

Complexity of Character in Jonson's *Sejanus*

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Abstract:

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Critics claim Jonson's *Sejanus*, the first of his only two surviving tragedies, lacks the emotional elements of more popular tragedies because Jonson relies on historical sources and simplifies his characters. This study first establishes Jonson's own unique requirements in tragedy that affect his character development, then it provides textual evidence of complex characters and offers a reading of the play with Rome, or the body politic, as the tragic hero.

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Introduction

*For rules are ever of less force, and valew, then experiments...
Among diverse opinions of an Art, and most of them contrary in themselves,
it is hard to make election; and therefore, though a man cannot invent new things after so many,
he may doe a welcome worke yet to help posterity to judge rightly of the old.
(Jonson, Discoveries 68)*

Ben Jonson's preference for experiments in tragedy resulted in two theatrical failures, *Sejanus His Fall* in 1603 and *Catiline His Conspiracy* in 1611. Of the former, the Oxford editors prophesy: "*Sejanus* can never be a popular play. Even when Jonson died, at the height of his poetic renown, audiences thought it 'irksome'" (Herford and Simpson II 27). This statement alludes to Leonard Digges' assessment of Jonson, who, in commemorating Shakespeare's Folio in 1640, made the first comparison between Jonson's and Shakespeare's tragedies:

So have I seene, when Caesar would appeare,
And on the Stage at halfe-sword parley were,
Brutus and *Cassius*: oh how the Audience,
Were ravish'd, with what wonder they went thence,
When some new day they would not brooke a line,
Of tedious (though well laboured) *Catilines*;
Sejanus too was irksome, they priz'de more
Honest *Iago*, or the jealous Moore. (qtd. in Pechter: 75)

Digges' compares the ease with which Shakespeare ravishes his audience to the intensity with which Jonson exhausts his. The poem's references to labor connote a strenuous amount of work, In being "laboured," the plays are highly elaborate, which implies excessive toil on Jonson's parts and, as a result, a heaviness and lack of spontaneity (OED 3). The toiling Jonson endured for *Sejanus* included developing his own deliberate style for tragedy as well as studying in depth

the classical sources from which he obtained his subject matter for his play. The result is tragedy that is “irksome” for the audience, which means it is wearisome and tedious, and even painful and loathsome (OED 2). Digges indicates that Jonson put much effort into his tragedies, and his audiences must do the same. Digges is correct; Jonson requires careful attention. However, he rewards the audience's labor with delight and instruction, which he believes should be the ends of drama (*Discoveries* 99).

The goal of this study is to examine how Jonson achieves that delight and instruction in *Sejanus*, despite common criticisms such as Digges’ that the labor of the plays, primarily Jonson’s erudition, deprives them of richness in character and emotion. Jonson’s learning comes through in his historical rendering of *Sejanus*’ Rome, but his technical skill as a writer comes through in the subtle details of character only obvious to the careful reader. Though Jonson’s tragedy requires careful reading, it provides the richness of character and emotion distinctive of Shakespeare’s genius; the difference is that in Jonson, those elements come through an intellectual response to *Sejanus*.

Sejanus was, in Jonson’s eyes, a great play that had to be written. Before 1603, Jonson had dabbled in tragedy, mostly in collaboration. He had only completed one full tragedy on his own up to this point (it does not survive), yet failed to publish it later in his collected works, indicating he did not consider it among his best works. Jonson viewed *Sejanus*, though, as something great, as evidenced by the comments in the apologetical dialogue he affixed to *Poetaster*, the play preceding *Sejanus*:

...since the Comic Muse
Hath prou'd so ominous to me, I will trie
If *Tragædie* haue a more kind aspect

Her favours in my next I will pursue,
Where, if I prove the pleasure but of one,
So he judicious be; He shall b' alone
A Theater unto me...
There's something come into my thought,
That must, and shall be sung, high, and aloofe
Safe from the Wolfs black Jaw, and the dull Asses Hoof. (222-239)

After audiences' negative responses to his comedies, Jonson turned to tragedy, but not because he desired praise. On the contrary, he indicates in these lines that he is happy to delight, to "pleasure," only one judicious person. The language he uses implies a separation from the popular audience: his work will be "high" and "aloof." *High* and *aloofe* both imply distance and separation; additionally, *high* implies loftiness and greatness. Jonson's tragedy, already in his thoughts, would be beyond the grasp of most audiences, yet it *must* be *sung*, or declared and celebrated (OED 12). Therefore, what Jonson had in mind—*Sejanus*—would be so great that he had to write it, even if the beastly audience would devour with their jaws and trample it underfoot with their hooves. Because Jonson separates his play from the common audience, he indicates that the "safe" realm for it is with judicious readers. Therefore, Jonson was shifting to tragedy not to please the crowds, but to delight the few careful readers.

In reference to this shift to tragedy, Rosalind Miles suggests that Jonson "nurtured a deep suspicion of comedy as a form: tragedy was, both in his and received opinion, the higher form" (134-5). But Jonson's turn to a higher form, and his own belief in the greatness of that form, did not ensure success on the stage; *Sejanus* failed miserably. The King's Men acted it in 1603, with Shakespeare listed as one of the actors. It may have been performed at court, possibly with

success, but it was hissed off the stage at the Globe. Though records of other performances during Jonson's lifetime do not exist, B. M. Wagner notes an anonymous allusion to it in a 1613 manuscript: "I a monst others hissed Seianus of the stage, yet after sate it out, not only patiently, but with content, & admiration" (qtd. in Herford and Simpson IX: 191). This is the only evidence of any other performance of *Sejanus* during Jonson's lifetime; it is also, however, evidence that some audiences enjoyed *Sejanus*. The enjoyment came not from the powerful rousing of emotions, but from a feeling of contentment, or satisfaction. This spectator indicates that a positive reception of *Sejanus* comes with some patience, or willingness to endure the tediousness.

Sejanus' next performance came in 1928 when William Poel brought it to the stage in shortened form; he cut it by approximately one quarter. The *Times* review of Poel's production indicated a highly successful reception (Ayres, Introduction 39). Poel, however, only produced a single performance. Philip Ayres, writing in 1990, has found no evidence of any other professional productions since. However, the Royal Shakespeare Company is currently reviving *Sejanus* for the 2005 season, with 38 performances scheduled from July 20 through November 5 at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. In *Sejanus*' 400-year history, this is probably the first time it has been scheduled to run for several consecutive performances.

The failures of *Sejanus* on the stage, though, did not prevent Jonson from defending its greatness. In his tribute to Aubigny that opens the play, he writes, "If ever any ruin were so great as to survive, I think this be one" (49). Then, eight years after *Sejanus*, Jonson brought *Catiline* to the stage, which strayed little from the formula he had developed for *Sejanus*: both were, for the most part, historically accurate accounts of the downfalls of villainous protagonists. Like *Sejanus*, *Catiline* failed on the stage. But Jonson, who strayed from precedent in carefully

collecting, editing, and publishing his own works, virtually guaranteed the survival of both when he included them in his 1616 Folio. In addition, these were the first of Jonson's plays to be published with commendatory verses from his contemporaries. For example, George Chapman wrote a 192-line poem calling for *Sejanus'* ruins to "grow / To all posterities" so that "under heav'n nought but his song might sound" (190-92). Such evidence suggests that Jonson highly esteemed these plays, possibly more than all his others, and he wanted readers to be aware of the greatness in them that the theatre audiences had missed.

The attention *Sejanus* failed to receive from its audiences has been granted it by critics. The earliest followed after Digges in comparing Jonson to Shakespeare. The common theme of the early criticism of Jonson's tragedy is a preference for Shakespeare's nature over Jonson's art. Art, in the Renaissance, implied both technical skill and "study and conscious effort"; nature, on the other hand, "meant that which was born in a man—that is, natural ability" (Harrison 1642). In the 1660s, Richard Flecknoe wrote that Shakespeare "excelled in a natural vein, *Fletcher* in wit, and *Johnson* in gravity and style," but had Jonson "mixt less erudition with his plays, they had been more pleasant" (366). John Dryden, also writing in the 1660s, deemed Shakespeare "the man who of all Modern, and perhaps Ancient Poets had the largest and most comprehensive soul...when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too." Dryden adds that for being the more correct poet, he admires Jonson, but for being the greater with, he loves Shakespeare (47-50).

What these criticisms have in common is an assessment of Jonson as a scholarly, deliberate, and learned writer, but not one with Shakespeare's ability to stir the passions, a criticism that continued through to the twentieth century.¹ The central problem with *Sejanus*, in

¹ For example, see Samuel Johnson's "Drury-lane Prologue," 1747; Charles Swinburne's *A Study of Ben Jonson*, 1926; Robert Ornstein's *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy*, 1960.

the eyes of most critics, is that Jonson's tediousness fails to engage and creates what Charles Swinburne called Jonson's "most irremediable" of "sins of intellectual omission": "...want of sympathy; a lack of cordial interest, not in his own work or in his own genius...but in the individual persons, the men and women represented on the stage" (21). All of these opinions on *Sejanus* imply that it allows only an intellectual response; but, as this study will show, the intellectual response is a foundation for, not an alternative to, an emotional response.

To understand the emotions of the play requires an understanding of how Jonson's "laboured" art is realized in *Sejanus*. In the tragedy, Jonson re-creates an event from Roman history through a strong reliance on Roman historians, particularly Tacitus. Jonson published *Sejanus* with copious marginal notes acknowledging his debt to those historians; the effort was, though, in his words, only done "...to show my integrity in the story, and save myself in those common torturers that bring all wit to the rack" (To the Readers 25-26). The notes, according to Jonson, were published specifically to avoid any suspicion that his play alluded to English political figures, especially since *Sejanus*' performance had resulted in his being brought before the Privy Council. The publication of *Sejanus* was "probably the first time that a work of imaginative literature had come forth buttressed with all the apparatus of critical scholarship" (Barish 7). Dryden noted that Jonson "was deeply conversant in the Ancients, both Greek and Latine, and he borrow'd boldly from them: there is scarce a Poet or Historian among the Roman authors of those times whom he has not translated in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*." In the twentieth century, C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson wrote, "With few and trifling exceptions...the plot of *Sejanus* is built with severe conformity to the historical record," and, "The characters, like the plot, of *Sejanus* show few traces of deliberate departure from the historical data" (II 15,19).

For the way Jonson has reproduced Rome from historical data, some modern critics have argued that he has fulfilled the dual offices of poet and historian as delineated by Sir Philip Sidney. According to Sidney, whose family were patrons of Jonson, the poet is the "monarch" of all human sciences, because he "doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it" (942). In other words, poetry can provide instruction, or "show the way," because it can offer reliable examples—"sweet prospects"—for men to follow. History cannot provide trustworthy instruction because it is "captivated to the truth of a foolish world" (941). Because history must tell only what men *have* done, not what they *should* do, it cannot offer reliable examples for men to follow.

Sidney's concept of the offices of poet and historian suggest that the same writer cannot fill both roles at the same time. However, modern criticism, through its emphasis on the historical accuracy of *Sejanus* and *Catiline*, implies Jonson has filled both roles in his tragedies.² This view is problematic, though, because it either ignores or minimizes the times Jonson strays from historical records. Some critics, such as Jonas Barish, go so far as to explain how Jonson negotiates between poet and historian:

Critics have noticed that Jonson, in composing dramatic characters from historical persons, seems deliberately to sidestep opportunities for complexity. His characters display a stubborn fixedness, a refusal to change or grow... If we ask why Jonson should thus have simplified, thus expressly declined the possibilities of psychological complexity in his characters, we may guess...he wished to avoid, precisely, the mixed and contradictory effect that Sidney had singled out as a defect in the real persons of history.

² For a summary of modern critical views on Jonson's fulfillment of the dual offices, see Ayres' "The Nature of Jonson's Roman History."

Jonson aims at exemplary characters, from whom audiences may take their own moral bearings. (8-9)

According to this assessment, Jonson has reduced his characters from accurate historical figures into moral types and anti-types precisely to provide the consistent examples Sidney believes only poetry can provide; in other words, Jonson has ignored the parts of history that lead to inconsistent characters.³ Ayres makes the same point and adds, “Had there not been such critical unanimity about Jonson’s adoption of the ‘office of historian’ in these plays, it would hardly have been necessary to make the point” (Introduction 32-33).

