
 They have great pain of me, who gain do win,  
 If such gain be not loss, from every sin,  
 The standing of great men's lives would afford  
 A pretty sum, if God would sell his word.



He cannot; they can theirs, and break them too;

How unlike they are that they're liken'd to.

Yet I conclude, they are midst my evils;

If good, like Gods; the naught are so like devils."<sup>1</sup>

That he should address verses to any professional writer of his day is remarkable; it would be hard indeed to imagine the proud and reticent Donne writing thus frankly of his affairs to anyone of whose friendship he was not assured.

On one other occasion Donne seems to have shown Jonson a courtesy which only friendship could have suggested to him. In that day of commendatory verses, there is evidence that Donne but few times in his history indulged in this form of writing; he held himself too indifferently aloof from his contemporaries to feel prompted to add anything to their praise. The first of the three instances of which I have any knowledge, in which Donne employed this kind of writing, is his contribution of a copy of commendatory verses to Captain John Smith's History of Virginia.<sup>2</sup>

1 Donne's Poems, II, p. 64.

2 See Gosse, II, p. 163.



This departure from his practice can be explained by the fact that Donne had always been intensely interested in the American colonies, and had at one time wished to go to Virginia as Secretary. The second instance is scarcely worth the notice, since Donne himself did not consider it seriously. I have reference to the verses Upon Mr. Thomas Corvat's Crudities. The third is an instance of Donne's use of the conventional commendatory verse, this time with a really commendatory intention. His Latin verses Amicissimo et Meritissimo Ben Jonson, in Volponem might be considered comparatively meaningless had they proceeded from anyone's hand but Donne's; but it was far from Donne's custom to recognize any of his contemporaries, much less to show them the courtesy of praising their works in verse. Therefore, however superficial the feeling which, as a rule, prompted such verses may have been, this was not Donne's feeling. On his part this unwonted courtesy has all the significance of an act of friendship.

These are the only indications on Donne's part of any degree of intimacy with Jonson. Jonson is always



less reticent, and in addition to those notes that bear more direct references to Jonson's esteem for Donne as a writer, there are passages in The Conversations which point to the existence of a distinctly friendly relationship between Jonson and Donne. The passages to which I refer seem to be repetitions of intimate conversations carried on by the two men. Drummond records in Conversations iii that Jonson said:

"That Done's Anniversarie was profane and full of blasphemies; that he told Mr. Done, if it had been written of the Virgin Marie it had been something; to which he answered, that he described the Idea of a Woman, and not as she was."<sup>1</sup>

Again in Conversations vii Jonson said:

"That Done said to him, he wrott that Epitaph on Prince Henry, Look to me, Faith, to match Sir Ed; Herbert in obscurenesse."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to what has already been quoted, there is a reference to Donne in Conversations viii which contains information about his purpose in writing the

1 Cunningham edition, III, p. 471.

2 Cunningham edition, III, p. 475.



Metemphychosis that only the poet himself could have given Jonson. Drummond has preserved Jonson's statement as follows:

"The conceit of Donne's Transformation, or Metemphychosis, was, that he sought the soule of that apple which Eva pulled, and thereafter made it the soule of a bitch, then of a shee wolf, and so of a woman; his general purpose was to have brought in all the bodies of the Hereticks from the soule of Cain, and at last left it in the bodie of Calvin; Of this he never wrotte but one sheet, and now, since he was made Doctor, repenteth highlie, and seeketh to destroy all his poems."

This unwonted recognition of Jonson on Donne's part, and what Jonson has to say in his Conversations is all that we have on either side which indicates a personal friendship between these two men, distinct from any literary appreciation. Gosse, however, mentions in his book a letter of Jonson's to Donne concerning the whereabouts of which he offers no explanation.



I quote what Gosse has to say of this letter. -

"Accordingly when Donne was still obscure in fame and fortune, we find Ben Jonson fascinated by him. 'You cannot believe', Jonson says, 'how dear and reverend your friendship is to me.'

He signs himself Donne's 'ever true Lover'; he dreads no greater penalty than 'the loss of you, my true friend, for others I reckon not.'<sup>1</sup>"

Since Gosse is in possession of such evidence, I consider that he is a trifle too cautious when he says of Donne's relation to his contemporaries: "All that we really know on the subject is that he was familiar with the Brookes, and that he was acquainted with Ben Jonson."<sup>2</sup> For even the slight amount of evidence that can be collected from Donne's works and from Jonson's seems to indicate a connection between the two poets, more intimate than mere acquaintance.

<sup>1</sup> Gosse II, p. 332.

<sup>2</sup> Gosse I, p. 81.



## II.

Jonson's Esteem for Donne as a Writer and Critic

With regard to a friendship between Jonson and Donne actual evidence is meagre and tantalizing. Jonson's esteem for Donne as a writer and critic, on the other hand, can be proved beyond reach of doubt from Jonson's own words; the Conversations and the Epigrams show conclusively what was Jonson's attitude in this matter.

