

# The city, the stage, the voyage: space and body in Ben Jonson<sup>1</sup>

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My title grows out of a concern with “body” and mobility that integrates a major theme of Jonson studies in recent decades. That theme reflects a perceived necessity to rescue Jonson from his self-fashioned image as monolithic classicist, literary pedant, and political reactionary: such are the values today associated with the image of authorship that Jonson did his best to create for himself, an image textually embodied in his 1616 *Folio Workes*. Although this concern with rescuing Jonson from himself has long been in evidence, it is significant that two collections of essays published a few years ago, revealingly titled *Refashioning Ben Jonson* (Sanders et al 1998) and *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson* (Butler 1999), should be defined by a sense of urgency in the task(s) indicated by their titles, explicitly taken on for the sake of a cultural moment not much interested in a classically austere and politically conservative Jonson.

The on-going and protracted reconfiguration to which these books are recent contributions has found some of its choice objects in Jonson’s representations of the body, of its space and its life, and in a corresponding definition of Jonson’s stance as satirist and as comic dramatist. And this global reevaluation of Jonson, with its emphasis on his writing of the body, has found (since the 1980s in particular) a fundamental theoretical prop in Mikhail Bakhtin’s famous disquisition of the grotesque in late medieval and early modern popular festive culture (Bakhtin 1984).

I acknowledge, from the outset, the importance of Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* for some of what follows. Of Bakhtin’s thesis I will retain, in particular, those basic concepts which, despite some critical overuse, still preserve (in my view) their operative and heuristic value – concepts such as the denial of spatial constraint, which he sees as proper to the

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<sup>1</sup> Some passages from this essay appeared in an earlier form in my “Fleshly Voyages: Ben Jonson, Space and the Body”, *SEDERI XI: Revista de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Renacentistas Ingleses* (Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2002) 25-41.

carnavalesque sense of the world; the correspondence of this in representations of the overspilling body, the body which breaks its boundaries, the “open” body which thus differs from the closed, individualised, spatially definite body of “classical canons”, and of bourgeois individual existence; and the regenerative ambivalence of scatology, laughter and aggression in “grotesque realism”, as opposed to modern forms of the grotesque (Bakhtin *passim*). Bakhtin’s underlining of a positive dimension to verbal and scatological aggression in grotesque realism, as a form of balancing death with life in the celebration of a collective body, will be understood, in this essay, to be akin to the world of comedy, in its gregarious and exculpatory dimension – and distinct from (if not opposed to) satiric violence, in that conventional sense which finds its correspondence in the acknowledgement of a sense of superiority and detachment on the part of the satirist, and of the audience he summons to his side, vis-à-vis the butts of satiric attack.

In general terms, my argument will emphasise the way in which Jonsonian renderings of bodily space, and of the spaces against which it is represented, can provide an enlightening access to his political and ethical universe, taken as an evolving set of attitudes, rather than as a static and ever coherent construction of reality. I will thus have to be aware of the variety of forms assumed by that “absolute centrality of the body to Renaissance culture” which Jonathan Sawday, a major practitioner of “somatic criticism”, underlines in his study of anatomy and dissection as master tropes for an early modern epistemology and its ensuing forms of representation (Sawday 1995: 229 and *passim*).

The pertinence of Sawday’s study to my theme (and my title) also derives from his remarks on that “spatial organisation of knowledge” for which he claims the body became a prime model within Renaissance culture – and to which the development of printing further contributed (Sawday 1995: 135-6). Equally cogent for my concern with body and space is his equation of the endeavours of the early modern science of the body (in the process of being accurately mapped), and the expansion of European knowledge of (and power over) the world:

The body was territory, an (as yet) undiscovered country, a location which demanded from its explorers skills which seemed analogous to those displayed by the heroic voyagers across the terrestrial globe. (Sawday 1995: 23).

