

M. BURDICK SMITH

“[P]lain and passive fortitude”: Stoicism and Spaces of Dissent in *Sejanus*

In Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*, performed at court in the first year of King James' reign in 1603, Arruntius arguably figures as "Jonson's spokesperson."¹ While lauding the moral responsibility of Arruntius, some criticism has tended to portray the Senator as a passive Stoic whose "only outlet is speech."² For a poet who emphasizes the moral and didactic responsibility of authorship, why, then, does his spokesman inhabit a peripheral space in criticism? While Jonson's personal life is marked by at least three imprisonments—in 1597, 1598, and 1605—due to comments he levied against the government, Arruntius maintains a detached stance that seemingly contradicts the didactic function of poetry. I argue that the spaces Arruntius inhabits are much like that of the seventeenth-century poet, and that interpreting his asides and moral reproofs as passive fails to fully consider the cultural context in which the play was written. Due to the many plots and conspiracies that surrounded the play's performance, Jonson deploys Arruntius as a relatively innocuous figure of dissent guarded by chronological, philosophical, and physical distance.

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Arruntius' function, then, is to reveal a politically-safe way to voice opposition, and the dark spaces from which Arruntius criticizes Tiberius' power are analogous to the murky spaces on and off the Jacobean stage.

The central premise of *Sejanus* reveals the catastrophic results of both court flattery and an unwillingness to speak. Sejanus' party, comprising of Afer, the corrupt orator, and a group of sycophants and spies, all traffic in the art of speaking too much, but the Germanican party, formed primarily by Sabinus, the general Silius, and the historian Cordus, speak too little throughout the play. Arguing that the play's real tragedy is that there are plenty of good men but no good statesmen, Katharine Maus is of the impression that "the Stoics in *Sejanus* are fundamentally uncreative,"³ and Blair Worden suggests that Arruntius is the "most defiant (but also the most impotent) of Sejanus's enemies."⁴ Sejanus himself advises Tiberius to forego dispatching Arruntius because "His franke tongue / Being lent the reines, will take away all thought / Of malice, in your course against the rest. / We must keep him to stalk with" (3.498–501).⁵ The critic, like Sejanus, has misunderstood Arruntius' function. Although he is a member of the Germanican faction, Arruntius is unlike his associates. When Arruntius asks Lepidus what arts he has used to preserve his dignity, Lepidus responds that it is not art that has preserved him but "the plain and passive fortitude, / To suffer, and be silent; never stretch / These arms against the torrent; live at home, / With my own thoughts, and innocence about me, / Not tempting the wolves' jaws" (4.294–98). It is too hasty a conclusion to include Arruntius, without qualification, with the stoic Germanicans; instead, Arruntius' repeated public criticisms demonstrate his rejection of passivity.

A Space for Stoics

According to Lepidus, passive endurance—rather than direct action—is the preferred response to corruption, but Arruntius' public criticism, while seemingly uttered as asides, qualifies his position as a Germanican. Instead of adopting Lepidus' passive

stance, Arruntius represents a relatively safe form of public dissent. Penelope Geng has recently argued that Arruntius cannot be conceived of as entirely separated from political discourse due to three significant qualifications. First, “all but six of the nearly six hundred lines spoken in Act I are delivered in the presence of the Germanicans.”⁶ Second, Arruntius’ open complaints during the trial of Silius offer a para-legal discourse on tyranny, and third, “Arruntius engages in eleven separate conversations” that “dominate the soundscape.”⁷ Arruntius disrupts political machinations by speaking publicly and extensively. In addition to this inchoate interpretive community, I argue that because Arruntius speaks openly to so many, he opens a pocket of political resistance. Arruntius’ para-legal discourse during the trial of Silius offers more than juridical commentary; in fact, I argue that his commentary is a sort of *arcana imperii*, the explication and uncovering of governmental secrets, which are—in this case—the rhetorical tools that Tiberius employs to manipulate the flattering Senators. During the trial, Arruntius offers multiple pessimistic observations that come to no more than caustic dissent, but his commentary begins to gather momentum as several other Senators join in on the dissent. After three sarcastic comments, ending with “Laugh on, still,” Sabinus and Gallus, who are not members of the Germanicans but become convinced of their efforts in this scene, join in the public denunciation, saying, “Why, this doth render all the rest suspected!” and conclude that Tiberius’ rhetorical maneuvering “poysons all” (3.1.118–24). Arruntius does not privately bemoan state corruption, but he mobilizes support by interpreting the events that unfold on stage. While *Sejanus* does support the tragic consequences of political Stoicism as articulated by Lepidus, it is not conclusive, as Jean Bodin avers, that all of the Germanicans “insulate themselves with private virtue and allow history its own ineluctable force.”⁸