The piece of writing which in all probability would settle the question of the relationship between Jonson and Donne in even the minutest particulars has long been beyond reach. Before the burning of his library in 1623, Jonson made a translation of Horace's Ars Poetica, which was accompanied by a commentary in dialogue form in which Jonson set forth his own theory of poetry. This commentary was destroyed in the burning of Jonson's library, but not until he had read it to Drummond. From Drummond we learn that Donne was represented as the sharer in this dialogue, and had the work been preserved, we would no doubt have before us both the points of



difference and the points of agreement between the two poets. However, the mere fact that Jonson chose Donne to sustain the other part of the dialogue, indicates that he held him in enough esteem as a writer to give his ideas of poetry some consideration. In the Conversations, Drummond twice mentions the part that Donne took in the lost commentary. He notes in Conversations v,-

"To me he (Jonson) read the preface to his Arte of Poesie, upon Horace('s) Arte of Poesie, wher he heth ane apologie of a play of his, St. Bartholomee's Faire: by Criticus is understood Done."

And again in Conversations xvi:

"He hath commented and translated Horace('s) Arte of Poesie: it is in Dialogue wayes; by Criticus he understandeth Dr. Done."

Drummond does not commit himself as to the way in which Jonson represented Donne. That it was not unsympathetic we may conclude from the further references to Donne that Drummond records from Jonson's conversations with him. In Conversations vii Drummond



## notes:

"He esteemeth John Done the first poet in the world in some things: his verses of the Lost Chain he hath by heart; and that passage of the Calme, That dust and feathers doe not stirr, all was so quiet. Affirmeth Done to have written all his best pieces ere he was 25 years old." Con. xii. - "Done's grandfather, on the mother side, was Heywood the Epigramatist. That Done himself, for not being understood would perish." According to Drummond, Jonson had frequently upon his lips an epigram of Donne's. Drummond says:

"He had this oft,

'Thy flattering picture, Phrenee, is lyke thee<sup>1</sup>  
Only in this, that ye both painted be.'

Here in the conversations with Drummond Jonson indicated in terms by no means vague his esteem for Donne as a writer. Proof yet more conclusive of his regard for Donne as both poet and critic is found in his Epigrams. In the Cunningham edition of Jonson's

1 Cunningham edition, III. Con. xviii.  
This is found on p. 211, v. 2 of Chambers' edition of Donne.



works there are three of these epigrams dealing with Donne. The first of these, Epigram XXIII, to John Donne is as follows:

"Donne, the delight of Phoebus and each muse,  
 Who, to thy one, all other brains refuse;  
 Whose every work, of thy most early wit,  
 Came forth ~~example~~ and remains so yet:  
 Longer a knowing than most wits do live,  
 And which no affection praise enough can give!  
 To it, thy language, letters, arts, best life,  
 Which might with half mankind maintain a strife;  
 All which I meant to praise, and yet I would  
 But leave, because I cannot as I should!"<sup>1</sup>

This I consider of least value for it is in Jonson's conventional vein of compliment to his fellow-writers, and can be paralleled by an epigram to Beaumont, which begins,

"How I do love thee, Beaumont and thy Muse,  
 That unto me dost such religion use!"<sup>2</sup>

The second epigram dealing with Donne is addressed

1 Cunningham edition, III, p. 229.

2 Cunningham edition, III, p. 235.



To Lucy, Countess of Bedford, with Master Donne's Satires.

"Lucy, you brightness of our sphere, who are  
 Life of the Muses' day, their morning star!  
 If works not th' authors, their own grace should look,  
 Whose poems would not wish to be your book?  
 But these, desired by you, the maker's ends  
 Crown with their own: Rare poems ask rare friends;  
 Yet satires, since the most of mankind be  
 Their unavoyded subject, fewest see;  
 For none e'er took that pleasure in sin's sense,  
 But when they heard it taxed, took more offence.  
 They then, that living where the matter's bred  
 Dare for these poems yet both ask, and read,  
 And like them too; must needfully, though few,  
 Be of the best, and 'mongst those best are you:  
 Lucy, you brightness of our sphere, who are  
 The Muses' evening, as their morning star! "<sup>1</sup>

The last of these epigrams is one which Jonson sent to Donne with a copy of his Epigrams. His Epigrams

<sup>1</sup> Cunningham edition, III, p. 244.



Jonson called in his dedication to the Earl of Pembroke "the ripest of my studies".<sup>1</sup> Upon these, the ripest of his studies, he desired the opinion of the critic whom he esteemed most able to pass an authoritative judgment. This and more he says in the poem to Donne. -

"Who shall doubt Donne, where I a poet be,  
 When I dare send my Epigrams to thee?  
 That so alone canst judge, so alone dost make:  
 And in thy censures evenly dost take  
 A free simplicity to disavow,  
 As thou hast best authority t' allow.  
 Read all I send; and if I find but one  
 Marked by thy hand, and with the better stone,  
 My title's sealed. Those that for claps do write  
 Let pui'nees', porters', players' praise delight  
 And till they burst their backs like asses load:  
 A man should seek great glory, and not broad."<sup>2</sup>

This last epigram, even if it stood alone, would show Jonson's regard for Donne as both writer and critic.

1 Cunningham edition, III, p. 223.

2 Cunningham edition, III, p. 246.



He regards Donne as a learned and impartial critic, "That so alone canst judge, so alone dost make"; he seeks Donne's opinion as a superior and final judgment.

