



Genre and Occasion in Jonson's "On My First Sonne"

Author(s): Joshua Scodel

Source: *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (Spring, 1989), pp. 235-259

Published by: [University of North Carolina Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174336>

Accessed: 26/01/2011 11:49

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=uncpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of North Carolina Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Studies in Philology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Genre and Occasion in Jonson's "On My First Sonne"

by Joshua Scodel

"ON My First Sonne," Ben Jonson's most compelling short poem, has received much excellent commentary, yet critics have not thoroughly explored the most relevant literary and historical contexts for understanding the poem. Jonson does not simply attempt to confront and conquer his grief over the loss of a son. He transforms a traditional generic combination, the elegy with a final epitaph, in order to bury and commemorate his son properly. Residing in Huntingdonshire during the 1603 London plague with his mentor William Camden and Sir Robert Cotton, Jonson, after premonitions of his son's death, learned in a letter from his wife that his son had died.¹ Jonson had probably been estranged from his wife and therefore away from his children since 1602.² By contemporary standards, Jonson had certainly neglected his patriarchal obligations in the summer of 1603: it was considered the particular responsibility of the male head of a household to look after his family in time of plague.³ Jonson could not have attended the burial of his son, which

¹ The circumstances are given in the "Conversations with Drummond" in Ben Jonson, *The Complete Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–1951), 1: 139–40. All citations of Jonson's works are from this edition, cited by volume and page number, though I have regularized i/j and u/v in conformity with modern practice.

² The most recent (and still inadequate) biography of Jonson accepts the conclusions of Herford and Simpson dating Jonson's five-year separation from his wife to 1602–1607 (11: 576–77); see Rosalind Miles, *Ben Jonson: His Life and Work* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 286.

³ The official prayer for plague in 1603 clearly expressed this duty: "Now the chief remedy to be expected from man is that everyone would be a magistrate to himself and his whole family." The prayer is cited by Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Stuart and Tudor England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), who notes that the plague "isolated the individual family and left it to its own resources" (290). David

would have taken place quickly after death. He thus failed to pay his final debt to his son.⁴ He could not have been satisfied with the burial his son received: during plague, funeral ceremonies were sharply curtailed, and most of the dead, instead of being buried in the consecrated ground of churches or churchyards with burial services, were quickly "covered simply with a winding-sheet, and flung without burial rites into pest-pits."⁵ Jonson's son, as a Catholic child, would have had even less chance of being properly buried.⁶ In "On My First Sonne" Jonson provides a compensatory burial ritual and an individualizing, immortalizing gravestone inscription for the boy who was in all likelihood unceremoniously buried in an unmarked grave.⁷ The poem thus implicitly asserts the power of poetry's verbal rituals and constructs: poetry can provide a proper burial for the dead without a body or a priest and a worthy monument to the dead without a material tomb.

Riggs, in his 1987 New York MLA paper, "Ben Jonson's Family," is the only critic I know who discusses Jonson's psychological response to his having left his family during the plague, arguing that *Sejanus*, written during the same period as "On My First Sonne," "displaced a potentially intolerable burden of anxiety" that Jonson felt concerning his actions as a father (9). My argument is that "On My First Sonne" is a more direct, though still not fully explicit, attempt to deal with such feelings. (I am grateful to Professor Riggs for sending me a copy of his paper.)

⁴ The notion that there is a final duty to bury one's kin is of course widespread. In the chapter on epitaphs in *Remaines Concerning Britaine* (1605), Camden describes the "care of burial" among all but "savage nations" and attacks those who neglect "the last duty" towards their "Parents, Wives, and the nearest unto them" (27-28). Though he did not publish the *Remaines* until 1605, Camden might well have communicated his ideas on such matters to his friend and former pupil Jonson much earlier. Camden and Cotton, Jonson's two companions during the 1603 plague, were both former members of the Society of Antiquaries, which held discussions concerning funerals and epitaphs in 1599-1600; see the papers preserved in Thomas Hearne's *A Collection of Curious Discourses*, 2 vols. (London: 1771), I: 121-22, 199-261, 310-54, II: 375-77.

⁵ F. P. Wilson, *The Plague in Shakespeare's London* (1927; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 43.

⁶ There were numerous seventeenth-century cases of struggles between unwilling parsons and Catholics wishing to inter their children in consecrated ground with the Catholic burial rites; see John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community: 1570-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 140-42. During plagues, by many viewed as God's punishment on mankind for such sins as the toleration of Catholics, it would be even harder for a Catholic to receive a proper burial; on religious scapegoating during epidemics, see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 86. Since Jonson was Catholic circa 1599-1610, and both he and his wife were accused of refusing communion in 1606, it is likely that Jonson's son would have been raised as a Catholic; on Jonson's Catholicism, see Miles, 40, 81, 106-7, 138-39 and *passim*.

⁷ Camden considers the "last duty" of relations and friends to the dead to include

Jonson's poem uses a little studied but important classical and Renaissance generic combination, the elegy describing or evoking a burial ceremony and concluding with an epitaph.⁸ The poem's first ten lines provide an innovative but still recognizable example of the form, while its final couplet breaks with the generic model more radically and thus foregrounds the crucial differences between Jonson's poem and earlier works. The elegy with a final epitaph moves from an act of mourning to a final artifact of praise, as the following excerpt from Poliziano's neo-Latin poem upon Albiera Albitia shows:

Praecedat jam pompa frequens, jam moesta sacerdos
Verba canit, sacris turribus aera sonant.

O quantum implexi crines, oculique, genaeque
Noctis habent! quantus nubilat ora dolor!

Et tandem gelidos operosi marmoris artus
Includit tumulus, & breve carmen habet:
Hoc iacet Albierae pulchrum sub marmore corpus;
Nulla quidem tantum marmora laudis habent.
Exornat tumulum corpus, sed spiritus astra:
O quanta accessit gloria, lausque Polo!

not only burial but also the erection of a suitable monument distinguishing the place of burial. He condemns those who "commit to the Earth . . . the nearest unto them in *tenebris*, with little better than *Sepulchra asinorum*" (Camden, 27). An early seventeenth-century epitaph expresses the sense of duty behind the erection of a monument: "Tombes" are built "to shoue / The due respect which friend to friend doth owe" ("friend" here means those close to the dead, kin and non-kin). (Epitaph on Edward Sherland [1609], ll. 1–2 in Thomas F. Ravenshaw, *Antiente Epitaphes* [London: 1888], 50).

