

2. 'Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (Louis Althusser). Discuss how one or more of the texts we have read performs ideological work of the kind Althusser identifies. 2606 Words

Ben Jonson's verse works convey his idealistic wish to inhabit a world in which observing his personal model of propriety would create an ideal social environment. Jonson's country house poems (in this essay, 'To Penshurst' and 'To Sir Robert Wroth') perform for his patrons ideological work in the way Althusser describes – they assert that the social ecosystem found in the country estates of aristocrats is the most natural and most moral ecosystem that could exist, even at a time when it was being threatened by the allure of the city and court. Jonson's epigrams (in this essay, 'An Epistle Answering to One Who Would Be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben', ('Epistle Answering') 'To My Bookseller', 'To the Reader', 'Inviting a Friend to Supper', and 'To My Book') represent his desire to be seen as percipient and shrewd; that he has precepts that result in the correct model of life in the same way that his aristocratic patrons do. Jonson sanctions his own impinging upon this trait, one conveyed as exclusive to the aristocracy, because it is aspiration of the correct kind. It results from superior wit (and therefore morality), rather than acquisitiveness, as is the case with other working professionals – specifically, in this essay, lawyers. Jonson imagines his temperance and civility as traits that separate him from these who threaten the country sphere, and traits that disprove his critics. This essay will explore these aforementioned kinds of ideological work, to argue that Jonson's depictions of these different groups ultimately combine to position himself as impervious to criticism. Just like the country lifestyles of his aristocratic patrons, the Jonsonian lifestyle cannot be faulted, regardless of whether his material circumstances are closer to that of the working professionals he repudiates.

Jonson's country house poems are initially an act of adherence to the contemporary class-based social stratification by affirming the ideological beliefs of the aristocracy. There is a fine difference between the accepted way of interacting with patrons, and what this essay asserts that Jonson attempts to do –

which is encroach upon the status of his aristocratic patrons through a series of morality judgements of different groups, and of himself. J.R. Hibbard's article 'The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century' outlines the seemingly egalitarian relationship between poet and patron: the poet is 'welcomed' into the patron's sphere because their role, 'to make [society] aware of itself', is pivotal to the functioning of said society.¹ The poet belongs in the ecosystems that Jonson depicts in 'To Penshurst' and 'To Sir Robert Wroth' just as much as the patron does, as owner of the estate. The purpose of the country house poem is to 'praise [...] the whole way of life of which the country house is the centre'.² The country house poem is the form in which Jonson fulfils his role in the country ecosystem: by responding to the pressing issue of threats to the country sphere, he exhibits the genre's Augustan origins to voice the values of a self-conscious society.³

'To Penshurst' depicts the ideal state of the country in such a way that suggests that country life is an unsurpassable model of social living. It is a divinely sanctioned place, where all are happy, despite the differences in rank between lord (Jonson's patron, Robert Sidney) and tenant. The classical references used to establish Penshurst in the beginning of the poem exemplify its prestigious station as an Edenic 'ancient pile' (l. 5).⁴ The presence of creatures from ancient Greek and Roman myth add historical weight to the estate, as it appears to exist in this idyllic state simultaneously in the present – Jonson makes reference to the real-life features of the estate like the river Medway – but also the distant, mythological past – these references are interweaved with images of 'Dryads', 'silvan', and 'satyrs' (l. 31, ll. 10-17). The natural beauty of Penshurst is so great that it is worthy to be inhabited by Pan and Bacchus, (the Greek God of Nature, and the Roman God of agriculture, wine, and fertility, respectively) and so the Sidney family must also be worthy to be graced with the presence of gods.

¹ G.R. Hibbard, "The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century", *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19:1-2 (1956): 159.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ All references to Jonson's works in this essay are taken from *The Works of Ben Jonson which were Formerly Printed in Two Volumes and are Now Reprinted in One: To which is Added a Comedy, Called the New Inn: With Additions Never before Published* [Works. 1692 New inn. Leges convivales, New inn] (London, 1692), ProQuest Early English Books Online.

This image of perpetual majesty is implicitly transferred to the Sidney family as owners. The presence of Bacchus specifically – a God whose advocacies are all semantically linked to abundance – divinely bequeaths endless abundance upon Penshurst, which is seemingly cultivated without the need for human labour. Lines 20-44 depict the natural landscape of the estate as a stage for endless production; a mechanism perpetually in motion whose products are food and crops. The livestock ‘feed’, the horses ‘breed’: the commodities continually reproduce themselves, even ‘willing to be killed’ or ‘leap[ing] before the fisher’ to be consumed without any encouragement from labourers. The little work that is done by the tenants is done without complaint or resentment (ll.45-46). Therefore, the aristocratic way of life is naturalised; the social construct becomes a thing of natural kind.

These insular, self-sufficient depictions of the Penshurst estate perform the ideological work that Althusser describes, because the entire purpose of the genre of the country house poems is ‘the reproduction of labour power’ through ‘a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order’ – to celebrate the country house and thus all the social processes that come with it.⁵ The ‘established order’ – the existence of the aristocracy as the sole proprietors of wealth – is reproduced because it is divinely sanctioned, and therefore labour power is reproduced, as the tenants continue to inhabit their place in the class system. Nothing, not even the ‘real conditions of existence’ that go unmentioned, could extricate the aristocracy from their ‘imaginary relationship’ with their current living conditions.

