CHICAGO JOURNALS

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Source: *Modern Philology*, Vol. 112, No. 2 (November 2014), pp. 336-357
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/678319

Accessed: 21/01/2015 12:09

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Poetry and the Potential Mood: The Counterfactual Form of Ben Jonson's "To Fine Lady Would-Be"

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Whatever Ben Jonson's epigram "To Fine Lady Would-Be" is, we know that it is not a sonnet. As far as knowledge goes, this piece of it is rather mundane. It is easy to come by: we need only count the lines (there are twelve). The couplets that organize these lines would seem to bar even the relevance of the sonnet form; they turn on the pointed closure characteristic of the epigram's famed *sal*:[1]

> Fine Madam Would-Be, wherefore should you fear,
> That love to make so well, a child to bear?
> The world reputes you barren; but I know
> Your 'pothecary, and his drug says no.
> Is it the pain affrights? That's soon forgot.
> Or your complexion's loss? You have a pot
> That can restore that. Will it hurt your feature?
> To make amends, you're thought a wholesome creature.
> What should the cause be? Oh, you live at court:

This essay is indebted to a number of generous readers, including J. K. Barret, Joshua Gang, Aaron Kunin, Jacqueline T. Miller, Henry Turner, Christopher Warley, and Katherine Schaap Williams, as well as participants in the 2009–10 seminar "Evidence and Explanation in the Arts and Sciences," sponsored by the Center for Cultural Analysis at Rutgers University.

1. In his "Certain Notes of Instruction" (1575), George Gascoigne writes: "Some think that all poems (being short) may be called sonnets, as indeed it is a diminutive word derived from 'suonare,' but yet I can best allow to call those sonnets which are fourteen lines, every line containing ten syllables" (in *Sidney's "The Defence of Poesy" and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander [London: Penguin, 2004], 245). Gascoigne restricts the rhyme scheme to that introduced by Surrey and pursued by Shakespeare: *abab cdcd efef gg*. For Martial's distinction between sweet and salty epigrams, see Rosalie Colie, *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton University Press, 1974), esp. 77–94; in Renaissance poetics, see, e.g., John Harington's competition between the "sugred" sonnet and the epigram of "salt" in "Comparison of the Sonnet and Epigram" (ibid., 79).

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And there's both loss of time and loss of sport
In a great belly. Write, then, on thy womb:
Of the not born, yet buried, here's the tomb.[2]

Jonson did write a handful of sonnets during his career—between one and six, depending on your criteria—but he opens his collection *The Forest* (1616) by drawing our attention to the conspicuous lack of sonnets in his book.[3] In "Why I Write Not of Love," Jonson provides a mythopoeic narrative for why he does not write love poems more generally: in spite of the poet's attempts to "bind him in his verse" (2), Love flies away "and again / Into my rhymes could ne'er be got / By any art" (8–10). As with the opening of Ovid's *Amores*, this story provides a causal explanation for why Jonson's "numbers are so cold" (11).[4] If not exactly chilling, Jonson's tetrameters do have something of the routine about them. The fact that Jonson's epigram "To Fine Lady Would-Be" is not a sonnet might thus evidence what modern readers have identified as a stylistic repudiation of eloquence more broadly conceived—conceived under the sign of "Ciceronianism," in the balancing figures of speech characteristic of the euphuistic mode, or in the "sugared style" typical of Philip Sidney and strongly associated with the Petrarchan sonnet form.[5] That Jonson writes an epigram and not a sonnet would thus evidence his turn away from Elizabethan ornament and his turn toward a "plain style," an allegiance that has led us to group him with a

2. Ben Jonson's poetry and "Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden" are taken from Ian Donaldson, ed., *Ben Jonson* (Oxford University Press, 1985), hereafter cited parenthetically in text by line number and page number, respectively. Short titles are given where necessary for clarity.

3. For counting Jonson's sonnets, see James A. Riddell, "Cunning Pieces Wrought Perspective: Ben Jonson's Sonnets," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 87 (1988): 194. According to William Drummond, Jonson did not even like sonnets: "he cursed Petrarch for redacting verses to sonnets, which he said were like the tyrant's bed, where some who were too short were racked, others too long cut short" ("Conversations," 596).

4. Noting the absence of "sonnet sequences" in Jonson's corpus, John Roe observes, "Though the sonnet as a genre was beginning to be outmoded by James' reign, there would have been nothing to deter Jonson from trying his hand as late as 1600 . . . had he been so inclined. Yet Jonson proves circumspect regarding amorous passion" ("Style, Versatility, and the Politics of the Epistles," in *Ben Jonson and the Politics of Genre*, ed. A. D. Cousins and Alison V. Scott [Cambridge University Press, 2009], 94). One foot short of the sonnet's pentameter line, Jonson's tetrameters imitate the opening lines of the *Amores*, in which Ovid, who sets out to write epic, is forced to write of love after Cupid steals one foot from every other line, transforming epic's hexameters into the elegiac distich. See Ovid, *Amores*, trans. Grant Showerman and rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 1.1–4.

5. The seminal study of Jonson's stylistic repudiation of late Elizabethan artifice remains Jonas Barish's *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 1–89.

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diverse body of philosophical movements, ranging from the Tacitean revival to the "new science."[6]

I would like to suggest, however, that the fact that Jonson's epigram is not a sonnet is more than simply evidence for a literary history that charts the emergence of a "plain style" in the seventeenth century or that seeks to locate Jonson's place in this history. Rather, I argue that though this epigram is not a sonnet, it might have been a sonnet and, what is more, that Jonson incorporates this counterfactual history of literary production into his poem.[7] As Rosalie Colie has shown, Renaissance poetic theory situated the epigram within a literary history extending from the *Greek Anthology* through Catullus and (via Petrarch) into the sonnet tradition.[8] Far from entailing the rejection of the other form, the sonnet was sometimes called the perfect epigram.[9] Though we might not associate sonnets with couplets, the form took on a variety of rhyme schemes: sonnets composed of seven couplets appear in John Harington's collection, *The Most Elegant and Witty Epigrams* (1618) and one kicks off Robert Herrick's *Hesperides* (1648).[10] Ann Ferry has suggested that Jonson's Epigram 103, "To Mary,

6. For the plain style, see Wesley Trimpi, *Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study of the Plain Style* (Stanford University Press, 1962); Brian Vickers, "The Royal Society and English Prose Style: A Reassessment," in *Rhetoric and the Pursuit of Truth: Language Change in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1985), 3–76; George Williamson, *The Senecan Amble: A Study in Prose from Bacon to Collier* (University of Chicago Press, 1951).

7. In her discussion of rhyme, Susan Stewart suggests the outlines for such a history when she indicates that "form is replete with any number of choices, and each choice then exercised is dense with its relation to what otherwise could have been. Each determination thereby leaves behind a trace of alternatives" ("Rhyme and Freedom," in *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin [University of Chicago Press, 2009], 30).

8. Colie, *Shakespeare's Living Art*, 77–94. See also James Hutton, *The Greek Anthology in Italy to the Year 1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1935), 56–59; Alastair Fowler, "Genre and Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry: Donne to Marvell*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 80–100, esp. 84–85; Ann Baynes Coiro, *Robert Herrick's "Hesperides" and the Epigram Book Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 31–33.