Barish, then, suggests that in his character development, Jonson departs from history, and, in fact, Jonson departs drastically from his sources throughout *Sejanus*. Herford and Simpson note that Jonson only translates or closely paraphrases from his sources roughly one quarter of the play (II 11). Barish writes, “In *Sejanus*, Jonson constructs a character who could hardly have been predicted from the annals” and, after offering several examples of characters not historically-rendered, concludes, “Probably only two characters can be said to preserve intact the inconsistencies of their Tacitean originals” (9-15). In addition, Jonson employs secondary characters barely mentioned in historical sources and must give them unique, individualized dialogue representative of their dramatic personas. Where history lacks, Jonson invents.

Jonson's invention, though, must agree with his own concept of “truth” in poetry, something that critics tend to discuss but not define. For Jonson, one of the chief offices of a tragic writer is “truth of argument,” best defined as a close as possible resemblance to history, with any departures presenting only what could have naturally happened without changing the outcome of the actual historical event. Jonson consistently emphasizes “truth” in *Discoveries*,

³ For similar views, see Ayres, Introduction to *Sejanus*; and Burton, “The Political Tragedies of Chapman and Ben Jonson.”

where he writes, "*Truth* is mans proper good, and the onely *immortall* thing was given to our mortality to use...nothing is lasting that is fain'd" (24). This statement seems contradictory; anything that is "fain'd," or feigned, is invented (OED 2), and therefore not "truth." Jonson clears up this contradiction later when he calls the writer is the "true Artificer," or maker, who "will not run away from nature...or depart from life, and the likenesse of Truth; but speake to the capacity of his hearers" (*Discoveries* 33). As the maker or inventor, the writer, according to Jonson, must present a likeness of truth. *Likeness* implies resemblance; hence, Jonson's "truth" is verisimilitude.

In *Sejanus*, the events and people resemble their historical counterparts, though they are not slavish re-creations of them. However, they cannot "run away" from nature. In other words, their actions cannot depart drastically from what the real historical characters would have done. Therefore, Jonson follows the Aristotelian concept of probability: "tragedians...keep to real names, the reason being that what is possible is credible: what has not happened we do not at once feel sure to be possible; but what has happened is manifestly possible: otherwise it would not have happened." Jonson uses historical data as a basis for creating a play with credibility. Everything that happens seems as if it could have happened. Therefore, Jonson's characters, to meet his own standards, cannot be one-dimensional types; these would be neither natural nor probable.

No current scholarship on *Sejanus* presents Jonson's characters as complex figures; this study's goal is to fill that void. Jonson's characters must negotiate several requirements. To instruct, they must have some consistency of nature. To present what is "true," or probable in the historical context, they must adhere to the inconsistencies of human nature. As complex beings, they must provide means for the audience to relate to them emotionally. This study argues that

Sejanus' characters accomplish all of these things, but they do so by subtle means that must first and foremost conform to Jonson's requirements for tragedy.

The first chapter of this study, by examining Jonson's requirements for tragedy, lays the foundation for understanding the subtle ways Jonson develops his characters. The two requirements that affect the character development the most—"truth" of argument and unity of action—are explained from Jonson's point of view. With that framework in place, the second chapter argues that Jonson, contrary to critical opinion, creates complexities in his characters, but his methods are subtle and require close attention to the text. For that reason, the chapter examines the text to argue that Sejanus and Agrippina are complex figures. The third chapter returns to the criticism this introduction began with, that Jonson cannot stir the audience's emotions as Shakespeare does. The chapter argues that the play presents Rome as a pitiable tragic hero; the emotional response, though, comes through—not instead of—an intellectual one. Finally, this study's conclusion examines how the findings of chapters one, two, and three contribute to Jonson's desire to delight and instruct, with part of the instruction coming through his presentation of a political theory.

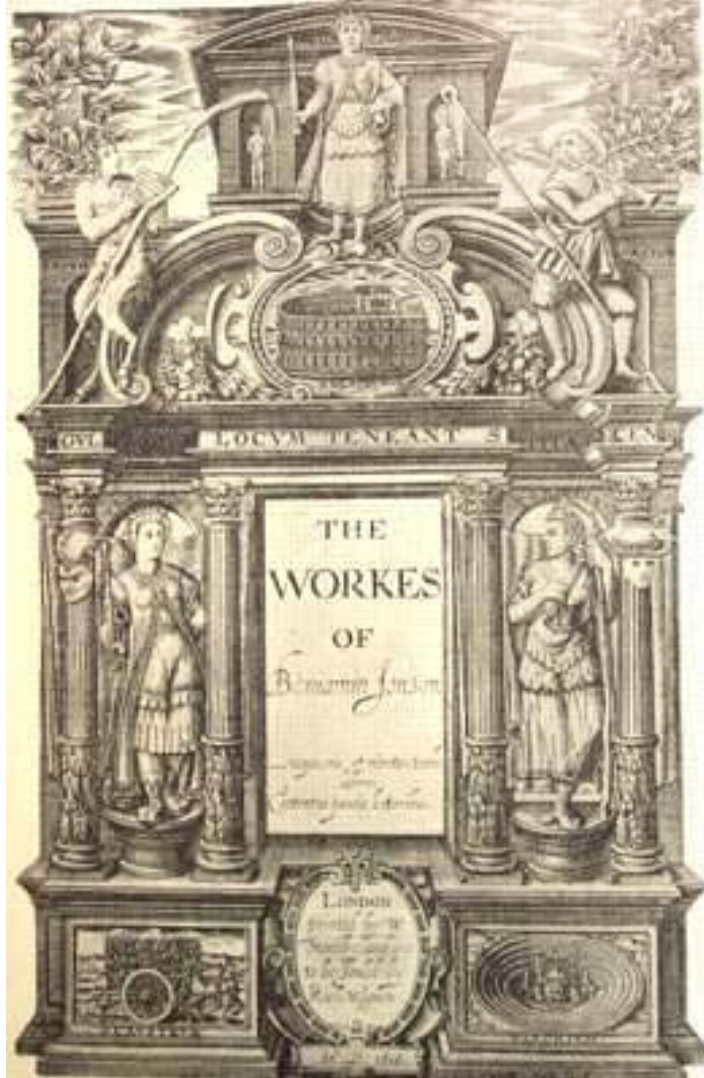


Fig. 1. Frontispiece of Jonson's 1616 Folio, reprinted in "Ben Jonson on Shakespeare," University of Victoria Internet Shakespeare Editions, 1998-2003.

1. Jonson's Requirements in Tragedy: Truth of Argument and Unity of Action

For Ben Jonson, the ends of any dramatic work are delight and instruction: "The parts of a Comedie are the same with a *Tragedie*, and the end is partly the same. For, they both delight, and teach" (*Discoveries* 99). But to reach these ends, Jonson had clear ideas of how to construct a tragedy. In applying those ideas to *Sejanus*, Jonson produced a theatrical failure. Jonson scholars, however, discuss *Sejanus* by emphasizing the ways it is *not* a tragedy, not by focusing on the specifically Jonsonian elements of it. This chapter argues that such an approach leads to a misinterpretation of Jonson's intentions in developing the characters of *Sejanus*.

Sejanus, as critics note, resembles non-tragic genres, particularly Senecan closet drama, satire, and comedy. For example, in *Sejanus*, Barish finds Jonson's wishes "to ruminate on questions of authority and empire" in accord with academic Senecan closet drama but the desire "to do so theatrically, within the confines of plot and character" in line with the popular tragedy (2). When theatre audiences rejected *Sejanus*, Jonson had no choice but to seek a different type of audience: the careful readers to whom closet drama most appealed. In the frontispiece to his *Works*, just below his name, Jonson prints a quote adapted from Horace: "I do not work so that the crowd may admire me: I am content with a few readers"⁴ (see fig. 1). In *Discoveries*, he similarly calls for a small audience for his writing:

The true Artificer will not run away from nature, as hee were afraid of her; or depart from life, and the likenesse of Truth; but speake to the capacity of his hearers. And though his language differ from the vulgar somewhat; it shall not fly from all humanity, with the *Tamerlanes*, and the *Tamer-Chams*, of the late Age, which had nothing in them but the

⁴ This is the translation given by Riddell in "Ben Jonson's Folio of 1616."

scenicall strutting, and furious vociferation, to warrant them then to the ignorant gapers...In the meane time perhaps hee is call'd barren, dull, leane, a poor Writer...by these men, who without labour, judgement, knowledge, or almost sense, are received, preferr'd before him...An other Age, or juste men, will acknowledge the vertues of his studies. (*Discoveries* 33)

Had Jonson desired the praise of his audience, whom he feels incapable of properly judging his works, he would not have repeated the failure of *Sejanus* eight years later in *Catiline*. To further define his intended audience, in *Catiline* Jonson prefaced the play with letters to the "Reader in Ordinary" and the "Reader Extraordinary." He writes to the ordinary reader "that neither praise nor dispraise from you can affect me" (5-6). However, he submits himself and his work to the "Reader Extraordinary." Jonson knew when he published his tragedies that he would likely not ever see them succeed on the stage; therefore, he turned to a new audience of careful readers. In this sense, *Sejanus* is closet drama.

On the other hand, *Sejanus* is like satire because it seems to have no point other than the examination of a vice figure. The audience learns nothing from Sejanus' fall because he is a villain that gets what he deserves, never recognizing his own part in his demise, and, therefore, never evoking pity. As a seemingly unnatural creature of vice, his fall is irrelevant to audiences. They cannot relate to his circumstances and thus sympathize with him as they can with a Shakespearean tragic hero.⁵ Herford and Simpson believe *Sejanus* is "the tragedy of a satirist" because Jonson "felt and saw more intensely the vices and follies than the sorrows of men." *Sejanus*, they add, "suffers from an inner poverty in the humanities of the heart" (II 27). For its studies of men's evil and folly, Mary Jo Adams notes that the tragedy seems to end where it

⁵ Chapter three defines and distinguishes between Shakespearean and Aristotelian tragedy, which are essentially the same in the effects they produce but slightly different in how they do it.

begins, yet "if one would allow that the 'recognition and/or reversal' so central to Aristotle's theories on tragedy could take place in the spectators rather than the hero...then one could even make the case that Jonson has in fact written tragedies that conform in spirit to Aristotle" (234-235). Adamson makes an interesting observation: perhaps *Sejanus* is a successful tragedy if *Sejanus* is not the center of attention.⁶ The problem with seeing *Sejanus* as a satire is that it assumes the characters are symbolic of the vices the play explores—in other words, they are reduced to types, or humours, with unnaturally consistent natures. This view of *Sejanus* indicates Jonson developed his tragic figures in a similar manner as his comic figures: both forms require a similar reduction of the characters' natures into types or moods. James D. Redwine believes the humours of Jonson's comedies come forth in his tragedies, but in a different degree: Jonson's tragic characters are hardened to evil much like his comic characters are predisposed to certain temperaments (li-lii).

In pointing out the elements of *Sejanus* characteristic of other genres, critics illustrate what they find lacking in *Sejanus*: sympathy, the ability to relate to the characters, and, consequently, the ability to feel that any of the events are relevant. And, while such opinions of *Sejanus* allow scholars to view the works in alternative ways, they de-emphasize the experimental nature of the works. Ralph Nash argues this point well:

If Jonson's tragedies are to be given their due, they need to be read without much thought of comparison with more universally popular tragedies of the period. This is not merely to admit that *Sejanus* and *Catiline* have something to fear from such comparison, but also to recognize these plays as experiments. (164)

Unlike Nash, those who de-emphasize the experimental aspect of *Sejanus*, comparing it to other genres, imply that because it failed as a stage tragedy, it cannot be a tragedy at all. This view,

⁶ See chapter three for evidence of an alternative protagonist.

however, ignores Jonson's own unique concept of tragedy, which does not eliminate sympathy and relevance, but makes them fit into a framework of unified action and truthful argument.

In his prefatory letter to the readers of *Sejanus*, Jonson outlines his views on the offices of a tragic writer. He confesses that he does not follow "the strict laws of time" nor provide a proper chorus, adding that he has not seen any effective chorus since those of the ancients (5-9). Then, as he continues, he lists the offices of a tragic writer he has attempted to achieve: "if in truth of argument, dignity of persons, gravity and height of elocution, fulness and frequency of sentence, I have discharged the other offices of a tragic writer, let not the absence of these forms be imputed to me" (16-18). This is Jonson's own request to be judged on the basis of what he sees as the four offices of a tragic writer. Of these four requirements, the one most relevant to critical responses is truth of argument because it implies that the events and the characters of *Sejanus* must be true.⁷ If this is the case, Jonson is not a poet, but a historian.

