

# Curse upon a God

Classical and Elizabethan Thought Blended

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One unusual result of Ben Jonson's lifelong zest for learning was his distinctive critical method. Intensely interested in classical literature, he blended classical thought with Renaissance enthusiasm in a natural manner.<sup>1</sup> He applied Horatian-Aristotelian critical theory to English literature, not as a direct imitator but as a mind thoroughly familiar with it, fusing it with his own ideas of beauty and structure. His light satire "An Execration Upon Vulcan" is a playful tongue-in-cheek curse on Vulcan, the Roman God of fire, whom Jonson accuses of intentionally burning the author's cherished library. In both form and content the poem illustrates this coalescence of classical and Elizabethan thought, the product of a lifetime of energetic study.

The atmosphere in which Jonson's judgment developed was one charged with almost as richly varied stimuli as the Hellenic environment of Aristotle. Old conceptions of the universe were being shattered by discoveries of new countries and by emerging science; religious tenets were being challenged; landed aristocracies were being weakened by the increasingly wealthy middle class. The sanctions of moral and political life were shifting from the supernatural and authoritative to the rational and independent.

There prevailed a sense of inadequacy of human knowledge, consequent sensitivity to dualism and contradictions, concern with paradox as expressing complexity of truth, belief in wholesome effect of doubt, conviction that where knowledge falters, a right life can supply the only confidence known to man.<sup>2</sup>

Christian dogmas were pitted against some basic needs of

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<sup>1</sup>Although Jonson is frequently called Jacobean, his ideology is based on Elizabethan thought.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret Wiley, *The Subtle Knot* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 59.

man's nature, and the result was questioning thought. From the midst of this struggle, learned men welcomed the classical optimism in man's inherent goodness as a clue to more mature understanding of Christianity. The middle class showed great faith in learning, not only for economic and social advancement but also as a means of religious salvation; for, since reason, understanding and will were believed to be in the upper hierarchy of the brain, their development was supposedly conducive to growth of one's righteous will.<sup>3</sup> To such stimuli Jonson responded enthusiastically.

As a child, he had experienced tension-creating controversy between a bricklaying stepfather who valued work done with his hands and young Ben's thoughts of his own deceased father, a minister descended from gentry who wanted him to become well versed in Latin. In addition to this, Jonson himself had had a fairly unstable childhood personality, as evidenced by his constant need for recognition and the habit of boasting which stayed with him all his life. Fortunately he compensated by a grim determination to show the world that his study habits were of great value, and the result was a rapid advance to the position of leading poet of England. His social mobility gave him an emotionally detached knowledge of both the middle and upper classes—excellent equipment for satire. He emerged with "an elaborate wit wrought out by his own industry."<sup>4</sup> That this industry continued in full force was obvious from the number of works he had in the process of completion at the age of fifty-one, when his library burned; translation of Horace's "Art of Poesie" with notes derived from Aristotle, a grammar, a story of his journey into Scotland in verse, three books of history, and religious poems. Following his customary habit of boasting, he implied they were worth far more than the popular literature of his time, and called them "some parts . . . of search, and mastery in the Arts."<sup>5</sup>

Critics who believed this statement of unpublished works to be the main value of "An Execration Upon Vulcan" have missed Jonson's main purpose. A superficial reading does give

<sup>3</sup>E. M. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: MacMillan, 1944), p. 65.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Fuller, *The Worthies of England* (London: Blackfriar Press, 1952), p. 382.

<sup>5</sup>*The Poems of Ben Jonson*, ed. Bernard H. Newdigate (London: Oxford, 1936), "An Execration Upon Vulcan," lines 88-103—hereafter found in text within parentheses.



the impression of hodge podge (see McEuen, *Classical Influence Upon the Tribe of Ben*, p. 46), but closer scrutiny rewards the discerning reader with humorous insights into the popular taste of the seventeenth century. The author looked regretfully across the charred ruins of his own carefully selected books to the material being read by the public. Had he been given warning, Jonson moans, he could have sent Vulcan reams of worthless writing to devour, and he points out the shoddy, though popular, works of his day.

