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Ben Jonson's Comedies on the Modern Stage by Ejner J. Jensen
(review)

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scendental and immanent view of life that is suggested and which would take Calderón to a position that the dramatist himself would not have accepted.

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Ejner J. Jensen. *Ben Jonson's Comedies on the Modern Stage*. Theater and Dramatic Studies, No. 27. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985. Pp. viii + 158. \$34.95.

One of the standard (and model) works of performance history is Robert Gale Noyes' *Ben Jonson on the English Stage: 1660-1776*. Noyes not only illuminates the history of Jonson criticism, but also offers a concise overview of English theater history from Shakespeare to Sheridan. Performance historians and Jonsonians have felt the need for a companion to Noyes' book, a work that would pick up the history of Jonson's work on stage from 1776 until the present. Ejner Jensen's *Ben Jonson's Comedies on the Modern Stage* does so, covering all professional productions of Jonson's plays through 1972, which was Jonson's quatercentenary. It is a worthy companion to Noyes' book, although one might wish it gave a fuller account of Jonson's works and his influence on the stage.

Within the limits that Jensen sets—professional stage productions before 1972 of the comedies—he is thorough and, as far as I can judge, accurate. In the case of *Bartholomew Fair*, for example, Jensen does discuss all the relevant professional productions and several amateur productions. He omits university productions by the Marlowe Society (1947, 1977) and the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1970); professional productions by the Nottingham Playhouse, the Young Vic, the Round House, and the National Youth Theatre (all after 1972); and a 1968 production on Radio 3. Since none of these eight productions falls within the boundaries he has established, one cannot be overly surprised by their absence; furthermore, his discussion of the ten productions that he does cover is intelligent and balanced. And what is true in the case of *Bartholomew Fair* is true for the other plays he discusses: *Eastward Ho*, *Epicoene*, *Every Man in His Humour*, *Volpone*, and *The Alchemist*. Each receives a tightly-focused and careful discussion.

Nonetheless, this book would have been richer had Jensen been a bit more flexible in setting his limits. After all, important productions have occurred since 1972: for example, the competing Round House and Young Vic *Bartholomew Fairs* or Peter Hall's production of *Volpone* at the National. It also is regrettable that Jensen elected to omit William Poel's *Poetaster* because he thinks that it "seems to have been revived exclusively on the grounds of its historical interest" (p. 5). In his autobiography *A Life in a Wooden O*, Ben Iden Payne writes about Poel's production of the play at Carnegie Tech:

I was greatly disappointed to be unable to attend either rehearsals or performances because of commitments in New York. My regret was somewhat allayed, however, when I learned that Poel had not relied on his usual quasi-Elizabethan setting. (p. 151)

Payne's remark suggests that historical interest was not the play's chief attraction for Poel.

Moreover, had Jensen ventured further than orthodox stage productions, he would have found much material. There have been productions on radio (for example, the BBC Home Service version of *The Alchemist*), on videotape (the Canadian Broadcasting Company *Volpone*), and on film (the French film of Zweig's *Volpone*). This last example serves as a reminder that Jonson, like Falstaff, is not only witty in himself, but the cause that wit is in other men. In addition to Stefan Zweig's recension of *Volpone*, Jonson has inspired such adaptations as *The Honeypot*, *Sly Fox*, *The Mortimer Touch*, and, perhaps best-known, the Strauss-Zweig opera, *Die Schweigsame Frau*. Jensen ignores these works. Equally frustrating is his decision to ignore virtually all criticism of Jonson written after 1972.

Jensen's refusal to consider these works that fall outside his boundaries may seem an error of judgment, but it also suggests one of his greatest strengths: his absolute consistency. Initially I wished that Jensen (like Noyes) had included a tabular listing of the productions he discusses, but I soon realized that the discussion was so well organized that locating a particular production was easy. Jensen begins his discussion of each play with a summary of individual productions, and then he discusses each production in greater detail.

Jensen's opening and closing chapters describe critical attitudes toward Jonson in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. His analysis of the fall and rise of Jonson's reputation is sensible, noting the antipathy of Romantic sensibilities to Jonson and the developing appetite for satire in the twentieth century. Particularly valuable is his discussion of Charles Lamb's contribution to our understanding of Renaissance authors and of the weakness in Lamb's work. One noteworthy feature of the closing chapter is that Jensen refuses to force his data to support a thesis or a fashionable attitude. For example, he argues that shifts in literary criticism have had no significant influence on Jonson productions and that a play can only exist fully in performance. Neither insight is altogether comforting if one is an academic critic. Jensen is far from being a nihilist, however, in the relatively traditional way that he treats trends in Jonson criticism up to 1972.

The book has a few typographical errors: I noted transpositions (pp. 21, 47), omissions (pp. 43, 115), and a mysterious superscript without footnote (p. 40). But these are of little importance; what matters is the growing recognition that Jonson is a dramatist whose work succeeds more fully on a stage than in a library. Jensen has written a useful companion to Noyes' book.

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