To these epigrams, conclusive in themselves, I append another which, because of its conformity in every circumstance to the last poem cited, I consider a probable reference to Donne. This is Epigram XVII, addressed To The Learned Critic. If my supposition is true, it is a repetition in more graceful form of a tribute to Donne in the poem which I have cited above.-

To The Learned Critic

"May others fear, fly, and traduce thy name,  
As guilty men do magistrates; glad I,  
That wish my poems a legitimate fame,  
Charge them, for crown, to thy sole censure hie,  
And but a sprig of bays, given by thee,  
Shall outlive gyrlands stol'n from the chaste tree."<sup>1</sup>

Since Jonson is the man of definite literary theories, his viewpoint is the important and definite one. <sup>1</sup> Cunningham edition, III, p. 228.



one in this whole discussion. I think it is not out of place, however, to cite here one of the rare instances in which Donne seems to have deigned to make a confession of having read a work of one of his contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> In The Autumnal, Elegy IX Donne writes:

"In all her words, unto all hearers fit,  
You may at revels, you at council sit.

This is love's timber; youth his underwood."<sup>2</sup>

From Jonson's note To The Reader, prefixed to the Underwoods I judge that the term underwood was not in common use at the time, but in this connection was of his own coining. I quote Jonson:

"With the same leave the ancients called that kind of body Sylva, or  $\Upsilon\lambda\eta$ , in which there were works of divers nature

1 Chambers notes that Holy Sonnets X suggests the address to "eloquent, just and mighty Death," at the close of Sir Walter Raleigh's History of the World. He dismisses the suggestion by saying that the History was probably later than Donne's sonnet. Gosse (v. 2, p. 52) says, however, that Donne must have composed his Holy Sonnets in 1617, while Raleigh's History was published in 1614.

2 Chambers' edition of Donne, v. 1, p. 117.



congested; as a multitude call timber-trees promiscuously growing, a Wood or Forest; so am I bold to entitle these lesser poems of later growth, by this of Underwood, out of the analogy they hold to the Forest in my former book, and no otherwise."<sup>1</sup>

If this supposition is true, Donne has taken some notice of Jonson as a writer: he has gone so far as to mention the names of certain of Jonson's works, - a marked departure from his practice. Perhaps this is what Jonson called " . . . but a sprig of bays, given by thee."

- 1 This whole matter becomes probable if we accept Gosse's date for The Autumnal, as I see no reason why we should not. Gosse dates the composition of the poem in 1625. (Gosse, II, p. 228.) Shelling dates the Timber in 1620, 21, or perhaps two or three years later. (Intro. Timber xvii) I do not know the supposed date of composition of the Underwoods. The Forest was published in the folio of 1616. In Jonson's note quoted above, the Underwoods are spoken of as of later date. Donne's use of the words, it will be noted, is the opposite of Jonson's..



## III.

Jonson's Literary Theories

As I have said before Jonson was a man of definite literary theories. What these theories were with regard to poetry the lost commentary would have told us in full; in its absence we can only gather dicta here and there from Jonson's writings or conversations. The most valuable source upon which we can draw in attempting any sort of a reconstruction of Jonson's theories is his Timber or Discoveries. The Conversations are of little aid here; but from the Discoveries certain ideas of Jonson's can be determined with definiteness.

(1.) In the first place that Jonson deplored the affected and unnecessary use of figures. This is proved by the Discoveries as follows:

Disc. 60 <sup>25</sup> De orationis dignitate.- "Metaphors far-fet hinder to be understood; and affected, lose their grace."

Disc. 28 <sup>30</sup> Otium Studiorum.- "Nor was he only



a strong but an absolute speaker and writer; but his subtlety did not show itself; his judgment thought that a vice; for the ambush hurts more that is hid. He never forced his language, nor went out of the highway of speaking but for some great necessity or apparent profit; for he denied figures to be invented for ornament, but for aid; and still thought it an extreme madness to bind or wrest that which ought to be right."

Disc. 61 <sup>31</sup> De orationis dignitate.- "Some words are to be culled for ornament and color, as we gather flowers to straw houses or make garlands; but they are better when they grow to our style as in a meadow, where, though the mere grass and greenness delights, yet the variety of flowers doth heighten and beautify. Marry, we must not play or riot too much with them as in paronomasies; nor use swelling or ill-sounding words, quae per salebras, altaque saxa cadunt."



(2.) In the second place that he considered clear-  
ness and elegance in writing of prime importance; and  
that he condemned harshness and affectation.

Disc. 7 <sup>1</sup> Perspicuitas, elegantia.- "A man  
should so deliver himself to the nature of the  
subject whereof he speaks, that his hearer may  
take knowledge of his discipline with some de-  
light; and so apparel fair and good matter, that  
the studios of elegancy be not defrauded; re-  
deem arts from their rough and braky seats,  
where they lay hid and overgrown with thorns to  
a pure, open and flowing light, where they may  
take the eye and be taken by the hand."

Disc. 21 <sup>5</sup> De vere argutis.- "But now nothing  
is good that is natural; right and natural  
language seem(s) to have least of wit in it;  
that which is writhed and tortured is counted the  
more exquisite; cloth of bodkin or tissue must  
be embroidered; as if no face were fair that  
were not pouldred or painted; no beauty to be  
had but in wresting and writhing our own tongue.  
Nothing is fashionable till it be deformed; and



this is to write like a gentleman."

Disc. 24 <sup>25</sup> Ingeniorum discrimina.- "Others that in composition are nothing but what is rough and broken. Quae per salebras, altaque saxa cadunt. And if it would come gently, they trouble it of purpose. They would not have it run without rubs, as if that style were more strong and manly that stroke the ear with a kind of unevenness. These men err not by chance, but knowingly and willingly; they are like men that affect a fashion by themselves; have some singularity in a ruff, cloak, or hat-band; or their beards specially out to provoke beholders, and set a mark upon themselves. They would be reprehended while they are looked on. And this vice one that is in authority with the rest, loving, delivers over to them to be imitated; so that oft-times the faults which he fell into the others seek for. This is the danger when vice become a precedent."

