

'This truest glass': Ben Jonson's verse epistles and the construction of the ideal patron

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly work done on the Renaissance verse epistle has usually considered the recipient a stable subject that is not significantly affected by the letters addressed to them. Erasmus's notion that a letter is "a conversation between two absent persons" epitomizes antique to early modern epistolary theories. This article argues, however, that verse letters make possible the active creation of the ideal patron. Among the many Renaissance poets who penned verse letters to actual and potential patrons, Ben Jonson was the most spectacularly successful; this success is directly related to his epistolary-poetic bids for patronage. In this essay, I use the *Epistle to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland* and the *Epistle to Katherine, Lady Aubigny* to explore the way Ben Jonson actively constructs and insistently pushes his addressees into what he sees as their ideal selves, as patrons of literature.

John Donne's famous line "Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle souls;/For, thus friends absent speak" (Smith ed. 1996:214) epitomizes antique to early modern theories that a letter is "a conversation between two absent persons," as Erasmus explained in *A Formula* (Sowards ed. 1985:258). This, and Erasmus' other argument that a letter "will vary according to the person addressed" (*On the Writing of Letters*, Sowards ed. 1985:19), have served to a large degree to define the work done both on the verse epistle in general and on specific writers' particular uses of the genre. Theories of the verse epistle thus far have also tended to consider the recipient a stable subject that is in no significant way affected by the letters addressed to them. I will show, on the other hand, that verse letters addressed to patrons make possible the active creation of the ideal patron. Poetic epistles addressed to the Countess of Rutland and to Lady Aubigny are the testing ground for my exploration of the way Ben Jonson actively constructs and insistently pushes his addressees into what he sees as their ideal selves, as patrons of literature. Stanley Fish (1984:34) claims that Jonson presents "the objects of [his]

praise to themselves [which] say in effect, 'Sir or Madame So and So, meet Sir or Madam So and So, whom, of course, you already know'", and rhetorically inquires, "Isn't its reader, its author-reader, directed to look at something he [or she] already is?" (p.32) – my answer is a definitive "No". If the ideal relationship, and therefore the ideal patron, existed already then the verse epistles arguably would not need to exist either – at least not in the rhetorically intricate form that they do now. Because Fish does not acknowledge this complexity, he can, with little difficulty, also assert that Ben Jonson was "a poet whose every title would seem to mark him as a man dependent not only for his sustenance but for his very identity on the favour and notice of his social superiors" (p.27), or, as is more commonly thought, that Jonson's verse letters to patrons were simple "begging poems" (Evans 1989:386). Robert C. Evans explains why this might be the case: "A play might fail in the theatre because it did not please, but a poet might fail at court if his personality were unpleasant [b]ecause the patronage system during this period was tied so intimately to the predilections of individual patrons" (p.385). While it is certainly true that Jonson relied on his patrons' favour, it is also true that, at least in the case of the epistles to the Countess of Rutland and Lady Aubigny, they are, because of Jonson's rhetorical machinations, equally dependent on him for their identities (as patrons). Epistles to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland and Katherine, Lady Aubigny are not the only examples of Jonson's rhetorical construction of the ideal patron, but I limit my focus to them.

I am not the only critic to question Fish's stance on Jonson's verse epistles. Evans also directly contradicts Fish's notion that in his patronage poems Jonson addresses stable subjects who are in no way effected by these poetic-epistolary exchanges. I differ from Evans on two fronts, however. First, he asserts that first, all of the patronage poems are destructive and manipulative. Secondly, Evans argues that Jonson, in spite of such manipulation, remains the most vulnerable party in these exchanges. I argue, rather, that Jonson's whole project relies on his attempts to change the rules of the game. Rather than subscribing to the negative view of patronage relations that Evans perceives as epitomizing Jonson's verse epistles to patrons, Jonson is subjecting patronage games based on fear and manipulation to criticism and attempting to present and enact a more positive alternative. Thus, I use "construction" advisedly to convey a positive sense of building up and creating rather than the negative and destructive connotations discussed by Evans. When negative moments occur in the poetry, I would suggest that Jonson strategically includes them to remind his patrons of the ugly alternatives to *his* way of playing the patronage game. Nonetheless, the presence of such negativity creates a tension in the *Epistle to Rutland* not seen in epistles to other patrons.