Arruntius unveils the nefarious uses of rhetoric during the trial of Silius in Act 3 by drawing attention to the formulaic stages in Roman law, beginning with a denunciation, the announcement of accusation, the sentencing, and ending with the determination of punishment. Arruntius’ lines during the trial, and many of his other commentaries throughout the play, are rendered by modern editors as asides, but Mark Bland notes that modern editors have

mistakenly added as many as eighteen asides during that act alone. In the 1605 quarto and the 1616 folio, Arruntius is marked as speaking only eight asides, but editions of the play inflate the number to as many as twenty-six because they are interpreted as commentary that takes place outside the circle of action, which could lead to “a cumulative misconstruction of the original meaning.”⁹ In order to fully ascertain the level of misconstruction, one must examine why such editing practices have taken place and their effect. By misconstruing Arruntius’ lines as asides, one more easily places him alongside the Stoic Germanicans rather than seeing him as the Germanican insurgent he actually is; indeed, by placing him outside the physical sphere of action, editors render him docile and ineffectual. If his lines are uttered in the middle of the action, however, his commentary is rightfully interpreted as radical opposition. Rendering Arruntius’ lines as asides inscribes him in a sort of unlocalized space on the figurative fringe of society and on the literal periphery of the stage. This spatial reordering, in both the textual and performative senses, amplifies Tiberius’ ideological dominion. The physical expulsion of dissidents, forcing them to the periphery of the stage and rendering their denunciations as meaningless asides, diminishes Jonson’s didactic purpose. By properly interpreting the majority of Arruntius’ commentary as open opposition, one can see he offers more than a powerful interpretive methodology concerning the use of rhetoric: he opens up a discourse of communicative action.

In the theory of communicative action, Jürgen Habermas creates a sharp distinction between speech acts as “oriented towards success,” which he calls strategic action, and those speech acts “oriented towards common understanding” or communicative action.¹⁰ For Habermas, the “lifeworld” subtends all human interaction; it is the shared common understandings, values, and precepts that develop over time in various social groups, and this lifeworld is inherently opposed to ideological influence or reifying systems. The lifeworld constitutes a site of possible cultures of resistance, and when ideological oppression disturbs or threatens people’s idea of self, then pockets of resistance necessarily develop. Resistance is the ground on which the play’s moral concern with flattery, corruption, and manipulation are resisted. By emending Arruntius’ lines as asides, then, the commentary loses its potency,

but if those lines are openly spoken and widely heard, they open up the pockets of resistance necessary to communicative action. While I do not suggest that Arruntius' asides constitute speech acts oriented toward success, it does seem that his speeches cultivate a common understanding, a space of resistance. One such space develops after Silius' shocking death.

In addition to Arruntius' rhetorical commentary in Act 3, his comments on the contents of Tiberius' letter in Act 5 confirm his interpretive power. Arruntius has proven to be perspicacious in regards to revealing rhetorical subterfuge, but after Sabinus is imprisoned for denouncing Tiberius in front of spies, Arruntius notices those spies lurking in the shadows, saying "We'll talk no treason, sir . . . Now you are spied, begone" (4.354–57). His acuity saves the other Germanicans from imprisonment and subsequently opens a space in which to further denounce Tiberius. He creates discursive spaces of dissent. Before Tiberius' letter is read in Act 5, Arruntius perceives—before anyone else—that Sejanus' "wane approaching [is] fast," but throughout the reading of Tiberius' letter Arruntius offers more than interpretive commentary; he offers communicative action (5.438). Arruntius notes that the rhetoric in Tiberius' letter forecasts Sejanus' denunciation: "The lapwing, lapwing," publicly diagnosing not only that Sejanus' fall is imminent but also that it is indicative of Tiberius' deceptive machinations. Arruntius perceives that Tiberius' critique of Sejanus anticipates a critique of Sejanus. Once Tiberius' letter says that Sejanus has been raised "from obscure, and almost unknown gentry . . . to the highest, and most conspicuous point of greatness," Arruntius perceives that "This touches, the blood turns" (5.564–69). Arruntius sees through Tiberius' rhetorical devices, and in a rehearsal of his earlier commentary, he reveals that Tiberius' letter follows the same three-part structure that applied to Silius' case: denunciation, accusation, and sentencing.

Further distancing himself from the Stoic faction that suppresses both good and bad fortune, Arruntius cannot contain his joy after Tiberius directly accuses Sejanus. His earlier commentary, "A good fox" and "The place grows hot, they shift" (5.581, 602), is replaced by emotive outburst, taunting Sejanus' allies "Oh, the spy! Hang up the instrument" (5.640–43). After the crowd is overcome, Lepidus laments that Romans have come to so "violent change,

/ And whirl of men's affections," but Arruntius, smelling blood in the water, concludes that "Their bulks and souls were bound on Fortune's wheel, / And must act only with her motion" (5.692–94). Arruntius understands that such violent outburst is the natural response to Sejanus' cruelty; indeed, it is seemingly a law of nature that Sejanus' actions have an equal and opposite reaction, which fundamentally contradicts Stoic temperance. The Stoic, Marcus Aurelius says, should

