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## The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition

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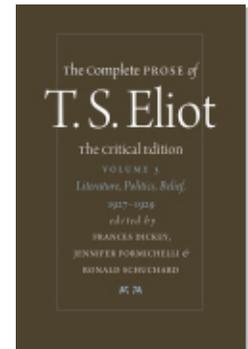
Eliot, T. S., et al.

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## Plays of Ben Jonson

An unsigned review of *Ben Jonson*, vol III: *A Tale of a Tub*, *The Case Is Altered*, *Every Man in his Humour*, *Every Man out of his Humour*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson  
Oxford: Clarendon, 1927. Pp. xv + 608.

*Eastward Hoe*, by George Chapman, Ben Jonson, and  
John Marston, edited with an introduction by Julia Harris  
New Haven: Yale UP; London: Oxford UP, 1927. Pp. lviii + 191.

*The Alchemist*, replica of First Quarto, by Ben Jonson  
London: Noel Douglas, 1927. n.p.

*The Times Literary Supplement*, 1329 (21 July 1927) 500

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The appearance of Volume I (the Introduction) of this magnificent Herford and Simpson edition of Jonson was noticed everywhere with the applause that it deserved.<sup>1</sup> For any but an audience of highly trained specialists there is less matter for discussion in the subsequent volumes containing the plays; but each merits, and the future volumes will merit, distinguished mention and the renewed thanks of the general as well as the academic public. For exact texts are the basis of literary criticism and appreciation; we have now, after three hundred years, a definitive text of Jonson, the text which everyone who writes about Jonson will have to use.

The text of Jonson's plays has always been thought to be the most nearly accurate in the whole of Elizabethan drama. So they are: Jonson took great trouble over the publication of his plays; of all the Elizabethans it was he who cared most deeply for the judgment of posterity. He cared also for his plays, not only as drama but as literature; thought of them probably as matter that would be read as well as played. One of the things to be learnt about Jonson from this edition, which gives every important variant, is the labour of alteration and improvement which he expended in giving literary perfection and polish to his work: he would have continued to revise and alter with every new edition. He it is who taught the English poet to write with

care and revise with labour; he is the ancestor of Dryden and Pope, the first “classic” of English literature in the French sense.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless any one of the short prefaces prefixed by the editors of this edition to the several plays is the fruit of great labour of textual criticism. We think of the Elizabethans as careless editors of their own texts and of the Elizabethan publishing trade as swarming with “pirates.” But Jonson was not a careless editor, and we are not at the mercy of piratical publishers of his plays; yet the state of the publishing trade and the printing art in his time was so undeveloped that even Jonson could not expect to produce a perfect text. And this being so, the situation is only complicated by Jonson’s passion for revision. The editors say modestly that “no problem arose” in editing the first two plays of this volume, though they admit a few confused passages and a number of misprints [xi]. For the text of *The Case is Altered* they make handsome recognition of the work of Whalley (1756) and Gifford (1816).<sup>3</sup> But –

in *Every Man out of his Humour* Jonson did not rewrite, he revised his early version. He worked over the Quarto text, submitted it to a close scrutiny, and retouched it in detail. Occasionally he makes a point a little clearer for the actor, but usually he strengthens or improves the phrasing. The underlying spirit of the changes is not so much the attitude of a practical playwright as a distant approach to Pope’s standard of correctness. [xii]

Miss Harris’s edition of *Eastward Hoe* was a dissertation for the doctorate.<sup>4</sup> Apart from its great interest as a study in collaboration the play is still a lively and amusing play, and deserves this full edition with every sort of critical apparatus and informative note. It will be interesting to compare Miss Harris’s conclusions with those of Dr. Herford and Dr. Simpson. The chief interest of the book is Miss Harris’s skilful and intelligent distribution of authorship; her preliminary account of the history of the prodigal son theme in drama is valuable chiefly in establishing the presumption that Chapman was responsible for those parts of the play which follow most closely the Italian tale of Masuccio.<sup>5</sup> When Jonson alluded to the play in conversation with Drummond he seems from his words to dissociate himself from it, and to intimate that he assumed responsibility only from a loyalty to Chapman and Marston, whose imprisonment he shared.<sup>6</sup> Miss Harris comes to the conclusion that Jonson had much to do with the structure of the plot – which is certainly better built than most of Chapman’s or