9. For the sonnet as the perfect Italian epigram, see Thomas Sébillet, *Art poétique françoys* (Paris, 1548), fol. 43v, quoted in Colie, *Shakespeare's Living Art*, 83.

10. For example, see Harington, "*Against* Paulus *an Atheist*" (E7v), "*A pretty question of* Lazarus *sole well answered*" (F4v), "*Of a certaine Man*" (Lr), and "*Of taking a Hare*" (M5v), in *The Most Elegant and Witty Epigrams* (London, 1618). While each of these fourteen-line poems is composed in couplets, sense units work with octave, sestet, quatrain, and couplet organizations. For Herrick's "The Argument of his Book" as sonnet, see Coiro, *Herrick's "Hesperides,"* 31–40. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey's "Alas, so all things hold their peace" alternates rhymes *a* and *b* until the poem's closing couplet in *Tottel's Miscellany*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 10; Mary Wroth's sonnet "How doe I finde my soules extreamest anguish" both is and is not composed of couplets: it rhymes the same *a* sound throughout its fourteen lines, alternating between "anguish" and "languish" (*The First Part of the Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, ed. Josephine A. Roberts [Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, 1995], 198).

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Lady Wroth," is a sonnet composed of couplets, and John Roe suggests the same of Epigram 128, "To William Roe"; two of Jonson's sonnets with a more familiar rhyme scheme—Epigram 56, "On Poet Ape," and Underwood 68, "An Epigram to the Household, 1630"—are typographically arranged with every other line indented as if they are made up of couplets (even though they are not).[11]

Sara J. van den Berg has described "To Fine Lady Would-Be" as a "truncated sonnet": the logical organization of the first eight lines falls into two quatrains (completing the sonnet's octave) and line nine, like a *volta*, produces an argumentative turn.[12] Moreover, "To Fine Lady Would-Be" begins with a topos characteristic of the sonnet form: deploying the activity of the *poiein*—"to make" (where we might also expect to hear the word "mate")—Jonson introduces the conceit that "making" children is akin to "making" poetry: "Fine Madam Would-Be, wherefore should you fear, / That love to make so well, a child to bear?" (1–2).[13] Jonson's subsequent interrogation conforms to the division of quatrains we tend to expect, after Shakespeare, from the sonnet form—"Is it your pain affrights? . . . Or your complexion's loss? . . . Will it hurt your feature?" (5–7)—and his interrogation turns toward an answer at the very moment we might expect to find our sonnet's *volta*. "What should the cause be?" the poet asks at line nine. "Oh," he says, offering a sound that signals comprehension—"Oh," with a disappointed conclusiveness (*Oh of course*, he seems to say)— "Oh, you live at court" (9). The poet's subsequent command appears to be logically entailed by the answer to his opening question: "Oh, you live at court / . . . Write, then, on thy womb, / Of the not born, yet buried, here's the tomb" (9–12). Instead of a sonnet, Jonson's epigram commissions an epitaph for what the Lady did not "bear" (2).

In his *Burdens of Perfection* (2008), Andrew H. Miller suggests that "one can explain a story by all that it is not as well as by all that it is." Jonson's poem could have been (but is not) a great many things. Jonson, for exam-

11. Anne Ferry, *All in War with Time: Love Poetry of Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Marvell* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 139. See also Sara J. van den Berg, *The Action of Ben Jonson's Poetry* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 95; and Roe, "Style, Versatility, and the Politics of the Epistles," 112. For the typographical couplets, see Riddell, "Cunning Pieces," 203–4, 211–12.

12. Van den Berg, *Action of Ben Jonson's Poetry*, 97.

13. For the childbirth topos in early modern sonnet sequences, see John Brett Mischo, "'Great with Child to Speake': Male Childbirth and the Elizabethan Sonnet Sequence," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 24 (1998): 53–73. Like Tom MacFaul, I hear a pun on "making" as both "mating" and poetic production (*Poetry and Paternity in Renaissance England* [Cambridge University Press, 2010], 202). For Jonson's rehearsal of the popular derivation of "poet" from the Greek for "maker," see his "Discoveries," in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925–63), 8:635.

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ple, could have stopped with a single couplet "Fine Madam Would-Be, wherefore should you fear, / That love to make so well, a child to bear?" (1–2). These two lines drive a wedge between two actions more regularly sequential—"make" and "bear"—and this antithesis lends the couplet a formal integrity. Miller goes on, however, to suggest that one can "explain a story most incisively, perhaps, by recognizing what *particular* story (of all those possible) that it is most decidedly not telling."[14] This essay argues that of all the possible forms "To Fine Lady Would-Be" could have assumed, including that single couplet, it "most decidedly" did not assume one particular form—that of the sonnet. When the poet commands Lady Would-Be to inscribe an epitaph on her womb—"Of the not born, yet buried, here's the tomb"—he forecloses on the possibility of a sonnet (12). Prior to that command, however, this epigram might have been something other than what it is and that potential remains an epistemological and an ethical problem, for Jonson and for us.

In "To Fine Lady Would-Be," Jonson draws our attention to an absent form in order to critique the object of his satire, and yet this critique is not a sentimental lament for the sonnet-children that would have been. It is, instead, a critique of what the Lady would—that which the Lady desires to bring about by her "mak[ing]" instead of the children she refuses to "bear" (2). If this were *Volpone* (1606), it would be considerably easier to answer the question of what it is the Lady wants as well as the related question of what it is the Lady wants to be. In that play, "Fine Madame Wouldbe," wife to Sir Politic Wouldbe, has traveled to Venice in order, as her husband tells it, "to observe, / To quote, to learn the language, and so forth," though his interlocutor, Peregrine, tells it another way: "Your lady / Lies here, in Venice, for intelligence / Of tires, and fashions, and behavior / Among the courtesans? The fine Lady Wouldbe?"[15] On hearing of the (fictitious) death of Volpone, Lady Wouldbe, among the handful of characters seeking pride of place in Volpone's will, learns that the parasite Mosca has been named heir, and she presses him for an explanation of her status: "Sir, I must have

14. Andrew H. Miller, *Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 209–10. For Miller, the "story" that a novel "is most decidedly not telling" is an essential component of a realism that encourages readers to imagine all of the stories that might have been and the decisions of characters that kept them from being. In literary studies, this counterfactual thought experiment has mostly taken realist fiction as its object, arguing, as Miller does elsewhere, that "such counterfactual imaginings were built into the realist novel as part of its very structure" ("Lives Unled in Realist Fiction," *Representations* 98 [2007]: 120). See also Catherine Gallagher, "When Did the Confederate States of America Free the Slaves?," *Representations* 98 (2007): 53–61, esp. 60–61.

15. Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), 2.1.12–13 and 2.1.26–29. She is listed as "Fine Madame Wouldbe" under "The Persons of the Play" (34). *Volpone* is hereafter cited parenthetically by act, scene, and line.