Let no emotions of the flesh, be they of pain or of pleasure, affect the sovereign portion of the soul [reason]. See that it never becomes involved with them: it must limit itself to its own domain, and keep the feelings confined to their proper sphere.¹¹

Arruntius' outburst, then, clearly allows emotions of pleasure *at* pain to overwhelm his reason. After the open accusation of Sejanus and his subsequent removal, Macro is installed in his place. Ever the discerning character, Arruntius, predicts that "out of this Senate's flattery / That this new fellow, Macro, will become / A greater prodigy in Rome, than he / That is now fallen" (5.740–43). By the end of the play, Arruntius and Lepidus—who act as the play's chorus and moral center—are joined by Nuntio, a messenger, and Terentius, a former follower of Sejanus. While those Stoic Germanicans prefer the life of private discontent, Arruntius opens a public discourse of resistance to flattery that generates a following. He marshals support and attracts followers through his public commentary. In terms of the didactic function of Jonson's art, the distinction between the two becomes significant when placed in its historical context.

"[T]imes are sore"

As I have shown, the Stoicism of the Germanican faction has come under the scrutiny of several critics for being "devoid of humanity"¹² and civically "irresponsible."¹³ While that moral reproof may hold true for Silius' and Lepidus' extreme Stoicism, Arruntius' repeated public dissent and his rhetorical discernment

confirm that his variety of political involvement is markedly different from that of his associates. I would like to recharacterize Arruntius in the terms of Jonson's own poetic involvement in politics. Worden argues that what Jonson is attacking is "not monarchial power but its ill administration: not absolute government ... but arbitrary rule ... the problem of good government to Jonson ... is not one of altering the constitution but of protecting it."¹⁴ Jonson does not wish to abolish monarchial government but to cleanse it. His foils, therefore, are court advisers, such as Jacobean historian Thomas Gainsford, who writes that "the safest way to live under tyrants is to do nothing"¹⁵ or William Camden's philosophy to "yield unto the time."¹⁶ Renaissance neo-Stoics Gainsford and Camden echo Sabinus' advice that "No ill should force the subject undertake / Against the soveraigne ... A good man should, and must / Sit rather downe with losee, then rise unjust" (4.163–66). Arruntius, on the other hand, speaks as a mouthpiece for those who practice communicative action, a notion Jonson supports in his Discoveries: "they are ever good men, that must make good the time."¹⁷

Arruntius attempts to make the times good through public dissent, and he figures as an avatar for what Jonson attempted to do through print. Indeed, when Afer proclaims that Cordus' books should be burned because "It fits not such licentious things should live / To upbraid the age," Arruntius replies "If the age were good, they might" (3.466–68). Jonson, like Arruntius, believes that print is most needed when the age is not good; it is a *pharmakon* for an infected state. It explains how wicked men, in the words of Sejanus, conspire "to put a prince in blood," to move him "into tyranny" and "make him cruel" (2.383–91). *Sejanus* offers a mirror for princes, but Jonson also provides the public spaces necessary to voice similar dissent.¹⁸ He identifies and makes accessible the legal and linguistic instruments used to control the public, and he offers the theater as a public space in which to examine public anxieties. Jonson prompts the audience to choose from an unbiased, didactic stance because, as W. David Kay points out, throughout Jonson's lifetime he "alternated between humanist optimism that society might be reformed by an educated elite and an underlying pessimism that the political and social order was incurably corrupt" (74). It is clear, then, that Jonson's responsibility

to provide instruction in his poetry was dangerously juxtaposed to a government that suspected – but could not prove – that Jonson’s poetry harbored seditious intent. In the Preface to *Volpone* Jonson makes the role of the poet abundantly clear, writing that “if men . . . look toward the offices and function of a poet, they will easily conclude to themselves the impossibility of any man’s being the good Poet, without first being a good man” who is “able to inform young men to all good disciplines, inflame grown men to all great virtues.”¹⁹ *Sejanus* emphasizes the recursivity of the theater. The theater casts its audience as victims as much as the Germanicans are victims of Tiberius’ intricate stage-management, and Jonson’s stubborn refusal to capitulate to audience expectations of hedonism and artistic simplicity testifies to his uncompromising belief in the poet’s responsibility.

Though he was called before the Privy Council on an accusation of treason based on *Sejanus*, Jonson argues in the “Preface to the Readers” that he abhors nothing more than clumsy poetry, and that he would rather “show my integrity in the story, and save myself in those common torturers, that bring all wit to the rack” than censure his own work (104). For Jonson, the court of public opinion is as real a threat as the Privy Council. If his treatment of Roman tyranny is meant to be a mirror for James, it also ventriloquizes the audience’s perception in order to implicate them in courtly dissipation. Jonson finds himself, then, in the precarious position between escaping suspicions of treason and penning ill-crafted poetry.

