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Ben Jonson's Unorthodox Poetics: Rhetoric, Proportion & Authorship

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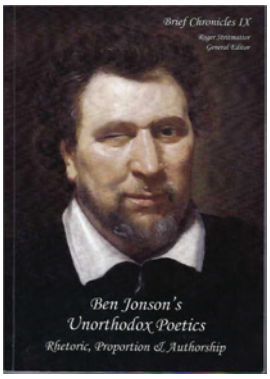

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In the history of the Shakespeare authorship controversy – whether the name Shakespeare could have been a pseudonym — the role of "honest Ben" Jonson remains a central paradox. Perhaps he was just a satirist turned eulogist in the First Folio and the editorial mastermind behind the legacy of an unlettered businessman from Stratford-upon-Avon. Or perhaps Jonson was instead a cryptographic game-player hiding in plain sight and a social revolutionary defending aristocratic privilege?

Whether Shakespeare heretics are right — and one or more concealed authors are indeed hiding behind the "Shakespeare" byline — or whether they're wrong, Jonson himself remains an enigma for the ages. That is probably the reason why Oxfordian scholars – those doubters — who believe that Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford was the real mastermind behind the works — have tended to shy away from the Jonson question, preferring instead to train their focus on the Bard himself. Or herself.

This recent collection of twelve essays edited by the pre-eminent Oxfordian scholar Roger Stritmatter begins to correct the record, however. The ninth in the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship's "Brief Chronicles" series, the 2025 edition examines Jonson's role in the Shakespeare First Folio as well as in the emergence of a Shakespeare mythology perpetuated in the 17th century and surviving down to today.

With this volume, the reader discovers a remarkable alternative intellectual ecosystem that has evolved over the last century of quiet, heterodox Jonson scholarship. Collectively, the works compiled in the volume (albeit at times shoddily proof-read and bearing an unfortunate, unwieldy title) present not merely alternative interpretations of Jonson's familiar texts, but rather a comprehensive reimagining of one of English literature's most foundational narratives.

THE META-ARGUMENT: JONSON AS MASTER ARCHITECT

The thesis binding these essays positions Ben Jonson not as Shakespeare's honest contemporary witness, but as the primary architect of what (if the heretics are correct) may be literary history's most successful deception. From George Greenwood's pioneering 1921 analysis to Roger Stritmatter's recent cipher work, the essays themselves construct a portrait of Jonson as a kind of sophisticated literary agent who orchestrated the Stratfordian attribution through multiple interconnected strategies: satirical attacks on the man from Stratford (Ruth Loyd Miller's deep dive into Jonson's dramatic character Sogliardo); editorial control of the First Folio (Gerard Rendall's meta-analysis of the Folio project), cryptographic embedding of the true author's identity (Stritmatter's essay on "witty numbers"); and memorialization of the Stratford story through monument inscriptions (Nina Green's linguistic analysis of the Stratford monument).

In all, the reader finds that the Shakespeare attribution was a carefully planned project executed by someone intimately familiar with court politics, publishing practices, and the social constraints governing aristocratic authorship. The essays collectively argue that Jonson possessed both the literary skill and institutional position necessary to construct and maintain such an elaborate fiction.

METHODOLOGICAL CONTRASTS AND SCHOLARLY EVOLUTION

In terms of authorship studies, the essays reveal stark contrasts in methodological approach over the last century. Early British scholars like Greenwood and Rendall used primarily historical and biographical analysis, focusing on documentary evidence and social context. Greenwood's work emphasizes the legal and social impossibility of Jonson's official testimony, while Rendall concentrates on family connections and publication chronology.

Modern scholars like the American Stritmatter and the late British writer Alexander Waugh have introduced sophisticated textual analysis techniques, including cryptographic analysis and computational linguistics. Stritmatter's "Cardano Grille" analysis of Jonson's "To the Reader" in the Folio represents a methodological leap from earlier work, suggesting that Renaissance authors embedded multiple layers of meaning through mathematical precision rather than literary allusion alone.

Canadian scholar Gabriel Ready's institutional analysis represents yet another methodological approach, examining how modern academic structures influence scholarly interpretation. Ready's "two tribes" framework suggests that methodological differences may be less significant than institutional pressures that shape scholarly conclusions.

Several significant contradictions emerge within this scholarly tradition. The most fundamental concerns Jonson's motivation and emotional state. American director Ted Story's essay emphasizes Jonson's humor and satirical pleasure in the deception and contrasts sharply with Greenwood's portrayal of Jonson as a writer constrained by social necessity and possibly conflicted about his role. Story's "Ben Jonson Made Me Laugh" suggests active enjoyment in the literary game, while Greenwood presents Jonson as operating under compulsion.

Similarly, the essays disagree about the scope of Jonson's knowledge and involvement. Canadian researcher Nina Green's essay suggests Jonson controlled even peripheral elements like the Stratford monument inscription, implying comprehensive management of the Shakespeare mythology. However, Waugh's "Sweet Swan of Avon" analysis suggests more limited involvement, focusing primarily on First Folio contributions.