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a fairer answer" (5.3.37). She finally leaves the house (and the play altogether) when Mosca threatens to write what amounts to a satirical epigram:

> Pray you, fairly quit my house.
> Nay, raise no tempest with your looks; but hark you
> Remember what your ladyship offered me
> To put you in an heir; go to, think on 't:
> And what you said e'en your best madams did
> For maintenance, and why not you? Enough.
> Go home and use the poor Sir Pol, your knight, well,
> For fear I tell some riddles: Go, be melancholic.
>
> (5.3.38–45)

Though Mosca does not write these "riddles," he gives us a good idea of what they might say: in order to fulfill her ambition as would-be heir, Lady Wouldbe was willing to become the courtesans she had studied. The lady would be an heir, and her promiscuity is therefore a means to an end, an instrument for accumulating wealth. The ambiguity of Mosca's syntax—"what your ladyship offered me / To put you in an heir"—invites us to couple the idea of inheritance—"put you in the will as an heir"—with the idea of adultery masquerading as socially legitimate procreation—"put you in the way of an heir." What this Lady "would be" therefore follows the familiar trajectory of "make" and "bear" except that the "heir" this Lady aims to produce is not a child but herself. In Jonson's epigram, by contrast, "Lady Would-Be's" sexual promiscuity is already an open secret. The knowledge that this poem trades in is not Lady Would-Be's promiscuity but, instead, the reason why that promiscuity does not produce children. According to Jonson's epigram, the problem with Lady Would-Be is that she "love[s] to make" *nothing*—a word that nowhere appears in the poem but is pointed up by her active production or substantiation of what she "would" in the place of progeny. The modifier for this clause—"so well"—is mobile, equally applicable to "love" and "make": she both really loves and is rather good at making "nothing."

It is the production of "nothing"—the same "nothing" that Philip Sidney marked out as the privileged domain of poiesis in his *Defence of Poesie* (ca. 1579)—that is the object of this epigram's satirical critique. When Sidney argued that the poet "never lieth" because "he nothing affirms," he suggested that the poet brings "nothing" into existence by speaking the language of contingency, a language that is not predicated on the existence of those things to which it refers and therefore, is not subject to the judgments of "true" and "false."[16] It is my contention that, in "To Fine Lady Would-

16. Philip Sidney, *Defence of Poesie*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford University Press, 1989), 235, hereafter cited parenthetically, with short title given where neces-

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Be," Jonson singles out the sonnet form as a metonymy for the potential mood of poetry—the mood that Sidney describes as "what may be and should be"—a mood that Jonson explicitly invokes when he names the lady of his epigram "Would-Be" (218).[17] I will suggest that Jonson's epigram offers a critique of the idea that contingent knowledge, the product of a poetic mode that "nothing affirms," has a privileged relation to the strictures of truth and falsity.

I

The trope that links poetic labor to childbirth was ubiquitous in the early modern period and all textual production (not simply sonnets) might be figured as the offspring of an author's (or printer's or even dedicatee's) mind.[18] Insofar, however, as the trope insists that the mind's womb is not simply fertile and hidden, but fertile because hidden—that it is, to quote Katharine Eisaman Maus, "the private space of thoughts yet unuttered"—the conceit that joins poetic-making and child-making has a peculiar resonance with the sonnet form, that form that scholars have long understood as an engine for the kind of inwardness on which modern subjectivity as such is predicated.[19] And yet, though Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* begins

sary for clarity. Sidney's poetry is also cited from this edition by sonnet and line numbers. My discussion of poetic language in relation to the categories of contingency and necessity is indebted to Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Fortune's Faces: The "Roman de la Rose" and the Poetics of Contingency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), esp. 11–28. He contends that the Boethian definition of the "language of contingency" is also "a precise definition of poetic language as such: that speech that, while formally indistinguishable from speech in its canonical form, does not predicate, assert, or bear truth and falsity, and therefore is not, in any established sense, speech. . . . In this sense poetry may be defined precisely as the language of contingency: that form in which language, speaking of what is merely possible, shows itself as something other than what it has been thought to be at least since its canonical, Aristotelian determination in terms of reference and signification, predication and assertion" (26).

17. On the grammatical category of the potential mood, see Margreta de Grazia, "Lost Potential in Grammar and Nature: Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*," *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 21 (1981): 21–35; Lynne Magnusson, "A Play of Modals: Grammar and Potential Action in Early Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Survey* 62 (2009): 69–80.

18. For the conceit more generally, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 132–34. While I agree with Terry J. Castle that "the symbolic models used to signify poetic process reveal dramatically the epistemological presuppositions underlying more conscious and abstract expressions of theory," it does not seem to me that the deployment of this conceit was, for Renaissance poets, simply "an obviously natural and psychologically convenient mode for designating the act of versifying" ("Lab'ring Bards: Birth *Topoi* and English Poetics, 1660–1820," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 78 [1979]: 193, 196).

19. Katharine Eisaman Maus, "A Womb of His Own: Male Renaissance Poets in the Female Body," in *Printing and Parenting in Early Modern England*, ed. Douglas A. Brooks (London: Ash-

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when Astrophil declares himself "great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes" (1.12), his Sonnet 50 suggests that when one links poetic creation to sexual reproduction, infanticide is always an option. Sonnet 50 begins:

> Stella, the fullness of my thoughts of thee
> Cannot be stayed within my panting breast,
> But they do swell and struggle forth of me,
> Till that in words thy figure be expressed.
>
> (Lines 1–4)

Sidney's pun on "expressed" pairs poetic expression with the act of pushing out, but no sooner are these children "formed" than they are deformed (5). Eyeing their "weak proportion" (7), Astrophil threatens infanticide upon his lines, "those poor babes [who] their death in birth do find" (11). Astrophil will ultimately refrain from silencing those bleating lines that he would have "dashed quite" or (via metathesis) *quiet*, but his act of poetic expression is never far from what Jonson figures in Lady Would-Be as the consumption of an abortifacient (12).

Whereas Sidney's Sonnet 50 imagines muting the sonnet-children of Astrophil's creation after they have been "expressed," Michael C. Clody has suggested that the sonnets of Shakespeare's sequence do not represent children so much as they substitute for them: these sonnets "relate themselves to a negative origin; they are grounded *not* in an actual child, but in a refusal that motivates the procreative *force*."[20] "The verse acts," Clody continues, "in the child's stead with obvious implication: the actual child is *absent*." Thus, the child of this conceit is "not a simple object to be represented": the refusal to procreate is instead an "abyss," or "a negative space that plays primordial resource for, and inspiration of, poiesis" (477). Elaborating by way of the familiar pun, Clody argues that the "lines" of verse "run in metaphoric parallel to the actual child that runs below as the possibility never realized": "the pun, here, is not the identity but the momentary proximity of, on the one hand, the physical procreation that never occurred and, on the other, the metaphoric procreation that poetry enacts. Poiesis, here, is an act of bringing forth anew just as it draws itself into proximity with that which it can never duplicate—*precisely because it*

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gate, 2005), 93. See also Wendy Wall's reading of Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti 2* in "Disclosures in Print: The 'Violent Enlargement' of the Renaissance Voyeuristic Text," *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 29 (1989): 45–46. For Shakespeare's sonnets and subjectivity, see Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

20. Michael C. Clody, "Shakespeare's 'Alien Pen': Self-Substantial Poetics in the Young Man Sonnets," *Criticism* 50 (2008): 476, hereafter cited parenthetically.

