



*The
Laureate
and the
Literary
System*

In dedicating the *Seven Books of the Iliads of Homer* to Essex, George Chapman spoke of poetry as “this poor scribbling, this toy . . . being accounted in our most gentle and complimentary use of it only the droppings of an idle humor; far unworthy the serious expense of an exact gentleman’s time.” Yet of this “fruitless, dead, and despised receptacle,” the human soul has, Chapman declared, made “her earthly residence . . . to reverse [poetry’s] appearance with unspeakable profit, comfort, and life to all posterities.” Chapman nicely defines the laureate’s task: to make of a gentleman’s toy something of unspeakable profit. His laureate contemporaries may not all have shared his Neoplatonic belief that the soul would, in some miraculous way, do the transforming, but they did agree that, if it were to serve their ambition, poetry required transformation. Though the Renaissance had given new life to the idea of the poet’s high calling, the practice of poetry, particularly in England, had, it seemed to the aspiring laureates, fallen into the hands of diletantes and hacks. Spenser complained that in his unheroic age even a poet “of the old stocke” must “rolle with rest in rymes of

rybaudrye"; Drayton despaired of being read "at this time, when verses are wholly deduced to chambers"; Daniel disputed "the received opinion" of poetry which

Hath so unseasoned now the ears of men,
That who doth touch the tenor of that vein,
Is held but vain;

and Jonson, after defining "the offices and function of a poet," lamented "that the writers of these days are other things, that, not only their manners, but their natures are inverted, and nothing remaining with them of the dignity of poet, but an abused name, which every scribe usurps."¹

We have learned to disregard such statements. "Conventional" or "formulaic" we call them. And so they are. They are the formulae of literary self-presentation. Chapman, Spenser, and the rest use them in imitation of other poets, ancient and modern, whom they hope to resemble. But they also use them to distinguish themselves from their amateur and professional contemporaries—contemporaries they would perhaps have had to invent had they not existed, but who, in fact, existed in such numbers that they dominated the literary scene. In the 1570s, when Spenser began to write, his fellow English poets were all amateurs. By the 1590s, when Jonson got started, the situation had changed. The expansion of the literary market, particularly the market for plays, had brought into existence a small but active group of true professionals, men who depended on writing for a livelihood, and Spenser's own, still uncompleted career was providing an English example of that

1. *The Works of George Chapman*, ed. R. H. Shepherd, 3 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1892), II, 8; *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, C. G. Osgood, et al., 11 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1932–1957), VII, 98; *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J. William Hebel, 5 vols. (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1933), IV, v*; *The Complete Works in Verse and Prose of Samuel Daniel*, ed. A. B. Grosart, 5 vols.

quintessentially humanist construct, the laureate poet. But still the amateurs remained ascendant. There was thus some plausibility to the laureates' charge.

The name of poet had been usurped, and poetry had been made a toy, a vanity, a thing of ribaldry fit only for private chambers. And if we do not see things quite this way now, it is nevertheless a fair representation of the received opinion in at least some influential circles—circles whose approbation the laureate required. The very context of these quotations should be enough to tell us that they were meant seriously, for each is part of a much larger exercise in public self-definition and each has many echoes elsewhere in its author's work. These men recognized that a laureate career would be intelligible only if presented in relation to other literary and nonliterary careers. It necessarily defined itself by means of a series of similarities to and differences from other ways of writing and other modes of being. But was the field of poetry large enough to hold differences of such magnitude? If Elizabethans understood poetry to be merely a fugitive and licentious toy—and, however loudly poetry was sometimes praised, such a view was widespread—then the laureate might have no way both to distinguish himself and to retain his title to poetry. Bend too close to contemporary practice and he would topple from his laureate eminence to "rolle with [the] rest"; but hold to that eminence with too little concession and he would, as Drayton discovered, lose his readers, and perhaps even the name of poet. "A good honest man," Jonson said of Daniel, "but no poet." The readiness with which such anathemas come to Jonson's lips testifies to his sense of the perilous exclusivity of the term, as does his half-

(London, 1885), I, 227; and *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–1952), V, 17–18. I have modernized spelling and, to a lesser extent, punctuation in all quotations except those from Spenser. Subsequent references to these editions will be noted in the text.

ironic insistence on its application to himself. "In his merry humor he was wont to name himself the poet" (I, 132 and 150).

Self-definition and *self-presentation* are the prime operative terms here. For the laureate, writing was a way of saying something about himself. He wanted not only to be a laureate, but also to be known to be one. Like any other meaningful communication, this required a system of conventional signs—a system that stands to the particular self-defining gestures accomplished by the various writers as, to use terms made familiar by Saussurean linguistics, *langue* stands to *parole*. An individual utterance (*la parole*) can have meaning only because certain possibilities exist within the competence (*la langue*) of the speaker and his listeners. In like manner, a set of poems and the various verbal and nonverbal gestures surrounding it could be the manifestation of a laureate career only if certain possibilities existed within the literary system that the writer shared with his audience. But Spenser and Jonson had reason to doubt that in their case the requisite possibilities did exist.

The laureates were, in effect, reviving a dead language. And though there might be a general inclination to regard that language as more noble than any then spoken, it remained nevertheless largely unintelligible. On occasion the poets were themselves uncertain whether they had gotten it quite right, uncertain whether the career on which they had embarked could be accomplished by the actions they were performing. Concern of this kind marks *The Shepherdes Calender* and occurs again in Daniel's *Musophilus*. But more often they felt that they were misunderstood, that the fit audience was few indeed. "In these jig-given times," Jonson wondered, who will countenance either a legitimate poem or a legitimate poet? "Thou pourest them wheat," he told himself on another occasion, "And they will acorns eat" (V, 431, and VI, 492). His image recalls Ascham's comparison of modern rime to ancient quantitative meter. "Surely to follow rather the Goths in rim-

ing than the Greeks in true versifying were even to eat acorns with swine when we may freely eat wheat bread amongst men."² Both Ascham and Jonson relate their claims to the Renaissance program of classical rebirth. But what if the old language, the old roles, and the old gestures were Greek to the dark, ignorant, and swinish present? The wheat bread of quantitative meter found little favor. Who could say that readers would not reject the laureate with similar disdain, leaving him to sing angry odes to himself? However exalted their notion of their role, however thorough their imitation of the great poets of antiquity, Spenser, Jonson, and the other English Renaissance laureates had finally to conform to the actual body of current literary practice. And that meant linking their self-presentation to the self-presentation of their amateur and professional contemporaries.

Laureates and Amateurs

We can, however, leave the theatrical professionals temporarily aside. In its Spenserian phase, laureate self-fashioning was related only to the amateur, and even later amateur patterns continue to dominate. Furthermore, throughout these years, public self-presentation through poetry was largely confined to the amateurs and laureates. Both used their literary work to say something about its author, and in doing so they necessarily conformed to principles familiar in semiotics—principles that would not much help us in discussing the career patterns of the professionals.