⁸ My generalizations concerning this composite form are based on these representative examples: Virgil's *Eclogue* V.20–44, Ovid's *Amores* II.6, Poliziano's "Elegia, sive Epitaphion. In Albierae Albitiae immaturum exitum," Ronsard's "Sonnet de luy-mesme [Charles IX]," and George Whetstone's "A Commemoration of the generall mone . . . of the most worthy Sir Philip Sidney." Pseudo-Tibullus's elegy III. 2, though it begins as the poet's directives for his own future funeral, and Sannazaro's *Piscatory Eclogue* I, though it treats not the actual burial but a commemorative ritual at the tomb, follow the same general patterns. (All classical texts and their translations are, unless otherwise noted, from the Loeb Classical Library editions.) Alistair Fowler cites the major example of the composite form, Virgil's *Eclogue* V. 20–44, as an example of the "inclusion" of one genre within another, but because he conflates the elegy with final epitaph and a quite different generic phenomenon, the pseudo-epitaph with a concluding inscription, he fails to elucidate the logic of the Virgilian example or of the form as a whole; see *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 179. (I am using the term "elegy" in

(The crowded procession now leads the way, the priest sings sorrowful words now, and the bronze bells ring from the church towers. . . . oh how much gloom do their uncombed hair, their eyes and cheeks express! How much grief clouds their faces! . . . And finally the tomb of elaborately worked marble shuts in the icy limbs and has on it a short verse: "The beautiful body of Albiera lies beneath this marble. Surely no marble has such fame. Her body adorns the tomb, but her spirit the stars: oh how much glory and fame are added to the heavens!")⁹

Poliziano's poem reveals the psychological and aesthetic logic of the composite form. By moving from the mourners' sorrowful feelings at Albiera's funeral to the final proclamation of her achievement upon her tomb, the poem dramatizes the fulfillment of the funerary ritual's central goal, the mourners' "working through" of grief and their acceptance of the new status of the deceased. The poem moves from the impermanent responses of the living mourners, whose immersion in time is emphasized by the repeated "jam" ("now"), to the deceased's permanent state of death and glory, located spatially in the monument on earth and in the stars of heaven.¹⁰ Poliziano makes the contrast between mourning and praise clear through the rhetorical similarity of the elegiac exclamation, "quantus nubilat ora dolor!" ("how much grief clouds their faces!") and its epitaphic counterpart, "O quanta accessit gloria, lausque Polo!" ("oh how much glory and praise are added to the heavens!"). The epitaph provides the poem with a strong sense of closure. The subject of the

the common modern sense of funeral lament rather than in its ancient and Renaissance sense of a poem in elegiac meter. The modern sense is, however, present in both classical and Renaissance poetic theory and practice, since it was widely believed that the elegiac meter was originally and most appropriately used for lamentations over the dead; see the discussion of the term in Martin L. West, *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974], 5-7 and Ovid's *Amores* III. 9. 3-5.)

⁹ Angelo Poliziano, "Elegia, sive Epitaphion. In Albierae Albitiae immaturum exitum," ll. 273-74, 277-78, 281-86 in Fred J. Nichols, ed. and trans., *An Anthology of Neo-Latin Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 269. I have modified the punctuation slightly, following at points the text in Angelus Politianus, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Ida Maier, 2 vols. (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmio, 1970), 2: 145-47. For an excellent discussion of this poem, which does not, however, discuss its place in the tradition of elegies with final epitaphs, see O. B. Hardison, *The Enduring Monument: A Study of the Idea of Praise in Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1962), 131-37.

¹⁰ For an anthropological discussion of the way funerary rituals seek the separation of the dead from the world of the living and their integration into a new "place," see Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death; The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 61-120.

epitaph, the ultimate state of the deceased, thematically evokes finality, and the brevity of the epitaph, which is so much shorter than the preceding elegiac lament, makes the final section of the poem seem all "end."¹¹ Such powerful aesthetic closure responds to the brute fact of death, that most abrupt and unwanted of endings, with an end regulated by art.

This movement—from ritual to artifact, from time to space, from the mourners' feelings to the deceased's glory—is in other examples of the form reinforced by a change in point of view. While the elegiac portion often records the mourners' sorrowfully addressing the deceased as an absent "you," the epitaph is always either third-person, "objective" praise or a first-person declaration by the deceased himself. In either case, the mourners' subjective feelings of loss are left behind when a point of view beyond them affirms the new "place" of the dead. In George Whetstone's elegy and epitaph upon Sir Philip Sidney, for example, the final impersonal praise of the deceased's lasting achievement ("Here underneath, lies Phillip Sidney Knight, / . . . / Who vanquisht death") answers the elegiac farewells the mourners address to Sidney ("Farewell the worthiest Knight, that liv'd, the multitude die crie / Farewell the hon'rd arte, by lawrell and the Launce, / Farewell the friend (beloved) of all, that hadst no foe but chance").¹² In Virgil's *Eclogue* V Daphnis's self-praise from his tomb ("Daphnis ego in silvis, hinc usque ad sidera notus, / formosi percoris custos, formosior ipse"; "I am Daphnis of the woods, known from here up to the stars, the keeper of a lovely flock, lovelier myself") affirms his triumphant fame and answers the mourners' la-

¹¹ Barbara Herrnstein Smith discusses epigrammatic brevity and subject-matter evoking finality as techniques for attaining aesthetic closure in *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 172–82 ("Thematic Devices: Closural Allusions") and 197–210 ("Epigram and Epigrammatic"). In the examples of elegies with concluding epitaphs cited in footnote eight, the elegies range in length from twenty to two hundred and eighty-six lines, while the concluding epitaphs range from distichs, as in Virgil's, Ovid's, Tibullus's, and Sannazaro's poems, to the six-line epitaph of Whetstone; the epitaphs are all less than one-sixth the length of their respective elegies, so that their brevity is strongly perceived. The brief concluding epitaph in fact provides strong closure in various genres: Fowler notes, for example, its use at the end of Renaissance love laments (179), a use of the epitaph going back to Ovid's *Heroides*.

¹² George Whetstone, "A Commemoration of the Generall Mone, the honorable and solemn funerall made for and of the most worthy Sir Phillip Sidney Knight" (1587), C3v–C4r, reprinted in *Elegies for Sir Philip Sidney* (1587), ed. with an intro. A. J. Colaianne and W. L. Godshalk (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1980).

ment over his absence ("postquam te fata tulerunt, ipsa Pales agros atque ipse reliquit Apollo"; "after the fates took you away, Pales herself and Apollo himself left our fields").¹³

One of Ronsard's poems on the death of King Charles IX reveals how much a sophisticated poet can omit while still expecting his readers to grasp the generic signals. Here is an excerpt from Ronsard's poem, which consists of a French sonnet for its elegiac portion and a concluding Latin quatrain for its epitaph:

.
 Te voyant au cercueil, hélas, trois fois hélas!

 Adieu, Charles, adieu, du Ciel Astre nouveau!
 Tandis que je t'appreste un plus riche Tombeau,
 Pren de ton serviteur ces souspirs et ces larmes.

 Carolus in terris terrarum gloria vixit,
 Maxima, Justitiae magno et Pietatis amore.
 Nunc idem caelo vivens est, gloria caeli
 Quo se Justitiae et Pietatis sustulit alis.

("Seeing you in your coffin, alas, three times alas! Farewell, Charles, farewell, o newest star of heaven! While I prepare a grander monument for you, accept these sighs and tears from your servant. Charles on earth lived as the greatest glory of the world, with his great love of justice and of piety. Now likewise dwelling in heaven he is the glory of the skies, to which he bore himself upwards on wings of justice and piety.")¹⁴

This poem moves from the mourner's elegiac farewell to the impersonal, epigrammatic praise of the dead's "glory." It also clearly moves from a temporal occasion, the funeral evoked by the speaker's sight of the dead king in his coffin, to praise of a king whose death is

¹³ *Eclogue V.* 43–44 and 34–35 (translations mine). Sannazaro's *Piscatory Eclogue 1*, like Whetstone's poem on Sidney, moves from a farewell addressed to the dead to an "objective," third-person epitaph; see Jacopo Sannazaro, *The Arcadia and Piscatorial Eclogues*, trans. Ralph Nash (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1966), 159–63. Ovid's *Amores* II.6 follows the Virgilian pattern in a comic vein, moving from an elegiac portion with lamenting addresses to the dead parrot ("infelix, avium gloria, nempe iaces!"; "ah, hapless one, glory of birds, you surely are no more!" l. 20) to the final distich epitaph in which the parrot once more demonstrates his one great gift, the ability to speak (ll. 61–62).