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never was" (479). I have quoted Clody at length because Lady Would-Be's own act of poiesis—her production of "nothing"—is also born from a refusal, a refusal not unlike that of Shakespeare's young man. The "quiet" with which Astrophil threatened his sonnet-children becomes, for Shakespeare and for Jonson, the refusal that motivates the production of sonnets.

In Shakespeare's sequence, the sonnet form renders children superfluous. In Sonnet 17, for example, the poet imagines a time after the young man's death when his "true rights" will "be termed a poet's rage, / And stretched miter of an Antique song."[21] He offers the following consolation in a closing couplet: "But were some childe of yours alive that time, / You should live twise in it, and in my rime" (13–14). This final sentence could end with "it": the young man might live a second time in the child toward which that pronoun points. The poet's addition of another life, the implicit thrice of "and in my rime," is a formal rather than a syntactical necessity: it occurs independently from the logical completion of the claim for second living as well as the syntactical completion ushered in by that pronoun, poised before the caesura. We need two more iambic feet to complete the pentameter line and our expectant ears search for the close of rhyme's reward. Time/rhyme: the final beat names the formal call to which it responds. At the very moment in which this poem comes into being as a sonnet—"and in my rime"—this act of becoming precludes the necessity of a child. The fact of what this poem is—a sonnet—renders the existence of its putative model, the child, superfluous: "it" never was and with that additive clause—"and in my rime"—need never be.

In Shakespeare's Sonnet 17, poetic making rendered the child redundant. In his revision of this conceit, Jonson recasts superfluity as annihilation while also asserting causality: abortion becomes the precondition for what the Lady "would." The poetic economy of "To Fine Lady Would-Be" plays out Shakespeare's conceit to its logical extreme so that the superfluous child becomes not simply unnecessary but a privation on which what the Lady "would" is predicated. The poem figures this act of poiesis as the consumption of an abortifacient in an effort to align the making of nothing with the making of death, and Jonson's poem is thus a history of the production of an epitaph where there might have been a sonnet, an epitaph to be carved on Lady Would-Be's skin (by her own hand) rather than on a headstone. As far as the form of an epitaph is concerned, skin and stone are interchangeable materials. If we think of each—of skin and of stone—as a material cause wielded by the poetic maker in the production of an epitaph, these materials are primarily significant for the limitations they

21. William Shakespeare, Sonnet 17, lines 11–12, in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977).

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impose on the length of that epitaph.[22] Because stone is hard to carve, epitaphs stay short. Because Lady Would-Be's womb is not a "great belly," Jonson's epigram is not a sonnet (11). The harsh close—"here's the tomb" (12)—enacts the word with which the poem begins, Madam Would-Be is "Fine"—not, as with *Volpone's* character, because she studies "fashions" but because she is an end (1). Jonson recovers her potential for generation—that she is not in fact "barren"—only to cast that potential as a "tomb" (12). The potential form of the sonnet becomes a past, contrary-to-fact statement: this poem might have been (but is not) a sonnet.

Shakespeare wrote an epigram that similarly invokes the sonnet form, but where Jonson will turn the sonnet into a counterfactual—what might have been (but is not)—Shakespeare's poem suggests that the sonnet form belongs to the deferred but necessary future of his epigram. Shakespeare's Sonnet 126, generally regarded as the sequence's final address to the young man, is formally indistinguishable from Jonson's epigram. As with Jonson's "To Fine Lady Would-Be," the syntactical organization of the first eight lines falls into two quatrains and, at line nine, we find a *volta* (fig. 1). The parentheses provided by the 1609 Quarto printer suggest that someone thought this epigram was a sonnet.[23] Following on the "*Quietus*" of line twelve, it is

22. George Puttenham defines the epigram as "an inscription or writing made as it were upon a table, or in a window, or upon the wall or mantel of a chimney in some place of common resort. . . . Afterward, the same came to be put in paper" (*Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007], 142). "An epitaph," he writes, "is but a kind of epigram . . . an inscription such as man may commodiously write or engrave upon a tomb in few verses, pithy, quick, and sententious, for the passerby to peruse and judge upon without any long tarriance" (144). In "Procreation, Child-loss and the Gendering of the Sonnet" (in *Shakespeare and Childhood*, ed. Kate Chedgzoy, Susanne Greenhalgh, and Robert Shaughnessy [Cambridge University Press, 2007], 96–113), Patricia Phillippy examines the conflation of "mother's womb, the child's tomb, and the sonnet form" (97–98) in the child-loss sonnets attributed to Anne de Vere (by John Southern in *Pandora* [1584]), arguing that Shakespeare learned from this "petrified womb" (99) how "the sonnet can be imagined as a living, reproductive tomb" (107).

23. In his edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Stephen Booth notes that the "logical organization is by quatrains" but concludes, "This sonnet, composed of six rhymed iambic couplets, is not a sonnet in any technical sense." He suggests that "the Q printer appears to have expected a sonnet to have at least fourteen lines whatever its rhyme pattern; he bracketed two final blank lines, apparently to indicate that he thought something was missing. (The poem's sudden *quietus* after twelve lines is—probably accidentally—an illustrative analogy that demonstrates the justice of the warning the poem offers)" (430). Katherine Duncan-Jones observes, "Although this poem is not a sonnet, the sense of a break and a modified viewpoint after the first eight lines—as if they were an octave—is here strongly marked" in her edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Arden, 1997), 36. Helen Vendler writes that "this odd six couplet poem 'feels like' a sonnet because the first eight lines—a single sentence—become a perfect octave in sentiment, if not in rhyme" and refers to the poem as a "sonnet" in scare quotes (*The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], 534). René Graziani refers to the poem as a "twelve line sonnet" in spite of his conclusion that "there is nothing in the text

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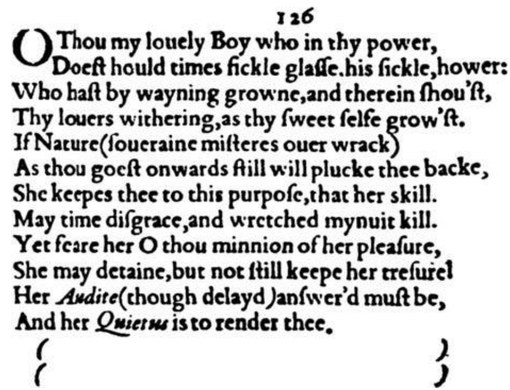

126
O Thou my louely Boy who in thy power,
Doeſt hould times fickle glaſſe.his fickle,hower:
Who haſt by wayning growne,and therein ſhou'ſt,
Thy louers withering,as thy ſweet ſelfe grow'ſt.
If Nature(ſoueraine miſteres ouer wrack)
As thou goeſt onwards ſtill will plucke thee backe,
She keepes thee to this purpoſe,that her skill.
May time diſgrace,and wretched mynuit kill.
Yet feare her O thou minnion of her pleaſure,
She may detaine,but not ſtill keepe her treſure!
Her *Audite*(though delayd)anſwer'd muſt be,
And her *Quietus* is to render thee.
( )
( )