A major concern of this essay is the importance of space for the production of meaning (the space *of* the body, and the space in which bodies move and interact), and the way in which Jonsonian space arguably “opens up” – both in the scope and dimension of his dramatic space, and in the ethical implications of that expanding space – in particular at one point in

the course of his work. But it should be highlighted that Jonson usually shows little enthusiasm for the notion of travelling, or of the voyage as a rewarding endeavour, for mobility (in short) as a mark of a new paradigm of the human. His treatment of such dynamics reflects, in broader terms, a disaffection with the ethos of urban individual mobility proper to early commercial capitalism; more specifically, it is a characteristic instance (even if with an element of idiosyncrasy) of Jacobean satire of travellers. Both his epigrams and several of his plays foreground Jonson's tendency to equate travelling with false pretensions, as much as his regular satiric targeting of harebrained "schemes" or greedy "projects".

In this as in other respects, though, Jonson is ultimately found to be less stable and coherent than his self-fashioned authorial identity might suggest. This, I believe, will become apparent in my approach to the three texts on which I will be focusing: a 1609 masque, *The Entertainment at Britain's Burse*; his epigram "CXXXIII, On the Famous Voyage" ([1612?] 1616); and his comedy *Bartholomew Fair* (1614).

Jonson's views on the mercantile yield of most early modern voyaging should seem definitely expressed by the satire of acquisitiveness to be found in much of his work; yet a text believed to be the most recent addition to the Jonson canon – *The Entertainment at Britain's Burse*, a 1609 masque rediscovered by James Knowles in 1997, and published in 1999 – can easily and surprisingly read like a panegyric to trade and merchants. Written for the opening, in 1609, of the opulent New Exchange (designed by Inigo Jones), *The Entertainment* proposes the opening ceremony itself as a voyage of discovery, by having the Key Keeper introduce himself as the "compasse" that will guide his royal audience "vppon some lande discouery of a new region heere" (Knowles 1999: 132). This dramatisation of commercial ambition for a royal and aristocratic audience contains the occasional jab at the preposterous schemes of projectors, or at "young return'd trauaylors", who "studyed little and trauayled lesse for that" (Knowles 1999: 133); it itemises commodities in long lists, glittering goods brought home by both straightforward business and far-fetched schemes for the satisfaction of wealthy consumers – but it is only uncertainly that it provides the reader with semantic and rhetorical elements that may render its celebration of commodities ironical. Further, *The Entertainment* ends with a generous offer of bargains, and the shopkeeper's wish that "god make me Rich, which is the sellers prayer ever was and wilbe" (Knowles 1999: 140). According to the text's editor, the whole description of the New Exchange amounts to "an almost incredible traveller's tale", and embodies "Jonson's vision of the wonder and mystery of the Burse" (Knowles 1997: 15).

As underlined above, instabilities such as caused by this surprising text have in recent years been foregrounded by a context of reception which, rather than regretting Jonson's contradictions, welcomes them as

a means of countering the totalising design of the author's self-fashioning and proposing instead a more complex and tolerant Jonson (see Sanders 1998: 1-27 and *passim*). This argument has been accompanied by a reconfiguring of the Jonson canon that entails a shift of attention to the more peripheral texts (dramatic and non-dramatic), deliberately avoiding the best-known comedies (see Sanders 1998: *passim*, Butler 1999: *passim*). My argument partly gestures in that direction, by departing from this rediscovered masque and moving on to one of the Epigrams; but I will, on the other hand, support my ultimate argument by looking at the last of the so-called middle comedies (*Bartholomew Fair*), to argue that it is in fact crucial to illuminate the "opening up" of Jonson's space, in the direction (precisely) of a more tolerant *ethos*, and of a more accepting relation to the body.