Jonson balances the necessity of composing didactic, politically-engaged plays with the threat of being accused as a traitor by making his mouthpiece a character who is interpreted as being both chronologically removed in the distant Roman past and philosophically removed as a passive Stoic. I suggest that Jonson places potent dissent in the mouth of one who is often seen, even in contemporary criticism, as an ineffectual Stoic in order to delegitimize or render harmless what may, or perhaps should, be interpreted as radical. Articulating dissent through a seemingly passive Stoic appears to acknowledge the limits of poetic dissent. A poet, like a Roman Stoic, is circumscribed by the juridical and social ideologies that permeate the Roman past and the Jacobean present. Arruntius, however, garners support and cultivates his network of friends. Communicative action is central to Jonson’s interest in friendship.

“For friendship’s dear respect”

Stoic ideals of friendship permeate Jonson’s oeuvre. Jonas Barish describes Early Modern England as “a whole nation turning into a race of spies and eavesdroppers, a situation in which informers were encouraged to bring charges in hope of inheriting their victims’ property, in which innocent remarks, half-remarks and non-remarks were made pretexts for accusations of treason.”²⁰ Jonson illustrates the importance of spaces of dissent among friends in his epigram “Inviting a Friend to Supper,” promising that at the table “No simple word, / That shall be uttered at our mirthful board, / Shall make us sad next morning; or affright / The liberty, that we’ll enjoy tonight” (39–42).²¹ Through the pretense of supper, Jonson invites his friends to enjoy the liberty of communicating dissent. The neo-Stoic Justus Lipsius, whose treatise *A Discourse of Constancy* Jonson owned and heavily annotated, suggests that stoic resolve should correspond to Christian hope:

For that great Master of ours is a good Poet, and vvill not rashly exceed the Lawes of his Tragedy. Do vve not vvillingly bear with Discords in Musick for some time; because vve know that the last closures vvill end in comfort? Do so here. But you vvill say those miserable Creatures that have suffered under this Tyranny, do not alwayes see the punishment. What wonder is it? For the Play is oftentimes somewhat long; and they are not able to sit it out in this Theatre.²² (113)

Lipsius invokes Roman history to catalogue a perpetual procession of violence and tyranny, but he instructs that “these things you may fear but not prevent.”²³ Tyranny, for Lipsius, is an inevitable consequence of humanity’s fallen state, and he recommends discourse and “friendly respect” as alternatives to despondency.²⁴ Injustice is a part of a play that must be watched but must inevitably end. Continuing the world as stage trope, Lipsius imagines God as the poet and the inevitable conclusion of plays as fate. It is not clear, however, whether Arruntius would approve of such a reaction. According to Michael Schoenfeldt, Neostoicism developed in roughly two divergent paths over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Tacitean Neostoicism was

politically cynical and explicitly criticized the government, which influenced prominent nobles like Essex. Augustinian-influenced Neostoicism, with which Lipsius was affiliated, advocated Christian patience. Schoenfeldt argues that “Neostoicism became a vehicle of political discontent rather than the absolutist code it had become on the Continent.”²⁵ It is important, then, to note that the tension in Arruntius’ Stoicism has precedence in Jacobean political affairs. It is not inconceivable that Arruntius aligns with Tacitean Neostoicism that is explicitly political. I suggest that Arruntius’ position within the Germanican faction, in particular, and Stoicism, in general, is complex, and that reducing him to simple passivity underestimates the complexity of Early Modern political philosophy. Arruntius vacillates between both poles of Stoicism, powerfully humanizing political crises, but his friendship with the Germanican faction provides stability. The theater materializes social and political instabilities, instabilities that can be endured through friendship. Stoic ideals of friendship are central to both the Germanican and the relationship between Tiberius and Sejanus.

Stoic-influenced treatises on friendship, like Thomas Elyot’s *The Book of the Governor*, were extremely popular throughout the Early Modern period. The source for most of these treatises, Cicero’s *De amicitia*, assumes that true friendship can only exist among social and moral equals.²⁶ Cicero warns that “alliances of wicked men not only should not be protected by a plea of friendship, but rather they should be visited with summary punishment of the severest kind” (156). Alliances between unvirtuous men should be suppressed because they lead to the corruption of the state: “let flattery, the handmaid of vice, be far removed, as it is unworthy not only of a friend but even of a free man; for we live in one way with a tyrant and in another with a friend” (198). Friendship and tyrants are mutually inclusive, inherent properties of human society.²⁷ Cicero argues that tyrants surround themselves by artificial flatterers, the antithesis of friendship, but bemoans the “life of tyrants — a life, I mean, in which there can be no faith, no affection, no trust in the continuance of goodwill; where every act arouses suspicion and anxiety and where friendship has no place” (164–65). It is not surprising, then, that Cicero’s work on friendship examines tyranny at length. As a restorative to tyranny’s ill-effects, friendship (Cicero avers) “adds a brighter radiance to prosperity

and lessens the burden of adversity by dividing and sharing it," and it "projects the bright ray of hope into the future, and does not suffer the spirit to grow faint or to fall" (134). Friendship invigorates the virtuous and allows friends to endure the adversity caused by tyrants. It is precisely when times are dangerous that friendship is most needed.