¹⁴ Pierre de Ronsard, "Sonnet de luy-mesme," ll. 5–6, 12–18 in Ronsard, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Gustave Cohen, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 2: 479 (translation mine).

described as a spatial ascent from glory on earth to glory in heaven. The elegiac section is relatively brief, but the difference in length normally found between the elegiac and epitaphic portions of the composite form is maintained and the sense of emphatic closure preserved. But this poem differs from other major examples of the composite form in two crucial respects. While the elegy normally includes expressions of the mourners' sorrow within the description of the funeral, as in Virgil's and Whetstone's poems, Ronsard's elegy is wholly given over to subjective lament. The elegy thus participates in, rather than describes, the funeral. While the epitaph is normally presented with a tomb upon which it is or is to be inscribed, as in all the previous poems cited, Ronsard's epitaph is a wholly verbal monument. Instead of the explicit references to the monument and its inscription, the movement from elegiac lament to epitaphic praise is signalled by the blank space between the sections and changes in form. The poem moves from a first-person vernacular sonnet, the genre of love lament here adapted for funeral lamentation, to impersonal Latin, the enduring language of solemn, public inscriptions, and hexameters, the meter of epic, the highest panegyric form. Ronsard's poem thus implies that an elegy can itself be an appropriate form of funeral ritual, and that the words of the epitaph themselves have the lasting power to commemorate the dead.

The general resemblances of the first ten lines of Jonson's poem to the composite form, particularly as practiced by Ronsard, are clear. Here is the text of "On My First Sonne":

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
 My sinne was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy,
 Seven yeeres tho'were lent to me, and I thee pay,
 Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
 O, could I loose all father, now. For why
 Will man lament the state he should envie?
 To have so soone scap'd worlds, and flesh's rage,
 And, if no other miserie, yet age?
 Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lye
 BEN. JONSON his best piece of *poetrie*.
 For whose sake, hence-forth all his vowes be such,
 As what he loves may never like too much.

(8:41)

The first eight and a half lines suggest the funeral of the poet's son.

The temporal occasion of the poem, the father's relinquishing of his son, is emphasized by the temporal markers "just day" and "now." The poem represses the moment of the son's actual death, a moment of which Jonson was passively informed after it had already passed. The poem instead recreates a moment of positive psychological and ritual action, allowing the poet actively to "pay" back his son to "fate" by giving him a poetic substitute for burial. "Rest in soft peace" in line nine is a modified form of the prayer normally said by the priest at a Catholic burial service, first when the body was laid into the ground and then again when the service was completed, and thus suggests the completion of a burial service befitting Jonson's son.¹⁵ The "Here doth lie" of the second half of the same line uses the ubiquitous "hic iacet" of sepulchral inscriptions and thus shows that the poem has shifted from the elegiac lament proper at a funeral to the brief panegyric inscription concerning the son. Though Jonson, like Ronsard, has compressed the elegiac section and left out

¹⁵ See the burial service in the English Catholic manual of 1604, *Sacra Institutio* (Salisbury: 1604), which contains the following prayer for recitation by the priest: "Anima eius & animae omnium fidelium defunctorum per Dei misericordiam requiescant in pace. Amen" ("May his soul and the souls of all the departed faithful by God's mercy rest in peace. Amen") (99 and 144). Protestants rejected prayers to the dead, and no such prayer is to be found in *The Book of Common Prayer*. Some might object that Jonson's "Rest in soft peace" recalls not the Catholic burial service but the well-known epitaphic formula, "Requiescat in pace." This formula, however, which itself derives from the burial service, becomes common in English epitaphs only much later than Jonson's poem and normally appears at the end of epitaphs. "Cuius anima requiescat in pace" was common at the end of Italian medieval epitaphs (see Iiro Kajanto, "Origin and Characteristics of the Humanistic Epitaph," *Epigraphica: Rivista Italiana di Epigrafia* XL [1978]: 17), but I have found no examples of this or the shorter "Requiescat in pace" in English medieval epitaphs. "Requiescat in pace" does not appear regularly on post-Reformation English tombstones until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when its increasing appearance reflects the greater tolerance, *de facto* and eventually *de jure*, of Catholicism, with which the formula tended to be associated. For two isolated examples of "Requiescat in pace" or some variant in epitaphs before the early eighteenth century, see the epitaph upon Lady Elizabeth Sheffield, who died in 1633, cited in Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Random House, 1981), 233; and that upon Sir Arthur Ingram, who died in 1655, in John Le Neve, ed., *Monumenta Anglicana*, 4 vols. (London: 1717-1719), 2: 37-38. Many English Catholic epitaphs ending "Requiescat in pace" or the abbreviation "R. I. P."—the sure sign that the phrase has become commonplace—may be found beginning in the 1720s. See, for example, the numerous inscriptions from Old St. Pancras church and churchyard recorded in Frederick Teague Cansick, ed., *A Collection of Curious and Interesting Epitaphs . . . of Saint Pancras, Middlesex* (London: 1869), 1-169. (Old St. Pancras was the major burial place of Roman Catholics in London and the vicinities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; see the remarks in Samuel Palmer, *St. Pancras* [London: 1870], 27.)

the building of the tomb and its inscription, the basic formal characteristics of the elegy with final epitaph are thus maintained in the first ten lines.¹⁶

These first ten lines differ crucially from the generic model in *goal*, however. While other elegies with concluding epitaph end by acknowledging the new "place" of the deceased separate from the living, in "On My First Sonne" Jonson seeks above all to bring the son that he lost back and to "place" him in a monument that reasserts the connection between the dead son and his father. In the elegy of lines one through nine, Jonson simultaneously calls back and offers to relinquish his son, while in the epitaph of lines nine and ten he constructs a monument firmly linking the son to himself. His central strategy is to substitute for the already lost flesh-and-blood child associated with the mother and mortality a name that connects father and son and can be recalled and immortalized by poetry.

In the first four lines Jonson purports to "pay" back the child that was but "lent."¹⁷ Yet his very first word, "Farewell," suggests the poet's unwillingness to accept his son's new state. Elegies often *close* with an explicit expression of farewell: Catullus concludes the elegy on his brother with the famous "ave atque vale" (poem 101, l. 10), Ronsard's elegiac sonnet has a final "Adieu, Charles, adieu," and Whetstone's elegy on Sidney records towards the end of the elegiac section the "Farewell's" of the mourners. Jonson *begins* with a "Farewell" and thus makes the rest of the poem an attempt to qualify this valediction's finality.

Jonson addresses his son with an etymological version of his son's

¹⁶ Several critics have either assumed or called the whole poem an epitaph, including W. David Kay, "The Christian Wisdom of Ben Jonson's 'On My First Sonne,'" *Studies in English Literature* XI (1971): 125–36; Wesley Trimpi, *Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study in the Plain Style* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1962), 182–83; and Jack D. Winner, "The Public and Private Dimensions of Jonson's Epitaphs" in Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, *Classic and Cavalier: Essays on Jonson and the Sons of Ben* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1982), 113–18. Kay speaks of the unusual attention given to the "mourning poet" in this supposed epitaph (125). Other critics have noticed the switch to an epitaphic formula at line nine but have either not discussed its generic sources and implications (see Francis Fike, "Ben Jonson's 'On My First Sonne,'" *Gordon Review* XI [1969]: 205–22 and Katharine Eisamann Maus, *Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984], 119–23) or have argued that one "discovers" at this point that the whole poem is an epitaph (see G. W. Pigman III, *Grief and the English Renaissance Elegy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985], 88–89).