Jonson's *Epistle to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland* was presented to its addressee as a New Year's gift for 1600 and presumably circulated amongst Elizabeth's friends and family before being published in 1616. As the daughter of Philip Sidney, the patriarch of Renaissance England's "most important aristocratic circle of literary patrons" (Van den Berg 2000:3), Elizabeth was financially well-off and laden with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic capital." Evans (1989:39-40) sees the *Epistle to Elizabeth* as "an exceptionally representative example of Jonson's patronage poetry" in that it plays on "his superiors' insecurities" and "threaten[s] their reputation and credit." In this verse epistle, Jonson's primary rhetorical moves include contrasting financial gain with virtue and discussing Elizabeth's literal and literary lineage. While Evans reads these moves as manipulative, I assert that rather than trying to reduce his patron to fear and paranoia, he is trying to build her identity as patron on a stable ground of mutual beneficence in sharp contrast to those who *would* threaten and bribe their patrons.

In the poem's complex introductory lines, Jonson highlights the differences in his and Elizabeth's positions in life and also suggests that the exchange of money is essentially corrupt:

Madam,
Whilst that, for which, all virtue now is sold,
And almost every vice, almighty gold,
That which, to boot with hell, is thought worth heaven,
And, for it, life, conscience, yea, souls are given,
Toils, by grave custom, up and down the court,
To every squire, or groom, that will report,
Well, or ill, only, all the following year,
Just to the weight their this day's presents bear;
While it makes hushiers serviceable men,
And some one apteth to be trusted, then,
Though never after; while it gains the voice
Of some grand peer, whose air doth make rejoice
The fool that gave it; who will want, and weep,
When his proud patron's favours are asleep;
While thus it buys great grace, and hunts poor fame;
Runs between man, and man; 'tween dame, and dame;
Solders cracked friendship; makes love last a day;
Or perhaps less: whilst gold bears all this sway,
I, that have none (to send you) send you verse.
(*Rutland* ll.1-19)

Jonson here distances himself from "that for which all virtue is sold" by refusing to participate in such economic exchanges – he sends Elizabeth a poem, which is "A present, which (if elder writs rehearse / The truth of

times), was once of more esteem" (*Rutland* ll.20) than "almighty gold." While Jonson cannot, as much as he claims he would not, participate in a purely financial relationship with Rutland, he sets them both apart from such viciousness anyway. Rather than simply the exchange of money then, it is a particular kind of relationship that Jonson is criticizing. As bad as the hushiers, squires, and grooms that relay gossip to their courtly superiors in exchange for social and economic favour are the "proud patrons whose favours [go to] sleep." Jonson sets himself, and therefore Elizabeth, apart from this merely capitalist exchange between hack poets and fickle patrons by asserting the worth of his gift. His gift, unlike the gossipy poetry of his contemporaries, is not part of an exchange where "gold [is] made [a] weapon to cut throats" (*Rutland* ll.23). Rather, it rewards one's poetic genius and allows it to continue to thrive. While his competitors write "dross" (*Rutland* ll.27) for "noble ignorants" (*Rutland* ll.28), Jonson's gift of true poetry, he writes, "With you, I know ... will find grace" (*Rutland* ll.30).