Stoic ideals of friendship show that perceived passivity among the Germanican faction is not so much political apathy as it is solidarity. While Sejanus flatters Tiberius in the opening scene, Arruntius becomes increasingly irritated, but Silius notes that "Flattery is midwife unto prince's rage: / And nothing sooner doth help forth a tyrant, / Than that and whisperers' grace, who have the time, / The place, the power, to make all offenders" (1.1.421–24). Like Jonson's epigram, "Inviting a Friend to Supper" tyranny intensifies when spying is licensed. Lorna Hutson shows that, in England, unlike the rest of Europe, "lay people judged the evidence, and a verdict could be reached without any witnesses at all" and with little to no concrete evidence.²⁸ The Germanicans voice anxiety over the lack of legislative rigor and susceptibility to the whims of court spies. Arruntius says that their response should be to "hunt the palace-rats or give them bane," but Sabinus says "We must abide our opportunity; / And practice what is fit, as what is needful" (1.1.427–32). Throughout the scene Arruntius' allies temper his passionate outbursts. In his treatise *Of Anger*, Seneca constructs a sequential taxonomy of passions, beginning with first movements, which may either be controlled or allowed to develop into unrestrained passion. "Passions begin and swell and gain spirit," writes Seneca, but "the first emotion is involuntary, and is, as it were, a preparation for a passion, and a threatening of one."²⁹ Acting in accordance with stoic friendship, Silius insures that Arruntius' passionate outbursts remain first movements, so that he does not allow them to grow into dangerous emotions.

Moderating a friend's emotions is central to cultivating virtue, and Cicero notes that friendship requires the mutual sharing of burdens. Instead of being regarded as passive spectators to political crises, the Germanican faction constructs a network of solidarity and free discourse grounded in friendship. Marvin Vawter argues that "while the Germanicans continually talk of their nobility and their exalted ancestry, they have forgotten what is incumbent on nobility in a world that cries out for the action and valor of

good men."³⁰ Instead of interpreting the Germanicans as calloused spectators, one might argue that their Stoic ideals of virtue prevent them from partaking in courtly conspiracies. Sabinus acknowledges that "we are no good engineers; / We want the fine arts and their thriving use, / Should make us graced, or favoured of the times" because "We have no shift of faces, no cleft tongues" (1.1.4–7). In the epigram "On Court-Worm," Jonson reveals the instability of court preferment, saying "All men are worms: but this no man. In silk / 'Twas brought to court first wrapped, and white as milk; / Where, afterwards, it grew a butterfly: / Which was a caterpillar. So 'twill die."³¹ The lifespan of a court favorite is limited, and, like Sejanus, once the court fly reaches maturity, it will surely die. The epigram "On Spies" diagnoses a similar ephemerality: "Spies, you are lights in state, but of base stuff, / Who, when you have burnt yourselves down to the snuff, / Stink, and are thrown away."³² Spies and courtiers are lumped into the same dangerously transient category. Jonson's views on the court's fickleness indicate that the Germanicans' refusal to participate is not due to political apathy but to an unwillingness to reject their stoic values. If they do adapt to the court's value, then virtue would cease to exist. Andrew Hadfield suggests that "Jonson casts himself and his circle—the 'tribe of Ben'—as a repository of virtue within a nation that has badly lost its way and has succumbed to the vices of bad government."³³ Jonson's role as poet, like the Germanicans', is to preserve morality. Their unflagging virtue sustains such ideals until the times are less corrupt. Cordus fuses the twin roles of Stoic and author, saying "but, in my work, / What could be aim'd more free, or farther off / From the time's scandal, than to write of those, / Whom death from grace or hatred had exempted?" (3.1.445–48). Cordus then asks:

Did I . . .

.....

Incense the people in the civil cause,
 With dangerous speeches? Or do they, being slain
 Seventy years since, as by their images,
 Which not the conqueror hath defaced, appears,
 Retain that guilty memory with writers?
 Posterity pays every man his honour.

(3.1.449–56)

The text is a living vessel that preserves virtue, but such historical distance limits suspicion. Although it is difficult to directly equate the events of the play to contemporary politics, Warren Chernaik notes that “there are passages in *Sejanus* that might have made James I and prominent courtiers distinctly uncomfortable.”³⁴ Cordus, like Jonson, understands the benefits of historicism, and he preserves virtue by coding it into historical records.