Meaning in the Elizabethan system of literary careers, as in any sign system, derives from relations and oppositions between the elements of that system. To write in a certain genre or

2. Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster*, ed. Lawrence V. Ryan (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1967), p. 145.

to speak of one's work in a certain way or to establish a certain relationship with booksellers, stage managers, or patrons was to associate oneself with one group of poets and to dissociate oneself from another. But the analogy between the system by which a sixteenth-century English poet declared his literary identity and the most common semiotic model, the linguistic, breaks down at one crucial point, for the meanings generated by the literary system depend to a far greater degree on history. The literary past was present to Renaissance readers and writers as ancient sound shifts and semantic displacements never are to the users of a language. The synchronic thus included an awareness of the diachronic. A sense of the literary past was part of their structure of apprehension. Without some recollection of Virgil or Horace the laureates would have been nearly unintelligible, as would the amateurs without Petrarch (the Petrarch of the *Canzoniere*) or Ovid. It is, however, easy to exaggerate the importance of this diachronic dimension, to mistake the identification of sources for an analysis of the literary system. Allusions to earlier writers are significant gestures, but no more significant than many others—than, for example, attitudes toward print, a matter on which the ancients were of necessity silent. Though Spenser was called “our Virgil” and Sidney “the English Petrarch,” neither much resembles his presumed model. Each presents himself in opposition to a set of contemporary expectations—expectations similar enough to those against which Virgil and Petrarch presented themselves to make those earlier poets usable, but different enough to alter significantly the resulting pattern.

The expectations against which the English amateurs defined themselves were, for the most part, not literary at all. They were rather those associated with gentle birth and a humanist education—in particular the expectation that the end to which a man so born and so educated should direct himself was service to the commonwealth. Now, of course, the humanists themselves admired poets and poetry and gave literary

studies a central place in their curricula. Castiglione's courtier, Elyot's governor, and the pupils of Ascham's schoolmaster were all expected to turn out verse. But as the century progressed and as humanism moved northward, the active life of civic service and the contemplative (or concupiscent) life of literary withdrawal came more and more into conflict. The place of poetry in Elyot is already narrower than in Castiglione, and it narrows still further in Ascham, who classes poets as “quick wits,” those hasty, rash, heady, brainsick, riotous, and unthrifty young men who, in Ascham's opinion, rarely “come to show any great countenance or bear any great authority abroad in the world.” Against these Ascham sets the dutiful “hard wits,” the men best suited for public service: “grave, steadfast, silent of tongue, secret of heart; not hasty in making, but constant in keeping, any promise; not rash in uttering, but ware in considering, every matter, and thereby not quick in speaking, but deep of judgment, whether they write or give counsel, in all weighty affairs.” These, he concludes, “be the men that become in the end both most happy for themselves and always best esteemed abroad in the world.”³ Nor is Ascham's ideal idiosyncratic. It echoes the prescriptions of the chief ancient sources of ethical precept, Isocrates' *Ad Demonicum*, Cato's *Distichs*, and Cicero's *De Officiis*, and is in turn echoed in the advice of such Elizabethan figures of paternal and governmental authority as Sir Henry Sidney and Lord Burghley.⁴ Ascham's grave and hard-witted counselor is the man Sidney, Spenser, and their contemporaries were taught to be.

The Elizabethan amateurs presented themselves as poets in

3. Ascham, pp. 22–24.

4. Sidney's advice to his son Philip has been reprinted in James M. Osborne, *Young Philip Sidney, 1572–1577* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 11–13. Letters of advice from Burghley to his sons Thomas and Robert can be found in *Advice to a Son*, ed. Louis B. Wright (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 1–13.

opposition to such teaching. They made a place for poetry and created an identity for the poet by systematically inverting the values of midcentury humanism. In their literary self-presentation, gravity gave way to levity, work to play, reason to passion, public accomplishment to private delight, misogynism and antiromantic prejudice to love. The very generic forms they most favored—the love sonnet, the pastoral, the prodigal-son fiction—express the opposition between poetry and duty. But, curiously, even in their self-defining rebellion, the amateurs confirmed the values of midcentury humanism. They rarely began without an apology or ended without a palinode. They thus enclosed and rejected the self-as-poet in order to reveal the dutiful and employable self-as-civil-servant. They publicly anatomized their own wit to show themselves in a glass of government. Their ultimate recognition of the claims that they made poetry deny declared them to be members of the class of the humanistically trained, prodigal sons who were ready to return. For them, poetry came to be a way of indicating their fitness for precisely the sort of service against which they were rebelling, a way of proclaiming a serious self by shamefully displaying its opposite. “If any ask thee what I do profess,” one of the least of the amateurs told his verse, “Say that of which thou art the idleness.”⁵

The laureates began in close association with the amateurs. They attended the same schools, visited the same great houses, wrote poems to the same noble patrons, and sought preferment in the same royal court.⁶ They shared, moreover, the same idea of the end to which their lives should be directed. Educated, like the amateurs, in the tradition of civic humanism, the laureates agreed that they could properly fulfill themselves and dis-

5. Thomas Bastard, *Chrestoleros, Seven Bookes of Epigrames*, Spenser Society (1888; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1967), p. 83.

6. See John Buxton, *Elizabethan Taste* (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 317–338.

play their gentility only in the active service of the commonwealth.⁷ The two groups differed, however, in how they hoped to accomplish that service—the amateurs as churchmen and statesmen, the laureates as poets. For the amateur, poetry was, as we have seen, a way of displaying abilities that could, once they had come to the attention of a powerful patron, be better employed in some other manner. For the laureate, poetry was itself a means of making a contribution to the order and improvement of the state. This difference resulted naturally in differing attitudes toward the circulation of their work and in literary careers of markedly different shape. The amateurs avoided print; the laureates sought it out. The amateurs wrote only in youth or, more rarely, in the interstices between business; the laureates wrote all their lives.

In their self-presentation the laureates made much of these differences. But they first emphasized their similarity to the amateurs. So firm was the amateurs' hold on the name of poet that the laureates could not wholly reject amateur attitudes. Nor could they wholly accept them. Thus, as a role-preserving compromise, they selected certain works, usually those written in the minor genres most practiced by the amateurs, and presented them with the familiar amateur self-disparagement. Daniel, in characterizing *Delia* as “the private passions of my youth . . . things uttered to myself and consecrated to silence” (I, 33), sounds as reticent and shamefaced as any amateur. Likewise, Chapman, who elsewhere calls himself the “grave and blameless Prophet of Phoebus,” can, in introducing his Ovidian *Banquet of Sense*, claim not to “profess . . . sacred poesy in any degree” (III, 9, and II, 21), as can Drayton in the comic *Owle*: “We . . . leave the laurel unto them that may” (II,

7. For a particularly relevant illustration of the humanist insistence on the active life, see Lodowick Bryskett, *A Discourse of Civil Life*, ed. Thomas E. Wright (Northridge, Calif.: San Fernando Valley State College, 1970), pp. 4–25. Spenser is one of the speakers in Bryskett's dialogue.

