Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture

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Most people who maintain an interest in fat studies do not see historicizing fat as a priority. Some are fat men and women concerned with finding ways to live within an intolerant society. Some are concerned with practical urgencies such as discrimination against fat people, or medically authorized panic over the “obesity epidemic.” None of us should allow immediate concerns to tempt us into ignoring or oversimplifying the past. If we do, we risk losing both rhetorical weight and the voices of long-dead fat men and women. Many people from the past experienced social stigma on account of their body fat, and some developed original strategies for dealing with that stigma that may still be useful today.

Even those who focus on the present alone adopt an implicit historiography. Many familiar voices in fat studies adopt a problematic methodology in order to explain increasing fatphobia. Each chooses a somewhat arbitrary date after which fat supposedly went out of style: before this date, they imagine, the round belly was valued and the padded posterior celebrated. Roberta Pollack Seid, for instance, dreams of a pre-twentieth-century Land of Cockaigne where the fleshly muses of Rubens and Renoir held court and flesh was celebrated: “I often curse the ill-timing of my birth,” she writes, adding wistfully, “[i]f I had lived before thin and fit were in . . . I would never have had to diet, never have [had] to hate flesh swelling on hips and thighs.” Others, variously, find a golden age in the times before female emancipation, industrialism, scientific method, or any number of modern changes. Richard Klein
writes that “Until this [twentieth] century no one has ever dreamed of living in a skinny land. Fat has always been the shape of Utopia.” Before modernization, these writers agree, fat people lived in a world which celebrated them and, equally importantly, hated the skinny.

This mean-spirited historiography bears little resemblance to reality past or present. Fat has been recognized, experienced, interpreted, and medically scrutinized in many different ways over the course of Western civilization. From Chaucer’s Cyrano-esque gift of his seductive words, to slimmer lovers, to the nastiness circulating in zaftig Queen Anne’s court, fat has long been stigmatized. Fat’s rewritability makes its enduring negative connotations all the more remarkable. To illustrate our culture’s long and complicated history of fatphobia, I offer here a case study of an influential fat man, who was both a subject and producer of fatphobic writing in an age long before Renoir or The Biggest Loser. Rather than rejecting his fat or any other aspect of his embodiment, he wrote of the fat body in a way that explored all of its tragedies and triumphs.

Ben Jonson was perhaps the most recognized literary figure of his day, rivaled only by William Shakespeare. He was employed by King James to write court masques, but made much of his daily bread writing for the public playhouses. Considered scrawny until at least his twenty-ninth birthday, he became famous for writing according to a classical tradition which privileged restraint, both of the pen and table. By the time court and popular audiences tired of Jonson in the late Jacobean years, he was tipping the scales at nearly twenty stone and receiving a great deal of mean-spirited criticism on that account. More grievously, in his estimation, many of his critics treated his body and writing as an interchangeable corpus. “Let me be what I am,” wrote Jonson, “as Virgil cold; / As Horace fat; or as Anacreon old.” In lines like these, Jonson used the classical canon to argue that the Muses, at least, were not fatphobic. If his phrasing was unlike Seid’s, the bitterness behind it was not.

Fatness was an important issue for Jonson. Unfortunately, most scholars today tend to ignore his size. In the few instances in which they do mention it, they read it as evidence that he lacked inspiration and control. Critics seem especially bothered by perceived incongruousness between the classical Jonson of the poetry and “learned” plays and the grotesque Jonson—more popular in recent years—of Bartholomew Fair. Patricia Parker, for instance, notes a great “contradiction” remaining “within the work of the famously corpulent Jonson himself, producer not only of the lean neoclassicism of the Cary-Morison Ode but of the fleshly copia of plays like Bartholomew Fair.” The fat body Jonson acquired as he aged seems incongruous with the “lean
neoclassicism” of his early writing. Given this, most scholars—Parker is a brave exception—seem to feel it is more civil, or convenient, not to talk about Jonson’s fat.

The tacit understanding remains that a fat poet’s body is unmentionable. In not mentioning it, the critic allows the reader to assume that Jonson has the privilege of a thin body. This silence is unfortunate, because it means scholars miss the reasons why Jonson wrote about his weight as well as his significant achievements in doing so. He spoke of fat at great length, elaborating and contesting its meaning in increasingly complex ways. As I will show, his poems ask us to read fat his way. Jonson’s belly was a crucial symbolic site of contest in an early modern struggle for literary supremacy. In writing his fatness, Jonson took the lead in expanding—or fattening—“lean neoclassicism,” complicating it by combination with the carnivalesque.