But first, a glimpse of Jonson at his satirically most aggressive – which also means, most distrustful of mobility – in epigram "CXXXIII, On the Famous Voyage" (Herford & Simpson 1947: 84-9). The *Epigrams* were probably completed around 1612, but do not seem to have been published before their inclusion in the 1616 Folio *Workes*. The closing piece in the collection, "On the Famous Voyage", is all the more infamous since the American critic Edmund Wilson, in his 1948 essay "Morose Ben Jonson", elected it as the "fullest and most literal expression" of "the whole malodorous side of Jonson" (Wilson 1948: 256). The mock-heroic design is apparent from the opening, proemial lines, where the satirist offers his times and places as debased analogues to Classical figures and landscapes: the new voyagers, whose exploits are announced as surpassing those "Of Hercvles, or Thesevs going to *hell*,/Orphevs, Vlisses" (ll.2-3), etc., are obscure gentlemen of Jacobean London, and their "venture" aims at taking them to Holborn up the Fleet Ditch, a watercourse which had in Jonson's time become no more than an open-air sewer (Boehrer 1998: 158-9). Up the Fleet Ditch, therefore, the challenges, ghostly encounters, and trials to be faced are totally scatological in nature. Parallel to the laughable equation with ancient and mythological voyaging, this "braue aduventure" is compared with other modern epics of mobility – "[of] him that backward went to *Berwicke*, or which/Did dance the famous Morrissse, vnto *Norwich*" (ll.35-6), "A harder tasque, then either his to *Bristo*,/Or his to *Antwerpe*" (ll.39-40) – which, in their foolishness and lack of consequence, threaten to become debased synecdoches for all travelling.

The debasement that this voyage involves also affects the space that witnesses and somehow produces it – the space of the early modern city. As Bruce Thomas Boehrer argued in his suggestively titled *The Fury of Men's Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal*, there is a socio-historical specificity to this epigram which derives from the way in which demographic expansion, together with decisive changes in patterns of living, was

causing England to evolve from “an economy of waste retention” to “an economy of waste expulsion” (Boehrer 1998: 151 and *passim*). There is, then, a historical prominence of sewage systems which entails, in Boehrer’s response to Edmund Wilson’s indictment of Jonson as a severe case of anal neurosis (Wilson 1948: *passim*), that “Jonson’s preoccupation with excretory processes should arguably be viewed as culturally paradigmatic rather than individually neurotic” (Boehrer 1998: 14). After all, the very last words in Jonson’s epigram are a tribute to “[him], that sung A-iax” (l.196) – Sir John Harington, who had celebrated his own invention of the flush-toilet (whilst possibly also satirising wild “projects”) by writing *A New Discourse of a Stale Subject, called The Metamorphosis of Ajax* (i.e., “a jakes”) (Prescott 1998: 106, Boehrer 1998: 151-2). If these voyagers’ traversing of the city at all times reflects the coexistence of multiple bodies which eat, digest and excrete in an ever more crowded space, it is also true that the expanding city is represented in terms that activate its culturally long-standing analogy with the human body – in this case, a flatulent, congested as much as voracious body, visited in the rank evidence of all its functions. Another commonplace analogy that Jonson exploits towards the end of the epigram is that which equates money with excrement: “heap’d like an vsurers masse” (l.139). The image reminds us that the allegorical body here visited is the space of an egocentric acquisitiveness which is the opposite of that celebratory scatology of grotesque realism, in which excrement, rather than amassed, is joyfully alienated in the form of festive aggression (Bakhtin 1984: *passim*). And yet another sign of the negative satiric treatment of this voyage is its ultimate static nature, the ineffectuality of the movement attempted: these voyagers brave no challenge, pass no trial, any purposes of mobility are never achieved (cf Boehrer 1998: 163-4). The epigram’s closing image is that of a memorial adequate to the voyagers’ achievement and the universe represented: the “Pyramide” of excrement which keeps growing in the stifling sewer that becomes emblematic of circulation in the modern city.

To find, in Jonson, representations of a body and a space arguably evocative of the forms of “grotesque realism”, rather than an extension of these instances of the “modern grotesque”, we need to look into a comedy first performed in 1614, *Bartholomew Fair* – the space of the fair itself, and those who belong to it, rather than the city visitors. Indeed, with the majority of those characters who come from the city for a day at the Fair, we witness a dis-location to the fair of the gestures and forms of desire proper to the socio-dramatic space of the city as elsewhere represented by Jonson. Two socially and economically predatory gallants progress from the city to the fair in search of a profitable marriage; a minor legal agent and would-be author, seeks in the fair’s puppet theatre a dramatic glory

that proves proportional to his talents; a Puritan, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, tries to conceal a gluttonous body behind a spiritual mission, and will be exposed at the fair. The fair will have on the city characters the effect of a space of revelation, to be dramatically effected through a foregrounding of the body in its lower functions, manifested through its openness, through the breaking of its boundaries: sudden calls of nature, a sudden vomit, etc. – varying forms of the confrontation with the question repeatedly posed by the ubiquitous Trouble-all, the madman of the fair, inquisitive of the grounds for authority: “where’s your warrant?”.