478). Even Spenser doubted whether he should publish his *Shepherd's Calendar* and spoke of his love poetry as "lewd layes . . . [made] in th' heat of youth" (IX, 5, and VII, 213). If the amateur—a Gascoigne, Sidney, Lodge, Hall, or Donne—advertised a tension between the poetry of youth and the business of age, a tension that often led to literary repentance, the laureate displayed a similar conflict between his work in the "amateur" genres and his work in those larger, more public forms on which his laureate claim depended. In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser transformed but retained the conventions of amateur love poetry; in *The Civil Wars* and *Poly-Olbion*, Daniel and Drayton abandon them altogether. On one side of the great divide were sonnets of youth and love; on the other, serious public poems of history and topography—poems that corresponded in the career of a laureate to the active public service of the amateur.

In Daniel's motto, *Aetas prima canat veneres postrema tumultus*, the laureate finds his answer to the amateur's abandonment of singing for fighting. Like the amateur, the laureate presents himself as having been betrayed into verse by youthful passion and exposed in print by a piratical publisher. But, like the amateur's, his private and licentious poems plead indulgence, for they too give promise of more respectable future accomplishment. "Favored by the worthies of our land," he will "grow / In time to take a greater task in hand" (Daniel, III, 27). This movement from one kind of poetry to another could easily be given an appearance of Virgilian continuity ("Lo I the man . . ."), but I suspect that imitation of the amateurs was no less decisive than imitation of the ancients. In combination, the two provided a gesture of extraordinary subtlety and power, for by its means a writer like Spenser or Daniel or Drayton could at once satisfy expectation and redirect it. He could show himself to be a poet in the Elizabethan sense, while he simultaneously assimilated that modern role to the ancient one of

Roman laureate. He thus made the familiar amateur formula say something new. But without that formula, he would surely have found less use for Virgil.

Jonson marks his originality, an originality that distinguishes him even from the other laureate poets of his age, by rejecting any compromise, however limited, with amateur self-disparagement. For the first twenty years of his career, he wrote in no genre that he considered unworthy, or at least in none that he could not elevate, and, though he silently suppressed some of his juvenilia, he apologized for nothing he wrote. His epigrams (not songs and sonnets, to be sure) he presented defiantly as "the ripest of my studies" (VIII, 25). No English poet, whatever his pretension, had made such a claim for such poems. Bastard had called his epigrams "the accounts of my idleness," and Weever his "a twice seven hours . . . study."⁸ Davies and Guilpin adopted similar attitudes toward theirs, and Donne did not allow his to be printed. Even Martial, Jonson's Roman model, had denied entry into the "theater" of his verse to any stern Cato; he feared the moralist's disapproval—a sentiment echoed, according to Thomas Moffet, in Sidney's literary repentance: "Having come to fear . . . that his *Stella* and *Arcadia* might render the souls of readers more yielding instead of better," Sidney, that most nearly laureate of amateur poets, "very much wished to sing something that would abide the censure of the most austere Cato."⁹ So, continues Moffet, he translated "the *Week* of the great Bartas" and "the psalms of the Hebrew poet." For Jonson, there could be no such amateur self-depreciation, no shame, no repentance, and no reparation. "In my theater," he proclaimed, "Cato, if he lived, might enter

8. Bastard, p. 4; John Weever, *Epigrammes in the Oldest Cut and Newest Fashion*, ed. R. B. McKerrow (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1911), p. 1.

9. Thomas Moffet, *Nobilis, or a View of the Life and Death of a Sidney*, trans. and ed. Virgil B. Heltzel and Hoyt H. Hudson (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1940), p. 74.

without scandal" (VIII, 26). A true poet, in Jonson's view, must be a poet without a palinode.

In opposing his work so uncompromisingly to the amateurs', Jonson only made more apparent the fundamental laureate strategy. If the Elizabethan amateur molded himself like a negative image on the template of midcentury English humanism, the laureate reversed the process, taking his form from opposition to the amateur. He thus restored to poetry a face resembling that of the humanist progenitor. When Jonson complains that the manners and nature of the writers of his time are "inverted," he points to this negative likeness between what he would call "poet" and "poetaster." Such likenesses are of course, never exact. Indeed, they may, to an eye not trained to see them, be scarcely perceptible. Poems and plays are crossed by so many systems with which we are more familiar—social, economic, psychological, philosophical, and literary—that quite fundamental relations in career type are easily obscured. But more often the differences on which authorial self-definition was based are readily apparent. What is less apparent is that the differences are functional, that they are the intended source of meaning. As critics, we use such differences to help us define by contrast the particular quality of each poet, but we do not often recognize that they are signs as well as symptoms, that they came to be there because they helped the poet define himself to his audience. In the production of meaning, as Saussure insisted, "il n'y a que des différences."¹⁰ The differences are the poet's meaning.

Consider, for example, Joseph Summers' characterization of Donne and Jonson in terms of "opposed ideals and practices."

Besides the private and the public, the amateur and the professional, the individual and the general, one thinks of extravagance and sobri-

10. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1915; rpt. Paris: Payot, 1976), p. 166.

ety, excess and measure, spontaneity and deliberation, immediacy and distance, daring and propriety, roughness and elegance, tension and balance, agility and weight. And one can go on to expression and function, ecstasy and ethics, experience and thought, energy and order, the genius and the craftsman—ending with those inevitable seventeenth-century pairs, passion and reason, wit and judgment, nature and art.¹¹

These differences are not, I would suggest, merely the fortuitous product of dissimilar temperaments, though temperament surely had something to do with them. If Donne appears extravagant, excessive, and spontaneous, it is in part at least because he wished to define himself as poet in opposition to humanist ideals of sobriety, measure, and deliberation. And if Jonson seems more sober (in verse, if not at the Mermaid), measured, and deliberate, it is because he presented himself in accord with those humanist ideals and in opposition to amateur extravagance, excess, and spontaneity—qualities that characterize the objects of his satire in both the epigrams and the plays.