Figure 1. William Shakespeare, Sonnet 126, in *Shake-speares Sonnets Neuer before Imprinted* (London, 1609), H3r. Image published with permission of ProQuest, www.proquest.com. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission. Image produced by ProQuest as part of Early English Books Online. Image courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

difficult not to see the space between these parentheses as a kind of extinction—a way of marking out the child that never was, the young man who will (at some future time) not be, even as the sonnet form comes into existence by drawing close to those absences.[24] Those parentheses may bracket the death into which "Nature" will "render thee," but it is on this extinction that the poem's affiliation with the sonnet form is predicated. This poem witnesses the transaction between "time" and "Nature" with its quiet, concluding couplet, but its act of becoming a sonnet depends on the "*Quietus*" rendered. This epigram is not a sonnet because it is not yet a sonnet: it is ready to become a sonnet with the death of the young man. The 1609 Quarto's parentheses are the typographical representation of a potential that the poem defers into a necessary future. It is not simply, then, that Jonson's epigram is not a sonnet (even though it might have been). It is, instead, that

itself to invite suspicion of missing lines, although the printer Thomas Thorpe seems to have been uncomfortable with the anomaly and cautiously bracketed two more empty lines" ("The Numbering of Shakespeare's Sonnets: 12, 60, and 126," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 35 [1984]: 81). In "The Application of Bibliographical Principles to the Editing of Punctuation in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*" (*Studies in Philology* 100 [2003]: 511–12), Carl D. Atkins suggests that these parentheses were added by the compositor to keep the proper line count per page.

24. Vendler contends, "The Quarto's two sets of eloquently silent parentheses . . . emphasize the reader's desire for a couplet and the grim fact of its lack. Inside the parentheses there lies, so to speak, the mute effigy of the rendered youth" (*Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 538). John Lennard writes, "the unfulfilled lunulae graphically represent both the Quietus which has been obtained, and, in human terms, either the silence (quiet) of the grave, or the empty grave which the corpse of the 'lovely boy' must sooner or later fill" (*But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1991], 43).

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Jonson's poem denies the potential that two sets of parentheses might have represented, as they do in Shakespeare's "Sonnet" 126.

II

We might think about Lady Would-Be as a version of Shakespeare's young man except that, instead of offering his subject another life in a sonnet, Jonson commissions an epitaph that records the absence of children and precludes the sonnet form: "Of the not born, yet buried, here's the tomb" (12). Jonson refuses to actualize the sonnet form in the stead of children, thereby divorcing the potential mood of Lady Would-Be's act of poiesis from the form that might have substituted for the child. In describing "what would be" as a variant on Sidney's formulation of "what may be and should be," I follow early modern grammars, where instruction in verbal moods laid bare the assumptions about capability, volition, and moral obligation that inform Sidney's conception of poetic possibility in the *Defence* (218). In *An easie entrance to the Latin tongue* (1649), the early modern schoolmaster Charles Hoole defined the indicative as a mood "which telleth a thing."[25] The indicative mood was defined, on the one hand, by its activity—that it "telleth"—and, on the other hand, by the value of that telling: another schoolmaster, John Brinsley, defined the indicative as "that which onely sheweth a reason true or false."[26] When Sidney suggests that because the historian deals in the "bare 'was,'" that historian cannot help but sometimes be a liar, he is pointing up the mood in which the historian operates (224). By contrast, the "potential" mood was identified by the words with which a student might translate the verbal form from Latin into English. The "potential mood" is that "which is construed with may, can, might, could, would, should, and ought."[27] Where the indicative, then, is defined in relation to those "things" it "telleth" (or to which it refers) and the truth-value of that "telling," the potential mood was recognized by a characteristic lexicon—those words that "bee signs of the Potential Mood."[28]

In her account of the historical emergence of this grammatical category, Margreta de Grazia argues that the potential mood served to distinguish "possibility residing in individual power" from "possibility resting in God's hands."[29] In the *Defence*, Sidney suggests that this power is the particular province of the poet. Astronomer and musician, geometrician and arithmetician, natural philosopher—each of these takes "the works of nature for

25. Charles Hoole, *An Easie Entrance to the Latine Tongue* (London, 1649), 15.
26. John Brinsley, *The Posing of the Parts* (London, 1615), Fv.
27. Hoole, *Easie Entrance*, 15.
28. Ibid., 96.
29. De Grazia, "Lost Potential," 22.

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his principal object" (215–16). The historian, likewise, is "bound to tell things as things were," which is why he studies the "bare 'was'" (224). The poet, by contrast, turns away from that "bare 'was'" and "borrow[s] nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be" (218). Sidney's poet attends to "what may be and should be" (218). Here is a modal distinction: if the poet is not "labouring to tell you what is or is not," then that poet "nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth." Sidney's poet deals in contingent knowledge that cannot be judged "true" or "false" because it does not refer to things of the world (235).

In his satirical epigrams, Jonson evades the accusation of lying on different grounds and preserves the truth-value of his poetry. The central conceit of his most venomous critiques is that he cannot be accused of slander because he never identifies a particular person. If you accuse the poet of slander, it can only be because you recognize yourself in Jonson's portrait, and this act of recognition means the poem is no slander at all. Take Epigram 30, "To Person Guilty":

> Guilty, be wise; and though thou know'st the crimes
> Be thine I tax, yet do not own my rhymes;
> 'Twere madness in thee to betray thy fame,
> And person to the world, ere I thy name.

This is not a simple iteration of Sidney's proclamation that the poet never "lieth" because he "nothing affirms" (235). Rather, Jonson suggests that any accusation of lie serves as evidence of the poem's truth. Sidney argues that a reader will never "give the lie to things not affirmatively but allegorically and figuratively written," because these statements do not refer to events that have been (235). Jonson suggests, by contrast, that the reader's own interpretation wrests figuration and allegory back into an indicative where they are subject to judgments like true and false. The accusation of "lie" is made parallel, here, to the act of naming oneself—an act that is predicated on the existence of that thing (i.e., the guilty reader) to which the name refers.

For Jonson, the act of reading and the time of interpretation transport figuration and allegory from Sidney's realm of potential—"what may be and should be"—into history where they serve as the instruments of a sociological survey (*Defence*, 218). To quote Tom MacFaul, Jonson trades the "eroticism and anxieties of literary and literal fatherhood" in exchange for "a stance that is something like godfatherhood, entitling him to name his social world."[30] In his subsequent Epigram 38, "To Person Guilty," Jonson finds that his object has been made "wise" by his own advice (1). "Guilty"

30. MacFaul, *Poetry and Paternity in Renaissance England*, 225. See also van den Berg, *Action of Ben Jonson's Poetry*, 92–99.

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begins to laugh at the poet's depictions of his crimes, clapping and crying, "Good, Good!" Jonson claims that this response "perverts my sense"—the "sense" of his advice but also, the "sense" of his allegorical portrait (5). Allegory and figuration become, here, only "modesty" and Jonson threatens to "tell your name" (8). Should the reader fail to "name" his or herself through the accusation of "lie," should the reader fail to anchor Jonson's poetics to the "bare 'was'" of history, Jonson is there to "tell" his or her name.