Cordus’ unflinching virtue itself is a virtuous message. Arruntius responds to Cordus’ speech, saying “Freely, and nobly spoken,” and Sabinus states “I like him, that he is not moved with passion” (3.1.461–62). They praise Cordus’ Stoic perseverance that moves its audience to virtue.³⁵ Self-sufficiency is central to Stoic friendship. While friends rely on each other for support and temperance, the goal is to remain in emotional equilibrium regardless of circumstances. Maus notes that “self-sufficiency does not involve a withdrawal from society; indeed, it is a prerequisite for the best kind of social intercourse,” which is free.³⁶ Free and self-sufficient friendship, according to Maus, is “the basis of community and life.”³⁷ Stoic friendship, then, emphasizes human personal relations less than large-scale sociopolitical relations. Arruntius’ frequent outbursts belie Stoic ideals, but he asks Lepidus about the arts of Stoic patriotism, underscoring his desire to become more self-sufficient. Arruntius’ development, however, is left out of *Sejanus*. Six years after the events of the play Arruntius, like Silius, commits suicide after being accused by Macro. With “an honorable hand,” Arruntius becomes the “excellent Roman” he idealizes (3.286, 340). Caught between the moral imperative to do no ill against the sovereign and stubbornly high Stoic ideals, the Germanican faction recognizes that virtue comes from within. “The most important function of the histories,” Tacitus surmises, “is to ensure that virtue may not be left unmentioned, and that wicked words and deeds might fear disgrace and the opinion of posterity.”³⁸ Jonson’s use of history, then, has two functions; on the one hand, it shows the state that no ill is left unrecorded, and on the other hand, it highlights the degree to which the individual is subject to the inevitability of history. Because the play was penned during the first months of James I’s reign, Robert Evans suggests that *Sejanus* “seems intended not to imply that James is a tyrant but rather to imply the opposite. James is credited with honouring all the values

Sejanus and Tiberius defile.”³⁹ Jonson offers James an edifying image of public virtue and idealized friendship, encouraging values James ostensibly endorses. The Germanicans model Stoic friendship, but Sejanus and Tiberius exemplify friendship’s wicked antithesis.

The relationship between Sejanus and Tiberius contradicts each of the ideals that Stoic friendship endorses. Friendship can only exist among equals because, according to Cicero, the inferior friend will try to become equals with the superior one. Concern about ambition permeates Jonson’s play. Like Jonson’s epigram “On Court-Worm,” Sejanus’ ambition necessarily leads to his own destruction. Sejanus recognizes that he can bind himself to another more easily through ambition than need, saying, “Ambition makes more trusty slaves than need” (1.1.366). His ambition is the demonic other of Stoic temperance: “He that, with such wrong moved, can bear it through / With patience, and an even mind, know how / To turn it back ... Revenge is lost, if I profess my hate” (1.1.576–79). Patience is not used to temper first movements; instead, Sejanus uses patience to bide his time until he can exact revenge. Cordus’ attempt to preserve virtue through historical record does not deter Sejanus, who wants to generate “a race of wicked acts ... which no posterity / Shall e’er approve” (2.1.151–53). Like the insatiable villains Edmund and Barabas, Sejanus has no desire other than conquest; he is the manifestation of a Machiavel’s *Id*. Sejanus mistakenly believes that, as he gains Tiberius’ confidence, he ensures his own rise to absolute power. As Brian Chalk points out, when Tiberius refuses to erect a statue of himself and erects one of Sejanus instead, it is because “Tiberius considers monuments to render their subjects vulnerable rather than impervious to destruction.”⁴⁰ Sejanus’ ambitious rise in power only cements his own doom. When Tiberius makes it clear that he fears Agrippina, Sejanus recommends that Tiberius “Be not secure: none swiftness are oppressed / Than they whom confidence betrays to rest,” and even though they have no evidence of wrongdoing, Sejanus advises that “thus your thought to a mean is tied, / You neither dare enough, nor do provide” (2.1.206–7, 274–75). By encouraging Tiberius to act rashly, Sejanus directly contravenes the responsibility of a friend to uphold the mean, to temper emotional perturbations. Sejanus’ willingness to proceed without evidence

emphasizes Jonson's own anxiety about friendship in "Inviting a Friend to Supper." Anxiety about surveillance and censorship runs throughout the play, most vividly by Silius' statement that "every minist'ring spy / That will accuse and swear, is lord of you, / Of me, of all our fortunes and lives," and Sejanus' advice to refuse such juridical protocol is evidence itself of a courtier's influence (1.1.64–66). While Stoic friends temper each other's emotions, Sejanus provokes Tiberius' suspicion, encouraging Tiberius to act on the emotions he should suppress. Sejanus' Machiavellian stage-management, however, begins to unravel the closer he gets to Tiberius.