In the detached note concluding the Discoveries



there is again a reference to harshness.-

"You admire no poems but such as run like a  
brewer's cart over stones, hobbling; et,  
Et, quae per salebras, altaque saxa cadunt  
Actius et quidquid Pacuviusque vomunt,  
Attonitusque legis terrarum, frugiferarum."

(3.) In the third place that Jonson considered condensation a literary virtue.

Disc. 22 <sup>31</sup> Censura de poetis.- "Indeed, the multitude commend writers as they do fencers or wrestlers, who, if they come in robustly and put for it with a deal of violence, are received for the braver fellows, when many times their own rudeness is a cause of their disgrace, and a slight touch of their adversary gives all that boisterous force the foil. But in these things the unskillful are naturally deceived, and judging wholly by the bulk, think rude things greater than polished, and scattered more numerous than composed."

This same idea is found in Discoveries 23 <sup>9</sup> De Shakespeare nostrat(i).- "I remember the players



have often mentioned it as an honor to Shakespeare, that in his writing, whatsoever he penned, he never blotted out a line. My answer hath been, 'Would he had blotted a thousand', which they thought a malevolent speech. I had not told posterity this but for their ignorance, who choose that circumstance to commend their friend by wherein he most faulted; . . . . He was, indeed, honest, and of an open and free nature; had an excellent phantasie, brave notions, and gentle expressions; wherein he flowed with that facility, that sometimes it was necessary he should be stopped."

(4.) As I have said the Conversations are of less value in establishing Jonson's literary theories. It is from them, however, that I draw the final point, that Jonson favored the couplet as a verse form. In Conversations i Jonson told Drummond,-

" That he had ane intention to perfect ane Epick Poeme intituled Heroologia, of the Worthies of this Country rowsed by Fame; and was to dedicate it to his Country: it is all in couplets, for he



detesteth all other rimes. Said he had written a Discourse of Poesie both against Campion and Daniel especially this last, wher he proves couplets to be the bravest sort of verses, especially when they are broken like Hexameters; and that crosse rimes and stanzaes (becaus the purpose would lead him beyond 8 lines to conclude) were all forced."

Fragmentary as is this matter here collected bearing upon Jonson's theories of poetry, we have at least a few definite principles which Jonson probably applied in judging other poets. Reduced to a smaller compass what we have is this: that Jonson believed in the use of figurative language only when its use was an aid to clearness; that he considered clearness and elegance in writing a first essential, and condemned harshness and affectation; that he considered condensation a literary virtue; that the couplet was his preferred verse form.



## IV.

Points of Difference between Jonson and Donne

It would be foolish to entertain the supposition that Jonson admired Donne unreservedly, for this, of course is not the case. Even the scattered bits of Jonson's theories brought together in the discussion above are sufficient to show that two, at least, of the characteristics of Donne's style must have been an offence to him. These are Donne's harshness and his lack of clearness. That Donne offended Jonson in these particulars we know by direct evidence as well as by the application of Jonson's theories about clearness and elegance. In the Conversations we have Drummond's statement that Jonson passed this sentence upon Donne:-

"that Done for not keeping of accent,  
<sup>1</sup>  
 deserved hanging;"

and in the Discoveries Jonson's direct mention of Donne's obscurity:

1 Cunningham edition, III, p. 471.



Disc. 57 <sup>15</sup> Praecipendi Modi.- "and as it is fit to read the best authors to youth first, so let them be of the openest and clearest, as Livy before Sallust, Sidney before Donne, and beware of letting them taste Gower or Chaucer at first, lest, falling too much in love with antiquity, and not apprehending the weight, they grow rough and barren in language only."

In addition to this Swinburne sees in Discoveries 24<sup>25ff.</sup> quoted above, a special reference to Donne.

"Others that in composition are nothing but what is rough and broken. . . . They would not have it run without rubs as if that style were more strong and manly that stroke the ear with a kind of unevenness. These men err not by chance but knowingly and willingly; they are like men that affect a fashion by themselves, have some singularity in a ruff, cloak, or hat-band; or their beards specially cut to provoke beholders, and set a mark upon themselves. They would be reprehended while they are looked



on. And this vice one that is in authority with the rest, loving, delivers over to them to be imitated; so that oft-times the faults which he fell into the others seek for. This is the danger when vice becomes a precedent."

The censure of roughness and unevenness in this passage might well enough apply to Donne. I hesitate to think, however, that Jonson would have brought this charge of cheap affectation against him. I do not doubt that Donne employed his harsh verse knowingly, but it is inconsistent with his general attitude of indifference to suppose that he did it to set his world agape.

These things only are certain: that Jonson censured Donne's harshness; and that he called attention to his lack of clearness. A more vital difference between the two poets is the difference in their literary ideals. That Jonson was essentially a classicist is almost a commonplace. He considered that a poet should imitate, not servilely to be sure, the writers of the past. A number of expressions of Jonson's



classicis are found in the Discoveries:

Disc. 77 <sup>21ff.</sup> Imitatio.- "Not to imitate servilely as Horace saith, and catch at vices for virtue, but to draw forth out of the best and choicest flowers, with the bee, and turn all into honey, work it into one relish and savor; make our imitation sweet; observe how the best writers have imitated, and follow them: how Virgil and Statius have imitated Homer; how Horace, Archilochus; how Alcaeus, and the other lyrics; and so of the rest."