If Sidney divides the potential and indicative moods between poets and historians respectively, in "To Fine Lady Would-Be," Jonson redistributes these moods between the forms of the sonnet and the epigram. In her refusal to "bear" children, Lady Would-Be generates the fiction that she cannot bear children and this fiction acts as social cover for the refusal out of which her own act of poiesis emerges: the "nothing" that the poem suggests is coterminous with death (2). While the poem begins as a discursive investigation into the presumed "fear" that is supposed to have caused the Lady's refusal—"wherefore should you fear?" (1)—this investigation is a pretense of the poem. Where we expect to find our sonnet's *volta*, we find another "sign" of the potential mood: "What should the cause be?" (9). The poet recasts the entire interrogation as a contrary-to-fact conditional: "If this were a question of fear (which it is not), what should the cause of that fear be?" That "Oh," is an epistemological anticlimax, providing only a dull echo to this more crucial piece of knowledge: "I know / Your 'pothecary, and his drug says no . . . Oh, you live at court" (3–4, 9). In fact, while the poet's closing command appeared to be logically entailed by the sonnet's discovery—"Oh, you live at court"—there is no reason why the inscription itself depends on the Lady's alleged fear of losing "time" and "sport" (10). Instead, the closing command responds to knowledge that preceded this inquiry, and we could easily read: "The world reputes you barren; but I know / Your 'pothecary and his drug says no . . . Write, then, on thy womb: / Of the not born, yet buried, here's the tomb" (3–4, 11–12). The fact that the Lady is not "barren," the fact that she consumes a "drug" from her apothecary is the real piece of knowledge offered up by Jonson's poem. This is the kind of knowledge that Jonson's satirical epigrams live for, the kind of knowledge that stakes a claim to truth-value and for which the accusation of lie might serve, paradoxically, as evidence of the poem's truth. Contra the sonnet form, the poet's adversative turn against what "the world reputes"— "but I know"—marks the real *volta* of this poem.

But how does the poet "know" that Lady Would-Be consumes an abortifacient? How does he arrive at that piece of knowledge on which his epigram is grounded such that the final line of the poem insists on its own truth-value, the negation of what the Lady would? Unlike the discursive investigation that structured the octave of the sonnet, the time for discover-

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ing the abortifacient is decidedly prior to the poem. For proof, Jonson calls on two witnesses: "but I know / Your 'pothecary, and his drug says no" (3–4). The poet ventriloquizes his evidence through an act of figuration that the early modern rhetoricians called *hendiadys*.[31] The poet takes the noun *drug* and its modifier—that it originated with an apothecary—and transforms each into two substantives, joined by a conjunction rather than a possessive: "Your 'pothecary's drug" becomes "Your 'pothecary, and his drug." One piece of evidence becomes two. The personhood of the apothecary allows the drug to speak the "no" that the poet "know[s]" (3–4). The drug itself is syntactically superfluous within a line that could easily read, "Your 'pothecary says no." The conspicuous irrelevance of "and his drug" points to the primacy of that "drug" as a material object, a thing in existence that motivates Jonson's epigram.[32] In his *Art of English Poesy* (1589), George Puttenham named hendiadys "the Figure of Twins": hendiadys is a "manner of speech when ye will seem to make two of one . . . which therefore we call the Figure of Twins."[33] Hendiadys is thus a figure of amplification: it breeds the substantives with which Jonson negates the potential mood of what the Lady "would." Hendiadys may be an instrument of *copia*, generating words in excess of things, but the conspicuous irrelevance of that "drug" nonetheless suggests that these words are predicated on a material thing in existence.

As this use of hendiadys suggests, Johnson's critique of the potential mood is not antifigurative. Hendiadys allows the poet to take a material object like the drug and incorporate its origin with the apothecary into an explanation of its evidentiary status (hendiadys is, for Jonson, the figure that expresses what we call chain of custody). Unlike Shakespeare's Sonnet 126, Jonson's epigram does not come into being by drawing close to an absence; the evidence Jonson supplies for the various claims that he makes has a figurative relationship to the indicative but that relationship is, nonetheless, invested in claims to truth: the drug did not speak anything, but its statement nonetheless constitutes an affirmation, and that affirmation is subject to the judgments of true and false.

The epigram's demonstrative grip on things in the world does, however, loosen as the poet moves to the deixis of his closing epitaph. When we learn of the reason behind Would-Be's putative fear at line 9, "Oh, you live at

31. Richard A. Lanham defines *hendiadys* as the "expression of an idea by two nouns connected by 'and' instead of a noun and its qualifier" (*A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd ed. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991], 82).

32. I borrow "conspicuous irrelevance" from Harry Berger Jr., *The Allegorical Temper: Vision and Reality in Book II of Spenser's "Faerie Queene"* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 120–60.

33. Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 261.

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court," Jonson quickly turns away from that place, that "court," on which his extended interrogation has landed. His turn away from "court" has an awkwardness to it: "Oh, you live at court: / And there's both loss of time and loss of sport, / In a great belly" (9–11). "There" first seems to point back to the "court" where one might lose "time" and "sport" but "there," instead, introduces an explanation—"And there's both loss of time and loss of sport / In a great belly." This explanation tightens around Jonson's conjunction, transforming his "And" into a *because*. While the poet surely means that it is what is inside the "great belly" that threatens the loss of "time" and "sport" at "court," a more literal interpretation might account for the hesitation of this syntax. Jonson knew as well as anyone that a "great belly" is not itself antithetical to the "sport" of "court." He opened his masque *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1618) with a hymn that begins, "Room, room, make room for the bouncing belly," the "bouncing belly" that is also called "the father of farts," and the Bowl-bearer concludes his encomium with the declaration "I am all for the belly, the truest clock i' the world to go by."[34] Hungry, satisfied, digesting, and venting, this "belly" does not lose time but keeps its own kind of time and is at the center of at least some forms of court sport.[35]

Lady Would-Be's refusal to grow a "great belly" starts to look like her refusal to become Ben Jonson: as with Jonsonian imitation, Lady Would-Be's poiesis also begins with an act of consumption, but the apothecary's drug is a substance designed to void the body rather than, as Joseph Loewenstein suggests, to "shore up a fugitive being within a bulwark of flesh."[36] In his tour de force reading of "Inviting a Friend to Supper," Loewenstein describes Jonsonian imitation, the poet's "attempt to digest Martial," as "a

34. Ben Jonson, "Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue," lines 10, 54, 72–73, in *Court Masques*, ed. David Lindley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

35. As Laura Gowing has shown in *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), the "great belly" was an ambiguous sign in seventeenth-century England, and it was not always easy to know whether a belly was big with pregnancy or with wind. A doctor told one Dorothy Bates, for example, that "she was not with child but troubled with wind"; this misdiagnosis would get her into trouble when it turned out that her remedy also acted as an abortifacient (120). Margery Elworthy reported that "when the throws of her travail came upon her, she did think that wind only was the cause thereof" (140).