Marston's – but very little to do with the actual writing. He is not therefore wholly innocent of the phrases which offended King James, though he did not write them. The offending phrase (it would be very astonishing if the King had *not* been annoyed!) was, of course, "I ken the man weel, he's one of my thirty pound knights" [xlv].<sup>7</sup> Chapman (as the editor points out) has elsewhere alluded to the sale of honours. But if he conceived this offensive insult Miss Harris thinks that it was Marston who put it into Scots. She sums up:

Jonson planned the play, wrote the prologue and epilogue, and perhaps inserted a few clauses here and there. Marston wrote all of Act I, a large part of Act II, the last few lines of Act III, and the first part of Act V. In addition to this, he worked with Chapman in Acts II, III, and IV, where the main plot and subplot join, and inserted in Chapman's scenes a few clauses containing the parodies on Shakespeare, and the slighting references to the Scots. The remainder, the largest share of the play, was written by Chapman. [lii]

Messrs. Noel Douglas's replica of the first Quarto (1612) of *The Alchemist* is charmingly produced, and the price for such an edition is moderate.<sup>8</sup> Lovers of Jonson will hope that other plays will follow. But it is to be desired that when the edition of Dr. Herford and Dr. Simpson is completed the Oxford Press text may consider the publication of the text alone of the more important plays singly, in a form which will put them within the means of students in schools and colleges.

#### NOTES

1. C. H. [Charles Harold] Herford, Professor of English at Manchester University, and Percy Simpson (1865-1962), a London schoolmaster and then Reader in Bibliography at Oxford, collaborated on their eleven-volume scholarly edition of Jonson's works with substantial assistance from Simpson's wife Evelyn (first recognized on the title page in vol 6). Herford contributed the first two volumes, a biography, and introductions to the plays; Simpson's text and commentaries began appearing in vol 3.

2. In Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve's famous essay "Qu'est-ce qu'un classique" [What is a classic] (1850), which TSE read at Harvard, the French critic explains that the term "classic" refers to "an old author canonised by admiration," and usually implies qualities of "uniformity, wisdom, moderation, and reason . . . unity of design, arrangement, and execution." *Essays by Sainte-Beuve*, trans. Elizabeth Lee (London: Walter Scott, 1900), 1, 4, 5.

3. In vol 1 of *Ben Jonson*, the editors identify *The Case Is Altered* as a comedy of romantic adventure probably first performed in 1597-98 (306). Peter Whalley (1722-1791), clergyman and author, produced the first critical edition of the works of Ben Jonson (7 vols), which was

superseded in 1816 by the “elaborate edition” of William Gifford (1756-1826), Tory satirist and editor of *The Antijacobin* and the *Quarterly Review* (xi).

4. Julia Hamlet Harris (1884-1965) taught English at Meredith College in North Carolina after receiving her doctorate from Yale in 1922. She states that *Eastward Hoe*, jointly attributed to Chapman, Jonson, and Marston and first performed in the winter of 1604-05, “embodies, in the garb of a comedy of London life, the fundamental idea of the prodigal-son drama” (ix).

5. The Italian poet Masuccio Salernitano (ca. 1410-75), born Tommaso Guardati of Salerno, wrote *Il novellino*, a collection of fifty *novelle*, or short stories. Harris identifies two tales from *Il novellino* (14 and 34) that Chapman may have used, but not Jonson, who did not know Italian (xxiv, xxix-xxx).

6. Harris writes, “There is very little external evidence for determining the division of authorship of *Eastward Hoe*. Jonson had declared in his conversations with Drummond that ‘he was dilated by Sir James Murray to the King, for writing something against the Scots, in a play Eastward Hoe, and voluntarily imprisoned himself with Chapman and Marston, who had written it amongst them’” (xxiv). Jonson continued that he was at risk of having his ears and nose cut off as punishment for his part in writing the play.

7. According to Harris, “Chapman in other plays satirized the purchase of knighthood . . . the number of new knights . . . and the character of the nobility . . . but it seems most unlikely that he would have been guilty of the impertinence of mimicking the King’s Scotch brogue” (xlv).

8. The firm of Noel Douglas was a publishing venture operating out of the Labour Publishing Company offices on Great Ormond Street, London, established in 1926 or 1927 by George Douglas Howard Cole, university teacher and political theorist, and Bernard Noel Langdon-Davies, socialist and publisher. They combined their middle names to create the name of the press, which produced mainly poetry and facsimile volumes similar to those of the Nonesuch Press. The price of their edition of *The Alchemist* was six shillings.