Jonson's concept of "truth" of argument involves rendering characters and events in such a way that the main action of the play (in this case, *Sejanus'* and Rome's fall) has the same outcome as the historical event. Between Jonson's prefatory letter to his readers and the list of characters in *Sejanus*, he includes "The Argument," a summary of the events of the play. Interestingly, he alters the sequence of the historical events. In Tacitus, *Sejanus* seeks to destroy Drusus, Tiberius' son and successor, only after Drusus strikes him in public. Then, *Sejanus* begins an affair with Drusus' wife, Livia, and receives her aid in poisoning Drusus. In Jonson's argument, though, *Sejanus* has already begun the process of bringing down Drusus by corrupting Livia before he received the blow from Drusus (Ayres, footnote 8-12). Immediately, before the

⁷ "Dignity of persons" means that the characters must be important enough for their actions to be significant; in other words, they must be of high birth or high position. This is the case in the *Sejanus*, and therefore this requirement brings about little or no critical response. As "height of elocution" and "fulness and frequency of sentence" are stylistic issues, they are beyond the scope of this study.

action begins, Jonson has deviated from history; therefore, “truth” of argument does not mean historical accuracy and Jonson is not a historian.

Jonson’s views on this subject are compatible with other Renaissance views.

Verisimilitude, not historical accuracy, was important to Renaissance critics. In his study on Jonson’s “truth” of argument, Bryant remarks, "to the Renaissance critics, truth of argument implied a historical argument capable of being presented with verisimilitude" (203). For example, Scaliger calls for verisimilitude in his *Poetics* in 1561: "The events themselves should be made to have such sequence and arrangement to approach as near as possible to the truth" in order for the play to "teach, move, and please" (qtd. in Bryant: 199). Sidney's *The Defense of Poesy*, which Herford and Simpson believe "appealed to [Jonson] powerfully" (I 10), calls for the poet's alteration of history into a "sweet prospect" that "will entice any man to enter into it" (942). "But the history," writes Sidney, "being captivated to the truth of a foolish world, is many times a terror from well-doing, and an encouragement to unbridled wickedness" (941). History is the matter that provides the knowledge for well doing, "which setting forward, and moving to well doing, indeed setteth the laurel crown upon the poet" (942).

With these views in mind, one can examine what Jonson says about truth and how he presents history to determine the ways Jonson differs from his contemporaries. Jonson, like his contemporaries, associates “truth” in writing with verisimilitude: the “artificer” does not "depart from life, and the likeness of Truth" (*Discoveries* 33). Therefore, Jonson believes poetry should resemble truth, or be like it. The difference between Jonson and Sidney, though, is that Jonson refuses to change the general facts of history to produce a "sweet prospect." In other words, because the fall of the historical Sejanus only signaled the coming of greater corruption and evil in Rome, Jonson did not alter the character or the events to produce a desirable example for his

audience to follow. This would be a departure “from life,” or the way the event would have seemed in real life. This does not mean that Jonson fails to instruct, but that his instruction comes not through exemplum but through recognition—the recognition of how the events surrounding Sejanus' fall led to greater decay. The slight deviations he makes allow him to alter the effects within the play without changing the outcome of the play. For example, when he changes the sequence of Sejanus' affair with Livia, he makes it clear early within the play that Sejanus was working to remove any obstacle to his power. This deviation helped him establish Sejanus' ambition more quickly than the actual event would have.

One more observation adds to a proper understanding of Jonson's “truth” of argument. Because Jonson expects his writing to resemble history and be true to life, he conforms to Aristotle's concept of probability: anything in *Sejanus* that did not happen in history must seem as if it could have happened.⁸ Whether or not Sejanus first seduces Livia or first receives the blow from Drusus is irrelevant; within the framework of the main event of the play, either could have happened, and Drusus still would have been poisoned and Sejanus still would have fallen. Therefore, “truth” of argument is not actual truth or historical accuracy, but a similarity to history in which nothing improbable happens to change the overall outcome of an event.

To test whether or not Jonson does what he set out to one must look at the action of the play. *Sejanus* is so much like the recorded history of Sejanus' fall that modern critics cannot separate Jonson's truth of argument from historical accuracy. For example, Bryant remarks that for Jonson, it was much more important “that the argument be true than that it merely seem to be true” (203). Additionally, A. Richard Dutton defines Jonson's truth of argument as “a fidelity to history, to the facts as the sources presented them” (182). Nash believes that “the most far-

⁸ See introduction, page 8.

reaching effect on the tragedies is 'truth of Argument,' which surely means here a subject matter chosen from reliable history" (164). These critics confirm that Jonson's play resembles history.

Also relevant to "truth" of argument is stage action: "To preserve the illusion, the suspension of disbelief, it was necessary that nothing should be presented that the stage could not manage without undue artificiality" (Bolton and Gardner xv). Though *Sejanus* chronicles such fascinating events as adultery, murder, the execution of traitors, mutilation of a dead body, rape, hangings, and even a dog's suicide, these actions are all reported in the characters' dialogue. For example, Lepidus reports the recovery of Sabinus' drowned body from the river: "I saw him now drawn from the Gemonies, / And, what increased the direness of the fact, / His faithful dog... Never forsook the corpse, but, seeing it thrown / Into the stream, leaped in, and drowned with it" (IV.283-87). Jonson agrees with Aristotle's view of spectacle: "Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means... But to produce this effect by the mere spectacle is a less artistic method, and dependent on extraneous aids." Spectacle on the stage by its very nature is not believable, for it cannot be accomplished without "extraneous aids." Jonson wanted every event in *Sejanus* to seem possible; therefore, the audience could not be permitted to see an unbelievable representation of an event on stage. Sejanus' beheading, for example, could not be presented with verisimilitude; however, Silius' suicide, in which he stabs himself before the Senate, could appear real. Therefore, Jonson allows the audience to see it. Jonson's willingness to avoid spectacle at a time when audiences relished "scenicall strutting" attests to his commitment to every aspect of his tragedies being believable and probable.

Despite Jonson's deviations, the majority of critics hold to the view that Jonson is historically accurate. This means, according to Sidney, he cannot be a poet. But, is he a historian? Jonson esteemed history almost as much as poetry, and wrote a nearly complete

history of Henry V that was destroyed in a fire in his library. Historians such as William Camden and Sir Walter Raleigh were among his closest friends and the subject of praise in his verses. In his commendatory verses to Raleigh's *History of the World*, Jonson calls history the "light of Truth" (qtd. in Barish: 7). Therefore, in *Sejanus*, Jonson has to negotiate between the requirements of poetry and his love of history. He does not, however, gloss over the inconsistencies of his characters to meet Sidney's requirement of instruction. This is not how Jonson teaches; Jonson instructs through the audience's intellectual recognition of the forces at work in bringing down a society. In this way, he comes closer to Sidney's definition of a historian, but he allows himself some freedom from the historical facts.

Instead of altering his characters into examples, as Sidney implies is a necessary requirement for instruction, Jonson magnifies the effects of a corrupt society on its citizens.

Barish provides conflicting interpretations of Jonson's technique. First, he writes:

If we ask why Jonson should thus have simplified, thus expressly denied the opportunities for psychological complexity for his characters, we may guess...that he wished to avoid...the mixed and contradictory effects that Sidney had singled out as a defect in the real persons of history. Jonson aims at exemplary characters, from whom audiences may take their own moral bearings. (9)

However, Barish later writes that Jonson, rather than simplifying, produces "a magnification of those traits chosen for emphasis" (9). Within the context of the play, this is the more accurate explanation, because, as the next chapter will illustrate, the characters are inconsistent.

However, their inconsistencies are subtly hidden within the dialogue of others. If Jonson is simplifying *Sejanus'* characters into moral "blacks" and "whites" in order to provide an example for moral behavior, then virtue should triumph in the play. This is not the case.

Critics, however, do not see the inconsistencies of human nature in *Sejanus*' characters. For example, Nash describes them as "representative of important political types, not...private men, interesting for their personal psychology" (182). Ayres believes Jonson simplifies "in the interest of universal (philosophical and moral) truth" (37). They provide two interesting views on Jonson's characters in *Sejanus*: they represent either political forces or moral forces. What these two views have in common, though, is that neither believes Jonson's characters are distinct individuals. This view, though, only has weight if Jonson's characters are not believable within their plot and setting.

History indicates that Jonson's characters are believable in their setting. Barish argues, "In *Sejanus*, Jonson constructs a character who could hardly have been predicted from the annals. Confronted with *Sejanus*' prodigious successes, and with the rather ordinary figure he cuts otherwise, Jonson has chosen to model him on a stage type...giving him attributes of the Senecan villain" (9). But, as Ayres points out, Jonson does not ignore history but prefers one historian over another: Jonson, presented with a positive view of *Sejanus* in Velleius Paterculus' history and a negative one in Tacitus' history, chose Tacitus (Introduction 37). With a negative historical record of his protagonist, Jonson's creation of a villain is not so far off the mark. Another point Barish makes is that Jonson's *Tiberius* shows no evidence of the good behavior of the young *Tiberius*, who only became a monster late in life (Barish 10). Yet again, this does not show in Jonson a disregard for history that produced an unrealistic *Tiberius*, but a preference for the old *Tiberius* over the young. What is apparent from Jonson's character development is not a complete divergence from history, but a preference for certain parts of history. It is Jonson's way of presenting the truth without presenting the entire truth—in other words, he presents "the likeness of Truth," or verisimilitude. As Ayres puts it, history gives Jonson "points of reference

...as they relate to moral decline" (32). From these reference points Jonson weaves his tale of moral decay in Rome with the characters that are most believable for the plot and setting.

In addition to verisimilitude, Jonson's plots and characters must conform to his idea of unity of action. In *Sejanus*, Jonson clearly indicates the importance he places on "truth of argument," or verisimilitude, by listing it first among the offices of a tragic writer; however, he does not list unity of action among those offices despite giving it utmost attention in *Discoveries*. The reason Jonson fails to mention this requirement for drama is because it is one of the classical unities he felt he had achieved in *Sejanus*. In the same prefatory letter to the readers that lists the offices of a tragic writer, Jonson apologizes for not meeting two classical requirements of drama: unity of time and use of chorus. If he felt he had violated the other classical unities—unities of place or action—surely he would have made apologies for those violations as well.

Jonson does not address the unity of place in *Discoveries*, but he describes unity of action in terms of spatial relationships, as if unity of action involves unity of place:

if a man would build a house, he would first appoint a place to build it in, which he would define within certaine bounds: So in the Constitution of a *Poeme*, the Action is aym'd at by the *Poet*, which answers Place in a building...But, as a Court or Kings Palace requires other dimensions then a private house: So the *Epick* asks a magnitude, from other Poëms. Since, what is Place in the one, is Action in the other, the difference is in space. So that by this definition wee conclude the fable, to be the *imitation* of one perfect, and intire Action; as one perfect, and intire place is requir'd to a building.

(*Discoveries* 101)

To understand this statement, one must understand Jonson's use of the terms *poet* and *fable*.

Jonson applies the term *poet* to any writer whose art is imitation of life, whether he write in verse

or not, and the resulting product of that imitation is the fable (*Discoveries* 89). Therefore, any writer who practices verisimilitude is a poet. The product, or the fable, is "the *Imitation* of one intire, and perfect Action; whose parts are so joynd, and kintt together, as nothing in the structure can be chang'd; or taken away, without imparing...the whole" (*Discoveries* 101). In other words, the fable is a well-constructed plot in which every part is essential; if anything is removed, then the outcome is not appropriate for the action. In reference to drama, Jonson adds further distinctions: "As, to a *Tragedy* or a *Comedy*, the Action may be convenient, and perfect, that would not fit an *Epicke Poeme* in Magnitude...So in a *Fable*, if the Action be too great wee can never comprehend the whole together in our Imagination...if it be too little, there ariseth no pleasure" (*Discoveries* 102). The proper amount of action for a drama, he adds, should adhere to classical ideas: "so it behooves the Action in *Tragedy*, or *Comedy*, to be let grow, till the necessity aske a Conclusion: wherein two things are to be considered; First, that it exceed not the compasse of one Day: Next, that there be place left for digression, and Art" (*Discoveries* 103).

