

Showcase 2007

The Value of Words

Synopsis

What did Ben Jonson and Robert Cecil have in common? Jonson, the gruff, satirical writer, with a following of young playwrights known as “the tribe of Ben”, and Cecil, the King’s Secretary of State, charged with defending the security of the country?

1606 saw the first performances of *Volpone*, Jonson’s first great comedy. But he still did not achieve financial independence. He continues to write masques at court, often commissioned by Cecil. In an age where writers needed the help of a patron, Jonson was fighting for a greater degree of artistic autonomy.

1606 also saw the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot. This had an added significance for Jonson, as he was a Catholic and a Catholic convert to boot. Cecil was responsible for the recruitment of spies and for the introduction of new anti-terror laws.

What if you wish to resist the new laws? Can the reaction of the state to a terrorist action result in a loss of freedom? Do the words of a playwright have any value, or are they lost in the clamour for tough new legislation?

Jonson does resist Cecil. He does not become Cecil’s spy. He can tell Cecil exactly what he thinks of him (even if he has to humble himself later for doing so).

The Value of Words might appear from the synopsis to be very serious. It is also meant to be funny. There are ticket touts and street hecklers as well as ladies of the Court. Selling dubious medicines in the street is followed by a rehearsal for a masque on the virtues of marriage. Above all, the play is meant to be a theatrical entertainment.

Cast

Ben Jonson	playwright, mid-thirties, London accent
Robert Cecil	very short, hunchback, 40's, Secretary of State
Tripp	Jonson's female servant, 18, Lancashire accent
Slipfast	male "wide-boy", Cockney, late 20's
Shiftquick	female "wide-boy", Cockney, late 20's
Lady Howard	ruling-class, early 20's
Lady Walsingham	ruling-class, 40's
Geoffrey	ruling-class, 20's, camp
Torturer	Cockney, 30's, drunk – same actor as Geoffrey
Dol	Cockney, 20's – same actor as Lady Howard
Boormouth	Cockney, 30's – same actor as Lady Wals'ham
Loaferman	non-speaking – same actor as Geoffrey
Loaferwoman	non- speaking – same actor as Lady Howard

Location

The play takes place in London in 1606, some months after the Gunpowder Plot.

Libels were illegal (and dangerous) short poems written and circulated at that time. A high number were written about Robert Cecil.

The play ends with an ironic explanation to Jonson's Epigram 64, which Jonson wrote in praise of Cecil.

EXTRACTS

Scene 1

SHIFTQUICK *and* SLIPFAST *are touting. They move about the stage, shouting "Buying or Selling"*.

SHIFTQUICK Nothing no longer in this game.

SLIPFAST *(rhetorical)* Tell me about it.

SHIFTQUICK Got a punter I did by the Duck and Drake and she says you get em cheaper if you go Bankside. Bankside my backside I tells her.

SLIPFAST And one comes and lets on he's a scholar and how books is getting more and can he have a reduction. Oh, yea? Tried to pass me a dodgy coin and all.
(shouting) Buying or selling. Buying or selling.

SHIFTQUICK What we need is old-fashioned entertainment.

SLIPFAST Something to cheer em up after what's happening.

SHIFTQUICK Bit of spectacle. Smoke and noise. Marlowe was the man.

SLIPFAST Main man was Marlowe – sell out and sell twice so much again.

SHIFTQUICK *(shouting)* Buying or selling. Buying or selling.
Me dad got me in to see *Dr Faustus* in ninety-two, bless his soul. Gone all serious now – no wonder they ain't coming.

SLIPFAST Rules on where you can ride your horse.

SHIFTQUICK Half the time makes you feel stupid cos you don't know what it's about. That Ben Jonson, some of his stuff, wants to educate us.

SLIPFAST And the price of stables.

SHIFTQUICK Then they're all scared away.

SLIPFAST Eh?

SHIFTQUICK Gunpowder. You not noticed?

SLIPFAST No gunpowder gone off.

SHIFTQUICK Perception, innit. Here, guess what I have?
(shows paper) Rhymes.

SLIPFAST On Parliament?

SHIFTQUICK On the Archbishop of York – on how he don't believe in God and he'd switch sides and turn Catholic again if it was to his advantage.

SLIPFAST Who wrote em?

SHIFTQUICK So what who wrote em? Course I'll say someone known... Sir Walter.

SLIPFAST Sir Walter Raleigh?

SHIFTQUICK Sir Walter Wipemyarse on a swan's neck. How many Sir Walter's you heard of?

SLIPFAST *tries to peek at paper*

SHIFTQUICK (*putting paper away*) No sampling the goods.

SLIPFAST A proposal I got. Mutual benefit, know what I mean.

SHIFTQUICK You? You wanna marry me?