Elizabeth will, of course, return grace, that is, virtuous gold, for the poem because Jonson is a great poet. He never asserts that his efforts are humble or inferior to her own, which was a common trope in poems to literary patrons – for example, Donne's somewhat cringing verse letters to Lucy, Countess of Bedford. The very fact that he writes to her, Jonson's confidence suggests, is because she is worthy of his poetic attention and can separate the wheat from the chaff of poetic endeavour. Barbara Smith (1995:102) writes, "[Rutland] already, as a poet herself, understands and values what she is supposed to. He need not convince her of anything." Yet, if Jonson's relationship to her were that uncomplicated, the epistle would not have needed to be so complex. Near the end of the poem, Jonson promises to "like a rich, and golden pyramid, / Borne up by statues, rear your head" (*Rutland* ll.83-4) – but this is conditional upon Elizabeth living up to the specific standards of patronage he creates for her in the poem.

Alongside this virtue-vice opposition, Jonson uses Elizabeth's lineage in his construction of her ideal patron identity. Having stated that he is sure she will show him favour, he reminds her that she is a Sidney: "For what a sin 'gainst your great father's spirit, / Were it to think, that you should not inherit / His love unto the muses" (*Rutland* ll.31-3). Jonson's sin would be to think Elizabeth did not inherit her father's love of literature; this implies, I would suggest, the corollary that if Elizabeth fails to act like a Sidney, it is *she* who commits a sin – against herself, her father, and her poet. Jonson continues,

Nature you a dowry gave,
Worth an estate, treble to that you have.
Beauty, I know, is good, and blood is more;

Riches thought most: but, madam, think what store
The world hath seen, which all these had in trust,
And now lie lost in their forgotten dust.
(*Rutland* ll.35-40)

This passage makes it clear that this relationship is as much about her reputation and identity as it is about Jonson's. As a Sidney, Elizabeth has a particular identity that should be independent of Jonson. However, his explicit invocation of that character makes it necessary that she fulfill it. Jonson makes the same move in his short epistle to Lady Mary Wroth. He points out that Wroth is "a Sidney, though unnamed" (*Wroth* ll.4) and asks her, "being named, how little doth that name / Need any muse's praise to give it fame?" (*Wroth* ll.5-6). This, of course, is ironic. Reminding Elizabeth of an already established set of behaviours she must adopt as a Sidney is integral to Jonson's construction of the identity Rutland must assume if she is what her name and station claim.

The logical conclusion to this argument is that if nobles "lie lost in their forgotten dust" it is because they have not earned the right to be immortalized by a great poet. Jonson's assertion that "It is the muse, alone, can raise to heaven" (*Rutland* ll.41) contains several layers of meaning. In one sense, Jonson is the muse and the line thus contains an implicit reminder that he holds her reputation both here and hereafter in his hands. While the poem that contains this reminder has been written, and therefore potentially immortalized her already, Jonson can always write a revisionist palinode so that she is remembered negatively. Or, he could simply choose not to publish it. On the other hand, she is the muse, granting him the means to continue writing poetry; it is in this second reading that we see how hard Jonson is working to alter the negative lines of patron/poet relations. How she behaves determines whether she will lie lost in forgotten dust or be remembered, and if remembered, whether for well or for ill. In other words, negative relations are at least partly the fault of unworthy patrons, which, of course, Jonson has been distinguishing Rutland so clearly from. This powerful line is followed by a list of famous figures who are remembered now only because poets chose to immortalize them:

There were brave men, before
Ajax, or Idomen, or all the store,
That Homer brought to Troy; yet none so live:
Because they lacked the sacred pen, could give
Like life unto them. Who heaved Hercules
Unto the stars? Or the Tyndarides?
Who placèd Jason's Argo in the sky?
Or set Ariadne's crown so high?

Who made a lamp of Berenice's hair?
Or lifted Cassiopea in her chair?
But only poets, rapt with rage divine?
And such, or my hopes fail, shall make you shine.
(*Rutland* ll.53-64)

While certainly reiterating Jonson's hope for Elizabeth's "grace", the final line of this passage also expresses Jonson's hope that she will be "heroic" enough to merit being immortalized by poets "rapt with rage divine," as Homer and Jonson clearly are.