Jonson further explains how unity of action affects plot: the plot cannot be all the actions of one man, as by a single man "many things may be severally done." Instead, unity of action should follow the example of Virgil, who only told of one event: how Aeneas came to Italy (*Discoveries* 104). The journeys of Aeneas are all episodes in his coming to Italy, and all work together to complete that one action. If any part were left out, the epic would not make sense. Likewise, a tragedy must also focus on one action, with the whole being made up only of the episodes that are necessary to that action. And, "to make it absolute, is requir'd, not only the parts, but such parts as are true. For a part of the whole was true; which if you take away, you either change the whole, or it is not the whole" (*Discoveries* 105). In other words, all parts of a

tragedy must be believable and appropriate for the one main event that unfolds on the stage. Therefore, any artistic digression should not interfere with the essential parts of the play.

In *Discoveries*, Jonson emphasizes unity of action more than any other requirement for drama, devoting the last section entirely to the discussion of what a fable is and what action is appropriate for it. Unity of action is not, like "truth of argument, dignity of persons, gravity and height of elocution, fulness and frequency of sentence," an office of a tragic writer, but an office of all dramatists. And, similar to "truth of argument," unity of action relates to character development.

The connection between Jonson's concept of unity of action and his development of characters is straightforward: for all of the action of the play to be appropriate to the one main event, such as the fall of Sejanus, the poet must show the characters as they are at the time of that one event. Jonson could not, then, relate all of the events of the life of Sejanus; he had to present him as he was at the time of the main event: his fall. At the onset of the action, Sejanus is already engaged in efforts to promote himself at the cost of Rome. He is not a Macbeth, who begins virtuous and allows ambition to tarnish him. Instead, he is already tarnished by his ambition when the first episode in the fall begins. If Jonson had presented Sejanus with the semblance of virtue or honor, he would not have been providing "true" episodes; such episodes are not appropriate for the main event that unfolds. Sejanus is already ruined by ambition long before the central action of his downfall begins. Therefore, he is not simplified because Jonson wants to make him into a vice figure; he is already a vice figure when his fall begins. Unity of action is one more way to explain why some of the characteristic of Sejanus and his rivals are magnified more than others.

Even within the limits of historical verisimilitude and action that Jonson self-imposes, he achieves a level of complexity in character through subtleties that only the "Reader Extraordinary" will discover. In the preface to *Catiline*, Jonson bemoans the pretense of the "Reader in Ordinary" to pass judgment on the play without the knowledge it requires. On the other hand, he fully submits himself and his work to the "better man," the "Reader Extraordinary." This preface is, in effect, a call for a new audience—not a theatrical audience, but a reading audience that will properly judge the tragedies. Additionally, Jonson cared for neither "praise nor dispraise" from the reader who would give it foolishly ("To the Reader in Ordinary" 5). Jonson's desire for such a narrow audience implies that perhaps his tragedies are not accessible to all, but this is not the case. As the next chapter will show, Jonsonian tragedy presents within the text itself "life, and the likeness of Truth"—the complexities of human nature that make his characters real for anyone who reads carefully enough to perceive their subtle development.

SEIANVS

his
FALL.

A Tragædie.

Acted, in the yeere 1603.
By the K. MAIESTIES
SERVANTS.

The Author B. I.

MART.

*Non hic Centauros, non Gorgonas, Harpyiasque
Immenses: Hominem pagina nostra sapit.*

LONDON,
Printed by WILLIAM STANSBY,

M. DC. XVI.

Fig. 2. Title page of *Sejanus*, 1616 Folio, in Herford and Simpson Vol. IV.

2. Jonson's Character Development: The Complexities of Sejanus and Agrippina

As the introduction has pointed out, critics commonly read *Sejanus* as a moral lesson in which static characters symbolizing virtue and vice face off, therefore reducing the play to a moral lesson to "steel ourselves against disaster, and so defeat it" (Barish 15). However, Jonson requires from his audience an intellectual understanding of the interaction between the individual and the corrupt society. With each reciprocally affecting the other, no one character is totally "black" or "white" because none are exempt from the effect of Rome's corruption. This interaction complicates the message of the play and complicates the characters, who are not static figures. The proof of their complexities is hidden within the dialogue of the play, but the reader who finds them also realizes that a moral response is not the way to defeat disaster.

On the title page of *Sejanus* Jonson quotes Martial: "No *Centaur*s here, or Gorgons look to find, My subject is of man, and human kind"⁹ (see Fig. 2). This is his first indication that the reader should look not for characters who are types or symbols, but for human kind, which is much more complex. This conflicts with critics who believe the subject of *Sejanus* is society and not man. William Wolfe writes, for example, that the central issues of both of Jonson's tragedies are "the fallen world, the reasons for its fall, and especially what will insure that society will not degenerate further" (1). Similarly, K. M. Burton sees Jonson's tragedies as studies of the flaw "*within the social order*, not within the individual" (397). These views echo a line in the play: "It is an argument the times are sore, / When virtue cannot safely be advanced, / Nor vice reproved" (III.481-83). Jonson, undoubtedly, gives insight into the workings of a corrupt society. However, he examines mankind within that society and tells us in the first act, "The

⁹ This is the translation David Renaker gives in "An Analysis of the Chapter on Robert Burton in Stanley Fish's *Self-Consuming Artifacts*."

men are not the same" (87). The flaw within the fallen world changes the individuals within it. Because each affects the other, this play is an examination of society *and* the individuals in it.

In searching for ways that "the men are not the same," a careful reader finds evidence of complex, changing human beings in the world of *Sejanus*. The most compelling evidence that no character is a symbol of virtue is the discussion of the dead Germanicus, husband to Agrippina, whose faction opposes Sejanus. Germanicus was "a man most like to virtue"; in all, / And every action, nearer to the gods, / Than men, in nature" (I.124-26). Germanicus, in being "like to virtue," resembles virtue itself.¹⁰ He is more like a god than a man because of his virtue. He is the symbol, then, of pure virtue in *Sejanus*, but he is dead before the play begins. Also, the "old virtue" itself is dead. Arruntius states of Germanicus, "O, that man! / If there were seeds of the old virtue left, / They lived in him" (I.118-120). As Ayres indicates, "The Latin *virtus* implied not only moral virtue, but valour, strength, fortitude, fitness for high, particularly military, tasks—general excellence. This is the sense in which Jonson uses the word here" (footnote I.119). With this understanding of *virtue*, Arruntius' statement implies that not only moral virtue, but valor and fortitude as well, are things of the past; they are "old." If any of these things remained, they lived—and, therefore, died—with Germanicus.

Sejanus, as the extreme opposite of Germanicus, at first seems to be a figure representative of vice. He exalts in his own wickedness: "A race of wicked acts / Shall flow out of my anger, and o'erspread / The world's wide face" (II.151-53). He contrasts Germanicus' god-like nature; as Germanicus was closer to the gods than men in his excellence, Sejanus believes himself equal to gods in his power: "all the world have seen / Jove but my equal" (IV. 263-64). While his pride and immorality are appropriate for a symbolic vice figure, they are effects of the

¹⁰ Ayres points out in his footnote to this line that Jonson echoes Paterculus: "he resembled Virtue herself." In this sense, Virtue is personified as if she were goddess, and Germanicus is the human who most closely resembles her.

larger workings of society. Jonson complicates Sejanus' character by making him not the cause, but the effect, of the decay that began in Rome before he achieved his height. This is not to say that he does not contribute to the corruption in Rome, because he does, but that his wickedness is partially the result of Rome's influence on him. This adds complexity to a seemingly straightforward character.

Jonson reveals other complexities of "good" and "bad" characters primarily through two techniques. First, he frequently allows a character to describe his rival in disparaging, sometimes sarcastic, terms. This is what Barish calls Jonson's "neutralizing" effect, explaining that the reader either discounts or disbelieves the information because the context neutralizes it (9). For example, when Sejanus describes Agrippina, his remarks seem untrustworthy because he is not an honorable character. However, Jonson's frequent use of this technique implies the descriptions are important—otherwise, he would have left them out. Also, they usually prove true in the unfolding of the play, giving credence to the original opinion given by the seemingly untrustworthy character.

A second technique Jonson employs to add complexity of character is "blackening" or "whitening" the opposition. In other words, Jonson makes "bad" characters less appalling by giving the "good" characters some faults, and he makes "good" characters less virtuous by giving the "bad" characters some redemptive qualities. He especially applies these techniques to build complexity in the two characters most opposite each other in their morals, Sejanus and Agrippina.

As the first chapter explains, Jonson requires unity of action; therefore, the plot of *Sejanus* centers only on the events of Sejanus' fall¹¹ and not his past. However, Jonson weaves into the

¹¹ As the next chapter argues, the play also includes the events immediately after Sejanus' fall because the real hero that falls is not Sejanus but Rome. The two falls coincide, but the action centers around Rome, not Sejanus.

text one clue to help the reader understand how Sejanus achieved his position. Arruntius, part of the Germanican party who opposes Sejanus, comments on Sejanus' former state: "A serving boy. / I knew him at Caius' trencher, when for hire / He prostituted his abuséd body / To that great gourmand, fat Apicius, / And was the noted pathic of the time" (I.212-216). As the only information Jonson gives us about Sejanus' past, this statement is significant. The reader's immediate response, perhaps, is disgust with the methods Sejanus used to rise in power; he prostituted his body to the gourmand, or glutton. Apicius' name is synonymous with epicurean appetite, and Dio's *Roman History* records he took his own life when his fortune dwindled because he feared starving to death (Ayres, footnote I.211-26). Late in the seventeenth century, *Apician* meant "Of or pertaining to epicures or to a luxurious diet" (OED). As a glutton and epicure, Apicius is a symbol of luxurious excessiveness, and, therefore a symbol of the uncontrollable appetites of the Rome of the past that gave rise to Sejanus. The "old virtue" was already giving way to men's appetites during Sejanus' youth.

The information from Sejanus' past also hints that Sejanus is deserving of sympathy. No evidence exists to verify Sejanus' age at the time he prostituted himself, but Arruntius calls him a "boy" and a "pathic"—both words with connotations of youth. This removes some of the responsibility from Sejanus and places it on the adult. Also, the act indicates desperation on Sejanus' part to rise above his status as a servant. Not born into nobility, Sejanus had to make his own fortune, and the only way he could rise was to please those with the power to elevate him. In addition, Sejanus' body is "abuséd," which implies it is both "worn out, consumed by use" and it is "misused; wronged, done violence to, violated" (OED 1,2). This indicates that perhaps Sejanus did not willingly prostitute himself but was violated and wronged. The word *pathic* means, "A man or boy upon whom sodomy is practiced" (OED 1). However, in the seventeenth

century the word *pathic* began to mean “one who suffers or undergoes something” (OED 2).

Jonson indicates Sejanus suffered in his rise; he did not begin as a wicked aggressor but a passive sufferer. Rome’s corruption affected him because, as a serving boy, Rome allowed him no honorable means to overcome his low status.

Sejanus also becomes complex in separating himself from evil deeds. In Sejanus' Rome, everyone is ambitious and eager to ally himself to someone powerful. This means most of the deeds carried out in Sejanus’ name are not actually performed by Sejanus. Silius, a Germanican supporter, does not comment on the cruelty of Sejanus, but on the cruelty of “the great Sejanus’ clients,” who “lie, / Flatter, and swear, forswear, deprave, inform, / Smile, and betray; make guilty men” (I.23-29). However, throughout the course of the play Jonson never demonstrates Sejanus ordering his "clients," Satrius and Natta, to carry out any malicious acts. The only time the reader sees his direct involvement in a plot is in Act II, where Sejanus conspires with Drusus’ wife and her physician to plan Drusus' murder. However, Eudemus procures a poison, and Drusus’ servant administers it. Sejanus is present only in the planning, not in the deed itself.