By erecting a statue of Sejanus, Tiberius prominently displays who people should blame when he begins his violent plan to solidify power. In Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Cesare Borgia uses an ambitious minister, Remirro De Orco, to pacify Romagna. After De Orco stabilizes Romagna through barbaric violence, Borgia apprehends "that such unlimited authority might become odious" to himself and the people, so Borgia "one morning caused Remirro to be beheaded, and exposed in the market place of Cesena with a block and bloody axe by his side. The barbarity of which spectacle at once astounded and satisfied the populace."⁴¹ Tiberius, like Cesare Borgia, uses the unrestrained violence of his minister to enact his own desires. Tiberius responds to Sejanus' advice, saying "We can no longer / Keep on our mask to thee, our dear Sejanus; / Thy thoughts are ours, in all" (2.1.278–80). Cicero believes that wicked friendship should be suppressed because it leads to wicked actions. Cicero argues that "tyrants are courted under a pretense of affection, but only for a season. For when by change they have fallen from power, as they generally do, then is it known how poor they were in friends."⁴² Friendship fundamentally runs counter to the vagaries of fortune; its primary purpose is to mitigate the effects of fortune, and fortune itself is the foundation of a tyrant's power. Indeed, Tiberius reveals as much when he says that "While I can live, I will prevent Earth's fury, / When I die, let fire overwhelm the earth" (2.1.329–30). Sejanus misinterprets his role in the relationship, thinking he can manipulate Tiberius into thinking they are in a true friendship. Tiberius, however, uses promises of friendship to stage-manage Sejanus. Sejanus' misunderstanding of friendship is the cause of his fall, and he represents every ideal

of Stoic friendship—hope, mutual temperance, and preserving virtue—turned into its monstrous other.

When Sejanus reveals his desire to marry Tiberius' recently widowed daughter Livia, Tiberius states "The rest of mortal men, / In all their drifts and counsels, pursue profit: / Princes, alone, are of a different sort, / Directing their main actions still to fame" (3.1.5533–6). Tiberius responds that the difference in status between the two obstructs their marriage. His differentiation between mortal men and all the rest, however, rightly underscores that Tiberius wants to be remembered in historical records, while Sejanus wants merely profit. Tiberius does not say that princes alone are different, but that princes *are* alone. This syntactical nuance, demonstrating the importance of commas, recalls the Stoic doctrine that friendship exists only among equals, thereby denying it to the prince. Just before announcing his ruse to leave Rome, Tiberius states "Be wise, dear friend. We would not hide these things / For friendship's dear respect . . . What we had purposed to thee, in our thought, / And with what near degrees of love to bind thee, / And make thee equal to us" (3.1.565–70). Immediately after Tiberius exits Sejanus gloats, saying that he will topple Tiberius and assume power, but Tiberius cuts Sejanus' triumphant soliloquy short to proclaim that Macro will co-rule while Tiberius is away. Macro functions as an even more diabolical, so more vulnerable, Remirro de Orco. Although he is more cunning and cruel, Macro also seeks to rise to power by flattering friendship, telling Tiberius that "For friendship, or for innocence . . . I would undertake / This, being imposed me, both with gain and ease: / The way to rise is to obey and please" (4.1.732–35). Tiberius forges two bastardized friendships with Sejanus and Macro, both operating on a logic inherently antithetical to Stoic friendship. Where Stoicism advocates virtue and emotional solidarity, the Tiberian faction displays immorality and emotional impulsivity, which leads to social instability. This social effect is precisely what concerns Cicero when he says that wicked friendship should be suppressed. Friendship is never only between two but something that affects the entire community, which is why homosocial relations are so prominent on the Early Modern stage. As the rigid social boundaries of feudal England gave rise to emergent mercantilism and the middle class, Early Modern Londoners increasingly saw

themselves as woven into a social fabric. This network of being invites discourse and integration.

Rendering Arruntius' commentary as asides denies the communicative action that attracts followers to the Germanican faction, and it underestimates the friendship's central role in the play. *Sejanus* presents two models of friendship that are central to Jonson's responsibility to edify through "truth of argument, dignity of persons, gravity and height of elocution, fullness and frequency of sentence" ("To the Readers" 15–17). As Robert Evans convincingly argues, Jonson "may have intended it as counsel, not criticism; as advice rather than attack, even as an endorsement of views already expressed by James rather than an indictment of his behavior."⁴³ Arruntius' commentary, like Cordus' history, provides the necessary checks and balances that preserve virtue and deter the prince from wickedness through record-keeping. It is not surprising that Sejanus invokes friendship with greater frequency as he begins to fall. Just before Tiberius' final, condemning letter is read to the senate, Sejanus welcomes incoming senators, saying:

Honest, and worthy Macro,
 Your love and friendship. Who's there? Satrius,
 Attend my honourable friend forth. O!
 How vain and vile a passion is fear?
 What base, uncomely things it makes men do?
 Suspect their noblest friends, as I did this,
 Flatter poor enemies.