¹⁷ On the *topos* of death as the repayment of a loan, see Richmond Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1962), 170–71.

(and his own) first name, Benjamin: "thou child of my right hand, and joy." The Hebrew name "Benjamin," the name Jacob gave his youngest son (Genesis 35.18), literally means "son of the right hand," the *filius dexteræ* of the Vulgate. Jerome and the *Glossa Ordinaria* interpret "*filius dexteræ*" to mean "*filius virtutis*," that is, "son of *virtus*" or "manliness" in its most general sense. Thus the name conveys all the patriarchal pride of a father in his male offspring.¹⁸ Jonson strengthens the sense of this bond of "*virtus*" between father and son by modifying the translation; whereas most commentators and both the Coverdale and King James Bibles translate the name as "son of *the* right hand," Jonson calls his son "child of *my* right hand."¹⁹ By his marked silence concerning the boy's mother, Jonson further asserts his son's absolute dependence upon his father for his identity. In the Biblical narrative, Jacob's son was first named "Ben-oni" ("son of my sorrow") by his dying, despairing mother Rachel and then renamed "Ben-jamin" by the joyful father Jacob (Genesis 35.18). By alluding to the Biblical meaning of the name "Benjamin," Jonson thus associates the name with the absence of the mother and the unmediated bond between father and son.²⁰ Jonson, a neglectful father who had left his child with the boy's mother, fiercely claims his son as his and his alone even as he agrees to "pay" back what was not only "lent" but also already taken from him. It was the wife and mother who witnessed the son's death and actual but inadequate burial, it was she through whom Jonson heard the news of his loss, and Jonson the father has to make a radical assertion of patriarchal possession in order to be able to "recall" the son enough to recreate the son's burial in poetry.

Jonson's desire to assert his possession of the son whom he had neglected has particular pathos and significance because of the son's age. In early modern England seven was considered the crucial age of transition at which children became subject to gender-specific behavior and boys left the feminine, nurturing world of their mothers, nurses, and school dames in order to enter the masculine, disci-

¹⁸ This is noted by Fike, 208. I am indebted to Fike's entire discussion of the name (206–8).

¹⁹ See J. Z. Kronenfeld, "The Father Found: Consolation Achieved Through Love in Ben Jonson's 'On My First Sonne,'" *Studies in Philology* LXXV (1978): 72.

²⁰ The absence of the mother is noted by some critics who do not, however, link it to the Biblical context: see Pigman, 88 and Winner, 116.

plined world of fathers and schoolmasters.²¹ A sixteenth-century family manual's recommendation that siblings of the opposite sex no longer sleep together when they reach seven presupposes gender-differentiation at that age.²² In *The Book of the Governor* (1531) Sir Thomas Elyot advised that boys be taken "from the company of woman" at seven and given to male tutors, while Miles Coverdale, in a work of the 1560s or 1570s, assumes the practice amongst his readers: "After seven years the child [i.e. the boy] has his [male] tutors and schoolmasters to rule him."²³ Jonson himself probably entered Westminster School and discovered his spiritual father, Camden, at the traditional age of seven.²⁴ Thus Jonson neglected and then lost his Benjamin before he could truly experience the child as the bearer of his own male "virtus." Jonson's evocation of his son's name, with all its patriarchal resonances, attempts to enter his son into the masculine world denied him by death, asserting his son's status as a proper heir and his own role as a proper father.

In the first couplet, speaking of his "sin" of "too much hope," Jonson suggests that his son's death is punishment for his own excessive hope. The next couplet, with its reference to the son as a gift lent for seven years, fights against this implication, however, by ascribing the death to the workings of inevitable "fate." The second couplet thus suggests that Jonson's punishment for his "sin" is his own intense sorrow rather than the death of the child.²⁵ Blaming the deaths of those dear to one upon one's own faults was in this period not only a common psychological reaction to death, as it is of course today, but also a widespread *explanation* based on the assumption that death was God's punishment of human sin.²⁶ Jonson both suggests, and provides an alternative to, such an explanation. Early

²¹ See Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family, 1450–1700* (London and New York: Longman, 1984), 150 and Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 116, 409–10.

²² William Harrington's recommendation in *The Commendacions of Matrimony* (1528) regarding siblings is cited and discussed in Alan Macfarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin: A Seventeenth-Century Clergyman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 91.

²³ Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Book of the Governor* (1531), ed. S. E. Lehmberg, Everyman's Library (New York: Dutton, 1962), 21; Miles Coverdale, *Remains of Miles Coverdale*, ed. George Pearson, The Parker Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1846), 57.

²⁴ Miles, 13.

²⁵ The ambiguity is noted and discussed in Maus, 120.

²⁶ Thomas notes that Ralph Josselin blamed the death of his son on his own vanity

modern fathers commonly and legitimately spoke of their sons, particularly their oldest or only sons, as their "hope," for the children represented the glorious future of the patriarchal line and name.²⁷ To have excessive hope in one's heir is to become blind, however, to the vulnerability and mortality of one's line and thereby to court punishment for ignorance and pride. Jonson's admission of excessive hope is difficult to interpret, however, because it is not clear how much truth and how much mystification reside in the words. Jonson's excessive hope may indeed on some level have caused him to neglect his paternal duties by preventing him from even imagining that his son could fail him as an heir, but Jonson's "confession" may also in fact be a way of denying the fact that what he had truly evinced was not too much but too little concern for the boy. Yet the most significant fact is surely that in the poem Jonson seeks not to suppress but rather to admit and fulfill his tragic "hope."

Jonson's sin is embodied in the highly "hopeful" name that he gave his son. Some commentators indeed glossed "Benjamin" or *filius dexteræ*, "the son of good fortune."²⁸ The name has a special complexity for Jonson, however, because his poetics is based on the assumption that the poet's task is to proclaim and preserve men's appropriate names.²⁹ In his panegyric epigrams, Jonson finds the names of the good expressive of their virtues and preserves "good, and great names to their remembrance with posteritie," as he says in the preface to the *Epigrammes* (8: 25–26). The "name" is what survives when the mortal body dies. Thus in *Poetaster* Jonson modifies

and frivolity (83–84). Sara Heller Mendelson notes that Stuart women diarists "tried to assure themselves that their own sins were to blame" for the deaths of their children; see her "Stuart Women's Diaries and Occasional Memoirs," in *Women in English Society 1500–1800*, ed. Mary Prior (London: Methuen, 1985), 197.

²⁷ Upon the death of his oldest son in 1673, Ralph Josselin wrote with great feeling: "he was my hope" (Macfarlane, 166). In *The Spanish Tragedy* Hieronimo, speaking over the corpse of his only son Horatio, laments: "Here lay my hope, and here my hope hath end" (Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. Philip Edwards, *The Revels Plays* [London: Methuen, 1959], 115, IV.iv.90). For the most recent argument that Jonson was responsible, about three years before his son's death, for making additions to Kyd's plays that focus on the very theme of a father's loss of a child, see Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 13–28.

²⁸ See Fike, 208.