Jonson uses Silius’ sarcasm to add more complexity to Sejanus. In a remark intended as disdain, Silius exclaims, “Sejanus can repair, if Jove should ruin; He is the now court-god; and well applied / With sacrifice of knees... / He will do more than all the house of Heav’n / Can, for a thousand hecatombs” (I.202-206). Here Sejanus’ power in the court is clear. A hecatomb is a great offering, originally the ancient Greek and Roman sacrifice of one hundred oxen (OED 1). A thousand hecatombs, literally 100,000 sacrifices, is an impossibly great sacrifice that would be sure to move the gods. This statement has two implications. First, such an offering to the gods is ineffective for producing favor in the court, because Sejanus is god there. Secondly, Sejanus, "for a thousand hecatombs," will bestow favors that heaven cannot. In other words, if the

subject's sacrifice is great enough, Sejanus will accept and reward the bribe. While this is further evidence of a corrupt Rome and an immoral Sejanus, it establishes an important understanding: Sejanus could do nothing if men did not sacrifice to him. He relies on the ambitious men of court as much as they rely on him. They are the ones sacrificing to him, in effect turning him into a god. If men were virtuous, Sejanus would have not power. He would have had no way to rise from his low position, and he would have no way to retain his position. By bowing to him, men endorse his methods and give him justification in his pride when he says, "Rome, Senate, people, all the world have seen / Jove but my equal" (IV.263).

The situation of the corruption in court is evident from the opening lines of *Sejanus* and tends to "blacken" the most virtuous characters in the play. Jonson offers his readers an interesting paradox: "virtuous" men inhabit the corrupt court, but do not act in it, therefore allowing its corruption to continue. On the one hand, virtue cannot act because the powers that rule Rome do not recognize it. On the other hand, by not acting, the most moral of Jonson's characters add to Sejanus' power. Keeping evil in check requires the skills of a good "engineer." This is clear from the observations Silius and Sabinus make when they meet in court in the opening scene. Silius states, "This place is not our sphere," and Sabinus responds, "No, Silius, we are no good engineers" (I.3-4). While they are present in court, they are absent in the action, or engineering, of the court. The "engineer," or engineer, is "One who contrives, designs, or invents...an inventor, a plotter, a layer of snares" (OED 1).

By describing the influential men of Rome as engineers, Jonson illustrates Machiavellian principles. Machiavelli writes:

...a prudent ruler cannot keep his word, nor should he, when such fidelity would damage him, and when the reasons that made him promise are no longer relevant. This advice

would not be sound if all men were upright; but because they are treacherous and would not keep their promises to you, you should not consider yourself bound to keep your promises to them. (61-2)

What Machiavelli describes and Jonson illustrates is the need for art in engineering. Because men are treacherous and untrustworthy, those who rule them must be willing to plot in order to undo their treachery.¹² The way to be “good” in Rome is not to be virtuous because Rome has no place for virtue to operate. Therefore, a “good” Roman is a “good engineer.” By not learning the engineer’s art, Silius and Sabinus are contributing to Sejanus’ power. Sejanus’ states, “All Rome hath been my slave. / The Senate sat an idle looker-on / And witness of my power.../The fathers have sat ready and prepared / to give me empire, temples, or their throats, / When I would ask ‘em” (V.256-62). In this passage, twice Sejanus remarks that the senate¹³ “sat,” or did nothing. Because the men with the power to undo Sejanus remain inactive, they cannot stop Sejanus. In this passage, inaction is the equivalent of preparation—the senators are “ready and prepared.” Here, though, the senators are not readying themselves to act but to be acted upon by Sejanus; they are preparing him for action. Without their inaction, his action would be impossible. Arruntius confirms Sejanus’ assessment of the Senate's idleness when he calls himself and the other supporters of Agrippina the “good-dull-noble lookers-on” (III.16). Their inaction keeps Sejanus in power and, in turn, spots their own virtue for allowing the corruption to continue.

With the engineer’s art at the center of *Sejanus*, Jonson establishes Sejanus as a good engineer. He is able to work men’s greed and fears to his own benefit. For example, he secures

¹² This is a point Jonson develops more fully in *Catiline*, in which Cicero works for the public good, yet often uses bribes and flatteries to do so.

¹³ Ayres notes (footnote III.28-9) that “Fathers conscript” is a title for senators, so the terms used her, *Senate* and *Fathers*, have the same meaning.

the services of Eudemus the physician in poisoning Drusus by granting Eudemus' request to buy a tribune's position. "Ambition," says Sejanus, "makes more trusty slaves than need" (I.366). This statement shows that Sejanus has a keen insight into human nature as well as into the workings of his own society. He knows from his own past experience what one must do to rise in power, and he uses that knowledge to his benefit. Behind the immoral actions of Sejanus lies a perceptive mind that succeeds in out-engineering everyone in Rome except Tiberius.

Jonson allows very little praise for Sejanus, and the majority of it comes through the mouth of Eudemus. Though the reader is clear of Eudemus' motive—ambition—he senses in Eudemus a genuine belief that the future of Rome lies in Sejanus. To Eudemus, Sejanus is the "unequaled man, this Soul of Rome, / The Empire's life, and the voice of Caesar's world!" (II.55-6). To Eudemus, Rome as a living political being¹⁴ could not exist without Sejanus. In equating Sejanus with Rome's soul, Eudemus asserts that Sejanus is the essential animating part of Rome (OED 7a). Also, to be the *soul of* something is to be the personification of it (OED 6b). Therefore, to Eudemus, Sejanus is the personification of Rome itself. Also, he is the "sole" of Rome, because without him the empire has no life and Caesar has no voice.

Eudemus seems to be an untrustworthy commentator on the greatness of Sejanus because of his own ambitious motives and willingness to murder. However, Jonson complicates Eudemus' character by revealing that many of the women of Tiberius' house are Eudemus' patients, including Tiberius' mother (Drusus' grandmother). His willingness to inflict injury on the family of those he serves indicates that, to Eudemus, Sejanus is more suited to rule Rome than Caesar and his descendants are. Eudemus says that Sejanus' "glories, style, and titles are himself" (II.100). This is Eudemus' affirmation that Sejanus deserves the honors he has been given; they are "himself," or most appropriate for him. The word *style* indicates Sejanus'

¹⁴ This concept is addressed in chapter three.

manner of conducting himself, his discourse skills, and his honorific titles and appellations (OED 15, 18, 19). Therefore, everything Sejanus does, in Eudemus' eyes, falls in line with the honors and titles others have given him, even unofficial titles, such as Eudemus' reference to him as "Soul of Rome." On one hand, Eudemus' remarks accurately represent the appropriateness of a corrupt man being worthy of the titles he has gained by dishonorable means. On the other hand, though, the reader cannot ignore the fact Eudemus' praise seems authentic and Sejanus must have some admirable qualities. The reason the remarks indicate genuineness is that Eudemus' excessive praise of Sejanus is given in Sejanus' absence. It is not flattery intended to influence Sejanus. This signifies that Eudemus truly believes what he says.

Sejanus, though corrupt, never completely loses a capacity for kindness. When he fears Tiberius has discovered his plots, Sejanus arouses his supporters by commending their kindness: "Now, my right dear, noble, and trusted friends, / How much I am a captive to your kindness" (V.278-79). While *kindness* implies a kind nature or disposition, it also indicates a type of kinship (OED 1, 4). Sejanus is not only saying he appreciates that his supporters treat him with kindness, but that he recognizes their loyalty as if they were family. By saying he is "captive" to their kindness, he implies he is slave to it; he cannot thrive without it. When Sejanus exits the scene after making these remarks, his supporters remark that his character has changed. Cotta states, "His lordship is turned instant kind, methinks," and the tribune adds, "'Tis true, and it becomes him nobly" (V.314-316). Sejanus' capacity for kindness is not dead, though he only reveals it here in his moment of desperation. Again, the commentators seem untrustworthy, but, as in Eudemus' case, they are not flattering Sejanus because they do not speak these comments in Sejanus' presence. Another tribune adds, "By Mars, / he has my lives, / Were they a million, for this only grace" (V.317-18). This statement is significant because it indicates a million lives'

worth of dedication to Sejanus for one moment of grace from Sejanus. *Grace* here implies the pleasing quality of Sejanus' character—his kindness—at this moment; it also implies the grace, or favor, he shows his supporters in this one moment (OED I1, II8). What makes this scene crucial to the play is that it gives Sejanus' the capacity to be a pitiable character when later in the same act everyone leaves Sejanus' side except Haterius, whose gout prevents him from walking away (V.626-31). Sejanus, as captive to the kindness, or familial loyalty, of his followers, receives no kindness when he is most in need of it. Though these men pledge their support of this "Most worthy lord," (V.312), they all leave his side when Tiberius and the Senate bring charges against him. This allows a modest degree of sympathy for Sejanus.

By this end of the third act, the reader knows that Sejanus is not the most evil force in Rome. His successor, Macro, has already pledged what he is willing to do to rise in power:

Were it to plot against the fame, the life
Of one with whom I twinned; remove a wife
From my warm side, as loved as is the air;
Practise away each parent; draw mine heir
In compass, though but one; work all my kin
To swift perdition; leave no untrained engine,
For friendship or for innocence; nay, make
The gods all guilty: I would undertake

This, being imposed me, both with gain and ease. (III.726-34)

Macro will attack the fame, or the character and reputation (OED 2) of his own twin and plot against his twin's life. To *twin with* is "to be born at the same birth *with*" (OED 1c). Literally, Macro is willing to kill his own twin brother or sister. However, *twin* also implies "identical" or

"alike," and to *twin* can mean "to separate or part asunder" (OED v¹). In a sense, Macro plans to "twin" Sejanus, or become identical to him in power, and then to "twin," or separate, Sejanus from his power. This is also his intent toward Tiberius, once Sejanus is parted. In regards to Macro, his literal family and his figurative twins are all subject to murder. He only loves his wife as the air, which, being invisible, symbolizes nothing, or no love at all. He will "practice away" his parents and his only child, or plot to remove them. He will make the gods guilty, which indicates he will blame them for the evil he commits.

The importance of Macro's comments is their affirmation that Sejanus is the lesser of two evils. Sejanus is the present Rome, and Macro is the Rome to come. After Sejanus' fall, Arruntius prophesies, "...this new fellow, Macro, will become / A greater prodigy in Rome than he / That now is fall'n" (V.761-63). This confirms that Jonson is not presenting the reader with a world of good versus bad; it is bad versus worse. In this type of world, Sejanus is not pure evil. Sejanus, like Macro, proclaims his plots: "...A race of wicked acts / Shall flow out of my anger, and o'erspread / The world's wide face, which no posterity / Shall e'er approve, nor yet keep silent" (II. 151-54). The vagueness of this comment deprives it of the repulsion that accompanies the reader's response to Macro's specific statements of intent. The reader is not sure how far Sejanus will go, but he is sure how far Macro will go. This is one more way Jonson gives Sejanus some favorable qualities; he is much more acceptable than his successor.

The primary way Jonson presents Sejanus as something other than a complete villain, though, is by blackening the figures who oppose him. Jonson "spots" the character of the house of Germanicus, particularly Agrippina, whose position as the head of that house makes her the most influential of the play's "virtuous" characters. However, as already stated, true virtue does not exist in Rome. Therefore, no one character can be a simplified, symbolic figure of virtue.

The corruption in Rome affects all, even Agrippina. When Jonson at times presents her unfavorably, he weakens the contrast between good and evil in the play, creating a gray area in which no one can be truly virtuous.

The perception of Agrippina and her supporters as a moral force in the play comes primarily through her opposition to Sejanus and Tiberius. Tiberius affirms that “She, and her proud race” concern him (II.190). Sejanus responds, “Proud? Dangerous, Caesar. For in them apace / The father’s spirit shoots up. Germanicus / Lives in their looks, their gait, their form, t’upbraid us / With his close death, if not revenge the same” (II.191-94). This comment sets up the contrast between the two parties. First, it affirms the involvement of Tiberius and Sejanus in the death of Germanicus, giving Agrippina cause to oppose them. Additionally, it establishes that Germanicus lives on through Agrippina’s house. He is in their physical features—“their looks, their gait, their form”—as well as in their spirit, or the animating force that gives them life (OED 1). In other words, everything about Germanicus, including his character, lives on to some degree in them. If they revenge his death, he is the force spurring them on. However, whatever virtue of Germanicus remains in his family is subject to the pride Agrippina passes on to her "proud race." Both parents contribute to the character of their house.