However, the purpose of the poet and the country house poem is to make society ‘conscious also of the forces that threatened to undermine and overthrow that achievement [of a civilised way of living]’.⁶ In the case of the poem ‘To Sir Robert Wroth’, these ‘forces’ would be the allure of the city and its threat to the country sphere. This is only implied in the opening lines of ‘To Penshurst’, where Jonson celebrates the qualities of the architecture by negation; Penshurst Place is not newly ‘built to

⁵ L. Althusser, “Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation),” in *On Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008): 6

⁶ See Hibbard, “The Country House Poem”, 159

envious show' (line 1). 'To Sir Robert Wroth' abandons the almost coddling approach taken in 'To Penshurst' – as a poet, it is Jonson's responsibility to highlight the 'real conditions of existence'.

That is why 'To Sir Robert Wroth' devalues the pull of the city by castigating the legal profession and depicting the bar and inns of court as a stage for barbarism, something opposed to the virtue that Jonson's patron Robert Wroth possesses as a man of the country. The essence of the poem is plainly stated in the first four lines: Wroth is 'blest' because he favours the country over the 'vice' and 'sport' of the 'city and the court', superior in morals because he resists the allure.⁷ Despite this obvious statement, the way that Jonson characterises the city to display its negative traits is key to unveiling his own moral priorities. The very existence of the legal profession is juxtaposed with the conviviality and happiness found amongst the tenants in the country – this time, in Wroth's Enfield estate Durants, a place characterised similarly to Penshurst as full of natural and classical imagery. The introduction of the city, through the volta in lines 61-62, interrupts the 'lively picture of an uninhibited mixing of classes in winter festivities'.⁸ The poem then turns depict of the inns of court as a battlefield less honourable than seen in actual warfare, where hypothetical battles are actually legal disputes. Being called to the bar is presented as the making of lawyers ('and brag that they were therefore born'), but, by way of martial imagery, in violent circumstances that instil them with negative characteristics rather than positive ones (ll. 72, 67-71). The immorality of the bar is again shown by the fact that the lawyer 'think his power doth equal fate's' (line 79) – they covet judicial power to the extent that they aim to surpass that of God. The legal field is explicitly positioned opposing godliness: 'let thousands more go flatter vice and win / By being organs to great sin' (ll.84-85). To Jonson, lawyers are immoral because they choose to occupy themselves in an 'acquisitive' manner.⁹ Wroth, however, is 'innocent', because he 'canst make thine own content' without desiring 'proud porches or their gilded roofs' (ll. 66, 65, 15). Ultimately, lawyers represent 'money values', and as said by Hibbard: 'to money values, which he regards as unnatural and perverted, Jonson opposes human values'.¹⁰ As these 'money

⁷ *The Works of Ben Jonson*, 147.

⁸ Hibbard, "The Country House Poem", 166.

⁹ Hibbard, "The Country House Poem", 165.

¹⁰ Hibbard, "The Country House Poem", 163.

values' are 'unnatural' – and the aristocratic way of life has been built up to be completely natural, Jonson delineates between those whose roles are harmonious with a well-functioning society (the aristocratic patron, the poet), and whose are not (the lawyer). The ideological work done by 'To Sir Robert Wroth' is 'reproducing subjects who believe that their position within the social structure is a natural one', in maintaining the hegemony of the aristocracy through asserting their morality, but by extension, defining whose position within the social structure is not natural.¹¹

'The human values' that Hibbard mentions are, for Jonson, conviviality, loyalty, and correct use of language. Somewhat, they have already been mentioned: they are reflected in the conviviality described in the communities of the Penshurst and Durants estates. But Jonson also had ideas about civility regarding communing with like-minded individuals and with friends. Once Jonson began to make a living as a writer, he then took the role of patron, communing with the "Sons of Ben" in the Apollo Room of the Devil tavern in the 1620s.¹² The Sons of Ben were an informal 'grouping', formed of Jonson's friends, associates, and literary apprentices' who dined together and engaged in intellectual pursuits.¹³ It was common for men to dine together in the city – but this city sphere is not the same as the one portrayed in 'To Sir Robert Wroth'. Socialising in the tavern meant not only eating, but engaging in 'pedagogic exercises, such as readings, mootings, and disputations'.¹⁴ These acts had classical bases in literature and philosophy, 'locating the origins of a civilised society in the rituals of eating and drinking together'.¹⁵ The Sons of Ben had rules outlining their specific manner of dining together, the *leges convivales*, which 'commanded guests to be witty, avoid vain disputes, and keep their conversations private'.¹⁶ These are Jonson's 'human values' – the traits he prioritises most in those worthy to dine with.

¹¹ William Lewis, "Louis Althusser", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2022, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

¹² Martin Butler, "Sons of Ben [Tribe of Ben] (act. c. 1620–c. 1629)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 21 May, 2009: 1.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Michelle O'Callaghan, "Taverns and Table Talk," in *The English Wits: Literature and Sociability in Early Modern England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 60

¹⁵ O'Callaghan, "Taverns and Table Talk", 64.