Perhaps one reason the poem seems jumbled is that its unusual form is not evident in the first reading. Following his custom of fusing the classical and the Elizabethan, Jonson intertwined the forms of an Anglican prayer of praise and a classical satire. The praise is, of course, parodied into a curse on Vulcan, the Roman god of fire who had burned his library. As in classical satires, the poem moves from a statement of Vulcan's specific crime to a denunciation of the god and then to a proclamation of his other crimes, such as the burning of the Globe theater. Knitted into the poem is a facetious appeal to reason which is typically seventeenth century:

Had I wrote treason there, or heresie,  
 Imposture, witchcraft, charmes, or blasphemie,  
 I had deserv'st then, thy consuming lookes,  
 Perhaps, to have been burned with my bookes . . .  
 If none of these, then why this fire? Or find  
 A cause before; or leave me one behind.  
(14-17, 26, 27)

Yet it ends with the satirist's curse, the formal execration which was so powerful a force in Greek thought:

Pox on thee Vulcan, thy Pandora's pox,  
 And all the Evils that flew out of her box  
 Light on thee; Or if these plagues will not doo,  
 Thy Wives pox on thee, B(esse) B(raughton)'s too.  
(212-215)

There are other evidences of classical satires, but also striking differences. Classical satires were written for the aristocracy; this was written for the middle class, who were busy collecting books which Jonson considered "not worth the paper they are written on." Use of the complete poem as a curse, and its address to a god rather than to the people being satirized, differed greatly from the formal satires of the

seventeenth century. While most of the latter are semi-serious poetry with a deadly serious purpose, Jonson's waggish poem has a purpose considerably less caustic than its pose. Herford and Simpson state that it "pleasantly simulates satiric invective—almost unmatched in verse of serio-comic bravery."<sup>6</sup> Any reader who is conscious of Johnson's profuse love of fun would recognize it for what it is: a continued haranguing, as much for the author's own pleasure as for his readers.

Thou mightst have yet enjoy'd thy crueltye  
 With some more thrift, and more varietie:  
 Thou mightst have had me perish piece by piece,  
 To light Tobacco, or save roasted Geese;  
 Sindrome Capons, or poore Pigges, froping their eyes;  
 Condemn'd me to the Ovens with the pies;  
 And so, have kept me dying a whole age,  
 Not ravish'd all hence in a minutes rage. (49-56)

The basic skeleton of "An Execration Upon Vulcan" is a prayer form of the Elizabethan Anglican church, to which Jonson belonged. A comparison of the poem's sections to those of an Anglican prayer of praise, such as that written by Bishop Andrews in *Preces Privatae*,<sup>7</sup> emphasizes not only the parallel structures, but Jonson's jocosely inverted meaning as well:

1. Adoration—Andrews: Attitude of humble respect.  
     Jonson: "Thou lame God of fire!" (1)
2. Confession—A. I repent my sins.  
     J. What have I done to deserve such treatment?
3. Petition—A. Request for personal help.  
     J. Request for Vulcan's ruin of substitute material.
4. Thanksgiving—A. Praise of God, listing His blessings.  
     J. Denunciation, listing Vulcan's most devastating acts.
5. Intercession—A. Prayer for others.  
     J. Why the Whitehall and Globe fires?
6. Praise—A. Request for God's presence. Praise.  
     J. Request for Vulcan's presence—elsewhere. Curse.

<sup>6</sup>C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, *Ben Jonson*, Vol. VII (Oxford, 1952), p. 90.

<sup>7</sup>The form is most easily recognized in "Order Where Morning and Evening Prayers Shall Be Used," *Liturgies and Occasional Forms of Prayer*, Set forth in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, ed. Rev. Wm. Keatinge, B. D. (Cambridge, 1847), pp. 53-61.



