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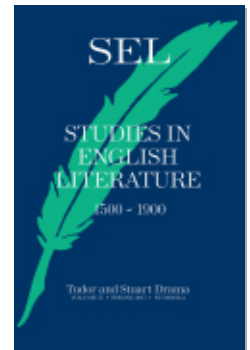
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Ben Jonson's Antagonistic Style, Public Opinion, and *Sejanus*

VICTOR LENTHE

Ben Jonson thrived on antagonism. Critics have written widely about how he used drama to antagonize rival playwrights, hostile theater audiences, supposed plagiarists, and a variety of other persons and entities.¹ This article is about the antagonistic literary style Jonson developed in the process. Although style can refer to other things as well, I use the term to indicate the unique and distinctive deviations setting a writer apart from the norms of the period and genres in which he or she worked.²

Especially early in his career, Jonson consistently presented his plays as struggles against theater audiences and readers. His first comedy to be printed—*Every Man Out of His Humour* (perf. 1599; pub. 1600)—opens with an induction relishing the thought that spectators would, “like galled camels, kick at every touch.”³ His first surviving tragedy—*Sejanus His Fall* (perf. 1603; pub. 1605)—similarly intends to provoke “the people’s beastly rage.”⁴ In both cases, Jonson’s antagonistic style of public address sets him apart from his contemporaries. Scholars of the Poets’ War such as James P. Bednarz and Grace Tiffany have shown that *Every Man Out* challenged the dominance of Shakespearean romantic comedy in the English theater.⁵ John Gordon Sweeney has suggested that all of Jonson’s plays from this period—comedies and tragedies alike—contributed to a new type of theater that “cherishes the moment of confrontation between author and spectator.”⁶ While I agree with these assessments of Jonson’s artistic originality, I

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contend that his confrontational style has more social and political relevance than generally recognized. Especially in *Sejanus*, this style offers a valuable perspective on his experiences as a member of a persecuted religious minority.

Jonson developed his antagonistic style as a Catholic dissident in post-Reformation England. He converted to Catholicism in 1598 while imprisoned for murder and rejoined the state-sanctioned Protestant Church of England around 1610—a period coinciding with a number of his most innovative plays.⁷ Although Jonson's Catholicism has not always received the attention it deserves, critics have increasingly begun to appreciate the degree to which “[r]eligion is central to his plays’ ideological purchase, and in significant ways is constitutive of his thought.”⁸ This religious turn within Jonson studies has led scholars to reassess the playwright's work in numerous ways, highlighting for example its learned engagement with theological disputes and its topical commentary on the sociopolitical situation of English Catholics.⁹ While building on these insights, I turn to Jonson's style, showing that it too relates to his dissident religion and that *Sejanus* illuminates the nature of this relationship. The play's relentless provocation of the English public and its overtly Catholic themes have both been noted separately by critics, and one part of this article's contribution is to connect the two.¹⁰ My method is to consider Jonson as an active contributor to his intellectual context. By the time he revised and framed *Sejanus* for publication in 1605, he had engaged deeply with a tract by Father Thomas Wright—the priest probably responsible for his conversion—that laments the obstacles impeding civil dialogue with England's Protestant majority.¹¹ In the context of Jonson's engagement with ongoing Catholic debates on this topic, his quarto's deliberate attempts to provoke its readers represent a studied departure from Wright's more irenic approach to public discourse and reflect Jonson's own critical analysis of what it meant to speak from a minority position.

In his eagerness to provoke, Jonson highlights a problem with the concept of public opinion that has relevance both within and beyond post-Reformation England. Following political theorists like Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser, I take “public opinion” to denote the beliefs and values ascribed collectively to the people as a whole.¹² This is also the sense in which John Florio's best-selling 1603 translation of Michel de Montaigne's essay “Of Custome” uses the term when it explains that “publike opinion may condemne” unusual beliefs or practices.¹³ Today the concept of public

opinion plays an integral role in the theories of the public sphere championed by deliberative democrats such as Habermas and Fraser, but “public sphere” and “public opinion” are very much distinct concepts. As Fraser explains the difference, “a public sphere is conceived as a space for the communicative generation of public opinion,” while public opinion itself is a belief reflecting “the general interest of the national citizenry,” which emerges as members of the public deliberate in this public sphere to decide what they collectively believe.¹⁴ Historically oriented scholarship has taken inspiration from public sphere theory and increasingly invokes it to describe the contentious political culture of post-Reformation England.¹⁵ Most of this work respects the conceptual distinction between public sphere and public opinion emphasized by Fraser.¹⁶ Peter Lake and Michael Questier, for example, describe the early modern public sphere as a venue in which polemicists could launch “campaign[s] to mobilize bodies of public opinion” for and against particular policies.¹⁷ My own article brackets questions about the mechanics of those political debates to examine more narrowly Jonson’s relationship to the concept of public opinion—the notion that a particular belief could be ascribed to the people as a whole.¹⁸

As a member of a religious minority, Jonson had good reason to critique the concept of public opinion. Today even political theorists who believe public opinion is central to democratic process acknowledge the threat it can pose to minorities. At its best, the consensus of an informed, politicized, and morally responsible citizenry can check a government’s authoritarian impulses; but the sociological fiction that the people in general agree on a particular issue can also stifle the dissent of those unable or unwilling to agree with the majority.¹⁹ Post-Reformation Europe illustrates such concerns in particular ways because its religious diversity so greatly outstripped its capacity for tolerance. While existing historical scholarship has rightly suggested that the influence of public opinion in early modern politics empowered commoners by forcing elites to pander to their collective preferences, this article considers the position of religious minorities excluded from that fiction of collectivity.²⁰ I argue that Jonson critiqued the conceptual possibility of public opinion by adopting an overtly antagonistic style of literary drama that embraced his exclusion from supposedly shared beliefs.