36. Joseph Loewenstein, "The Jonsonian Corpulence, or The Poet as Mouthpiece," *ELH* 53 (1986): 510. "In Jonson," Loewenstein writes, "when the self is flexed to the point of deformation, the presence of images of unwholesome dining is hardly fortuitous" (510). For the centrality of the body to Jonson's poetic process, see also Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *The Fury of Men's Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997). When "would" is spelled as "woud" (as in Jonson's *Grammar*), it also means "void." See "The English Grammar," in Herford, Simpson, and Simpson, *Ben Jonson*, 8:516. See *OED Online*, http://www.oed.com, s.v. "void, *v.*"

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response to the poem's disabused awareness of the contingencies of the modern bodily self." If, as Loewenstein suggests, "adequate foodstuffs at best 'may yet be there,'" the subjunctive allows Jonson to distinguish "necessity" from "will": what "may yet be there" announces the economic conditions of Jonson's own historical being.[37] Lady Would-Be, by contrast, refuses to yield her "will" to "necessity"; it is as if Jonson is impatient with his allegorical figure because she will not acknowledge herself a modern. "And there's both loss of time and loss of sport / In a great belly": this explanation is almost sententious, a rebuke to the Lady's hedonistic pursuits. According to this reading, the "nothing" that Lady Would-Be affirms is herself: the potential mood of "what would be" is, by this account, a kind of narcissism that paradoxically cancels out the desiring subject.[38]

And yet, the ambiguity of that preposition—"In a great belly"— suggests that this moralizing rebuke tips toward a different fantasy. For a moment, with that "In," the poet tries to get inside the "great belly" that never was, a "great belly" inside of which he might lose the very "time" on which his epigram insists. Witnessing an ambition to climb inside the "great belly," Jonson's preposition charts the path of the "infant of *Saguntum*" addressed in the Cary-Morison ode:

> Brave infant of *Saguntum*, cleare
> Thy coming forth in that great year
> When the prodigious *Hannibal* did crown
> His rage with razing your immortal town.
> Thou, looking then about,
> Ere thou wert half got out,
> Wise child, didst hastily return,
> And mad'st thy mother's womb thine urn.
> How summed a circle didst thou leave mankind
> Of deepest lore, could we the centre find!
>
> (Lines 1–10)

By returning to the womb upon the instant of his birth, the "infant of *Saguntum*" escapes historical time entirely and signifies, for Jonson, an aesthetic ideal. If the potential mood of Lady Would-Be's womb seems, for a moment, to reproduce this ideal, Jonson's "In" does not actually get us or him inside the "great belly," and that is partly the point. Not only is there nothing in there that, for example, Jonson might name in his epitaph, but

37. Loewenstein, "Jonsonian Corpulence," 512.

38. MacFaul, *Poetry and Paternity in Renaissance England*, 202. Van den Berg complicates this reading by suggesting that her "name seems at first no more than a sign of her ambitions, but finally comes to stand for her devaluation of life itself." She concludes that the "poet forces on her the fact of life itself, which her would-be child has lost" (*Action of Ben Jonson's Poetry*, 96–97).

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the "great belly" does not exist. That prepositional phrase took the stress out of "there," transforming it from a demonstrative into an empty subject—"there's both loss of time and loss of sport"— and "In," here, means "on account of," logically dull by comparison to a desire to get back inside. The deixis of Jonson's closing epitaph loses some of its force for following on these turns: a "there" that fails to point to "court," an "In" that does not get us or him inside the "great belly," even a "then" that turns from a moment of time to signal a step in reasoning that is actually a nonsequitur (we might even say that this "then" loses the time to which it might have referred).

In the end, Jonson's epitaph can do little more than point at her womb: "Of the not born, yet buried, here's the tomb" (12). Alluding to the classical formula of *Hic iacet*, Jonson closes his epigram where most epitaphs begin.[39] The paradox of this classical formula lies in its insistence that the thing it names is "here" even as it marks the absence of that thing through death. This is why Jonson's Epigram 45, "On My First Son," is a lie: "Rest in soft peace, and, asked, say here doth lie / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry" (9–10). In the epigram for his son, Jonson tells the name of an absence. In "To Fine Lady Would-Be," however, Jonson's epitaph is a circumlocution: he avoids naming something that is not and, by that naming, speaking the language of contingency.

III

In "To Fine Lady Would-Be," the forms of epigram and sonnet act as the indices to two distinct histories of literary production. The epigram points to the poem's origin in a material thing—an abortifacient (the "drug")—the thing on which its language is predicated such that it stakes a claim to truth-value (4). The sonnet, by contrast, points to the poem's origin in a refusal, an absence that constitutes the enabling precondition for Lady Would-Be's act of poiesis, her production of "nothing."[40] In "To Fine Lady Would-Be," Jonson inscribes a counterfactual history of production in

39. For Jonson's engagement with the classical tradition of the epitaph, see Mary Thomas Crane, "'His Own Style': Voice and Writing in Jonson's Poems," *Criticism* 32 (1990): 31–50.

40. In my emphasis on form and process, I am indebted to Chris Warley's discussion of form and "social contradictions": "the historical 'secret' of Shakespeare's Sonnets, for instance, does not lie in knowing who the young man or the dark lady 'really' are; neither does it consist of showing that the work is really a political allegory of patronage relationships or courtly ambition. Instead, the historical problem of the work (and all sonnet sequences) is the form itself—the fact that the speaker's desire for a noble youth and a dark lady exists in this particular way. The form corresponds to the conceptual structures by which the work produces itself and which cannot otherwise be given a definite representation" (*Sonnet Sequences and Social Relations in Renaissance England* [Cambridge University Press, 2005], 11).

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order to highlight what this poem is instead of a sonnet. For Jonson, the "how" of the poetic maker is coterminous with the "why."[41]

Sidney's distinction between the historian who studies the "bare 'was'" (*Defence*, 224), a stripped indicative, and the poet who studies the potential mood of "what may be and should be" continues to underwrite modern attempts to distinguish the work of literary scholars from their counterparts in departments of history (218). Catherine Gallagher, for example, cites Sidney's source in Aristotle's *Poetics* to illustrate what she calls a "'poetics' of counterfactualism," by which she means the "ability" of counterfactual history "to transform the actual" or "what has happened" into "merely one probability among others." In their ambition to uncover a universal rather than a particular truth, in their production of a statistical "god's eye view" and their subsequent adherence to "a more Aristotelian notion of 'probability' as normalcy,"[42] Gallagher's counterfactual historians are not unlike Sidney's poet-makers, who "range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be" (218). Sidney's distinction—more often by way of Aristotle—has inspired historicist methods that we might consider experimental: Lubomír Dolezel's efforts to translate possible worlds theory from philosophy to literary studies; Andrew Miller's recent account of an "implicative criticism" that does not look "to establish facts" or "make judgments" but provides a "drama" of thinking; Eve Sedgwick's notion of "reparative" reading practices that explore such "ethically crucial possibilities as that the past . . . could have happened differently from the way it actually did"; and finally, Wai Chee Dimock's investment in the "subjunctive" as "an alternative grammar of time, a pre-processed latitude, not granted by empirical reality but honored by the morphology of syntax." Dimock understands these "thinkable versions of the world" as a distinctly literary phenomenon, thereby marking the literary as a "cognitive and expressive domain different from others."[43] Sidney's modal distinction

41. A reference to Sidney's declaration that a reader must "learn aright why and how that maker made him" as the crucial pivot between gnosis and praxis, for transforming a single Cyrus into "many Cyruses" (*Defence*, 217).