The fatphobia facing Ben Jonson in his later years emerged on a variety of fronts: medical, fashionable, and literary. Early modern writers on nutrition, according to food historian Ken Albala, had by this time long “believed that gluttons [that is, overconsumers, not necessarily fat ones] were poorly nourished, their systems being tossed into such a state of disarray that little food would be properly processed. The surfeit of food in a sense overloads and extinguishes the heat which facilitates digestion.” A surfeit of food was known to affect the body. Scholars (such as Jonson) had to be particularly careful to restrict their diet, as it was thought that they tended to putrefy rather than digest. Robert Burton, for example, reminded his studious audience that they should either take exercise breaks or diet: “Lessius the Jesuit holds twelve, thirteen, or fourteen ounces . . . at most (for all students, weaklings, and such as lead an idle sedentary life), of meat, bread etc., a fit proportion for a whole day.” These views do not directly speak to the fat subject, but tied in to increasing awareness of fat as a pathology.

Albala takes as an example the writings of Gaspard Bachot, a Galenic physician writing in the early part of the seventeenth century. Bachot may offer advice on gaining weight as well as on losing it, but he also cautions his readers: fat people live shorter lives, because their constricted veins slow the flow of blood and spirits. Fat, he says, also presses on veins and arteries and causes shortness of breath.

Writing on nutrition begins to address fat as a condition that is medically undesirable, but there were far greater reasons in the Jacobean court to avoid fat than the purely medical. The Jacobean court, like our society, had cultural and aesthetic reasons to favor the thin male body especially. In the Jacobean court as now, there were reasons beyond simple good health to be thin. King James himself, for example, was fascinated by excess and
asceticism in equal measure. The court masques he commissioned—most of them from Jonson—were heady mixtures of conspicuous consumption and control. They were dance spectaculars involving a phenomenal display of excess of most kinds. Food was put on show in order to impress visitors from rival kingdoms. Indeed, James’ court enjoyed the surreal trick of presenting not one but two banquets, the first of which disappeared uneaten to reveal a second underneath.\(^9\) Sadly, however, regularly indulging in this excess was not a good career move. James famously loved to watch his courtiers perform elaborate dances in a style characterized by rapid, light steps in place and ornate costumes. This dancing required a thin but muscled frame.

George Villiers, the slim first Duke of Buckingham, was uniquely placed to benefit in this environment. Born into the minor gentry, Villiers rose to power through the King’s affection. In a letter of his old age, James wrote honestly and openly of his love for Villiers: “God so love me, as I desire only to live in this world for your sake, and that I had rather live banished in any part of the earth with you than live a sorrowful widow’s life without you. And so God bless you, my sweet child and wife, and grant that ye may ever be a comfort to your dear dad and husband.”\(^10\) This love was afforded in part because of Villiers’ tall, lean figure. As a young man, Villiers excelled at physical activities from fencing to dancing. Villiers was well-known for rescuing a dull masque by leaping onstage to perform impromptu steps that displayed his strong, slim body to advantage. Contemporaries readily acknowledged that the figure he cut in the masques played a role in his prominence at court. Some courtiers were jealous and resentful of his opportunities to dance. They saw his advantage in the same light as the rich sponsors who took charge of and invested largely in his wardrobe (conceivably, after he was “seen at a horse-race in Cambridgeshire in an old black suit, broken out in diverse places”).\(^11\) Both groups seem to have recognized a power derived in part from his body’s thinness. A large and wonderfully sensuous portrait of Villiers, attributed to William Larkin, is reproduced in figure 5.1. Now gallantly receiving visitors at the entrance to room four at the National Portrait Gallery in London, it depicts Villiers in his Garter robes.