My argument has three parts. First, I examine the antagonistic epistles and commendatory verses framing the 1605 *Sejanus* quarto, showing that their style of address rejects the notion that

the members of the public might hold an opinion in common. Second, I identify a religious subtext for that style of address, showing that the quarto's combative framing devices amplify a line of Catholic commentary already present in the play's action. Third, I situate Jonson's ideas within a line of ongoing commentary by English Catholics on their marginalization within English society. In conclusion, I extrapolate from Jonson's antagonistic style a critique of the concept of public opinion that emerges in *Sejanus* once the play is understood in its social, religious, and intellectual context.

I

Sejanus was famously "hissed ... off the stage" at its first performance in 1603.²¹ Although the reasons for its theatrical failure remain unclear, the event prompted Jonson to reflect deeply on the hatred he and his play had incurred from a broad cross section of English society. The prefatory materials he appended to the first printed edition in 1605 actively cultivate this hostile relationship to the general public. A dedication to Esmé Stuart coolly describes the play as having "suffered no less violence from our people here than the subject of it [the historical *Sejanus*] did from the rage of the people of Rome" (p. 212). An epistle to the readers takes this popular failure as evidence of Jonson's artistic merit, complaining about the impossibility of writing anything good for "such auditors [to whom] commonly things are presented" (p. 213). A series of commendatory verses by Jonson's friends, meanwhile, advertise the play as a deliberate provocation. George Chapman depicts Jonson heroically "adventur[ing] on the multitude" and incurring nothing "[b]ut wants, and scorns, and shames" for his efforts (pp. 216 and 220). Several other poems also allude to the play's "violent fortune," lambasting the "simple elves" who failed to like it and "the crew / Of common playwrights" that subsequently mocked Jonson's perceived downfall (pp. 227 and 225). The sequence culminates in Everard Buckworth's lurid description of Jonson's encounter with "the people's beastly rage." Other critics have recognized the quarto's presentation as a form of artistic self-assertion, vindicating the play and its author against the unfavorable judgment of the theater audience.²² By narrating Jonson's encounter with a hostile crowd, however, these prefatory materials also conceptualize a problem with broader social significance for religious minorities.

The quarto's antagonistic style of self-presentation implies a critique of the concept of public opinion. In embracing the people's hatred and scorn, Jonson rejects any notion that their collective judgment has value—or that it is even truly collective, given his own exclusion from their supposedly shared opinions. In making this argument, I wish to qualify a recent interpretation of *Sejanus* that brings into focus a number of the issues at the center of my own article. Penelope Geng has argued that Jonson's sympathetic depiction of the character Arruntius—a vociferous complainer out of favor at Court—promotes a model of public discourse in which dissident interpretive communities oppose a corrupt state by engaging in political critique.²³ I agree with Geng's interpretation of the play's action, which rightly brings into focus both Jonson's interest in the mechanics of public discourse and his concern for minorities who find their views pushed out of the mainstream. My own interpretation, however, departs from Geng's by stressing that the paratextual materials Jonson appended to the quarto two years later betray a chastened reassessment of the efficacy of such political critique for people who find themselves on the wrong side of public opinion.

The quarto's prefatory materials reject, for example, any attempt to mobilize the tastemaking judgment of an intellectual elite to counter the general public's negative opinion of the play. Advertising a play's failure with lowbrow audiences at the theater could indeed have that effect under other circumstances, encouraging the more educated readers consuming it in print to prove their sophistication by giving a second chance to something the masses had rejected out of ignorance.²⁴ Jonson, however, flatly proclaims that these readers will not like his play either. After lashing out against the common auditors in the theater, he expresses similar contempt for the would-be sophistication of readers, likening them to "common torturers ... whose noses are ever like swine spoiling and rooting up the muses' gardens" (p. 214). In dismissing his prospective readers alongside the audience that hated the play in performance, Jonson emphasizes that he craves no one's approval. As his epistle sums up, "But that I should plant my felicity in your general saying 'Good,' or 'Well,' etc., were a weakness which the better sort of you might worthily condemn, if not absolutely hate me for" (p. 215). In promising to bring its readers as little pleasure as the stage performance brought spectators, the *Sejanus* quarto both invokes and critiques a notion of public opinion. It invokes it by imputing collective tastes to the people in general, addressing them as a collective "you" and purposefully

conflating the common auditors at the theater with the common torturers reading the play at home. By highlighting his own exclusion from their collective judgments, however, Jonson also denies the legitimacy of this supposedly public opinion, which he emphasizes is not in fact shared by everyone.

The commendatory verses similarly deny any need to engage readers in critical dialogue about Jonson's merit, representing them as enemies to provoke rather than as potential allies to persuade. Chapman's verse urges Jonson to reinvigorate his assault on popular tastes, which began in the theater and now continues in print: "use thou the assiduity / Fit for a true contemnor of their scorn," he writes (p. 221). Perseverance is key as the text migrates to print. Chapman envisions readers showing the same hostility as the original spectators: "the sense / That thy spectators have of good or ill, / Thou inject'st jointly to thy readers' souls" (p. 219). Since the original spectators' poor judgment of good and ill led them to hiss the play offstage, Chapman's suggestion that Jonson inject the same sense into his readers bespeaks a deliberate attempt to replicate this antagonistic relationship. Whatever the actual print equivalent of Jonson's encounter with the rowdy theater audience might be, Chapman's metaphorical descriptions evoke physical combat. Likening Jonson the satirist to a physician curing society's moral ills, he suggests that readers—driven by resentment at Jonson's superiority—will "rage, beat out, or the physician fly" (p. 218). Jonson endorses these descriptions of a physically violent struggle, noting that his friends' commendatory verses "relieved me in much whereat without them I should necessarily have touched" (p. 213). His own epistles also contain the same equation of readers and spectators as Chapman's poem, harp similarly on their collective "violence" and "rage," and express plenty of the superiority Chapman recommends as a way of fueling their resentment (pp. 212–5). In combination, these framing devices endow the quarto with a deliberately antagonistic posture foreclosing civil dialogue and reciprocal persuasion.