Jonson's *Epistle. To Katherine, Lady Aubigny*, like the epistle to Elizabeth, engages in a lengthy rhetorical construction of the ideal literary patron. Jonson wrote the *Epistle. To Katherine*, whose husband was Jonson's patron as well, in late 1611 (Riggs 1989:180-81). When he wrote this poem, Jonson was in a much more financially and socially stable position than when he wrote the epistle to Elizabeth. By 1612, Jonson had arguably become the most spectacularly successful patronage poet in the English Court. His position as premier masque-maker for James I, after all, was attributable to "the Countess of Bedford who secured Jonson's commission to write the scripts" (Smith 1995:43). Hence, there is not the same level of tension suffusing this later poem as there is in the epistle to Elizabeth. Rather, we (and his patron) see a more confident Jonson who has had significant evidence of success in his positive attempts at patron construction. Evans claims that the epistle to Rutland is representative of Jonson's patronage poetics because of its betrayal of insecurities. As has already been discussed, the epistle to Rutland is meant to be more constructive than manipulative. Moreover, the *Epistle. To Katherine* and other self-assured poems such as *An Epistle to Sir Edward Sackville*, *To Lucy Countess of Bedford*, *To Esmé Lord Aubigny*, and *To Mary, Lady Wroth* as a group reveal a greater confidence than the solitary anxiousness distinguishing the epistle to Rutland.

Fish also sees the *Epistle. To Katherine* as a representative example in his discussion of Jonson's relationship to his patrons, but for different reasons than I do. The deceptively straightforward final lines of the poem, the central metaphor of which is the mirror, suggest a clear-cut reflection of Katherine: "Madam, be bold to use this truest glass: / Wherein, your form, you still the same shall find; / Because nor it can change, nor such a mind" (*Aubigny* ll.122-24). The "truest glass" Jonson refers to here is, of course, the poem itself. The rest of the poem, however, including its opening lines, complicate Fish's straightforward reading:

'Tis grown almost a danger to speak true
Of any good mind, now: there are so few.
The bad, by number, are so fortified,
As what they have lost to expect, they dare deride.
So both the praised, and praisers suffer: yet,
For others' ill, ought none their good forget.
I, therefore, profess myself in love
With every virtue, ...
(*Aubigny* ll.1-8)

Here Jonson makes a point of highlighting his own worth as he does in the epistle to Elizabeth. The result of this self-praising is that Jonson suggests that any patronage relationship with him is by nature set apart from the bad, "so fortified" in number. And by putting himself before Katherine as one defining aspect of a virtuous association, Jonson implies that he has at least as much power as she does in making the relationship honourable. Katherine is not addressed until Jonson has defined both what he is and what he is not. He is not vicious, he is virtuous, and in the face of others' "cap'tal crimes, t'indict my wit" (*Aubigny* ll.14), he has, he writes, "not altered yet my look" (*Aubigny* ll.16). The latter line is important because it hints at the image of the mirror that Jonson is about to invoke in his constructive praise of his patron. He continues with his descriptions of the viciousness of those around him in contrast to his own steadfast "look", and for the first time, salutes his addressee:

I, madam, am become your praiser. Where,
If it may stand with your soft blush to hear
Yourself but told unto yourself, and see
In my charácter, what your features be,
You will not from the paper slightly pass:
Look then, and see yourself.
(*Aubigny* ll.21-25; 29)

This is an extremely evocative passage and crucial to understanding precisely what Jonson is doing with the mirror metaphor. He claims to be presenting Katherine to herself, yet, it is only in his "character" that she can see this image – Jonson's use of "character" being a threefold pun meaning (i) the printed words of the poem, (ii) "strongly developed moral qualities" (Woods 1994:20), and (iii) his own face, which he claims earlier he has "not altered yet". Thus, she is defined both by and in relation to Jonson – which undermines Fish's suggestion that Jonson introduces his patrons to someone they already know (1984:34) and Smith's assertion that Lady Aubigny "need not 'strive' for anything, because she already embodies virtue, and requires no further guidance" (Smith 1995:102).