SLIPFAST Nah. Go in haves. Can help you out on other stuff – don't do to only sell the one product. Could do with a man to protect you.

SHIFTQUICK (*ignoring him – shouting*) Buying or selling. Buying or Selling.

SLIPFAST Nah, don't be like that.

SHIFTQUICK What you got?

SLIPFAST (*showing his hand*) Six by the back.

SHIFTQUICK Restricted view – you been done.

SLIPFAST Oblique vantage point. Got em knock down. Geezer printing em off I done a favour.

(*shouts*) Get your seats – *Volpone the Fox*.

SHIFTQUICK (*shouts*) Ben Jonson. England's answer to 'orace. See a play what follows the three unities.

SLIPFAST (*shouts*) Ben Jonson of Westminster. Ben Jonson what also does masques for the gentry. Buying or selling.

SHIFTQUICK (*shouts*) London's own Ben Jonson. Buying or selling. See Volpone get banged up. Buyi- The Watch. Fuck.

SLIPFAST Fuck.

They both run for it in different directions.

Scene 2

Court. Rehearsal for Hymenaei – a Ben Jonson masque. All hold sheets of paper.

GEOFFREY “Save, save the virgins; keep your hallowed lights”.

JONSON Louder.

GEOFFREY “Save, save the virgins; keep your hallowed lights
Untouched, and with the flame-

JONSON Louder.

GEOFFREY Tch.
“and with the flame defend our rites”.
Loud enough?

JONSON Rites is stressed as strong as lights.

GEOFFREY I know.
“and with the flame defend our... rites.
The four untempered humours are broke out”

JONSON What the fuck was that?

GEOFFREY What?

JONSON Untemper...id.

GEOFFREY I prefer an old-fashioned pronunciation.

JONSON Do you want to be in this or not, sunshine?

GEOFFREY Sunshine – you’re calling me sunshine?

LADY W. Don’t upset him, Geoffrey.

LADY H. Mr Jonson’s an artist

GEOFFREY Hah... servant more like.

LADY W. Mr Jonson, Geoffrey can be temperamental.

GEOFFREY I’m third son of the Duke of Bedford, and won’t be spoken to as such by
a... hireling.

JONSON Fuck you, Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY Me? Fuck you. Who’s your father?

TRIPP Perhaps we should move on – can we now have dialogue between the two ladies?

LADY H. Geoffrey, come on. It's for my wedding.

GEOFFREY His nights he spends drinking in pubs so that's why he's grumpy in the morning. Why didn't we get Shakespeare to do this?

JONSON (*snaps*) Because he can't write masques.

GEOFFREY He can write plays and he can write them better than you. I'll ask the King to choose Shakespeare next time.

TRIPP If we could have the two ladies now, Truth and Opinion.

GEOFFREY At least he knows his place.

LADY H. (*after clearing her throat*)
"Who art thou thus that imitat'st my grace
In steps, in habit and resemble face?"

LADY W. "Grave time and industry my parents are;
My name is Truth, who through these sounds of war
(Whose figure the mind's discursive fight)
In mists by nature wrapped, salute the light".

LADY H. "I am that Truth, thou some illusive sprite
Whom to my likeness the black sorceress Night
Hath of these dry and empty fumes created".

LADY W. "Best herald of thine own birth, well related:
Put me and mine to proof of words and facts
In any question this fair hour exacts".

Enter CECIL

LADY H. "I challenge thee, and fit this time of love
With this position, which Truth comes to prove:
Till the most honoured state of-". Father-in-law.

LADY W. Secretary of State.

CECIL (*clapping*) No ladies, continue. Pleasant it is to the ear. Bodes well for the wedding day. I will take a word with the playwright.

GEOFFREY If he'll condescend.

CECIL Something amiss, Geoffrey, you're not content with your lines?

GEOFFREY Nothing a...miss with me, I assure you.

JONSON Tripp, take over.

CECIL Indeed. Carry on, Tripp. What a peculiar name. So Lady Walsingham, Lady Howard, if we can...

LADY H. Certainly, father-in-law.

LADY W. Secretary of State.

LADY H, LADY W, and GEOFFREY *go to one side, JONSON and CECIL the other. TRIPP is in the centre, so she can overhear the Jonson/Cecil conversation.*

GEOFFREY He's not your father-in-law – why're you calling him that?

LADY H. His eldest son's married to my sister.

GEOFFREY You know the Cecil's are an upstart family – not two titles to rub together not two generations back.

LADY W. Hold your tongue, Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY I won't hold my tongue, and no one'll make me. Not even him. Little Crookback's not so indispensable to the King as he thinks.

LADY W. Quiet! For your own good.

LADY H, LADY W, GEOFFREY *and TRIPP stay on stage but are still*

CECIL All good stuff. Very good. We're so anticipating the finished masque. How many times have I had you released from prison, Ben?