Jonson's apparent desire in the *Sejanus* quarto is to make a large number of people hate him. He sets no bounds on the level of hostility he intends to provoke. His framing devices gleefully envision the printed text escalating the vocal opposition of the original theater audience into a physically dangerous riot. The rhetoric may verge on hyperbole, but it anticipates a struggle between the playwright and his public that respects no bounds of civility and would escalate to the point of bodily injury before resorting to persuasion or reasoned critique. Although surrender-

ing any hope of swaying an unfavorable body of public opinion, such overt antagonism nonetheless represents an ingenious approach to publicity. In highlighting his exclusion from the English people's collective beliefs, Jonson emphasizes that their supposedly shared judgment is not in fact truly representative; his cure for bad publicity is to provoke more of it.

II

It was as a Catholic in an anti-Catholic society that Jonson encountered what his quarto calls "the people's beastly rage." While Jonson surely had many reasons to feel he had fallen on the wrong side of public opinion, his position as an English Catholic provides a unique and important point of intellectual context because it put him in contact with other Catholic writers who theorized their experiences as a persecuted minority. Before discussing Jonson's engagement with this intellectual context, however, it is worth highlighting the degree to which *Sejanus* is overtly concerned with English Catholicism. As Lake has demonstrated, the play follows the early modern practice of using Roman history to comment on politically sensitive current events: it is filled with allusions to Catholic polemics such as *Leicester's Commonwealth* (1584) and makes a forceful argument about how English Catholics should relate to a state that persecutes them. While Lake focuses on the persecution Catholics suffered at the hands of elite courtiers and state agents, I add to his analysis by showing that *Sejanus's* commentary on English Catholicism also extends to Catholics' relationship to public opinion—especially to the collective hostility of nonelite people whom Jonson lumps together as "the multitude." In other words, the epistles and commendatory verses framing the quarto as a struggle against public opinion develop a theme already present in the play's action, where it is couched in distinctly religious terms.

Lake's interpretation of the play is worth rehearsing in some detail because it establishes the degree to which Jonson uses Agrippina's persecuted supporters—also known as the Germanican faction—to dramatize the situation of Catholics in post-Reformation England. Like English Catholics, the Germanicans are "[c]onstantly spied on, provoked beyond endurance into treasonable words," and "either destroyed or driven into exile as traitors and enemies of the state, and all this despite their innocence of any active plotting against the regime."²⁵ The fact that the Germanicans are victimized for their group identity and not

for any criminal actions resonates with the complaints of English Catholics that the state unfairly conflated their religion with political subversion.²⁶ Moreover, as Lake also shows, the play's main villain could come straight out of an early modern Catholic polemic. Sejanus seeks to "thrust Tiberius into tyranny" (II.391), just as numerous Catholic tracts from the period complained of evil courtiers corrupting a monarch whose natural inclinations were supposedly more tolerant.²⁷ The fact that Sejanus began his career as a "catamite" (IV.404) echoes *Leicester's Commonwealth* in particular, which insinuates that the notorious Catholic-hunter the Earl of Leicester attained his position of influence over the queen because of his sexual depravity.²⁸ Accordingly, Sejanus's victims also bear resemblance to English Catholics. Agrippina—the widowed leader of the Germanican faction—evokes Mary Stuart, a figurehead for English Catholics until her execution in 1587.²⁹ Moreover, the play repeatedly emphasizes that Rome had, a mere "[s]eventy years since" (III.453), been a republic—just as England, until almost exactly seventy years earlier, had been Catholic.³⁰ Imperial Rome, in other words, is post-Reformation England, and the Germanicans are English Catholics.

Lake establishes also that the play engages in depth with theoretical debates that held sway among English Catholics. Among other topics, it considers the ethics of armed rebellion against a tyrannical, persecuting regime—"an issue which," to quote Lake, "confronts the Germanicans in the play with quite as much force and urgency as it did Elizabethan Catholics."³¹ The Jesuit missionary Robert Persons, for example, argues in *A Conference about the Next Succession* (1595) that English subjects would be justified to take arms against a tyrannical regime, while the Catholic loyalist Henry Constable responds in *Discoverye of a Counterfete Conference* (1600) that armed resistance is never justified and that promoting it will only endanger their coreligionists.³² *Sejanus* depicts a similar debate when Latiaris, an agent provocateur in league with Sejanus, incites the Germanican Sabinus to pursue "liberty" by "active valour" (IV.144 and 157). The play represents Sabinus's even-keeled and quietistic response as the true Germanican—and, according to Lake, Roman Catholic—argument when the character quips, "No ill should force the subject undertake / Against the sovereign" (IV.163–4). The play thus dramatizes a theoretical debate that held significant currency among English Catholics, who sometimes harbored doubts about whether they owed allegiance to a state that persecuted them. Lake's topical application gains further support from the fact that the English

government found the same Catholic subtext, though apparently without appreciating Sabinus's loyalist stance. The play's publication, which was unfortunately timed just after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot on 5 November 1605, provoked the Earl of Northampton to haul Jonson in front of the Privy Council on charges of "popery and treason."³³

While Lake establishes that Jonson's depiction of the Germanicans dramatizes a number of issues English Catholics faced, his focus on state persecution leads him to overlook the more general marginalization of these groups in their respective societies. I therefore build on his account of the play's religious commitments by highlighting the degree to which the Germanicans also suffer substantially under the collective judgment of a hostile multitude. *Sejanus's* negative depiction of the Roman crowd was noted in the critical tradition long before Jonson's religion became a topic of interest. Russ McDonald once pithily observed that "[t]he multitude displays the malignity and faithlessness of its leaders," albeit "none of their intelligence or imagination."³⁴ Such observations resonate in new ways with the religious commitments Lake finds in the play and suggest that the Germanicans as a political minority are marginalized not only by the state but also by public opinion—the collective judgment of this corrupt multitude. The persecution in the first four acts indeed takes place in the realm of high politics and is very much consistent with the fears pervading Catholic polemics such as *Leicester's Commonwealth*: there are spies throughout, two sham trials in act III, and a monarch conspiring with a corrupt courtier to eradicate the Germanicans in act II. Act V, however, offers a different perspective on this persecution by introducing the Roman multitude as a major threat. It opens with an account of disturbances in the streets: supernatural portents have incited "Th'amazing wonder of the multitude," and a "throng" of commoners is running wild (V.221 and 60). Throughout the remainder of this last act, the collective judgment of this fickle multitude becomes a threat on par with the elite persecutors dominating acts I through IV.