The portrait shows socially desirable attributes we may recognize from our own times: conspicuous consumption strategically layered to foster the impression of a tightly controlled, bound body. A range of textures gives depth to the picture and shows unadulterated luxury. The painter has included skin, feathers, starched lace, velvets, silks, rope (almost certainly also of silk and detailed in gold), jewels, embroidery, and pompoms. They are layered, embellished, slashed and re-embellished to inflate Villiers’ slim presence into one that dominates the frame—but an ornate cincture reminds the
viewer that his body itself is cut lean. Ornamental slashing at the sleeve gives ease to the slim cut and hints at latent fencing speed. His pose is strongly reminiscent of the classic defensive fencing position: he may be standing still for the painter, but he could move at a moment’s notice. The backdrop’s textures simultaneously emphasize sensual excess and create the shadow effect that reduces Villiers’ apparent neck size and makes his legs appear thin but muscular. His legs are neatly extended in a heel that closely matches the valu-

Figure 5.1 George Villiers, First Duke of Buckingham. William Larkin, attrib., c. 1616. Oil on canvas. 81 in. × 47 in. (2057 mm × 1194 mm). National Portrait Gallery, London (ref. 3840).
able ivory silk stockings, while an excised section increases their apparent length, and the garter—a focal point signifying membership of a most exclusive Royal society—emphasizes the leg’s thinnest spot under the knee.

The portrait is an extreme example of James’s preferences; other plates from the same period do show fatter people that held positions of power under James. Additionally, we should not forget that extreme thinness unaccompanied by the trappings of wealth could signify quite as badly as fat. A poor thin man was something else, entirely, just as today ripped jeans on the catwalk mean something very different from ripped jeans on someone who cannot afford a new pair. This painting is of interest because it displays the new court favorite trying to make it obvious that his body is a thin body, one in the masculine, classical tradition. As Skiles Howard explains, “The beautiful and apt body created by dancing was in more than one sense a ‘classical’ body—finished, symmetrical, closed, its actions controlled and its dangerous passions contained.” Courtly dancing was “the very idiom of the intellect.”

The quick, controlled steps of such dances were an aesthetics of containment, displaying mastery of the spirit over the body.

Villier’s portrait, like many others of James and Elizabeth’s times, show that male thinness was an especially desirable characteristic. Elizabethan and Jacobean literature suggest a similar preference for the thin body and aversion for the fat one; as such, the fat man was often represented as a grotesque and feminized figure. W. H. Auden observed that Falstaff, for example, has our sympathy and love only so long as he makes no claim to governance. Unable to control his emotions, he is “fractured and corroborate,” playing the woman’s part. “Falstaff’s story,” writes Auden, “is not unlike one of those folk tales in which a mermaid falls in love with a mortal prince: the price she pays for her infatuation is the loss of her immortality without the compensation of temporal happiness.” Ridiculous in his loss, the tragic fool, the fat man, is unfit for royal company. In a world where body and text were easily, even naturally, conflated, fashions for one affected how the other was “read.” As Patricia Parker notes, Jonson himself did not easily think outside the terms of an “assimilation of body and style passed on through Vives and Continental writers.” It was at this time difficult, if not impossible, to speak of a classical body and a classical style as separate things, and fat poets inevitably suffered because the carnivalesque was increasingly associated with the fat body.

The carnivalesque style employed excess language as well as grotesque motifs such as pregnant or fat female bodies, and bodies eating, drinking and talking at table. The grotesque body was exemplified for critic Mikhail Bakhtin by “senile, pregnant hags,” dying as they replace themselves in the world. The grotesque body in its relationship to its environment and to other
bodies symbolizes productive interaction between voices and texts; the grotesque insists that all writing involves shared “selves,” even as it mocks the very idea that texts can ever be finished or closed. The classical body, associated with the classical style, was, to employ Bakhtin’s now-famous formulation, “entirely finished, completed, and strictly limited . . . shown from the outside as something individual.”

The carnivalesque gave birth to an evolving pleasure-reading prose genre identified by Katharine Craik as increasing in popularity in this period. Despite their increased readership, these works were imagined to be fare for ladies because their fleshy bodies made them incapable of digesting better stuff. A shift in attitude toward this genre is evident in the Jacobean period. Even as King James promoted the thin classical body at court, the carnivalesque style was increasingly regarded as inappropriate for gentlemanly consumption. If a gentleman insisted on reading it, he must do so in a manner that safely contained it. As one text from the period explained, this prose should be consumed as “an accompaniment to the dessert course at the end of a literal banquet, and . . . the unscholarly, trifling condiment to textual matter that provided intellectual or spiritual nourishment.” Enjoying carnivalesque fiction without a sufficiently manly excuse was more dangerous for the Jacobean man of letters than being caught reading a particularly racy romance novel would be for a “serious” poet or writer today.