The parody follows traditional prayer form throughout: the address to the god, the petition containing reasoned thought, the praise (which in this case was reproach), the recounting of the god's "blessings" (listing their most devastating effects), the adoration (revilement), the request for God's presence (elsewhere), and the ending of praise (the curse). Although the poem would have benefited by the omission of the god's grosser misdemeanors, this confusing addition was necessary because Thanksgiving and Intercession were integral parts of seventeenth century Anglican prayer.

Not only the poem's form, but its content, blends the theories of such classical writers as Horace, Martial, or Juvenal with Elizabethan vigor and originality. Classical literary theory has been used as a guide to criticism of seventeenth century literature. Jonson loved to call himself "Horace," but he lacked the subtle skill of his idol. Nevertheless, it is to Horace that he is indebted for his basic idea that good literature should be the product of consistent self-correction necessary for art.<sup>8</sup>

Like Horace he considered it beneficial for an author to imitate the material of other skilled authors, adding and changing as he wishes. The Roman author's attitude toward the function of poetry was to instruct by pleasing, or, as Jonson interpreted it, to absorb the attention in order to communicate a body of wisdom. This is the reason Jonson stated that the "learned library of Don Quixote" (30) should be more fit for the fire than his own: it contained little wisdom. Perhaps he felt a kinship to Horace, for one might easily assume that Morris was speaking of the seventeenth century poet rather than the Roman when he stated in his introduction to *Horace—the Satires and Epistles* (London, 1909), p. 13:

For the work of the critic he was all the better qualified because his own work was not inspired, but was the result of a conscious process. He had thought much of the choice of words, of the combination of the phrases, of the enlargement of vocabulary, and all that he says on such things as weighty with authority.

Jonson was one of the few Elizabethan writers to realize the necessity for using Aristotle's thought to aid in under-

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<sup>8</sup>Helen Griffith, "The Horatian Strain in Literature," *Horace: Three Phases of His Influence* (Chicago, 1936), p. 105.

standing Horace's literary theory. It was a great loss that "All the old Venusine, in Poetrie,/And lighted by the Stagerite" (88-89) should have perished in the fire. Aristotle also originated the ideas of unity, harmony and proportion which his seventeenth century admirer was to expound.

Jonson believed his contemporaries could learn much from Martial about variety and dignity of form, and attempted himself to write epigrams in all the variety of forms Martial had used. This may have been the incentive for writing an execration instead of the customary satire. From Martial also came Jonson's idea that wit should arouse intellectual appreciation primarily and an emotional reaction only secondarily.<sup>9</sup> His attitude toward the "heathen abominations" Talmud and Alcoran and those following (64-70) is similar to that in Juvenal's satire, as is the gloomy critical attitude toward the burning of Whitehall and the Globe. (154-7, 131)

Jonson, whom Herford and Simpson label "the chief of Jacobean humanists" (II, 343), drew his pattern of what ought to be from what had been done well previously and scrutinized classical literature for clues it could give to better techniques of writing. He reacted as a disciplined classical scholar to the watery sweetness of *Amadis de Gaule* (28) and other similar works. Following Horace's theory that poetry should have improvement of society as its principal aim, Jonson looked for sermonizing in literature. He believed literature, like painting, should abstain from vice, "lest they spoil men's manners while attempting to better their minds."<sup>10</sup> Were Jonson alive today, he would be viciously attacking modern books in which exploitation of sex covers a deficiency of subject matter, for his moral judgment was based not on the conventional Christian attitude but on the belief that virtue lay in the improvement of one's thought and that sin lay in ignorance and stupidity (Baum, p. 33). Literature, therefore, should be the product of and stimulant for great intellectual energy. It should induce "not reverie but intellectual interest, not romantic rhapsody but humane concern" (*Discoveries*, p. 58). Thus, we can readily understand his disgust with "The whole summe/ Of errant Knighthood, with the Dames,

<sup>9</sup>Paul Nixon, *Martial and the Modern Epigram* (New York, 1927), p. 164.