²⁹ There are several useful discussions of Jonson's poetics of naming: see Barton, *Jonson*, Chapter 8 ("Names: the chapter interloping"), 170–93; Eric Partridge, "Jonson's EPIGRAMMES: The Named and the Nameless," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 6 (1973): 153–98; and David Wykes, "Ben Jonson's 'Chast Booke'"—*The Epigrammes*, *Renaissance and Modern Studies* XIII (1969): 76–87. Both Wykes and Barton note that the

a couplet from Ovid in order to emphasize that poetry preserves the "name" from death: "Then, when this bodie falls in funerall fire, / My name shall live, and my best part aspire."³⁰ It is fitting that Jonson should imagine the "name" as a kind of child of a masculine womb in one of his panegyric epigrams—"Thy deeds, unto thy name, will prove new wombes" (*Epigrammes* 109, l. 17, 8: 70)—for the poet's ability to immortalize names functions as a masculine substitute for the feminine bearing of mortal children.³¹ In the opening of "On My First Sonne," the name appears as both an unwitting paternal curse, harmful to the father himself and possibly fatal for the child, and as a compensatory poetic blessing, an affirmation of what can be preserved by the father-poet despite the physical child's death. Indeed Jonson, in the first two lines, lovingly recalls his son by name not once but twice. "Benjamin" was also commonly glossed as "loved and cherished."³² Thus "lov'd boy," which means both "once loved" and "still loved," is yet another version of the name that preserves against death the bond between father and son.

The epitaph describes the son as "BEN. JONSON his best piece of poetrie," and in so doing both memorializes the name that the father and son share and reveals its final meaning. Jonson here puns on the

fascination with names is yet another point of contact between Jonson and his teacher-friend Camden, and it should be noted that Camden's long discussion of names in the *Remaines* specifically links names, including Hebrew names like "Benjamin," and parental "hope": "The first imposition of Names was ground upon so many occasions as were hard to be specified, but the most common in most ancient times among all Nations, as well as the Hebrews, was upon future good hope conceived by parents of their children, in which you might see their first and principal wishes toward them" (29).

³⁰ Quoted and discussed in Barton, 181.

³¹ Sherry B. Ortner's discussion of the cross-cultural contrast between man's "superior" cultural creativity and woman's "mere" natural reproduction of life reveals the general basis for Jonson's contrast between preserving names and giving birth; see Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1974), 43–66. Jim Swan makes some suggestive but inadequately supported remarks concerning the contrast between "civilization, tradition, and art" and "woman, sexuality, and the body" in Jonson's Cary-Morison ode; see Jim Swan, "Difference and Silence: John Milton and the Question of Gender," in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 146–47.

³² Fike, 208, cites Robert Estienne's *Biblia* (Geneva, 1577) and Henry Ainsworth's *Annotations upon . . . Genesis* (Amsterdam, 1616).

original meaning of "poetrie" as "that which is made or created" and thereby identifies his role of father with his poetic craft as a maker.³³ In being "made" into a poem, the son is also made true to his name, etymologized as the "child of my right hand," for the son-as-poem is indeed the product of his poet-father's writing hand.³⁴ The epitaph thus completes the movement of the son from physical generation, the mother, and mortality to the realm of poetic, paternal immortalization. Jonson's evident pride in the poem-child as the product of his hand, and his alone, may be compared to his proud declaration that *Volpone* came "From his owne hand, without a co-adjutor, / Novice, journeyman, or tutor" (*Volpone*, "Prologue," ll. 17-18, 5: 24).³⁵ Jonson's hopes for his son have, in fact, been fulfilled: the father who tragically wished for a flesh-and-blood child to continue his line fulfills his hope, with full awareness of its deep costs, in the epitaphic perpetuation of the name.

The epitaph uses a device found elsewhere in Jonson's poems: the triumphant display of a name asserted to be full of meaning towards or at the end of the poem. Jonson's epitaph upon Celia Boulstrode ends with the name and an assertion of its significance as the ultimate term of praise: "She was 'Sell Boulstred. In wch name, I call / Up so much truth" (8: 372); "The Poet to the Painter" concludes "Yet when of friendship I would draw the face, / A letter'd mind, and a large heart would place / To all posteritie; I will write *Burlase*" (8: 227). In "On My First Sonne," the elegiac portion twice calls upon the meaning of the boy's name, while the final epitaph resoundingly gives the name and its full meaning in one compact phrase. Jonson's use of the name three times has an obvious psychological power as a repetitive assertion of the remaining link between father and son. It also recalls, however, the classical burial ritual of *vocatio*, the calling three times upon the name of a dead person whose body is not available for burial. In the traditional ritual, the mourners build a cenotaph for the deceased and call upon him to enter the monument

³³ Wesley Trimpi was perhaps the first to note the unspoken pun; see *Jonson's Poems*, 182-83.

³⁴ See Pigman, 88.

³⁵ Jonson elsewhere expresses his view of poetry as a realm of self-sufficient and specifically masculine power; thus in *The Forrest* 10 he rejects all sources of inspiration outside himself and makes a final contrast between the unnecessary "ladies of the Thespian lake" and his self-generated Muse, "My own true fire" (ll. 25, 28-29, 8: 108). His assertions in *Eupheme* that Lady Digby is his "Muse" (8: 278 and 272) seem, by contrast, conventional hyperboles.

by the triple calling of the name. Aeneas calls the name of Deiphobus three times to bury the slain Trojan warrior (*Aeneid* VI. 505–6), while Ausonius succinctly expresses the rationale of the ritual in the prologue to the *Parentalia*: “ille etiam, maesti cui defuit urna sepulcri, / nomine ter dicto paene sepultus est” (“even he who lacks the urn of mournful burial will be well-nigh as though interred, if his name be uttered thrice”).³⁶ Jonson, without having any literal belief in the magical power of the *vocatio*, as a poet can find comfort in a verbal ritual sanctioned by poetic tradition that purports to make the absent dead present and can use it as a substitute for the normal burial rites denied his son. He builds a verbal cenotaph with his “right hand”—the epitaph itself—and by calling upon the meanings of the name “Benjamin” rather than the name itself, he further assimilates the ritual to his own poetics. He implicitly asserts that one truly buries the dead by calling upon and thus acknowledging their immortal essence, their name insofar as it contains their lasting significance.³⁷

Yet the epitaph does not simply lay to rest and commemorate the son. It also allows Jonson to escape from his own temporal suffering as a father by becoming the “maker” of the spatial monument. The traditional movement in the composite form from temporal mourning to spatial praise becomes the movement from the father’s unbearable sense “now” of the absence of his son to a “here” in which father and son can join as poet and poem. In the middle lines of the poem, Jonson’s outcry of paternal suffering “now”—“O, could I loose all father now”—wholly belies his acceptance of the piously generalized “just day” and expresses intense desire to escape an intolerable temporal predicament. The father imagines the son’s death not as a positive state but simply as an escape from the “now” of anguish in which he is himself entrapped. The son has “scap’d worlds, and fleshs rage,” and in traditional theological taxonomies,

³⁶ I have modified the Loeb translation of Ausonius. For further discussion of the *vocatio* ritual with additional classical citations, see J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1971), 54.