42. Gallagher, "Confederate States of America," 58–60.

43. Lubomír Dolezel, "Possible Worlds of Fiction and History," *New Literary History* 29 (1998): 785–809; Miller, *Burdens of Perfection*, 30; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 146; Wai Chee Dimock, "Subjunctive Time: Henry James's Possible Wars," *Narrative* 17 (2009): 243–44. Dimock proposes that we play the part of Sidney's poet-maker: "if works of fiction are always subjunctive to some extent, dwellers in some counterfactual universe, literary *scholarship* can also afford to go some length in that direction. Indeed, taking our cue from the texts we study, our methods can be part empirical and part conjectural" (244). Miller's *Burdens of Perfection* is worth quoting at length: "I remarked that much recent criticism aims, reasonably enough, to establish facts, convey information, and make judgments, and I suggested there that such writing seems to ask for

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also underwrites more normative negotiations with historicist methods in literary studies. Perhaps most pervasively, it conditions the category of "the thinkable" itself: what might have been—but was not necessarily—thought. As an object of investigation, "the thinkable" is distinguished by a modal difference from that which was thought; as David Scott Kastan has suggested, "the thinkable" requires a unique set of evidentiary standards and argumentative protocols.[44]

Jonson's allegorical portrait of the potential mood in "To Fine Lady Would-Be" suggests that the production of "nothing" does not fit neatly within, alongside, or as an addition to the indicative of the social world.[45] Instead, this poem suggests that the potential mood derives from a refusal that the epitaph casts as the annihilation of history. In conclusion, I want to compare two possible resolutions to the modal problem of poetry's relation to history that Jonson entertains: the optative mood and the imperative mood. Jonson wrote a poem to Sidney's daughter, "Epistle To Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland," as a New Year's gift in 1600. Recently married, Sidney's daughter is praised for her "love unto the Muses" as well as for a poetic skill with the potential to equal her father's: "his skill / Almost you have, or may have, when you will?" (33–34). The epistle goes on to praise the posterity of poetry beyond that of procreation—"glorious notes, / Inscribed in touch or marble, or the coats / Painted or carved upon great men's tombs," serve only to "prove the wombs / That bred them graves" (43–47). Promising her a place in his "strange poems" (81), Jonson will write, not "tickling rhymes" (87),

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no continuation from its readers. I called this sort of criticism (or this dimension of criticism generally), conclusive, thus implying that ending . . . presents no necessary or intrinsic problems for it. To the contrary, ending is its end." By contrast, in implicative criticism "marked first of all by the display of thinking, writers unfold the implications of their ideas rather than convey their conclusions. Such writing grants reading criticism its due drama: something is happening now, here, as this prose passes before my eyes. (Thinking is thickened, its pacing palpable)" (221). Miller elaborates on this distinction in the later article, "Implicative Criticism, or The Display of Thinking," *New Literary History* 44 (2013): 345–60. Sedgwick provides the following gloss to her account of a counterfactual reading practice: "I don't mean to hypostatize, here, 'the way things actually did' happen, or to deny how constructed a thing this 'actually did' may be—within certain constraints. The realm of what *might have happened but didn't* is, however, ordinarily even wider and less constrained, and it seems conceptually important that the two not be collapsed; otherwise, the entire possibility of things *happening differently* can be lost" (*Touching Feeling*, 151 n. 5).

44. David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 50.

45. This conclusion differs from van den Berg's account of Jonson's negotiation (formulated in what is now a familiar chiasmus): "History occasions and enables poetry; poetry probes, preserves, defines history. . . . A Jonsonian poem marks out the boundaries of its golden world, in part to determine its power to act upon the world of circumstance. History in turn acts upon the poem, evoking poetic action and rendering it significant. History shapes the poem; the poem shapes what will endure of that history" (*Action of Ben Jonson's Poetry*, 83).

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> But high and noble matter, such as flies
> From brains entranced and filled with ecstasies,
> Moods which the god-like Sidney oft did prove,
> And your brave friend and mine so well did love.
> Who, whereso'er he be . . .
>
> (Lines 89–93)

Having pointed to Sidney's investment in the "Moods" of poetry, Jonson's conclusion takes a strange U-turn: even though he has promised her a poetic monument, Jonson nonetheless concludes with a prayer for procreation. Jonson casts his poem as a "sacrifice" to Sidney (97), in return for which he seeks the fulfillment of his prayer—"may you bear a son" (100). This is the optative mood—not an expression of possibility as such but of wishing (this prayer directed toward a poet-god). By the time Jonson came to publish his "Epistle" in *The Forest*, however, the Countess of Rutland had died childless (her husband, apparently impotent).[46] In lieu of the concluding prayer, Jonson provides only: "*The rest is lost*" (94). This epitaph records the failure of the optative mood. Jonson sacrificed his poem to Sidney in exchange for a child but all he got in return was nothing.

Jonson's closing epitaph in "To Fine Lady Would-Be" offers the second, possible resolution: the imperative mood. Where the optative mood triangulated the poet's request through a poet-god, Jonson's imperative bypasses heavenly powers: "Write, then, on thy womb: / Of the not born, yet buried, here's the tomb" (11–12). If the poem dramatizes etiologies of form—the sonnet grounded in an absence and the epigram, in a material object—this concluding command evades problems of reference by scripting the actions of its first reader. By this poem's account, true poetry should resemble what Edmund Spenser's archvillain and poet, Busirane, writes from the blood of Amoret who is "cruelly pend," while "deadly torments doe her chast brest rend, / And the sharpe steele doth riue her hart in tway." Except that Busirane's "strange characters," motivated by Amoret's refusal, might be sonnets.[47] The poet of "To Fine Lady Would-Be" does not, as Busi-

46. Donaldson, *Ben Jonson*, 678.

47. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, rev. 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2007), 3.11.11 and 3.12.31. Patricia Fumerton describes Busirane as "a kind of sonneteer" (*Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* [University of Chicago Press, 1991], 107–8). Judith H. Anderson explains why Busirane cannot be destroyed at the conclusion of this episode: "Although Busirane's art works vanish, he still survives, bound by the very chain or, in terms of traditional iconography, by the rhetorical art that he has abused. Without him there is only a vacuum, and this vacuum might also have something to do with the fact that Spenser's own *Amoretti* . . . cannot wholly escape the available conventions of erotic discourse but indeed must use and try to reshape them" (*Translating Investments: Metaphor and the Dynamic of Cultural Change in Tudor-Stuart England* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2005], 122).

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rane does, write directly onto or with Would-Be's organs; instead, he commands her to inscribe an epitaph that he has already drafted (she becomes a kind of amanuensis to this new poetry). If we take the Lady's "womb" to be distinct from her "belly," to be inside her "belly" rather than synonymous with that "belly," access to the writing tablet requires (as with Amoret) anatomical dissection. What is more, being beneath the skin (rather than, as with a tattoo, visible on the skin), this epitaph would not hail a passerby. It is a poem that no one would ever be able to read.

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