Sejanus comments further on Agrippina’s house, this time bringing to the forefront their negative traits: “The youths are...hot, violent, / Full of great thought; and that male-spirited dame, / Their mother, slacks no means to put them on, / By large allowance, popular presentings, / Increase of train, and state, suing for titles” (II.210-214). Agrippina’s role in her family is to advance her sons’ prominence. She will “put them on” by any means. This phrase implies that she both urges them on and promotes them (OED 46h). They do not promote themselves, as she is the one suing for titles for them and presenting them before the people. Her actions at first

seem warranted; she must promote a virtuous successor to an evil emperor. However, her own children are “hot,” which implies an inclination to violence and anger. Their “great thought” is ambition.¹⁵ Agrippina’s male spirit coincides with the traditionally male role she assumes as the leader of her house as well as her group of supporters. This also implies, to Jonson’s Renaissance audience, a rebellious nature for assuming a role not traditionally granted to a woman.

Sejanus continues to reveal more evidence of Agrippina's pride: “she tells / Whose niece she was, whose daughter, and whose wife; / And then must they compare her with Augusta / ...and prefer her too” (II.222-225). Agrippina’s pride, according to Sejanus, does not thrive on gratuitous praise. On the contrary, she demands praise: they *must* prefer her. However, she does nothing on her own to warrant such praise. She relies on the fame and virtue of her ancestors, not on her own name. If she were the picture of excellence, as her husband was, she could stand on her own merits. This statement by Sejanus clearly establishes that Agrippina is not a simplified symbol of virtue; any “virtue” she has comes by means of her family’s reputation.

The problem with the complexities of Agrippina’s nature presented thus far do little to impact the reader because they all come through the mouth of Sejanus, who is by no means a trustworthy commentator, especially when his assessment of Agrippina is part of the engineering he uses to spur on Tiberius in eliminating the Germanicans. However, Agrippina confirms that she is proud, thus giving credence to Sejanus’ comments. When Jonson introduces Agrippina in Act II, he illustrates how her pride influences the way others address her. When Silius comes to Agrippina with reports of spies in their presence, he apologizes for troubling her: “May’t please

¹⁵ Ayers believes the "great thought" is the equivalent of thoughts of greatness, or ambition, a sense not expressed in the OED (footnote II.211).

your highness not forget yourself, / I dare not, with my manners, to attempt / Your trouble farther” (II.427-29). He then calls her “Most royal princess” (II.431). “Your highness” and “princess” are terms of royalty appropriate for Augusta, not Agrippina. As the emperor Augustus’ wife and mother of Tiberius, Augusta has served as empress; Agrippina, on the other hand, has never been in such a powerful position. She is the granddaughter of Augustus, but her husband was a general, not an emperor. Silius’ remarks here confirm Sejanus’ observations about Agrippina. Silius, in his language, is preferring Agrippina over Augusta by deeming her the true “highness.” Silius is also a strong military leader, yet he approaches Agrippina as an inferior who hates to trouble his superior; she is the “male-spirited” leader and queen whose subjects await her orders.

Silius’ warning of spies incites no action on the part of Agrippina. As the leader of the most moral group in Rome, her inaction renders any virtue they might have useless. Agrippina first refuses to act against the spies. She declines any change in routine, stating, “Virtue’s forces / Show ever noblest in conspicuous courses” (II.456-457). In other words, she believes because her cause is virtuous, it should shine openly for all to see. This statement indicates she is not only proud, but proud of her “virtue.” She wants it to be conspicuous, or obvious. Also, she speaks of the “virtue’s forces,” which generates the image of military forces marching to battle to fight the enemy. The imagery indicates strong, forceful action to combat the enemy, yet, for Agrippina, showing force is doing nothing to protect herself or to ward off the enemy. Her pride, by stirring up in her a desire to make her virtue¹⁶ obvious, keeps her virtue from acting.

¹⁶ The term *virtue* as used in reference to Agrippina does not assume complete or perfect virtue, which is an impossibility for anyone. It simply refers to the degree of virtue she maintains, which, despite her negative qualities, is a significant amount

Silius' concerns about the spies are soon overshadowed by the news of Drusus' death, which seems to be the impetus that stirs Agrippina to action. Upon Gallus' suggestion that she show patience in responding to Drusus' death, she replies, "I must have vengeance first—and that were nectar / Unto my famished spirits" (IV.2-3). At this moment, she compares her revenge to hunger; revenge is not a want, but a need—famished, she will starve without it. She incites her followers to action: "Think on your birth and blood, / Awake your spirits, meet their violence; / 'Tis princely when a tyrant doth oppose" (IV.65-66). She believes that revenge against tyrants is warranted, and such action against the tyrant is "princely," or fitting for the royal position she believes her family should have. She does not expect virtue and morality to motivate her followers, or even the murder of Drusus¹⁷; they should be motivated by their "birth and blood." This echoes the earlier observation that Germanicus' spirit lives in them. As members of his house, they should respond with strength and valour. However, in an ironic twist, Agrippina follows up her call to action with the specific instruction to "stand upright; / And though you do not act, yet suffer nobly" (IV.73-74). She believes the best action is no action; dignity comes by suffering. Jonson creates in Agrippina a character so confident—or proud—in her reputation and virtue that she feels she does not need to act.

The pride that infects Agrippina and her house allows Sejanus to turn them against each other. Sabinus gives the brief report in Act IV that Sejanus "Drave them to frowns, to mutual jealousies" by first presenting himself as a friend to Agrippina with false news that Tiberius planned to poison her (185-190). Then Sejanus' ministers tell Agrippina's son Nero that "all the people, / Yea, all the army have their eyes on him" to "give the world a hope" (IV.195-197). Sejanus tells the other son Drusus, Jr., that Agrippina wrongs him by preferring Nero (IV.205-

¹⁷ Though Drusus is Tiberius' son, he is also a brother-in-law to Agrippina (his wife is Germanicus' sister) as well as an enemy of Sejanus, which explains the Germanicus's desire to revenge his death.

211). From this account, Agrippina and her family prove they are the “proud race.” If they had more virtue than pride, Sejanus would have no way to incite “mutual jealousies.” *Jealousies* connotes both suspicions and envies; while the brothers are suspicious of each other and of Caesar, each is also envious of the favor he believes the other is receiving. The sons have inherited more of the mother's pride than the father's virtue. This allows Sejanus to succeed in dividing the house that should have united in opposing him: “Thus sets he them asunder, each ‘gainst other...Keeps in opinion of a friend to all, And all drives on to ruin” (IV.212-15). Sejanus' dissembling of Agrippina's house, only briefly mentioned in the text, is a result of his action and their inaction. He is the good engineer, and they are the “proud race” who arrogantly rely on their past—not present—virtue. Their “virtue” is overcome by their pride, and the remnant of Germanicus that remains within them crumbles in the face of the force it should be resisting.

By “blackening” Agrippina and “whitening” Sejanus, Jonson shows that in one respect the two most opposite forces in the play are the same: both are proud and ambitious. Sejanus proves this when he says, “The world knows only two, that’s Rome, and I” (V.5). Agrippina proves this by demanding praise from others. However, their pride is not as much a cause of their downfalls as their ability—or lack of ability—to be “good engineers.” In the world of *Sejanus*, where everything suffers from the state of decay, virtue cannot act because the state does not allow it to, as evidenced by Sabinus’ and Silius’ remarks that open the play. On the other hand, precisely because the most moral of the forces in the play do not act, they ensure further corruption.

By complicating the characters in *Sejanus*, Jonson illustrates that they have affected Rome and Rome has affected them. All contribute to the corruption—Sejanus by immoral action

and Agrippina by steadfast inaction. As a result of the interaction with society, Sejanus has experienced an unpleasant rise to power, followed by glory in his exalted position, then betrayal by his most loyal followers. Agrippina has gone from a strong moral force to the suspicious leader of a ruined house. These are far from static, unchanging, straightforward characters, and they do not teach us to "steel ourselves against disaster." If this were the correct response to corruption, then Agrippina's inaction would have defeated the disaster. Instead, the characters illustrate that what is required to defeat disaster is art in engineering.

3. The Relevance of *Sejanus*: Rome as *Respublica*

One of Jonson's most famous lines is this observation of Shakespeare: "*I remember*, the Players have often mentioned it as an honour to *Shakespeare*, that in his writing, (whatsoever he penn'd) hee never blotted out a line. My answer hath beene, would he had blotted a thousand...His wit was in his owne power; would the rule of it had beene so too" (*Discoveries* 28-29). Jonson is not criticizing Shakespeare's natural genius, which is the source of his great wit, but he is implying that Shakespeare should have been more technically skilled with his art. This view illustrates how highly Jonson values a well-planned design for writing, yet it does nothing to change the general opinion, already stated in the introduction, that Shakespeare's wit is better because it stirs the audience's emotions. Jonson's "laborious art," though, also stirs the emotions, but only for the extraordinary reader who realizes *Sejanus'* Rome is *respublica*, the world, and Jonson's tragic hero.

In *Sejanus*, Jonson's labored art is demonstrated through his re-creation of material from classical Roman sources according to a very deliberate plan. With the common misconception that Jonson is historically accurate comes views such as R.V. Young's that Jonson's knowledge is a detriment to the play: "Jonson binds himself so tightly to the facts of the past that he fails to create a fiction that comes alive in the present... It seems that Jonson's minute knowledge of the period and events that he wishes to treat, including a good many frivolous details, overwhelms the grave simplicity necessary for tragedy" (50). Contrary views, such as L.C. Knights', find Jonson's technique a problem because he seems to deliberately create an unrealistic world void of anything that would allow pity:

The world with which we are presented is completely evil. Tiberius and Sejanus are equal in cruelty and cunning...the satellites and senators are servile and inconstant...the

‘good’ characters are choric and denunciatory merely, representing no positive values.

How carefully anything that might bring sympathetic feelings is excluded is seen in the treatment of Agrippina; the meeting of her adherents, for example, is described in terms that reduce it to a gathering of fractious gossips. (180)

The tie that binds both of these views is that neither one finds the play relevant to its audience; it is either too historical or too unbelievable to engage their emotions.

To find this play relevant, its readers must understand the play as a whole. Because the society suffers from decay, none of its individual citizens can escape the effects of the decay on their own lives. According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, pity and fear are essential elements of tragedy, and “pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.”

Among the prominent characters in *Sejanus*, the reader will probably find none like himself.

But, the character that is constantly present is Rome, or the body politic. As an individual part of his own body politic, the reader can find *Sejanus'* relevance by realizing the effects of the body politic on the individual.

Just as Jonson carefully weaves together the details that make his characters complex, he subtly forms Rome into a living, feeling being, “whose blood, / Whose nerves, whose life, whose very frame relies / On Caesar’s strength, no less than heav’n on Atlas” (III.128-30). This creates an image of Caesar holding up all of Rome in the same manner that Atlas holds the entire world on his back, except Rome is a body with blood and nerves. If Caesar’s strength fails, then the entire body falls. Therefore, if he falls into decay and corruption, the state falls as well. This and other personifications of Rome throughout the text lend to the feel that she¹⁸ is a character.

¹⁸ In *Catiline*, Rome's presence as a character is much more developed and Jonson consistently characterizes Rome as a female. For example, he includes choruses that bemoan Rome as "mistress of the whole / World" (I.545-46) and mother to her people (III.56). Catiline disowns Rome as his mother, declaring "I will hereafter call her step-dame ever" (I.91). Therefore, it seems appropriate to refer to the character of Rome as a female in *Sejanus*.

Another personification relates the physical body of Rome to the political status of Rome and Caesar. When Silius is brought before the Senate for treason, one of the charges he must answer to is that he takes credit for single-handedly saving the empire. The charge before him is this: "You gave to Caesar and to Rome their surety. / Their name, their strength, their spirit, and their state, / Their being was a donative from you" (III.280-82). In these lines, Caesar and the empires are one being—one body—with a name, strength, state, and spirit. This description combines the features of a human body with those of a political body. For instance, *name* suggests an actual name—what a person is called—but also the reputation associated with a certain name. Similarly, a body's state is its condition; the political body's *state* is also its condition, or its status. While Caesar has the dominant state in Rome, Rome has the dominant state in the world. Therefore, the "being" of Rome, with reputation and high status, has strength and spirit—just like that of a strong physical body.