JONSON Twice.

CECIL Was it not more?

JONSON I think not.

CECIL Once you were arraigned for murder but acquitted, once for writing a drama which contained what the Privy Council termed "very seditious and slanderous matter", and most recently for providing a caricature of one of our King's favourite courtiers. You really should know better than to mock a male favourite of the King.

JONSON I didn't know of your interest in my acquittal for murder.

CECIL Oh, yes, I take an interest in all artists of this country. Life would be mundane if a berth of tolerance were not allowed to our artists – I cannot agree with those who demand our theatre doors shut. Do you rendezvous often with fellow scribes? You they respect, Ben.

JONSON I met Shakespeare only last week.

CECIL *(taking out paper)* You met Shakespeare in the Vine last Wednesday at twenty after eight with two other men, one Henslowe, an actor, the other Merriot, a stage-hand, all but Shakespeare moving to the Black Bull at eleven precisely. You left there at ten before one.

JONSON So sensible is Shakespeare – at his writing by eight. Shakespeare’s a nine-hour-a-day man. Did you note if he bought his round? Only I can’t remember and the bard has a habit of welching.

CECIL *(ignoring question)* Shakespeare knows how to please an audience. My father believed we ought only offer commissions to artists able to please a popular audience. If you are unable to please an audience, it shows deficiency in art. Then Ben you’ve had success yourself – *Volpone* your latest work is proving so well received. Does it pay?

JONSON Enough.

CECIL Enough to provide you with adequate comforts?

JONSON I’m most grateful to you and the King for the work you put my way.

CECIL I quite persuaded the King to commission you for this masque and this despite his reservations. For I assist my acquaintances, particularly my playwright acquaintances. What libels have you recently heard of?

JONSON Libels?

CECIL I read one concerning proceedings of the Parliament – rather amusing I thought.

JONSON I’m a serious writer, Sir.

CECIL And then there was another on how honours are bestowed in this Kingdom. I have it on solid evidence that all the playwrights try their hand at them – a diversion no doubt from their main literary activity. Do you never get the urge to write a libel?

JONSON Most libels are no more than doggerel verse, written by those unhappy at their condition.

CECIL Harmless – at least most are. But good fun. Hearty English roister doister. From the lowest vagabond to our most creative minds – everyone can have a go. Have you seen libels alluding to...me?

JONSON I don’t think so.

CECIL None at all? Hard to believe.

JONSON Do you know of any such? What do they say?

CECIL No, not worth the retelling. Idle words. If you hear of who might be writing them. Make some investigations.
(false innocence) That's an idea.

JONSON I don't know where I'd look.

CECIL You are a native Londoner. And a Catholic. Perhaps it's the Catholics who are proliferating such libels.

JONSON Not that I know of.

CECIL There's continued hostility among Catholics to our King at present.

JONSON I'm a loyal subject.

CECIL *(taking out snuff)* Newly arrived from loyal ships in the Americas.

JONSON *takes snuff*

CECIL The King is averse to tobacco but I know of nothing so sure to enlarge our revenues.
(approving of the name) To...ba...cco. Traders originally named it dry leaf but there is little gain in that.

JONSON *puts snuff up his nose*

CECIL Did our powder plotters Fawkes and Catesby not profess loyalty?

JONSON I've never once betrayed England.

CECIL That all they undertook was to redress a previous wrong done to their religion?

JONSON Opposition to violence is consistent in my work, you know that Sir.

CECIL "Opposition to violence" *(Laughs)*
I am to believe that?

JONSON Yes, sir.

CECIL Are you not forced to play the traitor by the doctrine you adhere to? And you don't have the plea of familial loyalties since you're a convert. Report to my study here at fifteen after ten next Wednesday – we shall see what you discover. Let me make a record.
Takes out pen (quill and ink holder attached via string to his neck) and paper and writes something down.

JONSON I may have nothing.

CECIL Do your best, Ben. One can never foretell when next you have need of my assistance.

PAUSE

TRIPP A woman I know...works on a printing press... And she was offering money...

JONSON Yours?
PAUSE
You're a dark horse. Braver than I am.

TRIPP Not mine.

PAUSE

JONSON Yes?
BEAT
Who wrote it, Tripp?

TRIPP It may not rhyme because the writer wasn't sober at the time.

JONSON You mean...?

TRIPP Last Wednesday when you came home from the pub.

JONSON But... No.

TRIPP You did.

JONSON I couldn't...

GEOFFREY *(sarcastic)* In your own time.

LADY W. Stop it, Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY He prefers his dramas – his general public – his *Volpone the Fox*. We may as well not be here – for all masques mean to him.

JONSON Fuck you, Geoffrey. Fuck you.

GEOFFREY Well. You would expect better vocabulary from a playwright.