The threat of public opinion constitutes an important aspect of the play's politico-religious commentary. Despite their fears of state persecution, the Germanicans actually come to agree with government agents about the danger represented by the multitude. After *Sejanus* is toppled by a palace intrigue and his family is brutally slaughtered in the streets by bloodthirsty commoners, the remaining Germanicans join the lamentations of their erstwhile persecutors. Lepidus and Arruntius, for example,

listen sympathetically to Terrentius when he returns to the palace to complain of Sejanus’s harsh treatment at the hands of “[t]he eager multitude” (V.741). Their collective commentary echoes *Sejanus*’s prefatory materials in highlighting the crowd’s beastliness: “not a beast of all the herd demands, / What was his crime? Or, who were his accusers? / Under what proof, or testimony, he fell?” (V.775–7). In its “violent rage,” they complain, “the rude multitude” exceeds even “the forward justice of the state” (V.791, 790, and 792). Despite the fact that Lepidus and Arruntius have both been terrorized by the state’s “forward justice,” they agree with Terrentius that the lynching taking place in the streets represents something even worse. Lepidus joins in lamenting the “popular rage,” while Arruntius decries “[t]hese very rascals, that now rage like furies,” half-ironically calling them “my monster, / The multitude” (V.758, 785, and 861–2). In figuring the people as a singular body with shared preferences, these descriptions evoke the fiction of collectivity entailed in the concept of public opinion. Germanicans such as Lepidus and Arruntius mistrust this collective form of judgment even when it occasionally turns on their persecutors in the political elite.

While the Germanicans encounter hostility from elite and popular sources alike, the quarto’s framing actually downplays elite persecution in ways that further highlight the threat of public opinion. Chapman’s commendatory verse, for example, contradicts the play’s cynical depiction of corrupt elites by appealing to a series of high-ranking Court officials for protection against the multitude. After appealing to King James himself, Chapman goes on to sue to several of James’s royal advisors:

His Chancellor, fautor of all human skills;
His Treasurer, taking them [i.e., poets] into his place;
Northumber, that, with them, his crescent fills;
Grave Worcester, in whose nerves they guard their fire;
Northampton, that to all his height in blood,
Heightens his soul with them; and Devonshire,
In whom their streams, ebbed to their spring, are flood;
Oraculous Salisbury, whose inspirèd voice,
In state proportions, sings their mysteries;
And (though last named) first, in whom they rejoice,
.....
Most noble Suffolk.

(pp. 221–2)

In appealing to the patronage of an enlightened elite, the quarto backtracks on the fears of anti-Catholic courtiers pervading the play's action. Jonson's epistles similarly appeal to the protection of "good men" such as his aristocratic patron Esmé Stuart—who, like many of the Privy Councilors addressed by Chapman, was Catholic (p. 212).³⁵ Thus, even as *Sejanus* echoes *Leicester's Commonwealth* in critiquing elite persecutors, the 1605 quarto actually exudes hope that good, reasonable, and tolerant members of this elite will help Jonson. By contrast, the quarto's style of self-presentation is entirely consistent with the play in highlighting the multitude's hostility. Unlike the quietistic Germanicans, however, Jonson actively courts the English people's collective hatred, seeking to provoke as much of it as possible.

III

Jonson's antagonistic style acquires social and political significance within his English Catholic intellectual context, where it offers a perspective on post-Reformation religion that departs from the findings of much recent historiography. Recent scholarship has emphasized that a binary Catholic/Protestant opposition fails in many cases to do justice to the complexity of early modern English people's religious experiences, practices, and identities. In describing a religious spectrum that allowed for complex negotiations both between and within religious groups, this scholarship has been drawn to liminal figures such as the "Church papist," the fluid identity of serial converts, and the complex negotiations by which Catholic loyalists at Court found common ground with Protestants.³⁶ Its goal has been, in Questier's words, "to resurrect a range of contemporary Catholic existence and experience."³⁷ To be sure, contemporary representations of the English religious spectrum were another matter. Early modern polemicists often imputed binary divisions with a questionable basis in reality; Lake and Questier describe both Catholics and Protestants exploiting "wedge issue[s]" when it became politically expedient to foment oppositional sentiment.³⁸ Even so, *Sejanus* is difficult to reconcile with recent historical accounts of typical post-Reformation religious politics because it does more than just carve out an adversarial position. Although full of biting social critique, it never aspires to change public opinion on a particular topic. Instead, its critique targets the very concept of public opinion, the notion that it might be possible for the people in general to agree. Rather than persuading, the style of address on display in the play's

prefatory materials engages readers only by provoking them into open, unbridled antagonism. This final section situates that approach to public discourse as an original contribution to Jonson's intellectual context as an English Catholic writer and thinker.