Given the infelicitous associations of the carnivalesque with fat “female” bodies, Jonson would readily understand the need to distance himself from it. He himself implied that the style could be associated with a broader cultural degeneration. In his literary reflections, titled Timber: or, Discoveries Made upon Men and Matter (1640), Jonson voiced the opinion that style and manners are interconnected. As he writes, “Do we not see, if the mind languish, the members are dull? . . . So that we may conclude: wheresoever manners and fashions are corrupted, language is. It imitates the public riot. The excess of feasts, and apparel, are the notes of a sick state; and the wantonness of language, of a sick mind.”

To sustain his claim to supremacy in letters, Jonson relied, to a degree, on a denigration of fat. “We say it is a fleshy style, when there is much periphrasis, and circuit of words; and when with more than enough, it grows fat and corpulent; Arvina orationis, full of suet and tallow.” He associated it with age, coldness, literary incapacity, indigestion, rhetorical flourishes and—worst of all—popular pleasure reading. It was only with difficulty that Jonson reconciled himself to the fact that he had to write to eat. Because fat was unfashionable, he articulated—at least at times—the reigning preference for the masculine cut and bound forms through the denigration of fat, both in style and by implication, body.
In his early work, Jonson embraced a pared-down classical style, which consisted of frank phrasing that sought to control the audience’s response. Its short-term purpose was forthright communication of facts and ideas; its long-term rationale was to nourish the developing minds of (male) readers. Principal heroes of this proto-neoclassicism were Seneca and Erasmus, and its bodily connotations were muscle, sinew, sexual power, and the phallus. Seneca himself was no great friend of the disordered fat man: “A mannerly belly,” Plutarch reports him as saying, “is a great part of a man’s liberty.”

Parker, in describing the development of such a lean classicism, characterizes the humanist Erasmus as follows: “Erasmus not only speaks [in *Lingua: on the Use and Abuse of the Tongue*] of the ‘female’ tongues of men (complicating . . . the identification of ‘female’ loquacity with women in particular) but also repeatedly praises a more ‘manly’ style, appealing to the Spartans not ‘effeminated’ (*effeminatus*) by indulgence in rhetoric or the arts of words.”

Jonson adopted these same classical terms in his own literary power play; thus he developed and promoted “a style that would have . . . a ‘manly’ strength and vigor, a reaction against an ‘effeminate’ Ciceronianism that privileged words over deeds or things, and ultimately the ‘plain style’ of a nascent early modern science described as a ‘masculine birth of time.’”

Given Jonson’s association with the lean, virile classical style he had nurtured in English letters, he was understandably embarrassed when he gained a great deal of weight. He was well aware of the problems his body caused, because his enemies were quick to assert that his style, like his life, was immoderate. Such attacks drew on the cultural associations examined above; conflating this carnivalesque style and populism, for instance, critics recommended that he should return to his “day job” as a bricklayer’s apprentice.

In *The Country’s Censure on Ben Jonson’s ‘New Inn,*’ an anonymous foe cruelly mocks Jonson for his claim that his Muse “can tread the air” by reference to his immoderate consumption of drink. In the following excerpt, the critic focuses especially on a general decline made manifest in the body of “poor cracked-brained elf” Jonson:

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Listen (decaying Ben) and counsel hear,
wits have their date and strength of brains may wear;
Age, steeped in sack, hath quenched thy Enthean fire,
we pity now, whom once we did admire

Thy Pegasus can stir, yet thy best care
Makes her but shuffle like the parson’s mare
who from his own side wit says thus by me:
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he hath bequeathed his belly unto thee
To hold that little learning, which is fled
Into thy guts from out thy empty head.24

This writer assumes an inverse relationship between head and belly, where the increase of one leads to slimming of the other. The fat poet cannot live up to the classical literary standard he established in his slimmer youth.

Other critics more expressly referred to Jonson’s bodily growth as a sign that his literary output was grotesque. George Chapman, a former friend and collaborator, lamented one who had become a “rogue past period, / A spawn of lust, in sack and Jonson sod.”25 There was a long-standing tradition wherein drink and carnivalesque literature were figured as materially the same. Chapman uses this figure to suggest that Jonson’s body and work were polluted. Still another piece of doggerel is a good deal blunter, figuring Jonson’s body as a mortal abomination. The writer repeatedly demands, “Die, Jonson!” and continues, “For shame, engross not age, / But now thy fifth act’s ended, leave the stage.”26 The choice of the word “engross” is striking and suggestive: Jonson, it seems, is taking more of life, fame, and space than he really deserves. Alexander Gill, in Upon Ben Jonson’s “Magnetic Lady” (1633), simply chuckles over all the travail that went into the making of that play, speaking as if digestion of its sources had gone horribly wrong:

O, how thy friend, Nat Butter ’gan to melt
When as the poorness of thy plot he smelt,
And Inigo with laughter there grew fat
That there was nothing worth the laughing at,
And yet thou crazy are confident
Belching out full mouth’d oaths with foul intent.27

In many ways, these jokes and insults were obvious and inevitable. Carnivalesque rhetoric could be easily turned against Jonson, the uncontrolled drinker and eater, as famous for his resulting “grossness” as for his insistence that a writer must work “not as a creature that swallows what it takes in crude, raw, or undigested, but that feeds with an appetite, and hath a stomach to concoct, divide, and turn all into nourishment.”28 It was inevitable that Jonson’s rhetoric against carnival would be turned upon him once he had become fat. Gill concludes that the poetry of this old, fat man is fit only for the workaday market world of “druggers, grocers, cooks / Victuallers, tobacco men, and suchlike rooks,” and recommends that Jonson join them.

“Fall then to work, in thy old age again / Take up your trug and trowel,
gentle Ben / Let plays alone.”

Highly placed Jacobean were, it seems, giving vent to their distaste for fat by dismissing Jonson in the carnivalesque’s insistently corporal terms. His poetry was figured as expelled “Into [his] guts from out [his] empty head,” and thus denied its place in the classical canon that Jonson had helped to create.

Given this bind, it was difficult to know how to respond. Jonson’s acolytes defended him by embracing a dualism in which the body is seen as having little or nothing to do with the mind. Like many scholars today, they politely pretended not to have noticed Jonson’s weight because, they insisted, his fat body had nothing to do with the “real him.” Enemy and ally alike shared an implicit fatphobia, which privileged the thin, classical body over the fat one.

Such a strategy is best seen in the posthumous tribute volume *Jonsonus Virbius*, where Jonson’s defenders describe him in classical dualist terms and use carnivalesque language only to insult his literary rivals. Such language is used to suggest that they have lowly appetites that make them unable to appreciate Jonson’s classical style. As William Cartwright writes, “These serve Thyestes’ bloody supper in, / as if it had only a salad been.”

Now that Jonson is dead, his followers are left in a carnivalesque world: “When we shall feed on refuse offals, when / We shall from corns to acorns turn again.”

Acorns were pig food, eaten by humans only when the choice was between life and death. “Refuse offals” repeats a recognizably carnivalesque motif in associating low literature or doggerel with body parts not worthy to be eaten. Ralph Brideoake’s “Upon the Death of Mr. Ben Jonson” elaborates on Jonson’s “Ode to Himself” to censure those who did not sufficiently appreciate Jonson’s plays:

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Though the fine plush and velvets of the age
Did oft for sixpence damn thee from the stage,
And with their mast and acorn-stomachs, ran
To th’ nasty sweepings of thy servingman,
Before thy cates, and swore thy stronger food,
’Cause not by them digested, was not good.
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Even as their clothing suggests high status, their stomachs betray them, Brideoake argues. Thus, they refuse Jonson’s delicate “cates” but gorge on the “sweepings” of an inferior writer. Brideoake’s digestive metaphors suggest that the tastes of such readers were peasant-like and thus unable to appreciate Jonson’s art; their taste is low, no matter how thin and high-born their bodies.
A defense of Jonson is more difficult precisely because his body does not conform to the kind of stereotypes his defenders apply to his detractors. How, then, should one defend a man, who has a neoclassical taste but a carnivalesque body? How can one do so while still preserving the dignity—or virility—of its subject matter? The answer seems to be to insist further on the dualism by ignoring his body entirely so that he is made to be exemplified by his superior, incorporeal mind. The very furthest we may depart from dualist virile rhetoric is with James Howell: “And is thy glass run out? Is that oil spent, / Which light to such tough sinewy labours lent?” or John Rutters: “for [men] will / Hardly believe disease or age could kill / A body so inform’d, with such a soul.” On the few occasions when his allies speak of Jonson’s body, they describe it as either innocently pure or as a mere worldly shell, unworthy of mention—Heaven forbid description! A typical piece, the unattributed “To the Memory of Ben Jonson” establishes itself and its subject as responsibly pure, disembodied by allusion to the fire at Vesta:

As when the Vestal hearth went out, no fire
Less holy than the flame that did expire
Could kindle it againe: So at thy fall
Our wit, great Ben, is too apocryphal
To celebrate thy loss, since ’tis too much
To write thy epitaph, and not be such.34

In this expression of esteem, there is an idea of purity and clean light: indeed, Jonson becomes a god capable of “ravishing” his acolytes—though only in the spiritual sense, of course. Sir Dudley Digges, afraid to pollute Jonson’s memory with anything in the least bodily (“I dare not, learned shade, bedew thy hearse”), has left us instead a eulogy of a Jonson so very pure and chaste that his bon-vivant subject surely could not have recognized himself:

His heat was still so modest, it might warm,
But do the cloistered votary no harm.
The face he sometimes praises, but the mind,
A fairer saint, is in his verse enshrined.35

For these writers, praise is clearly inimical to the grotesque bodily canon and Poetry to the workaday world. They cannot reconcile excess body with inspiration, and therefore must erase Jonson’s disproportionate material body before they can honor his soul. These defenders must have ignored, or per-
haps not read, their hero’s later work, for in *The Underwood* Jonson asks his readers to consider his fat body in all its mortal defects.

Jonson, it is true, contributed in many ways to the type of fatphobic assumptions that established virile classicism. Indeed, the much-anthologized “To Penshurst” is easily read as a celebration of the restraint of its patron. Nor was Jonson above using dualism to defend himself. In “An Epistle to a Friend” he asks, “Forgive it, as my frailty, and not me.” But as tempting as it must have been to cling to this virile, classical rhetoric (or even diet) as he aged, Jonson resisted such simple solutions. Jonson speaks of himself through both virile and carnivalesque rhetorics simultaneously, claiming mastery of both canons. Like the best satirists in the carnivalesque tradition, Jonson complicates the idea of himself as creator, subject, and addressee. In doing so, he draws attention to the notion that he himself must be constructed. He directs more energy to this project as he grows older and fatter. He compares himself to Horace, Virgil, and Anacreon in both a ‘lowly’ physical sense and a spiritual one: he is fat, cold, and old as they were, a “great blot,” “tardy, cold, / Unprofitable chattel, fat and old, / Laden with belly, and doth hardly approach / His friends, but to break chairs, or crack a coach.” He casts his fat body as the kind of miserable subject Julia Kristeva has called “a muse in the strict tradition of the ‘low genres’—apocalyptic, Menippean, and carnivalesque.” But his point in comparison is clear: if Horace grew fat, and Anacreon old, there must be a kind of literary value which is not diminished by physical change.

One of the most interesting aspects of *The Underwood*, published posthumously in 1640, is that Jonson relaxes the authorial voice in a way which challenges the received view of him as a resolute defender of his right to control meaning. Ian Donaldson has noted that poems which use a “Ben” character, such as those in “A Celebration of Charis in Ten Lyric Pieces,” betray the “realization that [authorial] power has its limits: that his poetry, for all its grace and dignity, cannot . . . perpetually ‘Keepe the middle age at stay.’” Jonson creates alternative comic “Bens,” and the Charis cycle in particular adds an appealing dash of humor and variety to Jonson’s poetic corpus as well as a humility that qualifies his habitually terrible perfectionism. “Ben” makes a show of giving two women the last word in the Charis cycle, one of whom makes the most of her chance to speak with a sly joke that highlights the courtly taste for a body very different from

Jonson’s old, fat one:
For his mind I do not care,
That’s a toy that I could spare;
Let his title be but great,

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His clothes rich, and band sit neat,
Himself young, and face be good,
All I wish is understood.
What you please you parts may call,
’Tis one good part I’d lie withal.41

Some of the pieces in question are rewritten leftovers, songs from other characters’ voices borrowed from plays, whereas others were added later. Not only do they resist the very idea of a formal collection, they are highly irregular in both temperament and tempo. Variously interesting or successful, they form a macaronic whole inside *The Underwood*, itself cobbled together from various genres, logics, and styles. These pieces refer to other poems in Jonson’s own catalogue. In unbounded carnivalesque style, the poem-at-large seems to have more to do with the real Ben and his life than the poem read alone. As Elena Levy-Navarro has shown, “objects within [*The Underwood*] cannot maintain anything like fixed and stable meanings. Jonson’s body . . . is weighed and experienced in very different ways depending on the responsiveness and imagination of the reader,” and “such a supposedly objective physical fact as Jonson’s ‘mountain belly’ or ‘rocky face’ takes on very different meanings whether read by a court lady or a friend.”42