³⁷ Eric Partridge argues that Jonson’s manipulations of names draw on “magical” beliefs that name and essence are so inextricable that to honor or injure a name is to honor or injure its bearer, though he does not fully explain whether Jonson as a poet simply uses such a belief as a potent “fiction” or in some sense actually believes in it (195–97). The ritual *vocatio*, which presupposes that calling a name can lay to rest the essence of the dead, is certainly based on such magical belief, but Jonson uses the *vocatio*, I think, in a highly fictive, self-conscious way.

the world is associated with avarice and the flesh with lust, the very sins Jonson committed and, despite himself, continues to commit in lines 1–4 by not wishing to "pay" his debt and in having "too much hope" of the child of his own flesh. The son has also escaped "age," the temporal "miserie" Jonson himself most keenly feels in the loss of his son.³⁸ Jonson's despairing question makes clear his need to escape: "For why / will man lament the state he should envie?" Jonson here draws a highly unorthodox distinction between lamentation for and envy of the dead, wishing he could feel the latter rather than the former. A *topos* of consolatory literature, both classical and Christian, is that lamentation for the dead shamefully betrays the mourner's selfish envy of their "blessed state." Seneca's *Consolatio ad Polybium* 9.3 expresses the *topos* with convenient brevity: "Beatum deflere invidia est" ("To weep for one who is happy is envy").³⁹ In his elegy on Lady Jane Pawlett, written some twenty-five years after "On My First Sonne," Jonson follows tradition in identifying lament as a disguised form of envy and advises the bereaved to be "happy" at their daughter's "blisse": "Goe now, her happy Parents, and be sad / . . . / If you can envie your owne Daughters blisse, / And wish her state less happie than it is!" (ll. 77, 83–84, 8: 271).⁴⁰ Such a feeling of happiness requires, however, a concentration on the blissful state of the other and not on one's own feelings of loss. This is a stance that Jonson cannot even imagine in "On My First Sonne" because he cannot treat his son as having an identity apart from himself. Thus Jonson can only imagine the false and equally sterile alternatives of lamenting his own loss or envying his child's impervi-

³⁸ See Patrick Cullen, *Infernal Triad: The Flesh, World, and Devil in Spenser and Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), xxv–xxxvi. Jonson's substitution of "age" for the traditional third sin of the devil, pride, is important: the very unconventionality of "age" in this series suggests its powerful significance for Jonson. William Kerrigan, in "Ben Jonson Full of Shame and Scorn," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 6 (1973): 216, argues that "worlds, and fleshs rage" is "deliberately close to pulpit cliché" and that the lines suggest that for Jonson "the conventional rages of world and flesh may not be, after all, so miserable, [but] 'age' certainly is." Although I disagree that the "rage" of the world and flesh is conventional within its poetic context, Kerrigan is surely right that "age" is a deep-felt misery both here and elsewhere in Jonson's works.

³⁹ See Pigman, 156, who cites the Senecan passage.

⁴⁰ One can see just how conventional Jonson's rhetoric is here by comparing it to the Elizabethan humanist Roger Ascham's chiding of his wife for mourning their dead son: "And now, Margaret . . . do you love your sweet babe so little, *do you envy his happy state so much*, yea, once to wish that nature should have rather followed your pleasure in keeping your child in this miserable world, than grace should have purchased such profit for your child in bringing him to felicity in heaven?" (*The Whole*

ousness to such loss. It is only by escaping into the spatial poetic monument that he can avoid such alternatives.

Jonson begins to escape from his condition with "Rest in soft peace," for though it is in one sense a prayerful address to the dead son, it is also an appropriate command for Jonson to give himself, bidding that the rage he has just noted and exhibited in his outburst of passion should cease. This double focus continues in the phrase "ask'd, say." The elliptical brevity of the phrase allows one to read it as the father's command both to his dead son, who is told what to say when asked concerning his own identity, and to himself. These two readings are, in fact, the same: Jonson's instructions to his dead son reveal that the son's "response" must be a fiction coming from his father. In making a reply for his son, Jonson underscores the fact that his son has indeed been made into a poem, a poem that silences Jonson's rage over his mortal son's loss by consoling him with the fiction of his son's response. Jonson thereby "looses," as he wished, the elegiac, mourning "father," and becomes the epitaphic poet, "a Maker, or a fainer. . . . that fayneth and formeth a fable," to quote the definition of a poet provided in *Discoveries* (2347–53, 8: 635).⁴¹

It is revealing to contrast the epitaphic message Jonson "makes" with the message sought by the neo-Latin poet Pontano in his elegy on his daughter Lucia. Punning on his daughter's name just as Jonson puns on "Benjamin," Pontano claims that he sees "Lucia" reborn as a light ("lux") in heaven. The poem ends with the father begging his daughter to speak of her happiness at having escaped life's miseries:

Coelo te natam aspicio: num, nata, parentem aspicias?
An fingit haec sibi vana pater?

.
siqua tamen de te superat pars, nata, fatere
felicem, quod te prima iuventa rapit.

(I behold you my daughter in heaven; do you, o my daughter, behold your parent? Or does your father feign for himself these delusions? . . . But if any part of you nevertheless survives, oh my daughter, confess you are happy that earliest youth snatched you away.)⁴²

Works of Roger Ascham, ed. Rev. Dr. Giles, 2 vols. [1864; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1965], 1: 170, italics mine).

⁴¹ Winner makes a similar point (116).

⁴² Ioannus Pontanus, *De Tumulis* II.5–6, 9–10 in *Carmina*, ed. Johannes Oeschger (Bari: Gus Laters & Figli, 1948), 221, translation mine.

Pontano, all too aware that he may have "feigned" ("fingit") the responsive glance of his child, begs his daughter to speak to him without any certainty of her vocal response. His final request leaves open the question whether he indeed receives, outside the poem, the reply that he so desires. Jonson, on the other hand, eliminates the possibility of failure by not so much asking his son for a true response as "fayning" the response he needs. The epitaph's status as the poet's own consolatory fiction perhaps explains why the epitaph is not in formal terms a self-contained whole: while the concluding epitaph is normally metrically independent from the elegy, the epitaph of "On My First Sonne" begins in mid-line, and its "hic iacet" clause identifying the deceased is not a self-sufficient couplet but instead two lines that rhyme with lines five and six of the preceding elegiac lament.

The move from the elegy to the epitaph introduces a new element in the poem, all the future readers who will inquire concerning the identity of Jonson's poetic child. "Ask'd, say" depends upon the epitaphic formula in which the passerby is assumed to ask concerning the identity of the deceased: one early seventeenth-century epitaph begins "Here who lyes if you now Enqyre," another "Reader if Thou wouldst know ye Gemm that lies / Cas'd in this Marble."⁴³ From this convention arose the motif of the poet telling the inscription itself what to say to the inquiring passerby. Thus a humorous epitaph by Jonson's friend John Hoskyns on a man named Pye begins: "If Any aske, who here doth lie, / Say, 'tis the Devil's Christmas pie."⁴⁴ But the most curious feature of Jonson's epitaph is the fact that although he bids not the inscription but the dead son—or rather himself—speak, the epitaph uses the *hic iacet* form that evokes the voice of neither son nor father but instead the impersonality of a lapidary inscription. In many epitaphs the dead reply in the first person to the living reader's inquiry concerning their identity.⁴⁵ Such a first-person response would, however, once more separate Jonson

⁴³ Epitaph on Thomas Nuce, who died in 1617, and Richard Ferris, d. 1649 in Le Neve, 4: 63 and 233. The formula can also be found in classical and continental Renaissance epitaphs.

⁴⁴ Louise Brown Osborn, *The Life, Letters, and Writings of John Hoskyns, 1566–1637*, Yale Studies in English 87 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 294.