Sejanus represents a studied departure in particular from the ideas of Wright, who plays a unique role in Jonson scholarship. Theodore A. Stroud's suggestion that Wright was the priest to convert Jonson in prison in 1598 can only be proven to a degree of probability, but we know that Jonson engaged critically with Wright's written work.³⁹ Wright promoted an irenic conception of post-Reformation Catholicism and has consequently proven useful to scholars invested in highlighting points of fluidity in English Catholic identity.⁴⁰ He devoted a large part of his missionary career to theorizing an intellectual framework that would allow peace between his coreligionists and their Protestant nation, articulating in the process a version of the argument that spiritual loyalty to the Pope did not require political loyalty to foreign Catholic states.⁴¹ In his brief career at the English Court (1595–97), he put theory into practice, supplying intelligence about Spanish military activity to the Privy Council. Wright also faced difficulties, including lengthy imprisonment, but his understanding of Catholic identity resists the antagonistic thinking on display in *Sejanus*. In *The Passions of the Minde in Generall*, which circulated in manuscript from 1597, Wright offers his take on the issues occupying Jonson as he wrote *Sejanus*.⁴² Jonson may well have read *Passions of the Minde* in prison in the autumn of 1598, as Stroud has surmised, but a commendatory verse that prefaces the 1604 edition of Wright's text indicates that Jonson had engaged deeply and critically with its ideas by the time he revised and framed *Sejanus* for publication in 1605.⁴³ Even as Jonson shares many of the priest's concerns, he departs strikingly from his conclusions.

Passions of the Minde reflects on the difficulties Wright faced with public opinion as a professional advocate for English Catholics. Critical accounts have explored both Wright's contributions to Renaissance rhetorical theory and the theory of emotions he develops in the process.⁴⁴ Wright's goal is not simply to move or to persuade, however. His intention, more specifically, is to "persuade a multitude" (pp. 3–4)—that problematic political entity Jonson considers on his own terms in *Sejanus*. This focus on the collective disposition of a large body of people places a conception of public opinion at the center of *Passions of the Minde*. As a member of a religious minority, the inherent problem Wright faced

with the multitude is that “likelinessse [likeness] causeth loue”; even among “lyons, tygres, and leopards, whose inclinations are most cruell ... one affecteth another and liueth in quiet societie, for the similitude of inclinations, and likelinessse of passions” (p. 97). Wright was acutely aware that such likeness was sorely lacking in post-Reformation England, but his approach to this problem differs from Jonson’s. Like Jonson, Wright is essentially concerned with the threat public opinion poses to minorities unable to join the consensus of the lions and tigers in his example. But whereas Jonson shows himself eager to highlight his difference from what the people in general think, Wright instead seeks to win the multitude’s sympathy.

Wright’s basic strategy to sway—or at least to soften—public opinion is to cultivate likeness and common ground. Fearing that reasoned debate would fail with all but the most learned, he recommends sensory appeals and oratorical gestures to win over the masses (pp. 149–93). Sympathy is crucial to his plan: “if we intend to imprint a passion in another,” he writes, “it is requisit first it be stamped in our hearts” (p. 174). Obstacles to such a plan abound, as Wright essentially intends to throw himself on the sympathy of a deeply unsympathetic audience whose members he has already compared to lions and tigers. Nonetheless, he hopes people will find common ground in their shared human passions. He spends a substantial portion of the tract modeling this strategy: in a long paean to divine love, he hopes to “incense my soule to loue [God] intirely” so that “all those motiues which stirre vp mine affections to loue [God], may be meanes to inflame all their hearts which read this treatise penned by me” (p. 193). His wager is that the sincerity of his passions will allow all members of his audience—irrespective of doctrinal differences—to identify with him. Thus, even as Wright’s account of the lions and tigers constituting his society is compatible with *Sejanus*’s assessment of the people’s hostility and beastliness, the priest’s pursuit of sympathetic identification stands in direct contrast to Jonson’s approach. Wright and Jonson both comment on the difficulties of speaking from a position on the wrong side of public opinion. Yet whereas Jonson seeks vindication in a continuous expression of antagonism verging on physical violence, Wright hopes to achieve collective emotional identification superseding interconfessional disagreement.

Like *Sejanus*, with its unmistakably Catholic Germanicans, *Passions of the Minde* conceptualizes the challenges of public opinion in overtly confessional terms. It helped that Wright was

a minor celebrity among loyalist Catholics, several of whom cited him in print as a typical example of their suffering.⁴⁵ Even beyond the significance attached to Wright's reputation, however, *Passions of the Minde* devotes great attention to issues of daily concern to English Catholics, such as avoiding entrapment by spies.⁴⁶ An excursus with conspicuously little bearing on public speaking teaches readers to anticipate the strategies of government agents, who might move a man to reveal his friend's secrets by pretending "vnder colour of amitie" that the friend has previously broken confidence himself (p. 122). To emphasize the relevance for politically repressed groups, Wright adds that "[t]his stratageme I know many politique superiors to haue frequented, and some persons of great pollicie, but of most small conscience" (p. 123). As Jonson may well have recognized in reading the tract, Wright's cautionary tale begins to indicate the limitations of any overly optimistic pursuit of common ground, warning repressed groups to guard against spies' false appeals to likeness.

Wright himself began to appreciate the shortcomings of his irenic approach to public opinion. He wrote *Passions of the Minde* in 1597, after a dispute with Protestant divines at York had already landed him under house arrest.⁴⁷ His status turned even more precarious after he was blamed for William Alabaster's conversion. By 17 October 1598, he was in an ordinary prison, complaining to his patron, the Earl of Essex, that England's Protestant society had made him "the object of revenge and football of suspicions in matters concerning religion."⁴⁸ His perception of pervasive mistrust, as well as the violent image of being used as a football, suggests limited faith in the efficacy of civil dialogue. "[S]poiled of all [his] books and writings ... [and] debarred of all company and humane conversation," he describes himself as lacking the basic tools of reciprocal persuasion.⁴⁹ Despairing completely of his mission to advocate and convert, Wright asks for help to leave the country. A separate letter to Anthony Bacon expresses the wish "wholly to abandon England" because "I have so many enemies that it will be impossible for me to live in quietness, but, either upon suspicion or malice, I shall daily be subject to calumnies and restraint."⁵⁰ Deprived both of an audience willing to listen and of the writings that would help him reach one, Wright at this point sees no possibility of swaying an English multitude predisposed against him. A tract written three years later during a brief escape from prison provides yet another glimpse of the despair Wright could reach. Titled *Certain Articles or Forcible Reasons*, it complains of "irreconcilable iarres" between Catholics and Protestants.⁵¹ Wright himself, in moments such as these, shows awareness of

the limitations of the likeness and common ground he pursued in *Passions of the Minde*.