The differences between Donne and Jonson are thus not primarily individual. Taken together, the terms on Donne's side could as easily serve as a description of Ascham's "quick wits," while those on Jonson's perfectly fit the "hard wits." They constitute opposed paradigms of rebellion and duty, of amateur and laureate. Sidney, Harington, Marston, or Nashe, different as they are from one another, could each be substituted for Donne with no change at all. And if changes would be needed to replace Jonson with Spenser, Daniel, Drayton, or Chapman, most of the terms would nevertheless fit, particularly if one thought only of those larger works on which they based their laureate claim. "Wild, madding, jocund, and irregular," the "wanton verse" of Drayton's *Idea* belongs, with the

11. Joseph H. Summers, *The Heirs of Donne and Jonson* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 39.

amateur juvenilia of other laureates, in the Donne column. But for the dutifully laureate *Barons' Wars*, Drayton sought rather Jonsonian "majesty, perfection, and solidity" (I, 485, and II, 4). To be sure, style follows genre, but both follow career type. Only a poet of a certain kind writes a poem like the *Barons' Wars*. Less adequately described by the Jonson terms is Spenser, whose attempt to reconcile amateur and laureate values goes much further than Drayton's movement from one mode to the other. But even applied to Spenser, the terms are not so much wrong as incomplete. In his self-presentation, Spenser did not perhaps oppose reason to passion, but he did try to reconcile the two in a way that would still distinguish him from the amateurs—not reason versus passion, but reasonable passion versus unreasonable passion. Though the distinction is less absolute than Jonson's, Spenser's laureate identity depended on it.

"But such a marshalling of abstractions can," Summers points out, "be misleading." It makes us forget how much Donne and Jonson had in common. To jog our memories, Summers borrows a sentence from Douglas Bush: "Both poets rebelled, in their generally different ways, against pictorial fluidity, decorative rhetorical patterns, and half-medieval idealism, and both, by their individual and selective exploitation of established doctrines and practices, created new techniques, a new realism of style (or new rhetoric), sharp, condensed, and muscular, fitted for the intellectual and critical realism of their thought."¹² In sum, Donne and Jonson are alike in that both are members of a single literary generation, a generation that defined itself in opposition to the generation of Sidney and Spenser. Taking both career identification and generation into account, we can express the relation of these poets to one another as a four-part equivalence.

12. Summers, p. 40.

Spenser : Sidney :: Jonson : Donne

But perhaps Jonson's position would be better appreciated were Donne replaced by Marston. Donne is in some ways more conservative than his generation and thus more resembles Sidney. With Marston as representative amateur, we see more fully the shift that separates Jonson from Spenser, the shift in literary form from poetry to drama, in mode from romance to satire, in fictional scene from pastoral to urban, in center of fashion from court to the inns of court, and in *magister amoris* (when love is not simply rejected) from Petrarch to Ovid.

On each side of this generational divide, the amateurs dominate, establishing a literary system particularly designed to express their own rebellious poetic identity. The task of the laureates was to take this system and make of it a vehicle for a very different sort of identity. If Chapman, Daniel, and Drayton seem not quite to have addressed themselves to this problem, it may be because of their intermediary position. Born midway between Sidney and Donne, they no longer saw the former as problematical and were too set in their Elizabethan manner to meet the challenge of the latter. They took, with varying degrees of dependence, Spenser's accomplishment as a model, a model imperfect only in its admixture of amateur attitudes, without realizing that the strength of Spenser's work as living poetry derived from that admixture. Instead of transforming the amateur themes and genres, as Spenser had done and as Jonson was to do, they sought in topography, history, and translation a laureate purity that left them alienated from the dominant literary fashion of their age—"the remnant of another time," as Daniel was already saying of himself in 1605.

An Official Self

So far I have said little of the professionals, and with good reason, for they said little of themselves. In the theater the

professional dramatist was visible, if at all, only as an actor. And when, on rare occasions, his work got into print, it was likely to be anonymous. In neither their acted nor their printed form were his plays exercises in self-presentation. But despite the professional's reticence, his activities were made a signifying part of the Elizabethan system of literary careers. The responsibility for this assimilation belongs largely to the amateurs.

At first glance, the union of amateur and professional may appear highly improbable. In terms of education and social standing, they were at opposite ends of the scale—the amateur at the top, the professional at the bottom. Yet that very contrast served the amateur assimilation, for how could a gentleman better declare his truancy than by writing for the public theaters? If poetry represented a dereliction of duty, drama was worse. Thus where the quick wits in Gascoigne's *Glass of Government* speed their way to destruction with poems, the prodigal in Greene's *Never Too Late* does it still more spectacularly with plays. And what happened in fiction could, the authors intimate, happen in life. Both Gascoigne's book and Greene's are transparently autobiographical. Moreover, Greene was not alone in his public-theater prodigality. Like him, Marlowe, Peele, Lodge, Nashe, Marston, and Beaumont all made play writing a part of an amateur career—a career that in each case served to define the writer to his audience. It was against this amateur assimilation and against the preexisting attitudes which made it possible that Jonson had to struggle in using drama as a main vehicle for his laureate career. And, as always, the struggle was to make meaning by significant opposition. Thus, if we examine the common attitudes of amateurs and professionals, we should see the laureate more clearly.

If play writing could so easily be made to occupy the place more commonly taken in an amateur career by verse making, it was because both were supposed to be equally frivolous. Nei-

ther private verse nor public drama made the claim to literary greatness that distinguishes the laureate and his work. The courtly amateur claimed to write only for his own amusement and that of his friends; the professional, for money and the entertainment of the paying audience. The similarity between them is reflected in a trait we have already noticed, their common reluctance, whether feigned or true, to have their work printed. Though the "kind" would not have been the same, most amateurs and professionals could have echoed Heywood's protest: "It never was any great ambition in me to be in this kind voluminously read."¹³ Their reasons no doubt differed—the amateur feared loss of face, the professional loss of income—but they resembled one another in lacking a desire to give permanent form and wide, printed circulation to the products of their wit. In this both differed from the laureates, who not only allowed their writings to be printed, but took great care that they be printed as handsomely as possible.

When they called their poems and plays "works," Daniel and Jonson defined the fundamental pretension of the laureate. (Suckling read this signal aright and in his "Sessions of the Poets" had Jonson tell "them plainly he deserved the bays, / For his were called *Works*, where others' were but plays.") Amateurs and professionals spoke rather of literature—or at least of the literature they wrote—as play. It occupied either the idleness of the writer or the idleness of the spectators, "that they may return to their trades and faculties with more zeal and earnestness, after some small, soft, and pleasant retirement."¹⁴

13. *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Heywood*, 6 vols. (1874; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), VI, 5. In this address to the reader, prefaced to his *English Traveler* (1633), Heywood distinguishes himself particularly from Jonson: "True it is that my plays are not exposed unto the world in volumes to bear the title of *Works* (as others)."

14. Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors*, ed. Arthur Freeman (New York: Garland, 1973), sig. F4. Heywood does of course argue that this retirement is in various ways morally improving.