When discussing the *Epistle. To Katherine*, Fish (1984:33-34) asserts that the “poem is a mirror in the sense of being blank, empty of positive assertions, filled with lists of what Lady Aubigny is not.” This is true but the implications and results of these absences require further explanation. The image of the mask, in relation to the mirror particularly, is of vital importance. Having established that Katherine’s mirror comprises the poet himself, as well as the poem he writes, Jonson, in one of these long lists of what Katherine is not, presents a seemingly incongruous diatribe against the use of cosmetics: “Let them on powders, oils, and paintings, spend, / Till that no usurer, nor his bawds dare lend / Them, or their officers: and no man know, / Whether it be a face they wear, or no” (*Aubigny* ll.77-80). In fact, this is closely bound to Jonson’s image of the mirror which defines, as much as it reflects, the gazer. The suggestion seems to be that those who create themselves, apply their own outward face, as it were, are the epitome of vice which Jonson discusses earlier. As Smith (1995:102) notes, “Katherine is told to use this ‘truest glass’, but not to improve herself in any way.” However, it is not alteration itself that is problematic; rather, the difference between virtue and vice is in what materials are used and by whom (that is, the virtuous brush of someone like Jonson, or one of the “squires and grooms” he criticizes in the epistle to Rutland). He ultimately suggests that painting (a term meaning both to apply cosmetics and to describe something poetically) can be virtuous, but only when his addressee allows Jonson to do the bulk of the painting, that is, the making up of her (ideal) self for her.

Having never changed *his* look, Jonson asks why “I should faint; / Or fear to draw true lines, ‘cause others paint” (*Aubigny* ll.19-20)? Because he is true, his lines of poetry are as well – he cannot help but construct the best possible version of Katherine, which, it is suggested, would not exist without him. Jonson creates for her the “*truest* glass” in which to contemplate the best self he has made for her – and here “true” is to be understood as both authentic and good. The point is this: Jonson is using the mirror trope in the way the “mirror of princes” genre was used in the Middle Ages by poets such as Thomas Hoccleve. It is not meant to reflect the patroness and addressee as she is, as a real mirror would; rather, it shows her as she should be, according to Ben Jonson. This poetic mirror is designed specifically so that the addressee will see exactly what the poet/mirror-maker wants her to see – she does not look into this mirror in order to be able to create herself (to recall the cosmetics metaphor) – rather, her image is ready-made and it is expected that she will conform to what she finds there.

All of these machinations on Jonson’s part show that the poet’s role in the patronage relationship is both more complex and respectable than the designation “begging poem” suggests. Further, in the particular situation of verse letters written to patrons, acts of subject definition are necessarily

reciprocal and potentially positive, if both parties perform their parts. Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that the very exchange that Jonson has in mind, even in ideal situations, is imbalanced insofar as what is exchanged is not equivalent in any pragmatic way: “the patron supplies the poet with food, shelter, wine, money, and influence, and in return, receives a poem which, in most cases, is described as a gateway to immortality” (Smith 1995:33). While Jonson’s constructions of his recipients’ identities suggest that it is his patrons who must earn the right to support him, his admission that his gifts both ask for and depend on their “grace” may seem to weaken the strong, or at least, dynamic part he insists on playing in the patronage game. I would suggest as an alternative to this debilitating view the idea that Jonson does not see anything wrong with the imbalance of power that is an integral aspect of the patron-poet relationship. Rather, he approves of it as long as his patrons are playing their part – and all of his rhetorical constructions of patrons’ identities are to make them do just that, not to make them bosom friends or social equals. When everyone is doing what they are supposed to be doing – and writing great poetry, Jonson makes clear, is his part and no one can criticize him for that – there is nothing degrading at all about being patronized.

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'Nothing but papers, my lord'

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