¹⁶ Butler, "Sons of Ben", 3.

Many of Jonson's *epigrams* deal with the idea of possessing these traits to create a civil space. In lines 9-30 of 'Epistle Answering', Jonson defines again by negation, the ideal civil dining companion and someone worthy enough to belong to the Sons of Ben. There is an emphasis placed on it being 'the corrupt uses of language' – to 'quarell', 'vent' – that disqualify one from being worthy.¹⁷ This, alongside Jonson's warning against 'vain dispute', again disqualifies lawyers from possessing 'human values' and belonging to the civil space. In 'To Sir Robert Wroth', they clearly engage in vain – needless – dispute, as they 'wrangle at the bar' for every penny, and 'blow up orphans, and widows' in inheritance disputes (ll.73-74). For Jonson, 'careerists', and overt monetary concern, do not belong in the civil sphere or the ideal social environment.¹⁸

In 'To My Bookseller', Jonson displays a reluctance to engage with mercantile matters, conveying the selling of his works as a purely literary – and therefore, moral – venture. The opening line, 'thou that mak'st gain thy end, and wisely well', is derisive of the bookseller's role, because to make 'gain thy end' is to be acquisitive. He engages in the 'vile arts' of merchandising out of necessity (l.12). His book is for sale not to make money, but to give high-quality art to the discerning; as said in 'to the Reader', to those who can 'read it well' (line 2). Jonson's imaginary relationship to his real conditions of existence is this: he cultivates an ideal model of convivial socialisation, just as the country mode of living is an ideal model of living, and he does this for the sake of good living and good literature. For him, the two are concomitant – the entire of 'Inviting a Friend to Supper' uses the double metaphor of a proper meal and a proper literature. He does not do this for money, despite as the first person to make a living as a writer in England, there would obviously be a monetary dimension to his reason for writing.

¹⁷ W. E. Cain, "Self and Others in Two Poems by Ben Jonson. *Studies in Philology*, 80, no. 2 (1983): 166

¹⁸ Butler, "Sons of Ben", 3.

There is no end to Jonson's ambition for self-betterment, as he covets status, with which comes money, but fundamentally, the rhetorical immunity of his aristocratic patrons. Jonson was often criticised for overly sharp wit (see 'To My Book') and his contemporaries thought him to be 'a great lover and praiser of himself'.¹⁹ So, he endeavours to show why he should be allowed to be so. While Jonson enacts his role in the country ecosystem through verse, he also attempts to undermine the equilibrium within the realm of this designated role. The invocation of ancient Rome in 'To Penshurst' is not only formal; by replicating the works of poets such as Martial and Horace, Jonson implicitly aims to replicate their literary renown. This is more obviously flattering for Jonson's patrons, who are then made comparative to prestigious Roman rulers, (lines 10-18, imitate Martial's description of a tree planted by Julius Caesar) but it is also a covertly self-valorising act.²⁰

In conclusion, the verse works of Ben Jonson are a performance of self-making. Whether that be constructing Jonson the poet, or Jonson the patron and famed writer, his works prove to convince of the quality of his work, and thus, his moral character. Jonson often finds himself – rather, positions himself as – someone unwittingly and unfairly criticised, and so, in any real situation, Jonson imagines and thus makes himself to be whatever he needs to be to deflect criticism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

¹⁹ Sara Van Den Berg, quoting Donaldson 1975, "True Relation: the Life and Career of Ben Jonson," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, ed. Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3

²⁰ Notes on 'To Penshurst' from "The Forest", The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online.

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)." In *On Ideology*, 1-60. New York: Verso, 2008.
- Butler, Martin. "Sons of Ben [Tribe of Ben] (act. c. 1620–c. 1629)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 21 May, 2009. Accessed 20 Sep 2023. <https://www-oxforddnb-com.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-95352>
- Cain, W. E. "Self and Others in Two Poems by Ben Jonson." *Studies in Philology* 80, no. 2: 263-182.
- Cambridge University. "The Forest." *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*. Accessed September 14, 2023. <https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/k/works/forest/facing/#>
- Hibbard, G. R. "The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century." *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19, no.1-2 (1956): 156-174
- Jonson, Ben, 1573-1637. *The Works of Ben Jonson which were Formerly Printed in Two Volumes, are Now Reprinted in One : To which is Added a Comedy, Called the New Inn : With Additions Never before Published [Works. 1692 New inn. Leges convivales. New inn.]*. London: 1692. <https://www.proquest.com/books/works-ben-jonson-which-were-formerly-printed-two/docview/2240949205/se-2>.
- Lewis, William. "Louis Althusser." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Fall 2022. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/althusser/>>.
- O'Callaghan, Michelle. "Taverns and Table Talk." Chapter. In *The English Wits, Literature and Sociability in Early Modern England*, 60-80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511483844.006.
- Van Den Berg, Sara. "True Relation: the Life and Career of Ben Jonson." In *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, edited by Richard Harper and Stanley Stewart, 1-14. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. doi:10.1017/CCOL0521641136.001.