A professional, like Heywood in his *Apology for Actors*, or an amateur, like Sidney in the *Defense of Poesy*, could, in good humanist fashion, make a far higher claim for drama or poetry, but he rarely presented himself or his own work—as the laureates habitually did—in such lofty terms. Few of Heywood's many plays were printed and, of those that were, very few include any prefatory self-presentation. Typical of these last is the dedication of *The Fair Maid of the West* to John Othow of Grey's Inn: "I must ingenuously acknowledge a weightier argument would have better suited with your grave employment, but there are retirements necessarily belonging to all the labors of the body and brain." As for Sidney, he allowed none of his literary productions to be printed and referred to the *Arcadia*, the most ambitious of his undertakings, as his "toyful book" to be read by his sister and her friends "at your idle times."¹⁵ Even in their defensive treatises, Heywood and Sidney maintain their characteristic attitudes, the self-effacement of the professional and the humorous *sprezzatura* of the gentleman amateur. "I have been ever too jealous of mine own weakness willingly to thrust into the press," writes Heywood, "nor had I at this time, but that a kind of necessity enjoined me to so sudden a business"; while Sidney says of himself, "I know not by what mischance in these my not old years and idlest times having slipped into the title of a poet, [I] am provoked to say something unto you in defense of that my unelected vocation."¹⁶ Needless to say, no such necessity or provocation was called on to explain the existence and publication of *The Faerie Queene*, *The Civil Wars*, *The Poly-Olbion*, *The Whole Works of Homer*, or *The*

15. Heywood, *The Fair Maid of the West*, ed. Robert K. Turner, Jr. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 3; Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (The Old Arcadia)*, ed. Jean Robertson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 3.

16. Heywood, *Apology*, sig. A4; Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (1965; rpt. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1973), p. 95.

Works of Ben Jonson. Their authors professed an elected vocation.

Toy, pastime, play, retirement—these terms were applied to their writings by amateur and professional alike, "for," as Dekker said of his *Shoemaker's Holiday*, "nothing is purposed but mirth."¹⁷ Such mirth might be reprehended by the Catos of Court and City, by the Burghleian humanists and the burgher Puritans, but society generally was more lenient. The amateur was excused because he would ultimately renounce poetry for more serious pursuits, and the professional because, having little claim to gentility and its duties, he made it his humble occupation to provide for the recreation of others. Both thus enjoyed a freedom denied the laureate, a freedom from seriousness.

It may, however, seem absurd to talk of the freedom from seriousness of groups that in Jonson's time included Donne on the one side and Shakespeare on the other. The seriousness of either would, in the opinion of most modern readers, outweigh that of a whole theater of Daniels, Draytons, or even Jonsons. But Donne's and Shakespeare's is a seriousness of a very different sort from the laureates'—not the seriousness of a man writing in conformity to the dictates of truth and duty, but rather a seriousness discovered in play. We see this most readily in Donne, in the histrionic excess of his wit, searching out through image and attitude roles for the performing self, but it is perhaps still more fundamental to Shakespeare. For two decades in comedy, history, tragedy, and romance, Shakespeare explored the indirect ways by which his playful mimetic art touched on a grace beyond the reach of the professors of seriousness. His stolid Romans may speak of poets as "jigging fools," unfit for the serious business of war, but Shakespeare

17. *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Fredson Bowers, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1953–1961), I, 19.

ironically undercuts those same Romans in every serious pose they strike. Not they, but rather the Hals, the Rosalinds, the Hamlets—the characters who give themselves up, if only for a holiday, to the games of disguise—achieve full seriousness. Though bracketed with the imaginings of lunatics and lovers, the poet's story of festivity and dream “grows to something of great constancy.” Critics have been no more successful than Hippolyta in defining that “something.” At the serious center of the professional's work, as of the amateur's, lies an enigma that neither feels obliged to resolve. It possesses greatness and constancy, but, like Bottom's dream, it has no definable bottom, no external referant, no unambiguously ascertainable meaning. It has rather the elusive autonomy of game.

By contrast, the something of great constancy at the center of the laureate's work is easily defined. It is the poet himself. His deliberately serious poetic is grounded on a serious, centered self. As Daniel suggests in *Musophilus*, his poem of renewed self-consecration, the laureate's self, muse, and art are so intimately dependent on one another as to be virtually indistinguishable. They are separate facets—the doer, the doing, and that which is done—of a single being. “I . . . here present,” he writes,

the form of mine own heart:
Where, to revive myself, my Muse is led
With motions of her own, t'act her own part,
Striving to make her now contemned art,
As fair t'herself as possibly she can;
Lest, seeming of no force, of no desert,
She might repent the course that she began.

(1, 223)

To avoid the repentance that was the mark of an amateur's career, the laureate returns to his heart to find there the beauty, force, and desert that justify his elsewhere “transformed verse, apparelled / With others passions or with others rage.” Spenser

makes a similar return in response to a similar provocation in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*, as Jonson does in the two odes to himself.

Let this thought quicken thee,
Minds that are great and free,
Should not on fortune pause,
'Tis crown enough to virtue still,
her own applause. (VIII, 174)

For the laureate, the something of great constancy is the poet's mind, “great” and “free.” Jonson embraced with a fervency only to be equalled by Milton the ancient notion that the poem referred to the poet and that both referred to an abstract, atemporal concept of virtue. “For,” as Jonson wrote in the preface to *Volpone*, “if men will impartially, and not asquint, look toward the offices and functions of a poet, they will easily conclude to themselves the impossibility of any man's being the good poet without first being a good man” (V, 17).

The derivation of Jonson's sentence from classical rhetoric tells us something more of the peculiarly uncomfortable position of the laureate, trying at once to be a poet and to distinguish himself from the poets of his age. For the amateur and the professional, rhetoric was primarily a source of pleasure; for the laureate, it was rather (and of necessity) an instrument of persuasion. “In moving the minds of men and stirring affections,” the poet, and particularly the comic poet, most clearly resembled, in Jonson's view, the orator (VIII, 640). For both, persuasion depended on self-presentation. “Persuasion,” Aristotle explained in his *Rhetoric*, “is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others.”¹⁸ There was, however, a danger in Jon-

18. Quoted by Robert M. Durling in *The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), p. 13. Durling goes on (pp. 13–43) to distinguish between Horace and Ovid in terms of their relation to the

son's identification of poet and orator, the danger that the former might be lost in the latter. Sidney, who, like Jonson, based his serious defense of poetry on its moving force, caught himself in time. "Methinks I deserve to be pounded for straying from poetry to oratory."¹⁹ For the laureate it was much harder not to stray. Without the persuasiveness of the orator, he could scarcely hope to accomplish his didactic undertaking—the undertaking that justified his claim to be fulfilling his humanist obligation toward the active life through poetry. Only by rhetorical persuasion could he "effect the business of mankind" (Jonson, V, 17). The amateur or professional, who accepted no such serious obligation, had likewise no need either to present himself as a good man or to risk his identity as poet.