Disc. 7 <sup>14</sup> Non nimium credendum antiquitati.- "I know nothing can conduce more to letters than to examine the writings of the ancients, and not to rest in their sole authority, or take all upon trust from them, provided the plagues of judging and pronouncing against them be away; . . . . For to all the observations of the ancients we have our own experience, which if we will use and apply, we have better means to pronounce. It is true they opened the gates, and made the way that went before us,



but as guides, not commanders."

In How differs a poem from what we call poesy? Disc. 78<sup>14ff.</sup>  
there is a third expression of Jonson's classicism.

"But our poet must beware that his study be not only to learn of himself; for he that shall affect to do that confesseth his ever having a fool to his master. He must read many, but ever the best and choicest; those that can teach him anything he must ever account his masters and reverence."

In his poems Jonson refers with great frequency to the classical writers, and in a way that shows that he is always conscious of their influence.

Epigram XXXVI, To The Ghost of Martial shows Jonson's manner of making these references:

"Martial thou gav'st far nobler Epigrams  
To thy Domitian, than I can my James;  
But in my royal subject, I pass thee,  
Thou flatter'dst thine, mine cannot flattered be." <sup>1</sup>

As do these lines from Epigram CI, Inviting a Friend to Supper.-

1 Cunningham edition, III, p. 231.



"But that which most doth take my Muse and me  
 Is a pure cup of rich Canary wine,  
 Which is the Mermaid's now, but shall be mine:  
 Of which had Horace or Anacreon tasted,  
 Their lives, as do their lines, till now had lasted."<sup>1</sup>

These allusions of Jonson's to the ancient writers are intimate in tone; these men were his literary friends and models.

Just as Jonson's references to the classical writers contain a suggestion of his sense of kinship with them, so his allusions to classical mythology produce a feeling of the nearness and reality of the things which he images. His allusions create a classical atmosphere; their effect does not consist in the mere recognition on the reader's part of this or that mythological name. From an epigram To His Lady, Then Mistress Carey Jonson's manner of employing classical allusions can be illustrated:

"Retired with purpose you fair worth to praise,

1 Cunningham edition, III, p. 248.



'Mongst Hampton shades and Phoebus' grove of bays,  
 I plucked a branch; the jealous god did frown,  
 And bade me lay the usurped laurel down;  
 Said I wronged him, and, which was more, his love,  
 I answered, Daphne now no pain can prove.  
 Phoebus replied, Bold head, it is not shee:  
 Cary my love is, Daphne but my tree."<sup>1</sup>

Donne's allusions to things classical are far different in tone from Jonson's. In the first place the number of classical allusions in all of Donne's poems is scarcely more than the number that can be found in Jonson's Epigrams alone. It is Donne's manner of introducing these allusions, however, that distinguishes him from Jonson. Donne's references to the classical writers are merely casual when compared to Jonson's. These references occur in Donne's works as follows: a reference to Martial's epigrams, Raderus II p. 212; two references to Esop in Mercurius Gallo-Belgicus, II, p. 212; a third mention of Esop, II, p. 203; a mention of Ovid, II, p. 205;

<sup>1</sup> Cunningham edition, III, p. 256.



of Pindar, Lucan, Homer, I, p. 30; Mantuan, I, p. 131.<sup>1</sup>

Donne's purely mythological references are also distinct in tone from Jonson's; they are meagre and transparent. Donne does not create a classical atmosphere by his use of mythological figures as Jonson does. He seems to have inserted them casually and his reader passes over them in the same way. To illustrate this I will cite, in juxta-position to the allusion in Jonson's epigram above, the references to Phoebus found in Donne's poems. These are as follows:

Elegy XIII, p. 131, l. 86.- "Yet Phoebus equally lights all our sphere."

Eclogue, l. 142ff. - "Powder they radiant hair which if without such ashes thou wouldst wear, Thou which, to all which come to look upon, wert meant for Phoebus, wouldst be Phaeton."

Epithalamion made at Lincoln's Inn. l. 55.-

"He (the sun) flies in winter; but he now stands still  
Yet shadows turn; noon point he hath attain'd;

1 See Chambers' note.



His steeds will be restrain'd,  
 But gallop lively down the western hill."<sup>1</sup>

These allusions in Donne, in contrast to the one in Jonson's poem, represent Phoebus as the sun. The significance of the name is limited to that one idea, and the classical suggestion is correspondingly thin.

As I have said, Jonson's references to classical things may be characterized as intimate; Donne's are merely casual. For Donne's was the counter influence to Jonson's. Donne was unfettered by literary traditions; he was nothing if not original; he had the romantic temper that neglects the classic past. I do not doubt for a moment that Donne was well grounded in classical learning; it is from choice that he assigns it small place in his writing. His interest was in the life, the science, and speculation of his time; Jonson's was in the writings and the traditions of the classic world.

1 An even thinner allusion is found in Chambers, v. 1, p. 93, l. 130. It should be noted that Epithalamia are in Spencer's manner.



This matter of classicism is the most vital of the differences between Jonson and Donne. The idea that Jonson intended to charge Donne with affectation we have dismissed. This seeming contradiction remains, however, that Jonson expressly condemned Donne's harshness; that he made a note of his obscurity; that these two poets followed opposing tendencies in literature, the classic and the romantic, - but that in spite of this Jonson praised Donne in both prose and verse. This is a contradiction almost irreconcilable if we proceed upon the supposition that Jonson held with tenacity to the principles which he laid down. That he did not, his own practice, as examined later, will prove.