Whether or not Jonson knew about Wright's moments of despair, his published commentary on *Passions of the Minde* shows insight into the limitations of the priest's stated plan of persuading the multitude. His commendatory verse to the 1604 edition of Wright's tract agrees with its concerns about the difficulty of swaying opinions through reasoned argument. Jonson envisions the multitude "languish[ing] in suspense ... / Betweene the doubtfull sway of Reason, and sense"—the very problem that led Wright to appeal, by means of the senses, directly to the passions.⁵² Yet Jonson's concluding couplet expresses doubt that sensory appeals will work any better than reason: "Tis not your fault, if they shall sense preferre, / Being tould there, Reason cannot, Sense may erre."⁵³ Jonson's poem indicates that he had read *Passions of the Minde* closely and admiringly, but it also expresses deep pessimism about Wright's goal of swaying public opinion. Wright's tract considers the challenges of persuading people impervious to reasoned arguments. Although Jonson's lament for "the doubtfull sway of Reason" echoes Wright's assessment of the limitations of reasoned discourse, his concluding statement that "Sense" too "may erre" indicates pessimism about the priest's preferred alternative method of building sympathy. The hostile reception of *Sejanus* had given Jonson an original perspective on these issues. In direct contrast to *Passions of the Minde*, he framed his play's quarto publication as an act of unbridled antagonism designed to provoke hatred from readers and spectators.

IV

Jonson's antagonistic style has particular value within the Catholic intellectual context in which this article has placed it. Political theorists today acknowledge the problems the concept of public opinion can pose for minorities excluded from the collective beliefs of their countrymen and women. As evidenced by Wright's prison letters, these problems were no different in post-Reformation England; the priest oscillated between hope and despair over the course of his career, repeatedly appealing to the multitude's sympathy only to be disappointed. His lofty goal of persuading even the most hostile multitude helps explain the depth his despair could reach.

Jonson, by contrast, rejects any attempt to win over public opinion. His 1604 commendatory verse to *Passions of the Minde*

displays skepticism about Wright's pursuit of common ground, while the 1605 *Sejanus* quarto adopts an antagonistic style embracing the people's collective scorn and hatred. Rather than advocating for an adversarial position on a particular issue of public interest, the play critiques the concept of public opinion as such, pursuing a style that consists of fostering continuous, irresolvable disagreement and exposing as fiction any notion that the people in general agree. This eagerness to provoke and endure the people's hatred represents a peculiar but studied approach to publicity. The antagonistic style Jonson was developing to such great effect at this point in his career acquires social and political value especially in the context of *Sejanus*'s broader commentary on the multitude's hostility to religious minorities. In embracing its unfavorable public reception, *Sejanus* reminds readers of the unassimilated outside excluded from the general consensus about aesthetic and moral judgment entailed in the concept of public opinion.

NOTES

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¹ See Charles Cathcart, *Marston, Rivalry, Rapprochement, and Jonson* (Aldershot UK: Ashgate, 2008), esp. pp. 1–8; Lynn S. Meskill, *Ben Jonson and Envy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), esp. pp. 1–35; and Joseph Loewenstein, *Ben Jonson and Possessive Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), esp. pp. 104–32.

² See Roland Barthes, "Style and Its Image," trans. Seymour Chatman, in *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. Chatman (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 3–10.

³ Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, ed. Randall Martin, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012), 1:233–428, Induction, line 132, p. 267.

⁴ Jonson, *Sejanus His Fall*, ed. Tom Cain, in *Works*, 2:195–391, 228. All subsequent references to *Sejanus* and its prefatory materials are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text and notes by act and line number for the play and page number for the prefatory materials.

⁵ See James P. Bednarz, *Shakespeare and the Poets' War* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2001), esp. pp. 55–81; and Grace Tiffany, "'That Reason Wonder May Diminish': As You Like It, Androgyny, and the Theater Wars," *HLQ* 57, 3 (Summer 1994): 213–39.

⁶ John Gordon Sweeney III, *Jonson and the Psychology of Public Theater: To Coin the Spirit, Spend the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985), p. 8.

⁷ See Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), pp. 138–44 and 272–4.

⁸ Butler, "Ben Jonson's Catholicism," *BJJ* 19, 2 (November 2012): 190–216, 213. Butler provides a useful survey of the critical trend toward appreciating the centrality of religion in Jonson's work.

⁹ Robert S. Miola gives an overview of both topics in "Ben Jonson, Catholic Poet," *Ren&R*, n.s., 25, 4 (Fall 2001): 101–15. Marshelle Woodward shows that theological debates about the sacraments inform *Cynthia's Revels* (1616) in "Ben Jonson's Sacramental Poetics: Manners as Mystery in his Poetry and Drama," *BJJ* 22, 1 (May 2015): 41–61. On sociopolitical issues, Molly Murray interprets *The Masque of Blacknesse* (1605) as commenting on the subtlety with which Catholics at Court performed their religious identity in "Performing Devotion in *The Masque of Blacknesse*," *SEL* 47, 2 (Spring 2007): 427–49. Peter Lake, whom I discuss in greater detail below, shows that *Sejanus* critiques the English state's persecution of Catholics in "From *Leicester His Commonwealth* to *Sejanus His Fall*: Ben Jonson and the Politics of Roman (Catholic) Virtue," in *Catholics and the "Protestant Nation": Religious Politics and Identity in Early Modern England*, ed. Ethan Shagan (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 128–61. Richard Dutton highlights *Volpone's* (1605) concern for English Catholics in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot in *Ben Jonson, "Volpone," and the Gunpowder Plot* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008).