⁴⁵ For classical examples, see the dialogues between the curious passerby and the deceased in *The Greek Anthology*, 2: 93–95 (poems VII.163–65). Here is the opening of a Renaissance neo-Latin example, an epitaph by Ariosto: "Quaeris quae fuerim? Me

from his son. The third-person point of view, on the other hand, which is so clearly a product of Jonson's writerly hand rather than of any voice, creates a space in which father and son can join together in "soft peace." Both father and son have indeed achieved the "best piece/peace" of poetry, the "peace" that only a poetic artifact can provide.⁴⁶

The "voice" of the dead son is thus really the product of a poetic inscription. Indeed "ask'd, say" recalls another tradition concerning the power not of voice but of writing to address a public readership, a tradition in which the poet addresses his writings as they are about to leave him to face public exposure. Consider Spenser's "To his book" at the opening of *The Shepherd's Calender*:

Go, little book! thyself present,
As child whose parent is unkent.
.
.
.
And asked who thee forth did bring,
A shepherd's swain, say did thee sing
.
.
.
But, if that any ask thy name
Say, thou wert base-begot with blame.⁴⁷

Spenser uses "asked, say" in advising his book-child what to tell the curious reader concerning the book and its parent, the poet. In "making" his child his best poem, Jonson reverses the poetry-as-child topos used by Spenser and others. Jonson's use of the same "ask'd, say" formula emphasizes that his seeming address to his son is really a figure for his confrontation with his own written words,

scito fuisse Philippam" ("Do you ask who I was? Know that I was Philippa" (Ludovico Ariosto, *Lirica Latina XLVI in Opere Minori*, ed. Cesare Segre [Milan: R. Ricciardi, 1954], 74).

⁴⁶ Winner, noting the "peace"/"piece" pun, sees it as troubling rather than consolatory (117). The pun testifies, however, to Jonson's power over words, the only power that he wields in the poem and one in which he puts his hopes for overcoming grief.

⁴⁷ Edmund Spenser, "To his Book," ll. 1-2, 8-9, and 13-14 in *The Shepherd's Calender*, ed. W. L. Renwick (London: The Scholartis Press, 1930), 2. See also Thomas Bastard's "If any aske thee what I do professe, / Say that, of which thou art the idlenesse" (Thomas Bastard, "Ad librum suum," ll. 9-10 in his *Chrestoleros: Seven Books of Epigrams*, Spenser Society 46 [1598; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1967], 83) and Anne Bradstreet's "If for thy Father askt, say, thou hast none: / And for thy Mother, she alas is poor" (Anne Bradstreet, "The Author to her Book," ll. 22-23 in *The Complete Works of Anne Bradstreet in Prose and Verse*, ed. John Harvard Ellis [1867; rpt. Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1962], 390).

the medium by which he can convey his son's immortal identification as poem and his own as poet. Spenser's notion of the book as the child of the masculine poet presupposes, of course, the same effacement of the female as Jonson's notion of the child-as-poem. Thus the evocation of this tradition of public writing reinforces the cultural, rather than natural, recreation of the son.⁴⁸

Jonson opposes the productions of his "right hand" not only to the procreation of man and woman but also to the monuments of the sculptor and tomb-maker. It has been plausibly suggested that Jonson's praise of his son as his best poem is indebted to Montaigne's discussion of artists' relative love for their children and their artistic creations.⁴⁹ Here are relevant excerpts from the 1603 translation of Montaigne by Jonson's friend John Florio:

For what we engender by the minde . . . are brought forth by a far more noble part, than the corpōrall, and are more our owne. We are both father and mother together in this generation. . . . There are few men given unto POESIE, that would not esteeme it a greater honour, to be the father of *Virgil's Aenidos*, than the godliest boy in *Rome*, and would not rather endure the losse of the one than the perishing of the other. . . . Nay, I would make a great question, whether Phidias or any other excellent Statuary, would as highly esteeme, and dearely love the preservation, and successfull continuance of his natural children, as he would an exquisite and match-lesse-wrought Image, that with long study, and diligent care he had perfected according unto art.⁵⁰

Jonson rejects Montaigne's crucial distinctions and categories. Montaigne follows Plato's *Symposium* in his division between corporeal

⁴⁸ Bradstreet's address to her book, quoted in the preceding note, clearly registers the usual effacement of the female by reversing its terms: *her* book has no "Father." Like Spenser, Samuel Daniel in *Delia* describes his poetry as the child of a masculine poet and no mother, but with a twist appropriate to a collection of amatory sonnets, Daniel sends off his poem-child with the request that it speak not of himself but rather of the disdainful beloved: "Goe wailing Verse, the Infants of my love, / Minerva-like, brought forth without a mother / . . . / Say her disdaine hath dried vp my blood" ("Sonnet II," ll. 1-2, 9 in *The Complete Works of Samuel Daniel*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, 5 vols. [rpt. New York: Russell and Russell 1963], 1: 38).

⁴⁹ Winner (116) and Wesley Trimpi, "BEN. JONSON his best piece of poetrie," *Classical Antiquity* 2 (1983): 147-50 suggest the relevance of Montaigne's discussion. Jonson's copy of Florio's Montaigne is listed in Herford and Simpson I: 268; since the work was published in 1603, the year of young Benjamin's death, Jonson might well have obtained the *Essays* by the time he wrote the poem. Jonson in any case also owned the 1586 French edition of Montaigne (Herford and Simpson, I: 268).

⁵⁰ Michel de Montaigne, *The Essayes*, trans. John Florio, 3 vols. (London: J. M. Dent, 1928), 2: 85, 88.

children, the products of "corporall" union between mother and father, and mental children, of which the parent is "both father and mother." Jonson, on the other hand, blurs this distinction by making the identity of his child-poem dependent upon himself alone.⁵¹ While Montaigne distinguishes between physical children, on the one hand, and the spiritual children produced by various kinds of *poetes* or "makers," including the poet and sculptor, on the other, Jonson sharply distinguishes the poet as "maker" and his "right hand" from what he considers the inferior "manual labor" of the sculptor. An epigram from the *Planudean Anthology*, here given in the Latin translation of Eilhardus Lubinus that Jonson owned, concerns the sculptor-mason Architeles who builds a tomb for his son Agathanoris:

Scalptor [*latupos*] Architeles Agathanori filio mortuo
 Manibus misseris concinnavit tumulum.
 Hei, hei, petram illam, quam non incidit ferrum,
 Sed contabuit crebris lacrumis irrigata.
 Hei, columna, mortuo levis mane, ille ut dicat,
 Vere paterna manus me imposuit lapidem.

(The sculptor [in the Greek, *latupos* or "mason"] Architeles made this tomb for his dead son Agathanoris with mournful hands. Alas, alas, this grave-stone, iron did not cut, but it wore away, flooded by many tears. Ah, head-stone, be light upon the dead, so that he may say, "Truly a father's hand placed the stone upon me.")⁵²

In addition to the general similarity between this poem of a father mourning his son and "On My First Sonne," there is a strikingly similar emphasis upon the fathers' creative hands and upon their desires that their sons in some sense acknowledge, beyond the grave, their fathers' vocations. Architeles the sculptor asks his son to tell of his building the tomb ("Truly a father's hand placed the stone upon me"), while Jonson asks his son to tell of his father's *poesis*. The final line of the Greek poem, like "Here doth lie / BEN. JONSON his best piece of poetrie," may be read as the epitaph for the son dictated

⁵¹ See Winner, 116.