The goodness of the laureate was not to him merely another pose. It was rather the truth that underlay all the poses of his fictive art, the immovable center of his work as of his being. When Jonson resolves to "Live to that point . . . for which I am man, / And dwell in my center, as I can" (VIII, 219), he makes a particularly laureate affirmation of serious selfhood.²⁰ Depart from that centered self and the laureate would, as Daniel remarked,

with these times of dissolution, fall
From Goodness, Virtue, Glory, Fame and all. (I, 223)

Detached role playing unites amateur and professional. The professional's negative capability, which allows autonomy to a realm of created selves, corresponds to the amateur's first-person assumption of a variety of often rebellious parts. For both,

rhetoric of persuasion. The differences between them are remarkably similar to those between the Elizabethan laureates and amateurs—a fact that Jonson had already noticed and used in *Poetaster*, where he presents himself as Horace and the amateurs as Ovid.

19. Sidney, *Apology*, p. 139.

20. See Thomas M. Greene, "Ben Jonson and the Centered Self," *SEL*, 10 (1970), 325–348.

the world is a stage on which they too are merely players. The laureate defines himself differently. "I have considered," Jonson wrote in *Discoveries*,

Our whole life is like a play wherein every man, forgetful of himself, is in travail with expression of another. Nay, we so insist in imitating others, as we cannot (when it is necessary) return to ourselves: like children, that imitate the vices of stammerers so long, till at last they become such and make the habit to another nature, as it is never forgotten.

But then he goes on to excuse one class, the one to which he, as good man and good poet, belonged, from this otherwise universal "we":

Good men are the stars, the planets of the ages wherein they live and illustrate the times. God did never let them be wanting to the world, as Abel . . . Enoch . . . Noah . . . Abraham . . . and so of the rest. These, sensual men thought mad, because they would not be partakers or practicers of their madness. But they, placed high on the top of all virtue, looked down on the stage of the world and contemned the play of fortune. For though the most be players, some must be spectators. (VIII, 597)²¹

Characterized by a superlunary constancy, the laureate is removed from and opposed to the mad mimicry of the world, a mimicry that embraces amateur and professional alike.²²

21. Jackson I. Cope refers to these passages in the course of an interesting discussion of the way in which Jonson presented himself in *Every Man Out of His Humor. The Theatre and the Dream: From Metaphor to Form in Renaissance Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 226–236. On the antitheatricalism suggested by the passages, see Jonas A. Barish, "Jonson and the Loathèd Stage," in *A Celebration of Ben Jonson*, ed. William Blissett et al. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 27–53. I take this antitheatricalism to be a function of Jonson's laureate self-presentation.

22. Compare Patrick Cruttwell's characterization of "metaphysical or Shakespearean" self-consciousness as "dramatic, that of the actor, who can let himself go—to all appearances—completely, because he knows that in reality the part he is playing need not be identified with his self: and because of that, his parts can always be changed, his range is infinite." Opposed to this, Crutt-

Jonson's list of good men again recalls Milton, who in *Paradise Lost* compiles a very similar list. The strongest link between these two seventeenth-century laureates is to be found here, in a shared sense of the good man's historic function of illuminating the age in which he lives. They agreed that virtue expresses itself most directly through the lives of these good men and that poems can be vehicles of that expression only because their authors are such men. But if the good man illuminates the world, he is also necessarily at odds with it. His separate identity depends on such opposition. Hence the intensely antagonistic bitterness of both Jonson and Milton. That this bitterness is a function of the laureate's role, of the process of self-definition, and not merely of the waspish characters of these two writers is suggested by its recurrence in Spenser and Daniel, both men of relatively gentle temper. If Richard Lanham is right, self-righteous antagonism to the world has been an integral part of the serious, centered self since its literary emergence in Plato's depiction of Socrates.

Questioning with a peculiarly modern preference for game over seriousness, Lanham asks whether Socrates' self "was especially worth knowing." "Isn't it really the testy, impatient, intolerant self of the religious zealot? . . . So full of self-importance and self-satisfaction . . . so willing to preach to others the error of their ways, is this man, whose whole life plays variations on 'Why the world should be more like me,' the perfect teacher? Is he indeed the model for Western man?" Though Lanham would say "no," Plato said "yes." Plato makes, as Lanham says, "the possibility of human seriousness depend on

well places Jonsonian self-consciousness, "that of someone obliged to behave according to a certain code, who would feel himself disgraced or humiliated if he went outside it." In calling the former "living and fruitful" and the latter "sterile and static," Crutwell expresses the usual nineteenth- and twentieth-century view. *The Shakespearean Moment and its Place in the Poetry of the 17th Century* (1954; rpt. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 48-49 and 220.

Socrates, on accepting him as a referential type of self, as divinely inspired."²³ In like manner, the Renaissance laureates made the seriousness of their works depend on the seriousness of their own centered and self-knowing selves. "First give me faith," wrote Jonson to one that asked to be sealed of the Tribe of Ben, "who know / Myself a little" (VIII, 220). To join the laureate's fit audience, to be sealed of his tribe, requires a constantly renewed act of faith in the inspiration, goodness, and self-knowledge of the laureate himself—an act of faith that neither amateur nor professional demands.

Lanham refuses this faith. In the serious Socratic self, he finds not self-knowledge, but rather willful self-deception.

From the rhetorical point of view, Socrates shows signs of not really knowing himself. . . . One sees running all through the *Apology* the dramatic sanction of identity. But this rhetorical sanction at the center of his Athenian life Socrates could never see. Neither could Plato. Had he seen it, he could not have contended with the Sophists as he did. He would have realized he was partly, as we are all partly, one of them. Socrates would have recognized, had he truly known himself, the rhetorical ingredient in all human behavior, would have seen his truth as only half the human truth, half the human self.²⁴

Many readers have detected just such self-deception in Jonson. It is, I would suggest, an inevitable result of the laureate enterprise. A man who plays a role that pretends to be no role at all is caught in self-contradiction of a sort that he can admit only at the price of abandoning his original pretension. Nor can he avoid the problem by giving up his dramatic self-presentation. No man can do that, the laureate still less than most. Since his self is the guarantor of his work, it requires a presentation that is of necessity dramatic. Thus the more the laureate labors to assert his ideal stasis and self-sufficiency, his godlike superior-

23. Richard A. Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 45-46 and 43.

24. Lanham, pp. 45-46.

ity to all role playing, the less static and self-sufficient he appears. "An innocent man needs no eloquence," Jonson sententiously wrote, yet, like so many of his moral sentences, this condemns him, for he could never resist using all the eloquence at his command in defense of his innocence. "I might have passed by," he continues a few lines later, "yet I durst not leave myself undefended" (VIII, 604–605). Throughout his career, he, like Milton or Chapman or Drayton, felt compelled to rebuke every slight and answer every criticism, even as he pretended indifference to both. Such compulsion could scarcely be resisted by men who were fashioning not only poems, but also a poet.