¹⁰ See Sweeney, "*Sejanus* and the People's Beastly Rage," *ELH* 48, 1 (Spring 1981): 61–82; and Lake, pp. 137–61.

¹¹ Father Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (London: Valentine Simmes [and Adam Islip], 1604; EEBO STC (2d edn.) 26040. I cite the first printed edition in which Wright was involved, which is also the first edition to carry Jonson's commendatory verse. All subsequent references to Wright's *Passions of the Minde* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number. Jonson's 1604 commendatory verse to *Passions of the Minde* is a deep reflection on Wright's theory of rhetoric ("To the Author," in *Passions of the Minde*, by Wright, A6v). On Wright's probable involvement in Jonson's conversion, Donaldson's biography assesses the facts of the two men's relationship (pp. 138–44). The original, slightly speculative account of Jonson's conversion is Theodore A. Stroud, "Ben Jonson and Father Thomas Wright," *ELH* 14, 4 (December 1947): 274–82; its broad outlines persuade Dutton (p. 98). An interpretive overview of Wright's religious politics can be found in Stroud, "Father Thomas Wright: A Test Case for Toleration," *Biographical Studies, 1534–1829* 1, 3 (1951): 189–219.

¹² See Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 2; and Nancy Fraser, "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World," *TCS* 24, 4 (July 2007): 7–30. See also Michael McKeon, "Parsing Habermas's 'Bourgeois Public Sphere,'" which defines "'public opinion' [as] a virtual and collectivized sort of knowledge" ("When Is a Public Sphere?," special issue, *Criticism* 46, 2 [Spring 2004]: 273–7, 276).

¹³ Michel de Montaigne, "Of Custome, and How a Receiued Law Should not Easily be Changed," chap. 22 in *The Essayes, Or Morall, Politike and Militarie Discourses*, trans. John Florio (London: Val[entine] Sim[me]s, 1603), pp. 46–55, 51; EEBO STC (2d edn.) 18041. The OED defines "public opinion" as "what is generally thought about something" (2d edn., s.v. "public," S2).

¹⁴ Fraser, pp. 7 and 11.

¹⁵ Habermas's 1962 statement on the public sphere was already anchored in a historical narrative about the English long eighteenth century, but scholars today increasingly apply the term to Jonson's historical moment. See Alexandra Halasz, *The Marketplace of Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997); Joad Raymond, "The Newspaper, Public Opinion, and the Public Sphere in the Seventeenth Century," in *News, Newspapers, and Society in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Raymond (London: Frank Cass, 1999), pp. 109–40; Lake and Michael Questier, "Puritans, Papists, and the 'Public Sphere' in Early Modern England: The Edmund Campion Affair in Context," *The Journal of Modern History* 72, 3 (September 2000): 587–627; Lake and Steve Pincus, "Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England," *Journal of British Studies* 45, 2 (April 2006): 270–92; Rebecca Lemon, *Treason By Words: Literature, Law, and Rebellion in Shakespeare's England* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2006), esp. pp. 18–22; Jeffrey S. Doty, "Shakespeare's *Richard II*, 'Popularity,' and the Early Modern Public Sphere," *SQ* 61, 2 (Summer 2010): 183–205; Bronwen Wilson and Paul Yachnin, eds., *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe: People, Things, Forms of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2010); James Kuzner, "Donne's *Biathanatos* and the Public Sphere's Vexing Freedom," *ELH* 81, 1 (Spring 2014): 61–81; and Stephen Wittek, *The Media Players: Shakespeare, Middleton, Jonson, and the Idea of News* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2015).

¹⁶ While most recent literary and historical scholarship respects the distinctions between public, public sphere, and public opinion, some earlier cross-disciplinary work occasionally sacrificed precision when importing these concepts from the discipline of political theory. Dagmar Freist's study of Caroline political debate, for example, uses the term public opinion in a more general sense than I do when it suggests that "[p]ublic opinion 'happened' when ordinary discourses ... turned to discussing the politics of the day" (*Governed by Opinion: Politics, Religion, and the Dynamics of Communication in Stuart London, 1637–1645* [London: Tauris, 1997], p. 301). Political arguments may indeed sway public opinion, but the terminology I follow resists collapsing the two. Nor is the concept of public opinion necessarily restricted to political issues. While political theorists such as Fraser (p. 7) are naturally most interested in moments when public opinion becomes a political force, the public may also approve or disapprove—rightly or wrongly, reasonably or not—of a celebrity's relationship choices or a grocery chain's produce selection.

¹⁷ Lake and Questier, p. 597.

¹⁸ In analyzing Jonson's critique of the concept rather than the phenomenon of public opinion, I take a different approach to a topic also at the center of András Kiséry's *Hamlet's Moment: Drama and Political Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), which came out while this article was with reviewers. Kiséry examines the public-sphere-like phenomena associated with the early modern theater from the standpoint of the communicative skills they developed among audience members. His narrative includes an insightful discussion of *Sejanus* focusing on "Jonson's reflections on the circulation and use of political knowledge" (p. 241). I agree with Kiséry's argument, but my focus falls instead on Jonson's critique of

the idea that a particular belief might be ascribed to the people in general, rather than on the playwright's commentary on the communicative process by which such a public opinion might be generated.

¹⁹ See Fraser, p. 11; and Black Public Sphere Collective, ed., *The Black Public Sphere* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), esp. pp. 182–3. For a near-total rejection of the fiction of consensus entailed in the concept of public opinion, see Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism," *Political Science Series* (Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna) 72 (December 2000): 1–17.