⁵² Eilhardus Lubinus, *Florilegium, hoc est veterum graecorum poetarum epigrammata comprehensa libris septem* (Heidelberg: 1604), 595 (translation adapted from Loeb). Jonson's copy of the 1603 edition of this work is listed in David McPherson, "Ben Jonson's Library and Marginalia: An Annotated Catalogue," *Studies in Philology* LXXI (1974): 46-47.

by the father: "Truly a father's hand placed the stone upon me" recalls early Greek one-line epitaphs that record the father's building of the tomb as proof of paternal love.⁵³ Thus the poems have a similar movement from a command that the son be at peace ("Ah, head-stone, be light upon the dead"; "Rest in soft peace") to the dictating of the son's epitaph. But although Architeles and Jonson both desire that their sons acknowledge them in the epitaph, the Greek sculptor-mason longs for recognition of the "paternal hand" that carves a material tomb, the English poet for the acknowledgement of a "right hand" that makes a purely verbal monument. Indeed Jonson, by avoiding, like Ronsard, the description of the tomb traditional in the elegy with concluding epitaph, elides the one funerary act upon which the Greek poem centers, the building of the tomb. In so doing Jonson makes an implicit assertion that poetry provides a sufficient monument for the dead. It is this claim that Jonson makes explicit at the end of a later poem, written circa 1619: "*Reader, whose life, and name, did e're become / An Epitaph, deserv'd a Tombe: / Nor wants it here through penurie, or sloth, / Who makes the one, so't be first, makes both*" ("An Epitaph upon Master Vincent Corbet," ll. 37-40, 8: 152). In the Corbet poem Jonson proclaims with characteristic pride that a poet who writes, as he does, a truly excellent epitaph ("so't be first"), also "makes" a tomb worthy of the dead.

The poem from Lubinus's anthology may have had a personal resonance for Jonson seeking to define his paternal relationship to his son. Since D. J. Gordon's work on Jonson's quarrel with Inigo Jones, the importance for Jonson of the contrast between the "liberal" art of poetry and the "mechanical" arts of sculpture and architecture has been well known.⁵⁴ Jonson's contempt for these "lower" arts associated with manual labor was, of course, both complicated and increased by his own lowly beginnings. Jonson's step-father and he himself, briefly and against his will, were builders. Jonson might

⁵³ Compare this early Greek inscription: "This tomb to Spinther his father placed over his body" (in Paul Friedlaender and Herbert B. Hoffleit, *Epigrammata: Greek Inscriptions in Verse from the Beginnings to the Persian Wars* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948], 11).

⁵⁴ See D. J. Gordon's classic article, "Poet and Architect: The Intellectual Setting of the Quarrel between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 12 (1949), 152-78, reprinted in *The Renaissance Imagination: Essays and Lectures* by D. J. Gordon, ed. Stephen Orgel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 77-101.

indeed have worked on tombs; his early occupation could, in any event, be associated with such a manual task.⁵⁵ Thus Mildmay Fane's elegy on Jonson cleverly combines, in a way that would have been highly repugnant to the deceased, Jonson's roles as poet and supposed tomb-maker:

He who began from brick and lime
 The Muses' hill to climb
 And whilom busied in laying stone,
 Thirsted to drink of Helicon

 Now since that he is turned to clay, and gone,
 Let those remain of th'occupation
 He honored once, square him a tomb may say
 His craft exceeded far a dabbler's way.⁵⁶

In "On My First Sonne," a poem so concerned with what it means to be a proper father and a "best" son, Jonson might well have considered his own patrimony and early years as a son. Jonson's pointed omission of the fiction of a physical tomb may imply not only the general superiority of poetry to physical monuments but also his more personal sense that what he as a poet-father has given, and made of, his son far surpasses what his step-father gave to, and almost made of, him.

Yet Jonson does not end his poem with the epitaphic proclamation of his "best piece of poetrie." The final couplet—"For whose sake, hence-forth all his vowes be such, / As what he loves may never like too much"—indeed subverts the distinction between epitaph and elegy, for it mixes epitaphic impersonality and elegiac temporality. While in the first two lines of the epitaph Jonson uses the mediation of the text to escape time as the "maker" of a mortal child who has

⁵⁵ Jonson and his step-father were, to be more precise, bricklayers, but the distinction between the various building trades was a fluid one. One finds allusions to Jonson as a mason, and masons built the majority of tombs in the early seventeenth-century. On the building trades in this period, see Stella Kramer, *The English Craft Guilds: Studies in their Progress and Decline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), 82–83; on masons and tomb-making, see Katharine A. Esdaile, *English Church Monuments, 1510–1840* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1946), 44–45. On Jonson as bricklayer, see Herford and Simpson, I: 4–6 and Walter George Bell, *A Short History of the Worshipful Company of Tylers and Bricklayers of the City of London* (London: H. G. Montgomery, 1938), 21–22.

⁵⁶ Mildmay Fane, "Of Ben Jonson," in *Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets*, ed. Hugh Maclean, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 205.

become an immortal poem, in the last two lines of the poem he uses the externalized text to reflect back upon himself as a man who must return to lived time: the "here" of the poet's epitaphic pride gives way to the "hence-forth" of the father's elegiac resolution. The last line echoes the concluding line of a poem in which Martial consoles a friend for the loss of a beloved slave: "quidquid amas, cupias non placuisse nimis" ("may you wish that what you love has not pleased you excessively"; VI. 29. 8). But while Martial's line offers a concluding piece of sympathetic advice to another, Jonson's line represents the "vowes" that the externalized poem places upon its poet in the hope that he can live them outside the poem. The continuing description of the father-poet in the third person emphasizes that the poet has only begun to detach himself from the proud impersonality of the epitaphic text and open himself to the future. The Martial allusion clarifies that the final line is a wish that the things the poet "loves," including the things he has himself created, not please him excessively ("like too much"). Jonson's use of "like" in the sense of "please" underscores the difficulty of tempering his investment in the things he loves, for the reader's difficulty in comprehending the distinction between the normally synonymous "loves" and "like" is the interpretive analogue to the difficulty of actually *living*, outside the space of the poem, the distinction. The poem thus ends not with the panegyric space of a verbal monument but with a problem for the future.

The elegy with final epitaph traditionally provides strong aesthetic closure as a compensatory substitute for the brute ending of death. Jonson counters the loss of his son and his own failure as a father by giving his son a poetic burial and a poetic monument that answers death with a short but resounding "piece / peace" of "poetrie." But just as he refuses to give the epitaph its traditional formal independence from the preceding elegy in order to emphasize that the poetic monument arises as a fictive defense against unbearable elegiac feelings of sorrow, so he refuses to end with the easy aesthetic closure of a poetic monument. He concludes, instead, with a couplet of uncertain generic status which suggests that he cannot permanently rest in poetic fictions but must confront, anew, time and loss. Thus the consolatory aesthetic closure of the traditional form gives way to a more complex sense of the relationship between poetic endings and continuing life. We do not know how Jonson responded to the death

of his second son, born five years after the first; we only know that the poet-father, filled no doubt with both memories and renewed hope, followed a traditional practice and named this child, too, Benjamin.⁵⁷

University of Chicago

⁵⁷ See Miles, 115.

I would like to thank David Bevington, Thomas M. Greene, Phillip Harth, Janel Mueller, Michael Murrin, Tom Stillinger, and John M. Wallace for commenting on earlier versions of this paper.