V.  
Jonson Has Imitated Donne's Verse.

In spite of the fact that Jonson's literary principles seem to be so materially different from Donne's, Jonson has not only praised Donne's verse, but has paid it the higher compliment of imitating it. Jonson's style approaches Donne's in a number of his poems which I do not include among those that seem to be exercises in Donne's manner. Underwoods XXX and XXXI illustrate what I mean by this. They have Donne's condensity of expression, and the harshness that his abruptly broken and unexpectedly run-on lines produce, but they lack some quality that we expect in Donne's verse. The series of elegies, Underwoods LVII, LIX; LX; the elegies XXXV and XXXVI of Underwoods; and the satire called A Satirical Shrub, Underwoods XXXVII are the poems of Jonson's that so closely resemble Donne, that I have ventured to characterize them as exercises in Donne's style. The elegy, LVIII in Underwoods, I do not include. This is printed as Elegy XVI in Chambers' edition of Donne, where Chambers has a note which I think fixes its



authorship quite certainly.

The three elegies Underwoods LVII, LIX, and LX constitute a series dealing with a lover's quarrel and separation. The unwonted violence of expression, and the intensity of feeling with which the lines are charged, point to Donne's elegies as a model. These qualities are as much a mark of Donne's style as are his ruggedness and his wonderful richness in imagery; Jonson's style, on the other hand, although occasionally graceful, is as a rule stiff and restrained. It is sparing in the use of figures and almost altogether lacking in emotional quality. The first of this series of elegies is the most consistent in sustaining a Donnelike tone. The opening lines of the poem show how different the style is here from Jonson's usual stiffness and dispassionateness.

"Tis true I'm broke! vows, oaths, and all I had  
 Of credit lost. And I am now run mad;  
 Or do upon myself some deperate ill:  
 This sadness makes no approaches but to kill.  
 It is a darkness hath blocked up my sense,



And drives it in to eat on my offence,  
 Or there to starve it. Help, O you that may  
 Alone lend succours, and this fury stay,  
 Offended mistress, you are yet so fair,  
 As light breaks from you that affrights despair  
 And fills my powers with persuading joy,  
 That you should be too noble to destroy."

This is enough like Donne to be his own verse, but there is no authority for claiming it as such. The elegy following this in the Cunningham edition of Jonson's works is the one which Chambers has proved to be Donne's. The third elegy of the series begins with a conceit in Donne's manner.-

"That love's a bitter sweet I ne'er conceive,  
 Till the sour minute comes of taking leave,  
 And then I taste it; but as men drink up  
 In haste the bottom of a med'cined cup,  
 And take some sirup after; so do I  
 To put all relish from my memory  
 Of parting, drown it, in the hope to meet



shortly again, and make our absence sweet."<sup>1</sup>

Underwoods LX, the last of this series of elegies points to Donne's thirteenth elegy, His Parting From Her, as a probable model. The resemblance is in the introductory lines of each poem. Donne's begins,-

"Since she must go, and I must mourne, come(night)  
 Environ me with darkness, whilst I write;  
 Shadow that hell unto me, which alone  
 I am to suffer when my love is gone."<sup>2</sup>

The first of Jonson's elegy is as follows:

"Since you must go, and I must bid farewell,  
 Hear, mistress, your departing servant tell  
 What it is like: and do not think they can  
 Be idle words, though of a parting man  
 It is as if a night should shade noon-day,  
 Or that the sun was here, but forced away;  
 And we were left under that hemisphere  
 Where we must feel it dark for half a year."<sup>3</sup>

1 Cunningham edition, III, p. 317.

2 Donne's Poems, I, p. 128.

3 Cunningham edition, III, p. 318.



In addition to this series Underwoods XXXV,  
An Elegy contains several lines of Donnelike verse.

"Can beauty, that did prompt me first to write,  
 Now threaten with those means she did invite?  
 Did her perfections call me on to gaze,  
 Then like, then love; and now would they amaze!  
 Or was she gracious afar off, but near  
 A terror? or is all this but my fear?  
 That as the water makes things put in't straight,  
 Crooked appear; so that doth my conceit:"<sup>1</sup>

This simile is just what we might expect from Donne.  
 The broken verse, with its rapid movement, in lines  
 5 to 9 is particularly like Donne. The elegy following  
 this one, Underwoods XXXVI, also has some lines which  
 Donne might have written. The lines that I have in  
 mind begin with, "Tell me, my loved friend, do you  
 love or no;"<sup>2</sup> line 11 of the elegy. Underwoods XXVII,  
A Satirical Shrub, also suggests Donne. Its bitter  
 cynicism of tone can easily be paralleled in Donne's

1 Cunningham edition, III, p. 305.

2 Cunningham edition, III, p. 306.



poems. The metaphor, -

" . . . . . had I perceived  
 That their whole life was wickedness, though weaved  
 Of many colors; outward, fresh from spots,  
 But their whole inside full of ends and knots;" <sup>1</sup>

is one of Jonson's rare uses of a sustained figure. The homeliness of the figure gives it a Donnelike character.