<sup>10</sup>Helen Watts Baum, *The Satiric and the Didactic in Ben Jonson's Poetry* (Chapel Hill, 1947), p. 31.



the Dwarfes;/ The charmed Boates, and the enchanted Wharfes" (65-67). The melodious soft poetry he repudiated lacked too much of the sterner stuff which his mind demanded. In 1623 such literary criticism was startlingly different, for most authors were placing heavy emphasis on artistic method.

Through close association with the classics Jonson realized that to be remarkable wit must contain more than mere word-play, and would gladly have offered "spun out Riddles" (32) to satiate Vulcan's appetite. However, classical restraints could not dim Jonson's appreciation of Elizabethan exuberance in wit. This energetic exbricklayer thoroughly enjoyed startling his readers with extreme statements which masked a barb, such as:

See the World's Ruines! nothing but the piles  
Left! and wit since to cover it with Tiles.  
The Brethren, they streight nois'd it out for Newes,  
'Twas verily some Relique of the Stewes.  
(136-140)

His comprehension of beauty in literature, as in life, lay primarily in his appreciation of the underlying symmetry. He searched for similarities and bonds between the various planes of existence: the divine, the universal, the national, and the individual (Tillyard, p. 69). In poetry he found beauty of order representative of the patterns he found in the numerous aspects of life. Such emphasis upon structure is evident in his "Discoveries" wherein Jonson recommends that a piece of writing be knitted together, with each part having such a relation to the whole that if it were taken away the whole would either be changed or destroyed (p. 85). The anagrams, acrostics and such pretensions as "A paire of Scisars and a Combe in verse" (34-38) he abhorred, because they subjected the thought to an unnatural, useless form.

Paramount in his idea of beauty also was a concern for the choice of language. Like Horace, he believed an author should choose his words carefully, weighing their effect. He preferred simple words in a natural syntax rather than pretentious words. Note the simplicity in the poem's opening:

And who to me this, thou lame Lord of fire,  
What had I done that might call on thine ire? . . .  
I ne're attempted Vulcan 'gainst thy life;  
Nor made least line of love to thy loose Wife; (1,2,5,6)

However, Jonson's demand for a natural did not mean a limited diction. His zeal for study prompted an enthusiasm for beautiful new words or forgotten words which fitted the tone of a poem. Dryden (*Works of John Dryden*, ed. Scott-Salsbury, London, 1892, p. 737) noted that Jonson witnessed and aided not only a tremendous growth in vocabulary but also progress toward uniformity in grammar, pronunciation and spelling. The seventeenth-century critic realized that language was constantly changing, but he differed from our modern view in that he felt the change should be stopped. It was this desire for stability that he had in mind when he wrote the Grammar to teach "The puritie of Language" (92). Herford and Simpson found that, owing to his habit of searching for perfection, he valued brevity, terseness and emphasis (II, 412). Consequently, linguistic satire was a natural form of expression for Jonson himself. For example:

Had I fore-knowne of this thy least desire  
 T'have held a Triumph, or a feast of fire,  
 Especially in paper; that, that steame  
 Had tickled thy large nothrill, many a Reame  
 To redeeme mine, I had sent in enough,  
 Thou should'st have cry'd, and all been proper stuffe.  
(58-63).

I suggest that the playful poem "An Execration Upon Vulcan" fuses classical and seventeenth century thought into a judgment of literature far superior to others of that time. Jonson's lifelong habits of energetic deliberation are directly responsible. Drummond, in recording the former's conversations during his Scottish visit, stated, "Where he refers to poetry in general he speaks as the habitual critic, concerned to maintain a scale of values in literary appreciation, in defiance of the world's indifference, and according to Aristotle, distinguish between poet and verser."<sup>11</sup> At a time when few were critical, this boisterous humorist led England toward a clearer understanding of literary values.

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<sup>11</sup>Ralph S. Walker, *Ben Jonson's Timber or Discoveries* (Syracuse, 1953), p. 127.