To us, the amateur and the professional seem closer to truth, and to a true poetics, because they make no direct claim on truth. W. B. Yeats put the modern view nicely in his un-Jonsonian essay of Jonsonian title, "Discoveries." "If it be true that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere, the saint goes to the centre, the poet and artist to the ring. . . . The poet must not seek for what is still and fixed, for that has no life for him; and if he did, his style would become cold and monotonous, and his sense of beauty faint and sickly . . . , but be content to find his pleasure in . . . whatever is most fleeting, most impassioned."²⁵ Like the saint, the Renaissance laureate went to the center, the "still and fixed" center of himself, which ideally was also the center of his culture—the juncture of religious, moral, political, and artistic authority. It was a self that could best be found, not

25. W. B. Yeats, *Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), p. 356. The persistence of such views is illustrated not only by Cruttwell's remarks quoted in note 22, but also, in a very different critical idiom, by Roland Barthes's distinction between "readable" and "writeable" texts, between *le lisible* and *le scriptible*. *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 10. Like Yeats, Cruttwell, and (for that matter) Lanham, Barthes rejects the fixed, static, and serious "classic" text in favor of a more open and less referential text whose reading is characterized by "désire," "volupté," and "enchantment." These values obviously suit Shakespeare better than Jonson.

by introspection, but by the careful study of Scripture and those various Greek and Roman mirrors of duty that we have noticed influencing Ascham: Isocrates' *Ad Demonium*, Cato's *Distichs*, and Cicero's *De Officiis*. In a letter to a friend, Sidney cited the Bible and Cicero as the keys to self-knowledge and Polonius borrowed from Isocrates and Cato in composing the most famous Renaissance list of precepts, a list that ends, "This above all, to thine own self be true." In their poetry, however, Sidney and Shakespeare, the amateur and the professional, could suspend and even mock this serious, centered, referential self. As poets, they belonged rather with Yeats, masquerading on the ring of being. To distinguish himself from them, the laureate had to attach himself to duty.

Officium was for the laureate, if not for the amateur or the professional, related to poetry in its full double meaning, both dutiful action and office. As well as seeking to accomplish his duty, the laureate sought a public office, an office symbolized by the laurel crown, an office comparable to those for which the amateurs abandoned poetry. The idea of goodness on which the laureate modeled himself was riven by a paradox that required such public officiousness of him. According to a tradition that goes back at least to Plato and that was made central to the Christian idea of God, the Good is characterized equally by self-sufficient stasis and by altruistic expansion. Closed in the circle of its own perfection, goodness needs nothing outside itself; "Tis a crown enough to virtue her own applause," as Jonson said of and to himself. Yet the Good ceases, by definition, to be good if it withhold its good; to be good, the Good must do good.²⁶

In the Renaissance these contradictory principles found

26. For a discussion of this paradoxical idea of the good, see Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (1936; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1942), pp. 24–66.

their fullest embodiment in Stoicism and in civic humanism, and the characteristic postures of each deeply mark every laureate career. To the poet as Stoic, his mind was kingdom enough. But to the poet as humanist, an office in the king's court was a necessity. The laureate poet thus both fulfilled and abandoned himself by becoming Poet Laureate. His civic obligation made the monarch the center of his circle, and to that center Spenser, Daniel, Drayton, Chapman, and Jonson all gravitated. Yet what they discovered there bore a troubling resemblance to the games of vanity and mimicry they had left behind. Nor could they help playing such games themselves, though they often played them with an awkwardness that betrayed their discomfort. In this respect, both the amateur, who shared the laureate's humanist ambition, and the professional, who didn't, had the advantage—the amateur because his poetry was neither a serious presentation of himself nor a serious application of that self to the business of government, and the professional because, as entertainer, he hardly had to present himself at all.

But modern readers have not until recently been much inclined to sympathize with the laureate's predicament. An official self is, almost by definition, an insincere self; an official poet, a bad poet. How can official poetry, cut off from that "rage for chaos," which the romantic temper sees as the essential basis of all art, be anything but cold and monotonous?²⁷ Yeats himself raised the central objection in his introduction to Spenser. "One is persuaded that his morality is official and impersonal—a system of life which it was his duty to support—and it is perhaps a half understanding of this that has made so many generations believe that he was the first poet laureate, the first salaried moralist among the poets. . . . He should have been content to be, as Emerson thought Shake-

27. Morse Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1965).

spere was, a Master of the Revels to mankind."²⁸ Like Spenser, the other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets of laureate pretension have all, at one time or another, been blamed for not having been content to be Shakespeare. Put this way, the reproach is unanswerable. Foolish indeed the ambition to be more! Shakespeare's accomplishment is proof enough that his was the more profitable course—as in its smaller way Donne's accomplishment seemed, a few years ago, proof of the greater profit of his.

But, as critics and scholars in the last quarter-century have been at pains to demonstrate, neither our prejudices nor our preferences were the Elizabethans'.²⁹ In their self-fashioning, the laureates necessarily opposed the usual sixteenth-century literary practice, but at least they were supported, indeed projected into the postures they assumed, by the governing ideals of their society. Not sharing those ideals, we read them awry. To us the association of poet and monarch means selling out to the Establishment. To them it meant fulfillment of duty. We have no trouble understanding the little flute player in Georges Brassens' song who refuses the king's offer of a title of nobility because, as he says, "On dirait par tout le pays, le joueur de flute a trahi." But we do have difficulty in understanding the very different gestures of Spenser or Jonson. Yet the laureate's search for royal favor had in its system precisely the meaning that the flute player's rejection of it has in ours. Both mean: "This artist is true to himself."

In poetry, as in all other domains, Renaissance theorists

28. Yeats, pp. 458–459.

29. Two recent studies that deal directly with the problem of the relation between poet and monarch are Michael O'Connell, *Mirror and Veil: The Historical Dimension of Spenser's "Faerie Queene"* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1977) and Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975). See also Thomas R. Edwards, *Imagination and Power: A Study of Poetry on Public Themes* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971).

conceived of a hierarchy of value, and at the top of the literary hierarchy they placed the great public poet, the true poet, the laureate. Such a poet, they often argued, was as rare and as precious as a monarch. *Solus Rex aut poeta non quotannis nascitur*, runs one of Jonson's favorite Latin tags. Both king and poet, the one as governor, the other as maker, were thought to reflect on earth, in a way that distinguished them from other men, the image of God. When the civil and literary hierarchies met in one person, as Puttenham claimed they did in Elizabeth, or Jonson in James, the Renaissance man felt a particular *o altitudo*. But even when separate, their functions ideally brought them together. "Learning"—and to Jonson, who translated this passage out of Vives, learning was a prime distinguishing characteristic of the laureate poet—"learning needs rest; sovereignty gives it. Sovereignty needs counsel; learning affords it. There is such a consociation of offices between the prince and whom his favor breeds that they may help sustain his power, as he their knowledge" (VIII, 565). How could one feel disgraced in being a "salaried moralist" when the paymaster and pupil was a king? The laureates asked not whether the goal was worthy, but rather whether, given the state of poetry and of the polity in their time, it could be achieved.