From the number of these poems of Jonson's that I have mentioned, Swinburne is inclined to eliminate all four of the elegies that deal with a lover's quarrel, instead of discrediting but one as Chambers does. I quote what Swinburne has to say about this matter:

"The four very powerful and remarkable elegies on a lover's quarrel and separation, I should be inclined to attribute rather to Donne than to Jonson; their earnest passion, their quaint frankness, their verbal violence, their eccentric ardour of expression, at once unabashed and

1 Cunningham edition, III, p. 306.



vehement, spontaneous and ingenious, are all of them typical characteristics of the future dean in the secular and irregular days of his hot poetic youth. The fourth and final poem of the little series is especially impressive and attractive. The turn of the sentences and the cadence of the verse are no less significant of the authorship than is a noble couplet in the poem immediately preceding them - which would at once be recognized by a competent reader as Jonson's:

So may the fruitful vine my temples steep,  
And fame wake for me when I yield to sleep! " <sup>1</sup>

Swinburne evidently has no authority for this but his own opinion. That at least one of these elegies which he calls into question belongs to Jonson, I am inclined to believe. In the third elegy of this series, That love's a bitter-sweet I ne'er conceive, there is an expression which I think marks the poem as Jonson's. This is, -

1 A Study of Ben Jonson, p. 106.



"Thy look at best like cream-bowls and you soon  
 Shall find their depth; they are sounded with a spoon."  
 It readily suggest one of the few figurative ex-  
 pressions in Jonson's Discoveries, where in speaking  
 of what he calls women's poets, he says,-

"You may sound these wits and find the  
 depth of them with their middle finger.

They are cream-bowl -, or but puddle-deep."<sup>1</sup>

I think that this expression must necessarily be  
 Jonson's.

To return to my theory that those poems of  
 Jonson's that so closely correspond to Donne's are  
 the result of Jonson's exercise in Donne's manner,  
 there is every reason to believe that Jonson was  
 acquainted with Donne's elegies. He told Drummond  
 in 1618 that he had the verses of the Lost Chaine  
 by heart.<sup>2</sup> If he knew this elegy it is scarcely to be  
 doubted, since he has shown such an active interest  
 in Donne, that he had read the others. In the matter

1 Disc. 25 13

2 This is Elegy XI, The Bracelet, in Donne.  
 Chambers' edition I, p. 120.



of dates this is entirely probable. Chambers says that most of Donne's elegies were written earlier than 1600, all earlier than 1614.<sup>1</sup> The Underwoods, Jonson's note quoted above tells us, were of later date than The Forest, which was published in the folio of 1616. It is highly probable then that Jonson was familiar with Donne's elegies before he wrote the Underwoods, where his particularly Donne-like verse occurs. That Jonson has used in his elegies a subject matter like that of Donne's; that he has employed here Donnelike figures; that his speech shows a degree of passion to which Jonson rarely attains, but which is characteristic of Donne; that the verse in Jonson's elegies is broken like Donne's verse,- the presence in Jonson's elegies, which appeared later, of all these characteristics of Donne's elegies indicates that in these poems Jonson consciously imitated Donne's style.

1 This is not true of The Autumnal.



## VI.

The Cause of the Sympathy between Jonson and Donne

Now that all of the evidence concerning Jonson's relation to Donne is before us, it is time to examine into the relative weight that should be given to Jonson's praise and to his dispraise of Donne. On the one hand, we have discovered that Jonson and Donne belonged to opposing influences in literature, and that Jonson in specific instances spoke of the harshness of Donne's verse and of the obscurity of his language. On the other hand, Jonson gave Donne no scanty measure of praise in the passages which have been cited from the Conversations and in the Epigrams. He esteemed Donne "the first poet in the world in some things", and he made his praise more convincing by, as I believe, consciously striving for a Donnelike effect in his elegies. That Jonson's praise of Donne is convincing enough, to outweigh these instances of his disagreement with him, I think is obvious. And there need be no insurmountable contradiction in the fact that Jonson admired Donne, although Donne did not conform to all of his literary



theories. Jonson was not, - we have his own word for it, - a strict observer of his theories. He did not think that laws of writing should be permitted to exercise an undue restraint over a poet. In Discoveries 79 <sup>30</sup> is found his statement to that effect.-

"I am not of that opinion to conclude a poets liberty within the narrow limits of laws which either the grammarians or philosophers prescribe."

Moreover, Jonson and Donne had certain things in common which may account in some degree for the sympathy between them. In the first place, they were both men whose interests were primarily intellectual. Jonson must have admired this quality in Donne, for solid learning was one of the things that he required in a poet. He despised the mere surface show of learning. In Discoveries 10 <sup>17</sup> he says,

"Now there are certain scioli or smatterers that are busy in the skirts and outsides of learning, and have scarce anything of solid literature to commend them. They may have some edging or trimming of a scholar, a welt or so; but it is no more."



Again in speaking of what we require in a poet, he says,—

"But that which we especially require in him is an exactness of study and multiplicity of reading, lectio, which maketh a full man, not alone enabling him to know the history or argument of a poem and report it; but so to master the matter and style, as to show he knows how to handle, place, or dispose of either with elegancy when need shall be. And not think he can leap forth suddenly a poet by dreaming he hath been in Parnassus, or having washed his lips, as they say, in Helicon."<sup>1</sup>

It is practically unnecessary to bring forward any proof to show that Jonson and Donne were both men of high intellectual attainments. Jonson's first editor has summed up his learning in a convincing way, and I shall allow Whalley to vouch for him:

"He was laborious and indefatigable in his studies; his reading was copious and extensive; his memory so tenacious and strong that when turned of forty he could have repeated all that he had ever