“Let it not your wonder move,” begins the cycle, “Less your laughter, that I love. / Though I now write fifty years, / I have had, and have my peers.” This declaration of age, although unlikely to be perfectly accurate at the time of collation, marks Ben as decrepit and most likely diseased. It displays Jonson’s learning, but also his heightened awareness of his body. Horace spoke of fifty as the age when Venus should leave him alone, and fifty was considered by Jonson’s contemporaries as a powerful turning point in a man’s life.43 At fifty, it was thought, his balance of humors changed, his digestive efficiency waned, and the body and mind disintegrated toward death. In calling attention to his age, Jonson foregrounds mortal realities in a way that his allies would not. He does not recoil from the reality of corporeal degeneration.

The second Charis piece, “How He Saw Her,” makes Jonson’s claim to poetic ability equal to any young man’s seem a bit ridiculous, but it also suggests that a young man’s poetry might of its own nature be absurd. This piece is rhythmically similar to the first, but feminine rhymes and simple rhythms like “Far was I from being stupid, / For I ran and called on Cupid” make the speaker sound ridiculous, and “Where’s thy Quiver? Bend thy bow: / Here’s a shaft, thou art too slow!” is self-consciously funny. These are the words of a young Romeo, too hot-headed in love or lust to bother with social graces, even toward a god.
This tongue-in-cheek aged lover persona is important because it mirrors and distorts other Jonson poems, in which age, disease, and fatness are associated with literary ability. “My Picture Left in Scotland,” for instance, is a forthright poem which is nevertheless difficult to categorize generically, as it repeatedly focuses on his fat body in a way that should have given eulogists like the prudish Dudley Digges pause. “I now think Love is rather deaf than blind,” writes the disappointed old man, “For else it cannot be / That she / Whom I adore so much should so slight me.”

Oh, but my conscious fears
That fly my thoughts between
Tell me that she hath seen
My hundred of grey hairs,
Told seven-and-forty years,
Read so much waste, as she cannot embrace
    My mountain belly, and my rocky face;
And all these through her eyes have stopped her ears.++

There is, here, not only a porous body, but also a porous world. Conscious fears live in the middle way “between” thoughts. This hero’s body is fat and permeable. His “rocky face” must remind us of the causes of the all-too real frailty and aging of his body. Besides weight gain, smallpox had scarred his face and extreme drinking given him a swollen aspect. Jonson suggests his body has been invaded by disease, and is already well on its way to ultimate degeneration. He will not, however, accept the criticism that his words are the worse for wear.

The young lady in question is not more classical or contained than the poet, though her body is in better shape for the time being. That body, rather than her soul, receives—or refuses to receive—his poetry, and that body is no more contained than his: “All these through her eyes have stopped her ears.” Tempting fate, Jonson puns on his “waste,” and his reluctant love object “reads” his body as if he were a text. Like the ladies of the Charis cycle, this anonymous woman (with all her womanly fat and flesh) is perfectly competent to act with agency in any highbrow masculine literary tradition, and even sees fit to rebuff its acknowledged leader.

“My Picture” echoes the words of “An Elegy” almost faithfully in talk of youth and skill at poetry, thereby associating grotesqueries with the lines “Let me be what I am, as Virgil cold; / As Horace fat; or as Anacreon old.” Why should Jonson evoke these classical heroes when their acolytes would con-
demn “My Picture”? Perhaps it is because he can thereby mock those who would rigidly adhere to constructed boundaries between life and words. In this way, he gains the type of rhetorical “weight” he desires:

Let it not your wonder move,
Less your laughter, that I love.
Though I now write fifty years,
I have had, and have my peers;
Poets, though divine, are men:
Some have loved as old again.
And it is not always face,
Clothes, or fortune, gives the grace;
Or the feature, or the youth:
But the language, and the truth,
With the ardor, and the passion,
Gives the lover weight, and fashion.45

Jonson plays with the word “weight” here as he does throughout The Underwood. The reference only further underscores the fact that he is both fat and a poet—a great poet. In this, he challenges the fatphobic assumptions of his day. He writes against courtly fashions and against a longstanding Western philosophical tradition that values disembodied thought as masculine and associates the body and “fat” with femininity, excess, and lack of control.