"I Play the Man I Am"

In their literary self-fashioning, Spenser, Jonson, and the other laureates tested, however inadvertently, some of the deepest values of their culture—values that had given rise to the idea of the laureate poet. The idea of the laureate was, in large measure, the idea of the Renaissance. Each envisioned a rebirth of classical antiquity and, more particularly, a rebirth of the kind of man prescribed by ancient moral philosophy. By their under-

taking, the laureates implicitly asked whether such a man could exist and succeed. Could an Elizabethan poet "know and be one complete man"? (Chapman, II, 434). Could he be both Stoic and humanist, true both to himself and to his civic duty? Could he create an "art of presence" (to use the term Arnold Stein has recently applied to Milton),³⁰ which would also be an art of moral persuasion, without losing his claim to the art of poetry as his contemporaries understood it? In seeking to give an affirmative answer to these questions, the laureates offered themselves as cultural protagonists—aspirants to glory, but unwitting preys to defeat. In a different way, the amateurs were already playing the role of cultural protagonist. "Make me your mirror," Gascoigne told the young gentlemen of England. "If you see me sink in distress, notwithstanding that you judge me quick of capacity, then learn you to maintain yourselves swimming in propriety and eschew betimes the whirlpool of misgovernment."³¹ By their rebellion, the amateurs tested the narrow limits of midcentury humanism, and by their repentance, they confirmed those limits. But for most of them, both the rebellion and the repentance were too conventional to include much risk.

The amateur's testing of his culture is comedic in its outline, a conflict between youth and age that ends in reconciliation and in the reaffirmation of the basic order of society. The pattern of laureate testing is more nearly tragic, for it ends not in a predictably repentant return (the laureates had nothing to repent and had never left home), but rather in lonely disillusionment with a hypocritical society that rejects those who act out its official ideals. Taking a hint from the writers themselves, who modeled many of their fictions and self-portraits on the

30. Arnold Stein, *The Art of Presence: The Poet in "Paradise Lost"* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977).

31. *The Complete Works of George Gascoigne*, ed. J. W. Cunliffe, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1907), I, 14.

parable of the prodigal son, I have elsewhere referred to the Elizabethan amateurs as “a generation of prodigals.”³² The laureates resemble rather the prodigal’s elder brother, dutiful but ignored. Jonson’s complaint of ill-use after much faithful service is much like the elder brother’s. “Poetry, in this latter age, hath proved but a mean mistress to such as have wholly addicted themselves to her or given their names up to her family. They who have saluted her on the by and now and then tendered their visits, she hath done much for and advanced in the way of their own professions (both the law and the gospel) beyond all they could have hoped or done for themselves without her favor” (VIII, 583). Having given their names up to poetry, the laureates understandably felt that poetry should have made some suitable return. But they saw the fatted calf of worldly consideration going instead to the amateurs.

Advancement and patronage, “a kid that I might make merry with my friends,” were not all these elder brothers lacked. Mere recognition of identity, the bare admission that a valid distinction had been made, seemed often denied them. For, as Jonson continued, not only did poetry, in her neglect of the laureates, “emulate the judicious but preposterous bounty of the time’s grands, who accumulate all they can upon the parasite or freshmen in their friendship but think an old client or honest servant bound by his place to write and starve.” She also imitated the less grand.

Indeed, the multitude commend writers as they do fencers or wrestlers, who, if they come in robustiously and put for it with a deal of violence, are received for the braver fellows, when many times their own rudeness is a cause of their disgrace. . . . But in these things the unskillful are naturally deceived and . . . think rude things greater than polished and

32. Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), p. 155. André Gide’s adoption of the parable in his self-defining “Retour de l’Enfant Prodigue” (1907) provides additional evidence of the persistence of the attitudes toward the writer expressed by the sixteenth-century amateurs. Gide differs from them—and thus marks the difference

scattered more numerous than composed. Nor think this only to be true in the sordid multitude, but the neater sort of our gallants, for all are the multitude. Only they differ in clothes, not in judgment or understanding. (VIII, 583)

Commons, gallants, and grands alike—all are the multitude. Unrewarded and misapprehended, the laureate thus stood alone at the moral center of an otherwise erring society.

Though tragedy is no doubt too strong a word for careers as outwardly successful as those of Spenser and Jonson, the laureates’ sense of alienation, particularly when the fullest incorporation was what they had sought, does come near the heart of tragic experience. Despite their careful effort to achieve an identity congruent with all that seemed most worthy in their culture, these men came to feel that their serious self-presentation was not taken quite seriously—that their work was regarded as play. They were being cast in the very role from which they had dutifully sought to differentiate themselves. Champions and victims of an exalted and unworkable ethos, they, like Coriolanus, whose career theirs resemble, might have asked the society that had made them,

Would you have me
False to my nature? Rather say, I play
The man I am.

Playing the men they were (or were supposed to be), Daniel drifted into prose, Chapman into querulousness, and Drayton into isolation from his audience. Even Spenser and Jonson, who had so much better understood the problem of laureate self-definition, knew disillusionment and defeat—Spenser, threatened by the Blatant Beast of envy and detraction, bitterly telling

between the modern and the Renaissance sensibility—by having his prodigal return not to repent and, by his repentance, confirm the established values of society, but rather to subvert them still further by enticing his younger brother into rebellion.

his verse to “keep better measure, / And seeke to please, that now is counted wisemans threasure” (VI, 149), and Jonson, neglected alike in court and theater, contenting himself with his own applause. It would take Milton and a political revolution to make the laureate’s fall seem fortunate. Though Spenser, like Milton, could celebrate the paradise within, he and his laureate contemporaries were too much shaped by the values of civic humanism to find in private rectitude a satisfactory consolation for the defeat of their public ambition.



*Self-
Crowned
Laureates*

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JONSON
MILTON
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University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Library of Congress
Cataloging in Publication Data

Helgerson, Richard.

Self-crowned laureates.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. English poetry—Early modern, 1500–1700—History and criticism. 2. Poets, English—Early modern, 1500–1700—Biography. 3. Spenser, Edmund, 1552?–1599—Authorship. 4. Jonson, Ben, 1573?–1637—Authorship. 5. Milton, John, 1608–1674—Authorship. 6. Authorship—History. I. Title.

PR531.H4 1983

821'.3'09

82-8496

ISBN 0-520-04808-3

AACR2

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9