Sir Thomas Elyot's political theory is relevant to Jonson's creation of the body metaphor in *Sejanus* because both relate the metaphor to a hierarchical system. In 1531, Elyot's *The Book Named the Governour* justified hierarchical rule by describing a society as a body under the rule of the prince. "A public weal," Elyot writes, "is a living body, compact or made of sundry estates and degrees of men, which is disposed by the order of equity and governed by the rule and moderation of reason" (53). The Latin term for this body is *respublica*: "the word *Res* hath divers significations, and doth not only betoken that that is called a thing which is distinct from a person, but also signifieth estate, condition, substance, and profit. In our old vulgar, profit is called weal" (53). *Respublica*, then, is the public weal. But for Elyot, the public weal is not "the welfare of a country or community; the general good" (OED 3). Instead, it is the varying degrees, or estates, of the public as determined by their wealth or goods. Therefore, *respublica* is

a body made up of all the people of the state, in all their varying degrees. The public weal is not the common weal, though, because *common* implies "that everything should be to all men in common, without discrepance of any estate or condition...moved more by sensuality than by any good reason or inclination to humanity" (53). If all men were equal as "commoners," according to Elyot, none could rise above the others and rule the body with reason. The commoners at the bottom of the hierarchy are part of the same body as the prince that controls it, but they are the least rational part.

Jonson echoes Elyot in his views of the commoners' beastly natures. He writes, "The *vulgar* are commonly ill-natur'd; and alwayes grudging against their *Governours*: which makes, that a Prince has more busines, and trouble with them, then ever *Hercules* had with the Bull, or any other beast: by how much they have more heads, then will be rein'd in with one bridle" (*Discoveries* 39-40). The picture of the commoners that Jonson gives here alludes to Hercules when he wrestled the Cretan bull. The common crowd must be wrestled, or controlled with excessive force, because they are like wild beasts, or creatures controlled by their cravings, not by reason. They have many "heads," which represents the multitude of their numbers as well as the multitude of their varying complaints. Therefore, the force necessary to control them is justifiable. This assessment by Jonson echoes Elyot, who similarly calls the multitude of commoners a "monster with many heads" (57).

Both Jonson and Elyot agree that the best rule is that of a prince interested in the good of his subjects. Elyot writes, "undoubtedly the best and most sure governance is by one king or prince, which ruleth only for the weal of his people to him subject" (57). In Jonson's hierarchy, only God is above the prince: "*After God*, nothing is to be lov'd of man like the Prince... For when hee hath put on the care of the publicke good, and common safety; I am a wretch...if I doe

not reverence, and honor, him: in whose charge all things *divine* and *humane* are placed" (*Discoveries* 40). Elyot and Jonson, then, advance a theory of a form of rule in which all people are part of one body politic under the rule of the prince. In this body, the commoners are subject to beastly natures that must be kept in check by the prince's reason.

In making *respublica*, or Rome, a character in *Sejanus*, Jonson explores how the forces within and without the political body act upon it. Rome, despite her strength and spirit, is a weakened and injured body—she is "bleeding Rome" (IV.402) and Sejanus' slave (V.256). Sejanus, though, is not the disease that corrupts Rome. His wickedness is only a by-product of the larger workings of an already corrupted society; therefore, purging Sejanus from Rome does not heal the diseased body. The tragedy, then, cannot be Sejanus' fall; it must be something with greater impact on the body. As Katherine Maus points out, "The play's real tragedy is that Roman society under Tiberius is so completely corrupt that no moral course of action is possible" (36). Rome itself, with each individual character making up part of the body, falls into a state of decay that renders virtue inactive and justice impossible; this is the tragic fall in *Sejanus*.

Rome's corruptness itself does not evoke any pity; rather, the effects of the corruption on the body and its parts cause pity. First, though, Jonson must make clear to the reader that Rome is corrupted. In the opening lines of *Sejanus*, Sabinus indicates that he and Silius are not capable of being "favoured of the times," or succeeding in their Rome, because they have "no shift of faces, no cleft tongues, / No soft and glutinous bodies, that can stick, / Like snails, on painted walls" (I.7-9). He further states, "We have nor place in court, office in state, / That we can say we owe unto our crimes" (I.13-14). Here the condition of the times is linked to parts of the body. The faces shift, or change, indicating those with favored positions have appeared to be something

they are not to rise in power. Their tongues are cleft, or split, meaning what they say to one person is inconsistent with what they say to another. Their bodies are soft and glutinous, or sticky, so they climb their way to the top instead of rising by their own virtue. All of the parts of this body, though, are beastly. This is the reader's first indication that *respublica* is not a healthy body ruled by reason. The powerful ones in Rome are beastly in their desires; they have the cleft tongues of snakes and the bodies of snails. Also, *glutinous* resembles *gluttonous* and hints at the insatiable appetite for power among the beasts in court. From the beginning, Jonson indicates that, like the commoners, the collective members of the court are not ruled by their reason but by their sensual appetites—in this case, their ambition to rise in power by any means, even if those means are criminal. By not resorting to the beastly practices of the corrupt court, Silius and Sabinus are, in a sense, cut off from the body. Silius states late in the first act that if Tiberius' actions were allied to his word, "How blest a fate were it to us, and Rome!" (400-02). By separating "us" and "Rome" in his statement, Silius indicates he does not consider himself part of Rome. Because he retains his virtue, he can exist within the body, but he can no longer act as part of it. Because he will not use crime to advance his place in the body, he has no place to act within the body.

The frequent references to the corrupt times are continual reminders of the condition of Rome. Every mention of the times is a mention of the body itself. For example, Silius describes the methods of Sejanus' ministers: "These can lie, / Flatter, and swear, forswear, deprave, inform, / Smile, and betray...cut / Men's throats with whisp'rings" (I.27-31). Sabinus responds, "Alas! these things / Deserve no note, conferred with other vile / And filthier flatteries, that corrupt the times" (I.41-43). Sabinus' response indicates that these actions are not shocking: other vile and filthier, or worse, actions are corrupting Rome. Then Sabinus, speaking to

Arruntius just forty lines later, indicates that the corruption has caused a change in Rome: "But these our times / Are not the same, Arruntius." Sabinus recognizes the effect of men's actions on Rome: she is different in these times than in past times.

On the other hand, Arruntius, in his reply, recognizes the effect of the corrupted state on the men: "Times? The men, / The men are not the same: 'tis we are base, / Poor, and degenerate from th'exalted strain / Of our great fathers ...There's nothing Roman in us; nothing good, / Gallant, or great" (I.85-103). Arruntius, instead of speaking of Rome or the times, speaks of its men and makes the personal effect of the corruption obvious in saying "*we* are base." As one of the most virtuous characters in the play, Arruntius does not engage in the vile and filthy flatteries himself, yet he has become base because the entire hierarchy spirals downward; the formerly high, exalted, strain is now low. Arruntius' statement reveals that as the condition of Rome worsens, so does the condition of its men, even if they do not participate in the actions that corrupt the state. The decay of morality is represented by the declining status of the entire hierarchy that in turn lowers the individuals within it. Arruntius gives one more insight: the old Rome is forever gone. Rome is no longer herself; she was good, gallant, and great, but no more. The body is corrupted, as if infected with a disease that has permanently altered it. Additionally, none of the characters are ignorant of the decay, but, as the end of the play will show, they are not yet fully aware of the effects of the corruption.

Despite the evidence thus far that Rome as *respublica* is the central character of *Sejanus*, Rome can only be the central character if Sejanus is not. In other words, Sejanus—or any other character, for that matter—must individually be found inadequate as a protagonist in order for the entire political body to be the protagonist. The Germanicans are easily ruled out because they lack action, and Tiberius is ruled out because he lacks presence. Even though Tiberius has

the weight of a protagonist, especially in his ability to out-engineer Sejanus, Jonson completely removes him from the final two acts so that his part in bringing down Sejanus (through a letter to the Senate) is minimized. Sejanus, as the title character, as well as the most present and most active of all the characters, seems to be the protagonist; however, if Sejanus is the protagonist, the play fails. Robert Ornstein writes, "A tragedy, especially a political tragedy, can succeed even though its main figure lacks heroic stature... But no play can succeed if the audience feels that its dramatic action centers on the wrong protagonist. And Jonson, it would seem, had a knack for creating tragedies with the wrong protagonists" (89). Ornstein is correct in asserting that Sejanus does not *feel* like a protagonist, primarily because his fall is insignificant; it is justice for a villain who never realizes his own wickedness. In tragedy, the audience should "recognize the appropriateness of the characters' fates. Their fortunes must matter to them and to us" (Maus 38). Sejanus feels like the wrong protagonist because his death is irrelevant—the audience does not care that he falls and does not pity his fate. Therefore, it seems logical to assume that Sejanus is not the protagonist and Rome is. The fate of Rome matters because Rome is representative of *respublica*, and as *respublica* the interactions within it represent the interactions within all political bodies.

Further proof that Sejanus is not the protagonist of the play bearing his name comes in the form of the emotional elements of the play. While Jonson does not entirely remove pity, he specifically allows none for Sejanus. According to Aristotle, pity should coincide with recognition and reversal:

Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity...Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge...The best form of recognition is coincident

with a Reversal of the Situation, as in the Oedipus... This recognition, combined with Reversal, will produce either pity or fear; and actions producing these effects are those which, by our definition, Tragedy represents.

Sejanus certainly experiences a reversal in his situation, falling from Caesar's favorite to an executed traitor in a day's time. But his recognition is limited. He only recognizes that he has fallen in favor, which is not a recognition worthy of pity. Recognition, for the Renaissance dramatists, coincided with growth in the protagonist's understanding:

most of the dramatists believe that 'man's understanding / Is riper at his fall than all his life-time' [Middleton]; they see him rising above calamity not simply by accepting it with total constancy but by perceiving the extent to which he himself has worked it or by recognising the operation of a universal law from which no one is exempt... This...is not Aristotelian in origin... It was probably inspired by Seneca's interpretation of Hercules's death and by the related Stoic doctrine of 'right reason'. (McAlindon 21-22).

Terentius reports Sejanus' death and dismemberment to the audience (Jonson did not show the death because he could present it realistically), but there is no report of how Sejanus himself reacted as he faced his inevitable execution. Did he gain understanding before he died? Did he acknowledge his guilt? Did he come to a recognition of his own role in bringing about his fall and rise above the calamity? No one knows; therefore, his death is only a just punishment for a wicked man who, as far as the reader knows, never recognized his own wickedness.

In addition to the insignificance of Sejanus' fall to the reader, Jonson specifically instructs the reader not to pity Sejanus. In Arruntius' final lines in the play, he states, "Forbear, you things / That stand upon the pinnacles of state, / To boast your slippery height. When you do fall, / You pash yourselves in pieces, ne'er to rise / And he that lends you pity is not wise" (V.903-907).

This is a twofold warning: first, it warns against pride and boasting—high positions are "slippery." Secondly, it warns that pitying a proud person's fall, in this case Sejanus', is not wise. This is a final instruction from Jonson, with only six more lines of the play following, that Sejanus is not to be pitied. Additionally, none of the characters in the play pitied Sejanus' fall or death. Lepidus comments on the sudden reversal of change of Sejanus' position: "He, that this morning rose proudly as the sun,... That had men's knees as frequent as the gods, / And sacrifices more than Rome had altars— / And this man fall! Fall? Ay, without a look / That durst appear his friend, or lend so much / Of vain relief to his changed state as pity" (719-30). Though men revered Sejanus as a god, all fled his side when Tiberius' letter indicted him, and no one pitied the sudden reversal of his fortune. In condemning Sejanus before the Senate, Macro states, "no man take compassion of thy state" (V.687). Jonson places this phrase in parentheses, indicating this is not a command spoken out loud to the Senate, but an aside in which Macro observes—and delights in—the unpitied state of Sejanus. All of these statements about the lack of pity for Sejanus make his own earlier statement a foreshadowing of his fate: "When I do fear again, let me be struck/ With forkèd fire, and unpitied die" (V.397-98).

Only after Sejanus' death does Jonson specifically appeal to his audience to pity. Terentius commands, "you whose minds are good / And have not forced all mankind from your breasts, / That have...virtue left / To pity guilty states, when they are wretched; / Lend your soft ears to hear, and eyes to weep / Deeds done by men, beyond the acts of furies" (763-768). This is a call for pity from "good minds," which implies that Jonson's narrow audience of extraordinary readers should be moved to pity in reading the play. Though Jonson requires an intellectual response to *Sejanus*, he rewards it with an emotional response.