Jonson’s rivals did not understand the complexity of his literary style. So committed were they to a singular construal of Jonsonian classicism, they could not appreciate how he derived drama and tension from a joint carnivalesque and classical style. To them, Jonson must be associated with the carnivalesque and thus must be deemed a hypocrite insofar as he portrays himself as a poet in the classical tradition. Sadly, even Jonson’s allies could not understand the complexities of their hero’s poetry; thus they could defend him only inside a singular understanding of the virile classical tradition, characterizing him by a “spirit” seen as antithetical to the (fat) body.

Despite all this, Jonson defiantly determined to wear the “Ivy Garland” and claim the jester’s privilege. He therefore laid claim to greatness in both realms:

Let me be what I am, as Virgil cold;
As Horace fat; or as Anacreon old;
No poet’s verses yet did ever move,
Whose readers did not think he was in love.
Who shall forbid me then in rhythm to be
As light, and active as the youngest he
That from the Muses’ fountain doth endorse
His lines, and hourly sits the poet’s horse?
Put on my Ivy Garland, let me see
Who frowns, who jealous is, who taxeth me.46

Ambiguously autobiographical poetry of this kind allowed Jonson to move between personae, exploring and exploiting the fraught situation of a fat poet in a land that privileged thin. What, then, can we take from Jonson’s experience and strategy? Sadly, Jonson’s case shows that fatphobia is entrenched firmly, and often invisibly, in every English speaker’s heritage. It may not be a story we want to hear: if fatphobia is part of our language and literature rather than being dependent on the vagaries of fashion, “speaking back” becomes very difficult. Constructionist history, however, opens these corridors for exploration. With history more firmly in hand, fat studies can, like Jonson, begin to speak with an authority based upon understanding. Its practitioners can take possession of what it is to be fat in an Anglophone society.

In addition, Jonson’s experience of fatphobia may illuminate the unspoken fatphobic assumptions of our own age, holding a mirror to our absurdities and prejudices. Galenic medical discourse was certainly not like our own, and our literary critics only rarely equate a writer’s body with his writing—at least overtly. But the view that a fat person’s intellectual ability is second-rate is still endemic. Fat is assumed to be a result of inferior willpower and thus, presumably, intelligence. Certainly, many recommend “education” (coded white, male, and elite) as the means by which a fat person may become thin. In the rough-and-tumble of daily life, the types of assumptions I have described here remain alive and well.

More encouragingly, we can see in Jonson’s success the full extent to which fat is rewritable. Despite the pitfalls of language, the words “I’m fat” have malleable signification. This may not seem to be true in our time and place, full of thin images and exhortations to diet, but Jonson’s success shows that the public self can be reconstructed in a more positive manner. Fat writers would do well to look to Jonson for even if, like him, they face a culture that would prefer to be without them, they have in Jonson a powerful model for response. Insisting on embodiment can, when handled carefully, be a powerful alternative to a dualism that has no room for life’s material joys and tragedies.


16. Ibid., 320.


18. *Ben Jonson*, 8:592–93 [Timber; or Discoveries].

19. Ibid., 626 [Timber; or Discoveries].

22. Ibid.
23. Ben Jonson, 8:230 [“Epistle: To My Lady Covell”].
28. Ben Jonson, 8:638 [Timber; or Discoveries].
31. Ibid., 35.
32. Ibid., 35.
33. Ibid., 21 and 29.
34. Ibid., 23.
35. Ibid., 15.
36. Ben Jonson, 8:190
37. Dieting of a kind was certainly known and practiced at the time. If it was performed differently and on a far smaller scale, it was known and practiced best in Jonson’s own learned circles through Latin manuscript versions of Louis Cornaro’s The Art of Living Long.
38. Ben Jonson, 8:227 and 8:230 [“My Answer. The Poet to the Painter” and “Epistle. To My Lady Covell.”]
41. Ben Jonson, 8:142
43. See, for instance, Horace’s Ode 4.1. In Niall Rudd’s translation, “Are you making war again, Venus, after so long a truce? Have mercy, I beg you, I beg you! . . . Stop, o cruel mother of sweet Desires, stop driving one who after nearly fifty years is now too hardened to answer your soft commands” (Loeb 2004).
44. Ben Jonson, 8:149–50.
45. Ibid., 131
46. Ibid., 199–202.