(5.1.380–86)

For Sejanus friendship is an odious burden, something foreign to him, that has only instrumental value. For the Stoics, however, friendship is its own reward. Upon greeting fellow Germanicans, Latiaris thanks them for the "noble constancy you show / To this afflicted house: that not like others, / The friends of season, you do follow fortune" and leave "The place whose glories warmed you" (4.1.115–19). These radically different opinions on friendship demonstrate, not the success of iniquity and the failure of virtue, but that wickedness is inherently unstable. The play demonstrates the fragility of wickedness, and although fortune may smile upon the wicked for a season, noble constancy withstands. Jonson makes

it clear that the court's flattery and spying are only temporary. In *Discoveries*, Jonson writes that "Language most shews a man: Speak, that I may see thee ... No glass renders a man's form, or likeness so true as speech."⁴⁴ Flatterers like Sejanus and Macro are only ever fragile worms wrapped in silk and so 'twill die. Their place in court is predicated on flattering words, and language itself shows a man. Although the Stoics declare that "No ill should force the Subject undertake / Against the Sovereign," they galvanize support and mobilize resistance throughout the play (4.1.163–64). Their language preserves their values; from historical records to public dissent, Stoic language cements permanence. In the epistle to Lord Aubigny, Jonson writes that "If ever any ruin were so great, as to survive; I think this be one I send you," and even though the play "suffered no less violence from our people here ... this hath out-lived their malice" (1–12). Jonson, like the Stoics, sees that the vagaries of public opinion cannot erase monuments of truth. The play meditates not on the power of flattery but on its instability, and it underscores not the absence of virtue but its permanence.

University of Alabama

NOTES

1. Margaret Jane Kidnie, *Sejanus His Fall*, in *The Devil Is an Ass and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 457.
2. David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 100.
3. Katherine Eisman Maus, *Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 36.
4. Blair Worden, "Ben Jonson Among the Historians," in *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993), 88.
5. Ben Jonson, *Sejanus*, ed. Jonas Barish (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965). This edition is cited throughout this essay.
6. Penelope Geng, "'He Only Talks': Arruntius and the Formation of Interpretive Communities in Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*," *Ben Jonson Journal* 18.1 (2011): 133.
7. *Ibid.*, 134.

8. Quoted in Marvin Vawter, "The Seeds of Virtue: Political Imperatives in Jonson's *Sejanus*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 6.1 (1973): 55.

9. Mark Bland, "Ben Jonson and the Legacies of the Past," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 67.3 (2004): 395.

10. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 385.

11. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 5.26.

12. Sean McEvoy, *Ben Jonson, Renaissance Dramatist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 44.

13. Jonson, *Sejanus, His Fall*, Ed. Philip J. Ayres (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 36.

14. Quoted in Warren Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 124–25.

15. Quoted in W. David Kay, *Ben Jonson: A Literary Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 74.

16. Quoted in Kevin Sharpe, ed., *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 88.

17. Jonson, *Ben Jonson, The Poems; The Prose Works*, eds. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8:303–4.

18. Antitheatricalists, such as Stephen Gosson and Philip Stubbes, feared that theaters were breeding grounds for sedition, both as the content of a play and because political radicals used the crowded, public theater as an assembly. For more on the theater as a site for political subversion, see Linda Charnes, *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 103–160.

19. Jonson, *Five Plays*, ed. G. A. Wilkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 223.

20. Jonson, *Sejanus*, 16.

21. Jonson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt. (London: Penguin Books, 1996).

22. Justus Lipsius, *A Discourse of Constancy* (London, 1670), 113. *Early English Books Online*. Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

23. *Ibid.*, 128.

24. *Ibid.*, 2.

25. Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19.

26. Cicero, *De amicitia*, trans. W. A. Falconer (Loeb Classical Library, 1923), 20.71. Cited throughout this paragraph.

27. Richard Edwards' *Damon and Pythias*, published in 1571, underscores similar sentiments. Throughout the play, the eponymous friends reiterate

Cicero's idea that friendship can only exist between equals and that it is founded upon virtue. The courtiers Aristippus and Carisophus are foils, like *Sejanus*'s faction, who use flattery to gain power. Eventually, the tyrant Dionysius is edified by Damon and Pythias' friendship and peace is restored.

28. Lorna Hutson, "Law, Crime and Punishment," in *Ben Jonson in Context*, ed. Julie Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 223. George Chapman praises *Sejanus* for materializing rumor on the stage: "Performing such a lively Evidence / in thy Narrations, that thy Hearers still / Thou turnst so thy Spectators" (qtd. in Hutson, 224).

29. Seneca, *Anger, Mercy, Revenge*, trans. Robert A. Kaster (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 36.

30. Vawter, 47.

31. Jonson, *Complete Poems*.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Andrew Hadfield, "Politics," in *Ben Jonson in Context*, ed. Julie Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 239.

34. Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 117.

35. According to George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, eds. Frank Whigham and Wayne Rebhorn (1589; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 224, a poet's responsibility is to cultivate "effective virtue." The poet creates "lively images," or *Energeia*, that present a vivid picture that moves the audience to virtue.

36. Maus, 119.

37. *Ibid.*, 126.

38. *Ibid.*, 37.

39. Robert Evans, "*Sejanus*: Ethics and Politics in the Early Reign of James," in *Refashioning Ben Jonson*, ed. Julie Sanders (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 82.

40. Brian Chalk, *Monuments and Posterity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 98.

41. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Ninian Hill-Thompson (JiaHu Books, 2013), 49.

42. Cicero, 165.

43. Evans, 82–83.

44. Jonson, *Discoveries*, 625.