Though Terentius appeals to those with enough humanity to pity wretched, guilty, states, he does not request pity for Sejanus, but for the "deeds done by men." Terentius then describes the ghastly scene after Sejanus' execution: "Sentence, by the Senate, / To lose his head—which was no sooner off, / But that and th'unfortunate trunk were seized / By the rude multitude; who, not content / With what the forward justice of the state / Officiously had done, with violent rage / Have rent it limb from limb" (815-820). The next 22 lines continue the description of how all the people—virgins, widows, the elderly, mothers—in a cruel but excited rage ravaged and scattered the body to the extent that Sejanus "lies...nowhere, and yet often buried" (842). But this is only the beginning of pity, and the beginning of Rome's downfall.

Rome's fall is final with its execution of Sejanus' innocent children. The nuntius enters with news, but Lepidus, knowing Sejanus dead, asks "What can be added?" (V.843). The nuntius tells him—and the audience—that Sejanus is not worth lamenting and that his death is only the place to "begin your pity." What comes next is enough to "melt ev'n Rome / And Caesar into tears" (844-846). This signals a moment of recognition for Rome, since the event is powerful enough to melt the entire *respublica* to tears. The nuntius continues: "A son and daughter to the dead Sejanus... / Have they drawn forth for farther sacrifice; / Whose tenderness of knowledge, unripe years, / And childish silly innocence was such / As scarce would lend them feeling their danger" (V.849-855). Because Roman law would "Admit no virgin immature to die," Macro delivered Sejanus' daughter "to be deflow'ed and spoiled / By the rude lust of the licentious hangman" (856-863). She was then "strangled with her harmless brother" (864). When Apicata, Sejanus' estranged wife and the mother of his murdered children, finds their bodies, she tears away at her hair and face, beats her breast, and demands to know "What she and those poor innocents have transgressed, / That they must suffer such a share in vengeance, /

Whilst Livia, Lygdus, and Eudemus live—/ Who...poisoned Drusus" (V.870-887). No audience could deny that these events do evoke pity, but the pity must somehow coincide with recognition and deepened understanding. If Sejanus is the protagonist, these events seem added on and contrived for the sole purpose of adding pity into a pitiless play. However, the events coincide with a sense of recognition and understanding for the mob and for Rome.

After Apicata reveals who the truly guilty ones are in Rome—the ones that should have been punished instead of her children—the mob changes. It ceases to rage: "Their gall is gone, and now they 'gin to weep / The mischief they have done... Part are so stupid, or so flexible, / As they believe him innocent. All grieve. / And some, whose hands yet reek with his warm blood... Wish him collected, and created new" (V.889-97). But, what is the recognition Rome comes to—the knowledge that has quieted the rage of the mob and brought all of Rome to tears? What was Rome's fall and how did she realize her own part in it?

For Rome, the reversal is the replacement of the public weal, in which the prince governs by means of reason for the public good, with the common weal, in which reason yields to the animal behavior of the mob. In other words, the reasoning part of the body gives in to the sensual urges of the body. The mob represents all of Rome because the leaders of Rome, from the beginning of the play, have been ruled by their own appetites just as the common mob is. Recognition is the knowledge of that reversal. But, Rome does not recognize her fallen state with the rape and murder of innocent children; she only realizes her fall when she knows her beastly form of justice has failed and murderers are still free.

Rome's recognition, however, is not simply a realization of decay within the body. Throughout the play, all acknowledge the corruptness of the state. The governing powers of Rome have given in to their own ambitious appetites, even the prince. For example, when

Sejanus hints that Tiberius should destroy the threats to his power, Tiberius asks, "Are rites / Of faith, love, piety to be trod down?" Sejanus tells him "All for a crown...All the command of sceptres quite doth perish / If it begin religious thought to cherish" (II.175-181). In following through with Sejanus' advice and gradually bringing down Agrippina's supporters, Tiberius shows he has greater concern in maintaining his own power—his "crown" and "sceptre"—than in maintaining faith, love, and piety. And, Tiberius is willing to destroy Sejanus when Sejanus becomes a threat, even if that means using Macro, who is so eager to rise in power that he says he would willingly kill his own family for gain (III.726-732). As these men in power give in to their ambitions, they gradually yield the public weal helpless. When the beastly rule of the common weal takes over, the reversal—the fall of Rome—has happened.

Because everyone in Sejanus' Rome is aware of the corruption, the knowledge Rome gains as a result of the reversal must be more significant than an awareness of decay of the body. What Rome comes to understand is that the body can no longer rightly govern itself when reason fails to keep the rest of the body in check. In other words, because the governing members of Rome have given in to its appetites for ambition and power, the whole body is susceptible to the rule of the common weal. Government cannot govern; no one can ensure the public weal can ever be restored. This is why justice is impossible and innocent children were executed. Not until Apicata accused the truly guilty did Rome realize her fault. Ironically, though, instead of pitying for the dead children, the mob pities for Sejanus and want him restored. In a hierarchical *respublica*, the corruption of the prince, the senate, and the nobility spreads downward until the commoners, already base in their desires, become nothing more than untamed beasts incapable of understanding their actions.

The view of Rome as the protagonist of *Sejanus* is not necessarily the only correct reading, but it is not without critical support. William Wolfe believes the central issues in Jonsonian tragedy are "the fallen world, the reasons for its fall, and especially what will insure that society will not degenerate further" (1). Burton believes *Sejanus* is a political tragedy that is "concerned with the tragic flaw *within the social order*, not within the individual" (397). Nash agrees that Jonson concentrates "upon public life, not private" (184). If the society is at the center of the action, then it makes sense that the body politic is the one protagonist that truly *feels* like a protagonist. However, the critics who believe *Sejanus* is an examination of a flawed society fail to realize the individual's role in Rome's decay. Individual ambitions led to the corruption, which in turn rendered the body ungoverned. From the beginning of *Sejanus*, the virtuous individual could not act, as indicated by Sabinus' remark that he lacked the shifting face and cleft tongue necessary to be "favoured of the times." The play is not simply an examination of public life, but a study of how all the individual members of the political body affect and are affected by it.

The reader who realizes the individual's role in *respublica* finds *Sejanus* an emotional play because Rome's fate matters. The Roman Empire, as the most powerful ruling body in the world during its time, represents the entire world. Jonson does not describe Sejanus as the second face of Rome, but the "second face of the whole world" (I.217). And, Sejanus, "next to Caesar did possess the world" (V.839). Rome is the world. As part of the world, the audience is part of Rome, or *respublica*. The audience can sympathize not only with the effects of Rome's downfall, but also with the realization of how they are affected by their own Rome. Within *Sejanus*' Rome the reader realizes the "misfortune of a man like ourselves" (Aristotle) because no one is exempt from the effects of the *respublica*.

With Rome established as the protagonist comes one final consideration: is Rome the tragic hero of *Sejanus*? So far, this chapter has not examined Rome as a tragic hero because Rome first had to be established as a character. Also, designating a tragic hero for *Sejanus* implies Jonson followed some generally understood principle in developing a tragic hero. It is better to examine how Rome, as the protagonist of *Sejanus*, is similar to Shakespearean and Aristotelian tragic heroes.

As a tragic character, Rome meets most of Aristotle's requirements:

It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes—that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty.

As a political body of collective corruption, Rome is not the "man like ourselves." However, the body contains within it individual like ourselves who must fall with the whole body. This gives the individual reader someone to relate to and sympathize with. However, Rome seems to fall not by an error but by vice and corruption. This would render Rome unpitiable, except for the

fact that much of the body is not depraved; they simply have no way to act in the face of collective depravity.

Rome should also be examined in comparison with the Shakespearean tragic hero, which, according to James Hammersmith, is slightly different than the Aristotelian one. Because Aristotle's hero is brought down by an error or frailty, that error is all that is necessary to cause the fall. In other words, the fall would happen regardless of the circumstances. Shakespeare's heroes do not have an error, but a trait, or a predisposition that can lead to a downfall only in specific circumstances. For example, "much of the first act of *Macbeth*...is occupied with letting the audience know that there is nothing wrong with or evil in Macbeth's 'ambition.' On the contrary, he is on the rise...through perfectly legitimate and recognized means—through exemplary service to his King"; however, when the circumstances change and he is in close proximity to both the King and Lady Macbeth, these specific circumstances "conspire to afford the opportunity for the hero to pervert the trait or to direct it to fatal ends" (Hammersmith 249).

With these distinctions made, it seems Jonson is more Aristotelian than Shakespearean because Rome, as a corrupted body, is in a constant downward spiral for its inability to keep its appetites in check. The body could lose control at any moment; the specific circumstance of Sejanus' fall has little to do with the body's inability to rule itself, as the same Romans who worshiped Sejanus as a god in one moment tore his body to pieces the next.

Hammersmith believes that except for Jonson, Aristotle's *Poetics* "affected Elizabethan and Jacobean England scarcely at all... There is no evidence that the dramatists of the period, with the exception of Jonson, knew the *Poetics* at all, or, if they did, that they made any use of it" (245). Evidence indicates that the *Poetics* did not exist in any Western vernacular until 1549, when it was translated into Italian. The first Latin version in England did not appear until 1623

(Hammersmith 245). However, Aristotle's influence on Jonson, is obvious in *Discoveries*, where he deems Aristotle the "first accurate *Criticke*, and the truest Judge; nay, the greatest *Philosopher*, the world ever had" (95) and echoes Aristotle's definition of unity of action (103-04). But, Jonson is not Aristotelian in his purpose. For Aristotle, tragedy should, "through pity and fear" bring about "the proper purgation of these emotions." For Jonson, tragedy should delight and teach. Both allow emotional responses, but Jonson also provides for instruction. When the reader finds *Sejanus* relevant to himself, he can experience instruction through the understanding he gains of his own *respublica*—and that should end in delight, for, though the audience's own *respublica* functions like Rome, it is not the fallen Rome of *Sejanus*.

**Conclusion:
Delight, Instruction, and Political Theory**

The immediate appeal of Jonson is to the mind; his emotional tone is not in the single verse, but in the design of the whole. But not many people are capable of discovering for themselves the beauty which is only found after labour. (T.S. Eliot 66).

After carefully reading and researching Jonson, only two questions remain: Did he delight? Did he instruct? I feel the best answer to these questions comes in the form of a personal response from someone who became his ideal reader, the “reader in extraordinary.” To both questions, I answer, “Yes.”

I believe the delight in *Sejanus* is in the discovery of the subtleties of Jonson’s art. In other words, the delight is in “getting it,” at least some of it. The reader who heeds Jonson’s advice to be judicious delves into the text with expectations; Jonson does not disappoint.

But there are other delights as well—the simultaneous pleasure and disgust in reading how the villain was torn to pieces, the satisfaction that Agrippina’s pride caught up with her, and the purging of pity and fear when the mob quieted and Jonson foreshadowed justice for other villains. I think, however, Jonson wanted the delight to be the instruction itself. As a scholar who labored over the design of his tragedy, he must have found the greatest pleasure in learning.

The instruction in *Sejanus* is a lesson in political theory, but it has nothing to do with hardening ourselves in the face of disaster. On the contrary, it seems most of us could do nothing to defeat the disaster. Jonson presents us with his perception of the way the system works: all parts of the body politic affect and are affected by the whole of the body. When the authorities at the top of the hierarchy descend into corruption, the rest of the body goes with it. By virtue of this theory, it seems plausible that a good prince and virtuous leadership would

similarly affect the state in a positive way. Jonson seems to be giving us the opposite of Erasmus:

A beneficent prince, as Plutarch in his great learning said, is a living likeness of God, who is at once good and powerful. His goodness makes him want to help all; his power makes him able to do so. On the other hand, an evil prince, who is like a plague to his country, is the incarnation of the devil, who has great power joined with his wickedness. (157)

So it seems that the cure for Rome's disease is virtue in the upper ranks of the hierarchy—or is it? Jonson indicates otherwise: though virtue *needs* to act to restore Rome, it *cannot* act.

Individual virtue has no power against collective decay. Does this mean that Rome is irrecoverable? Or does it simply imply that the rescuer of Rome will have a little bit of virtue but a great engineering skill? I think this is the case. True virtue does not allow the engineer to use whatever means necessary to maintain the public weal. However, the “good” prince, or good engineer, can use immoral means to a positive end: the good of the state. In Jonson's eyes, it seems, the ends justify the means.

And this leads to one final delight: Jonson presents us with new ways to examine our own society. The interaction between the body and its members applies to anyone at any time. This means that Jonson is accessible. He does not require his readers to be Roman historians to “get it”—they just have to pay attention.

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