Social history lets us know that Smithfield, the setting of the fair, was being encroached upon by the city space in the early seventeenth-century (Sanders 1998: 13): the site of this revenge is thus a space under pressure, a boundary between two cultural spaces, one of which is regressing – but not without a fight.

That *agon* takes place, to an important extent, on the space of the body, and of its troping in terms of the fight between Carnival meat and Lenten fish – in the voice of Ursula, mistress of the pig booth, between herself, “a plaine plumpe soft wench o’ the Suburbs”, and the city woman, “like a long lac’d Conger, set vpright” (II-5: 83, 87). Roasting pigs at the centre of the fair, ruling over it as “*Vrsa maior*” (II-5: 190), and indistinctly hailed or derided as the “fleshy woman” (III-6: 33), the “shee-Bear” (II-3: 1), the “mother o’ the Pigs” (II-5: 75), the “fatnesse of the *Fayre*” (II-2: 118), the “Body o’ the *Fayre!*” (II-5: 73), Ursula epitomises her environing space – and its allegorical coextension with the world (as Patricia Parker points out in her study of *Literary Fat Ladies* – Parker 1987: 24-6). She is a clear-cut example of the apotheosis of the body in grotesque realism: the ambivalent duality of the grotesque body, as a space where life and death coexist in that circularity which secures the regular triumph of the former, is instanced in her double function as provider of food as well as of the only equivalent to a toilet in the fair – thus foregrounding that other characteristically grotesque trait which is the fusion and interchangeability of bodily functions. It will be from her booth that the decisive moment will be produced for bringing *Bartholomew Fair* to a gregarious and absolving ending, in which all bids for individual assertion, prominently including those put forward by Judge Adam Overdo, will be dis-authorised and diluted in food and drink. The analogy between text and body which Jonson himself stimulated makes it less simplistically biographical to point out, in connection with this deflation of authority, that the expansion of Jonson’s own body to a near-legendary fatness was by the time of *Bartholomew Fair* already a conspicuous aspect of his public persona, and one that he himself seems to have associated with the growing spaciousness of his reputation (Boehrer 1998: 83-5). An ironical connection between the ambitions of a physically and literarily growing authorial body and the gluttony

for promotion which the fair denounces, offering instead a confrontation with the body as the great leveller, is thus not completely speculative – in particular when the misjudgements of judge Overdo, highest example of the dis-authorized, are named his “discoveries”, precisely one of the titles given by Jonson to his own book of maxims and basic principles.

To conclude: the three texts considered are all crucially centred on the human rapport with space, but they are also fundamentally diverse instances of Jonson’s writing:

- *The Entertainment at Britain’s Burse* gives us the early modern dramatic poet who cannot afford to alienate a royal patron: the first English poet to have enjoyed the status of Poet Laureate emerges in this text lending his wit to a festive dramatisation of precisely those acquisitive drives that elsewhere he would lambast;
- indeed, his last and longest epigram evinces the acerbity of his satiric treatment of ventures moved by greed in an early modern world where circulation starts being equated with increased opportunities for wealth;
- a similar judgement might be passed on the denunciation of the urge felt by the city characters to visit the Fair – were it not for the fact that Smithfield becomes not just a space for the exposure of their pretensions, but also for the emergence of a third term, an alternative to transgression and its condemnation: the starkness of the body and its workings as the fundamental leveller. In the Fair the city finds its enabling and redemptive other, with which it can enter a dynamics that proves productive of a more balanced and reconciled relationship to experience and to the spaces against which it is lived.

The outcome of *Bartholomew Fair* can thus be seen as a moment of arrival of a writing of the body, and of a management of space, which allows us to counter the conventional view of Jonson as the static and pedantic proponent of a “classical” closure, and endorse rather Bruce Thomas Boehrer’s view of him as the practitioner of a “poetics of mobility”, concerned with “notions of movement, kinesis, energy, exploration” (Boehrer 1998: 202); a poetics that ultimately calls on the flesh to disprove a monolithic construction of authorship.

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