1 Disc. 77 29



wrote; his judgment accurate and solid; and often consulted by those who knew him well in branches of very curious learning, and far remote from the flowery paths loved and frequented by the Muses. The Lord Falkland celebrates him as an admirable scholar; and saith, that the extracts he took, and the observations which he made on the books he read, were themselves a treasure of learning, though the originals should happen to be lost."<sup>1</sup>

It is equally unnecessary to vouch for Donne's learning. The fact that he wrote the kind of poetry that he did, is a sufficient proof of his intellectuality, if we had no other. Even Samuel Johnson grants the metaphysical poets the merit of having this attribute. He says:

"To write on their plan, it was at least necessary to read and think. No man could be born a metaphysical poet, nor assume the dignity

1 I have this from Robert Bell's Memoir of Jonson in the Poems of Robert Greene, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson.



of a writer, by descriptions copied from descriptions, by imitations borrowed from imitations, by traditional imagery, and hereditary similies, by readiness of rhyme, and volubility of syllables."<sup>1</sup>

In the second place both Jonson and Donne had a distaste for the tuneful verse that is considered the conventional Elizabethan style. Gosse says, "One of the main objections he (Donne) took to the verse of his youth was that it was so mellifluous, sinuous, and soft. A five-syllabled iambic line of Spenser or of Daniel trots along with the gentlest amble of inevitable shorts and longs."<sup>2</sup> Jonson says in the Discoveries,-

"Others there are that have no composition at all, but a kind of tuning and riming fall in what they write. It runs and slides, and only makes a sound. Women's poets they are called, as you have women's tailors.

They write a verse as smooth, as soft as cream

1 Life of Cowley, p. 26.

2 Gosse, II, p. 334.



In which there is no torrent, nor scarce stream.  
 You may sound these wits and find the depth of  
 them with your middle finger. They are cream-  
 bowl-, or but puddle-deep."<sup>1</sup>

I think that both Donne and Jonson wished to inaugurate a new order of things poetic, and that the spirit of reform was a bond between them. Jonson for his part speaks of his desire to introduce a new order: In Cynthia's Revels, he says:

"She (his muse) shuns the print of any beaten path<sup>2</sup>  
 And proves new ways to come to learned ears."

In The Forest XII as well, there is a passage expressive of Jonson's lack of sympathy with the conventional poetry of the age, and of his consciousness of being an innovator.--

"Then all that have but done my Muse least grace,  
 Shall thronging come, and boast the happy place  
 They hold in my strange poems, which, as yet,  
 Had not their form touched by an English wit.

1 Disc. 25<sup>6ff.</sup>

2 Cunningham edition, II, p. 229.



There, like a rich and golden pyramide,  
 Borne up by statues, shall I rear your head  
 Above your under-carved ornaments  
 And show how to the life my soul presents  
 Your form imprest there: not with tickling ryhmes,  
 Or commonplaces filched, that take these times,  
 But high and noble matter, such as flies  
 From brains entranced, and filled with extasies;<sup>1</sup>

Although Donne has left no account of his literary theories, he plainly shows that his sympathy was not with the writing of the time. He set out to improve the verse of the day not by words but by example. This is Gosse's idea. He says, "As to this, I can but repeat, what I have said before, that what there was to know about prosody was, we may be sure, perfectly known to Donne. But it was evident that he intentionally essayed to introduce a revolution into English versification. . . . The conventional line vexed his ear with its insipidity, and it doubtless appeared to him that his great predecessors had never completely shaken off

1 Cunningham edition, p. 273. v.3.



a timidity and monotony which had come down to them from Sidney and Gascoigne." <sup>1</sup> That this was one of the things that attracted Jonson to Donne I do not doubt.

But more than by either of these things Jonson was drawn to Donne, by the rare poetical quality that makes Donne's readers forgive him his faults of style. In Discoveries 78 <sup>28</sup> Jonson says,—"but all this (the lectio, imitatio, etc. which he requires in a poet) is in vain without a natural wit, and a poetical nature in chief." The qualities which Jonson conspicuously lacked, Donne's wonderful imaginative power and his power to put feeling into his verse,—his "poetical nature" in short,—are what Jonson admired in Donne. These are the things that Jonson imitated in his elegies. They are, I think, "the some things" in which, according to Jonson, Donne was "the first poet in the world".

In short, the admiration which Jonson expressed for Donne can be accounted for in this way. He

<sup>1</sup> Gosse, II, p. 334.



admired Donne for his intellectual attainments, which he considered an essential qualification for a poet; he sympathized with Donne's efforts to get away from the insipidity which characterized so much of the contemporary verse; and he recognized in Donne something for the lack of which neither great intellect, nor extreme diligence can compensate, - a poetical nature.



Summary.

In this paper I have attempted to establish the following points concerning Ben Jonson's Relation to Donne:

- (1.) That there was a personal friendship between Jonson and Donne.
- (2.) That Jonson assigned Donne high rank as both poet and critic.
- (3.) That Jonson censured Donne, and that the two poets differed in literary ideals; but that Jonson's praise of Donne outweighs his dispraise.
- (4.) For Jonson consciously imitated Donne's style in his elegies.
- (5.) That Jonson's admiration for Donne can be accounted for, in part, by these things:
  - i that between the two poets there existed the bond of mutual intellectuality.
  - ii that both had a distaste for the contemporary style and that both felt



themselves to be innovators.

iii that, in spite of his faults of style,  
Jonson recognized in Donne his poetical  
nature.



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1 I did not have access to Grosart's edition of  
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