²⁰ See, for example, Lake and Questier, p. 624; Lake and Pincus, pp. 276–7; and Doty, pp. 183 and 198–9.

²¹ Francis Osborne, *The True Tragicomedy Formerly Played at Court* (ca. 1654), qtd. in Cain, introduction to *Sejanus*, in *Works*, 2:197–209, 200.

²² See Brian Patrick Chalk, "Jonson's Textual Monument," *SEL* 52, 2 (Spring 2012): 387–405; and Sweeney, "Beastly Rage," pp. 62–4.

²³ Penelope Geng, "'He Only Talks': Arruntius and the Formation of Interpretive Communities in Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*," *BJJ* 18, 1 (May 2011): 126–40, 134–7.

²⁴ See Zachary Lesser, *Renaissance Drama and the Politics of Publication: Readings in the English Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 52–80.

²⁵ Lake, p. 149.

²⁶ On this point more generally, see also Lake and Questier, pp. 601–2.

²⁷ See Lake, pp. 137–44.

²⁸ See Lake, p. 143.

²⁹ See Lake, p. 149.

³⁰ See also Jonson, *Sejanus*, l.59; and Lake, p. 144.

³¹ Lake, p. 144. See also Lake, pp. 144–55.

³² [Robert Persons], *A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of Ingland Diuided into Two Partes* ([Antwerp: A. Coninx], 1594[–95]), part 1, pp. 77–8; EEBO STC (2d edn.) 19398; and Henry Constable, *Discoverye of a Counterfect Conference Helde at a Counterfect Place, by Counterfect Travellers, for Thadvancement of a Counteefecte Tytle, and Invented, Printed, and Published by One (Person) that Dare not Avowve his Name* (Collen [i.e., Paris?]), pp. 21–5; EEBO STC (2d edn.) 5638.5.

³³ Lake, p. 155. On the "popery and treason" charge, see Jonson, *Informations to William Drummond of Hawthornden*, ed. Donaldson, in *Works*, 5:351–91, 375. On the quarto's dating, see Cain, "Sejanus: Textual Essay," in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/k/essays/Sejanus_textual_essay.

³⁴ Russ McDonald, "Jonsonian Comedy and the Value of *Sejanus*," *SEL* 21, 2 (Spring 1981): 287–305, 300. See also Sweeney, "Beastly Rage," p. 77.

³⁵ On the Catholic sympathies of a number of the Privy Councilors in Chapman's poem, see Jonson, *Sejanus*, pp. 221n139–222n151.

³⁶ See Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity, and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge UK: Boydell Press, 1993); Questier, *Conversion, Politics, and Religion in England, 1580–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996); and Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy, and the English Literary Imagination, 1558–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), esp. pp. 107–68.

³⁷ Questier, *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England: Politics, Aristocratic Patronage, and Religion, c. 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 66.

³⁸ Lake and Questier, p. 609.

³⁹ See Stroud, "Ben Jonson and Father Thomas Wright"; and Donaldson, *A Life*, pp. 138–44.

⁴⁰ See Walsham, p. 61; Questier, *Conversion*, p. 55; and Shell, pp. 126–33.

⁴¹ On this point, see especially Stroud, "Father Thomas Wright: A Test Case." In general, unless otherwise noted, I follow William Webster Newbold's concise biography for the details of Wright's life ("Biography," in *The Passions of the Mind in General by Thomas Wright: A Critical Edition*, ed. Newbold [New York: Garland, 1986], pp. 3–16).

⁴² On textual issues, see Newbold, "Textual Introduction," in *Passions*, pp. 51–68.

⁴³ Jonson, "To the Author," A6v. See also Stroud, "Ben Jonson and Father Thomas Wright," p. 280.

⁴⁴ On rhetoric, see Thomas O. Sloan, "A Renaissance Controversialist on Rhetoric: Thomas Wright's *Passions of the Minde in Generall*," *Speech Monographs* 36, 1 (1969): 38–54. On emotions, see Steven Mullaney, *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 48 and 51–6.

⁴⁵ See, for example, William Watson, *A Decacordon of Ten Quodlibeticall Questions Concerning Religion and State Wherein the Authour Framing Himselfe a Quilibet to Euery Quodlibet, Decides an Hundred Crosse Interrogatorie Doubts, about the Generall Contentions betwixt the Seminarie Priests and Iesuits at the Present* (London: [Richard Field], 1602), pp. 43–5; EEBO STC (2d edn.) 25123; and Robert Charnock, *A Reply to a Notorious Libell Intituled A Briefe Apologie or Defence of the Ecclesiasticall Hierarchie, &c.* ([London: Robert Barker], 1603), p. 77; EEBO STC (2d edn.) 19056.

⁴⁶ Wright, incidentally, was himself spied on. See "Information for Chief Justice Popham, July 1603," ed. M. S. Giuseppi, in Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquess of Salisbury*, ed. Giuseppi, 23 vols. (London: HMSO, 1930), 15:216–7. Historical Manuscripts Commission is hereafter abbreviated HMC.

⁴⁷ See Newbold, "Biography," p. 12.

⁴⁸ Wright to Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, 17 October 1598, in HMC, *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury*, 23 vols. (London: HMSO, 1899), 8:394.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Wright to Anthony Bacon, 17 October 1598, in HMC, 8:395–6.

⁵¹ Wright, *Certaine Articles or Forcible Reasons Discouering the Palpable Absurdities, & Most Notorious Errours of the Protestant Religion* (Antwerp, 1600), B3r; EEBO STC (2d edn.) 26038.5. On authorship and publication facts, see William Waad to Sir Robert Cecil, 26 April 1600, in HMC, *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury*, 23 vols. (London: HMSO, 1904), 10:125; Waad to Cecil, 3 May 1600, in HMC, *Salisbury*, 10:135–6; and Newbold, "Biography," p. 11.

⁵² Jonson, "To the Author," A6v.

⁵³ Ibid.