Despite such methodological contradictions, the essays do demonstrate remarkable coherence around several core propositions. They consistently argue that orthodox interpretation of Jonson's testimony relies on selective reading that ignores contradictory evidence within Jonson's broader corpus. They agree that the First Folio represents a publishing project fundamentally different from normal early modern practice, requiring explanation beyond conventional literary history.

The collection's greatest strength lies in its cumulative effect. Individual arguments that might seem speculative gain credibility when multiple independent analyses point toward similar conclusions using different methodologies. Stritmatter's cryptographic analysis independently corroborates Rendall's historical documentation of Jonson's editorial control, while Green's linguistic analysis supports Greenwood's thesis about coordinated deception.

However, the collection's coherence does suffer somewhat from its reliance on negative evidence — demonstrating problems with orthodox interpretation rather than providing definitive proof of alternatives. The essays excel at revealing inconsistencies in traditional scholarship but struggle to establish positive proof of their own counter-narratives.

UNEXPECTED IMPLICATIONS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Perhaps the most striking unintended consequence of this scholarship is its implicit challenge to the nature of authorship itself. By demonstrating the sophisticated collaborative networks surrounding Renaissance publication, these essays inadvertently undermine the idea of individual authorship as a meaningful category. Ready's analysis of Cambridge University's more recent chronological revelations suggests that even clearly attributed works like Jonson's involve complex collaborative processes that resist simple attribution.

The essays also reveal the extraordinary sophistication of Renaissance literary culture. Stritmatter's cipher work implies that educated readers were expected to decode multiple layers of meaning, suggesting intellectual standards that challenge modern assumptions about historical literacy and textual consumption.

Paradoxically, the collection's detailed analysis of literary deception provides a template for understanding how textual authority is constructed and maintained across historical periods. The mechanisms Jonson allegedly used to establish Shakespeare's authorship — editorial control, strategic collaboration, institutional endorsement – surely mirror those used by modern academic institutions to maintain scholarly orthodoxy.

For modern readers, this collection of Jonsonian essays suggests that the relationship between Jonson and the Shakespeare project represents an impressive case study in how literary reputation can be manufactured and sustained across centuries. The sophisticated techniques allegedly employed — from cryptographic embedding to institutional coordination – seem to prefigure modern concerns about textual authenticity in digital environments.

The volume's challenge to orthodox scholarship certainly parallels contemporary debates about institutional authority across multiple disciplines. Ready's analysis of *academic avoidance* strategies resonates with broader discussions about how professional structures shape scholarly conclusions. The essays' demonstration that conventional wisdom can persist despite contradictory evidence certainly speaks to current concerns about institutional inertia and confirmation bias.

The most profound contradiction between these essays and prevailing scholarly belief concerns the nature of evidence itself. Orthodox Shakespeare scholarship treats the absence of contemporary contradiction as evidence for authenticity, while these essays treat the same absence as evidence of a successful deception. This epistemological divide suggests fundamental disagreement about how historical truth is established and maintained.

Interestingly, current trends in digital humanities and computational analysis may provide new tools for resolving these disputes. The kind of systematic textual analysis Stritmatter uses could be scaled across entire corpora, potentially revealing patterns invisible to traditional literary analysis. Similarly, network analysis of Renaissance social and publishing connections might well illuminate the collaborative structures these essays describe.

CONCLUSION: THE ARCHITECTURE OF LITERARY TRUTH

These twelve essays collectively argue that Ben Jonson was not merely Shakespeare's contemporary but the master architect of Shakespeare's literary immortality. Whether through conscious deception or unconscious collaboration, Jonson emerges as the figure most responsible for the textual and institutional structures that have sustained the traditional Shakespeare attribution for four centuries.

The collection's most profound contribution may therefore be its demonstration that literary authority depends not on intrinsic textual properties but on the sophisticated coordination of multiple cultural institutions — editorial, academic, commemorative, and critical. In revealing the mechanisms allegedly used to construct the Stratfordian authorship, these essays provide a blueprint for understanding how literary truth is manufactured, distributed, and preserved across historical periods.

The ultimate meta-question these essays pose is not so much whether Shakespeare was someone else, but rather whether authorship itself means what we think it means. In pursuing the former question, Stritmatter and the collection's authors have inadvertently illuminated the latter. And in doing so, they have provided tools for understanding literary authority that extend far beyond Renaissance England into the digital age and beyond.

ENDNOTE

1 Allison Richards is an independent scholar and longtime Shakespeare researcher who resides in Massachusetts. She did a previous book review for JSE in in the special issue on the Shakespeare Authorship Question (Summer 2023, volume 37, issue 2). Readers are asked to note that the name Allison Richards is a pseudonym being used with the express knowledge and permission of the journal to protect the author's professional status and well-being.

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