Jonson's Imaginary Library: "An Execration upon Vulcan" and Its Intertexts

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ABSTRACT Ben Jonson's 1623 poem "An Execration upon Vulcan" responds to a fire in his house, which seemingly destroyed some books and papers. Scholarly interest in this work has largely been confined to what biographical information it reveals. Yet this poem is in dialogue with Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Rabelais's *Pantagruel*, and Donne's *The Courtier's Library*, and it engages with the genre of the mock library catalogue. By bringing together these works, the essay not only contributes to ongoing study of such Jonsonian concerns as censorship, interpretation, and the value of learning but also highlights his interest in contemporary European comic literature and the closeness of his association with Donne. It sheds light on early modern literature's self-consciousness about the library as a malleable concept, a self-consciousness with important methodological implications for critics and historians of the period. **KEYWORDS:** seventeenth-century libraries; book ownership; censorship; John Donne; Cervantes; Rabelais

IN NOVEMBER 1623 a fire in the house of poet and playwright Ben Jonson destroyed some of his books and papers. Jonson responded with a comic poem, "An Execration upon Vulcan," addressed to the god of fire. The poem berates Vulcan for Jonson's losses, as well as for other famous fires over the ages, presenting the god as an envious, malicious, and greedy intruder. "An Execration," which circulated in manuscript before appearing in print in 1640–41, has received relatively little scholarly attention beyond attempts to mine the poem for factual information.[1] For while critics have recognized the poem's use of exaggeration for comic effect, its study has tended to be limited to what it might tell us about the writing projects Jonson had in

1. "An Execration" appears as poem 43 in *The Underwood*, which was included in volume 2 of the second folio of 1640–41. It was also printed by John Benson in two volumes, one a quarto (where it is the title poem), the other a duodecimo, in 1640.

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hand at the time, might add to our knowledge of his book collections, or might even reveal about his psychology. Lillian Schanfield, reflecting a wider tendency to treat Jonson's works as more directly and transparently autobiographical than those of his contemporaries, goes so far as to suggest that "the poem is actually an expression of outrage and a cathartic working out of intense emotions" and deserves "serious psychological analysis."[2] Ian Donaldson's biography is careful to acknowledge that the poem "presents" rather than reveals a particular image of Jonson but nevertheless finds its primary interest to lie in the fact that most of the unfinished writings listed as lost in the fire are "serious works of scholarship" rather than plays.[3]

The poem may have been prompted by the actual fire in Jonson's lodgings, but it is a work of imagination as well as recollection, and it engages creatively with two of the early modern period's most influential literary depictions of libraries: *Pantagruel* (1532) by Rabelais, with its title character's visit to the Library of Saint-Victor; and *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615) by Cervantes, with its hero's treasured private collection. *Pantagruel* includes a list of made-up books and initiated the minor comic genre of the mock library catalogue. The works that it inspired include Johann Fischart's *Catalogus catalogorum perpetuo durabilis* (The everlasting catalogue), published in Germany in 1590; *Catalogus librorum aulicorum* or *The Courtier's Library* (ca. 1603–11) by Jonson's friend John Donne; and Sir Thomas Browne's *Musaeum clausum* (The sealed museum), also known as *Bibliotheca abscondita* (The hidden library), written in the second half of the seventeenth century.[4] *Don Quixote*, which explores the reading of romance and features a politically resonant scene of book burning, was likewise well-known across Europe.[5]

"An Execration" not only reflects Jonson's reading of *Pantagruel* and alludes to *Don Quixote* but also is in dialogue with Donne's *The Courtier's Library*. Like these other works, Jonson's poem features nonexistent books as well as real ones, explores the different ways in which books may be consumed, and is richly and self-consciously intertextual. The comparison also, however, highlights Jonson's distinctive concern with the processes and practices of authorship—in particular, how notes taken from existing books may form the basis of new writing, which in turn prompts readers to pursue connections back to earlier texts. By exploring "An Execration" in relation to *Pantagruel*, *Don Quixote*, and *The Courtier's Library*, this essay adds to

2. Lillian Schanfield, "Ben Jonson's 'An Execration upon Vulcan': No Joking Matter," *Ben Jonson Journal* 7, no. 1 (2000): 353–64 at 353.

3. Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford, 2011), 369. This biography provides valuable insights into just how important scholarship was to Jonson.

4. On Fischart and other European humanist writers on the library, see Dirk Werle, "Copia librorum: Problemgeschichte imaginierter Bibliotheken 1580–1630" (PhD diss., Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, 2007). On Browne, see Claire Preston, *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science* (Cambridge, 2005).

5. On Cervantes in England, see Dale B. J. Randall and Jackson C. Boswell, *Cervantes in Seventeenth-Century England: The Tapestry Turned* (Oxford, 2009).

ongoing critical discussion of some important Jonsonian concerns: what it is to read well or badly, the value of scholarship and poetry, censorship. And it reveals a less familiar Jonson: a Jonson who was an interested reader of contemporary European comic literature, a Jonson who enjoyed sharing jokes about books with Donne, a Jonson who was not always serious about learning.[6]

More broadly, the essay illuminates the fascination of the early modern period with the library and what it represents. There have been important studies of actual early modern book collections as well as *longue durée* histories of the library in Western culture.[7] Scholars have begun to pay more attention to the cultural significance of the library as a concept that has changed over time, and to references to libraries within fictional works.[8] The shared concern of some of the early modern period's most prominent authors with this complex and malleable concept has not, however, been fully recognized. The present essay highlights how self-consciously Rabelais, Cervantes, Donne, and Jonson all explore how books are judged and categorized, how the book-as-material-object relates to the book-as-text, and how book-based learning can be facilitated, deployed, recognized, and feigned. After briefly exploring the relationship of "An Execration" to Jonson's actual book collection, the essay considers how the poem imagines an alternative collection of real books like the one found in *Don Quixote* and joins Cervantes in treating issues of censorship. The following sections explore how the poem also responds to *Pantagruel* and *The Courtier's Library* as it incorporates two made-up books and satirizes reading practices. The essay argues that "An Execration" develops the interest of each of these other texts in the dynamic interactions between and among books and readers, both real and imaginary, and that these works together pose a productive challenge to some of the ways in which modern critics have attempted to imagine the early modern library.

6. This Jonson has often been obscured by his reputation for serious scholarliness and even pedantry; for an illuminating discussion, see Adam Zucker, "Pedantic Jonson," in *Ben Jonson and Posterity: Reception, Reputation, Legacy*, ed. Martin Butler and Jane Rickard (Cambridge, 2020), 44–62.

7. On early modern libraries, see, among others, Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries,* trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford, Calif., 1994); *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector: Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and His Legacy,* ed. C. J. Wright (London, 1997); Heidi Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender, and Literacy* (Cambridge, 2005); Jennifer Summit, *Memory's Library: Medieval Books in Early Modern England* (Chicago, 2008); and the ongoing series *Private Libraries in Renaissance England: A Collection and Catalogue of Tudor and Early Stuart Book-Lists*, gen. ed. R. J. Fehrenbach, 10 vols. (Binghamton, N.Y., and Tempe, Ariz., 1993–2020). General histories of the library include *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*, gen. ed. Peter Hoare, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 2006); and James W. P. Campbell, *The Library: A World History* (London, 2013).

8. See in particular *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History*, ed. Alice Crawford (Princeton, N.J., 2015). This chronologically wide-ranging collection includes essays on the library in poetry, in fiction, and in film.

Jonson's "Library"

Commentators on "An Execration upon Vulcan" have repeated the claim that "Jonson's personal library was destroyed by fire."[9] This claim, however, does not entirely square with what the poem says and with what we know from other sources about Jonson's book collecting. The term *library* had long been current in most of the senses it has today: "A place set apart to contain books for reading, study, or reference," which could be a room in a house or even a bookcase, a designated building, or the books contained therein.[10] But for all that the poem comically inflates the fire's significance, Jonson does not apply the term *library* to his own collection here (or anywhere else in his works). What the poem does say is that Vulcan found on Jonson's "desk" (85) several unfinished works, ranging from "parcels of a play" (43) to a translation of Horace's *Ars poetica* (89–91), and some items he had borrowed from friends.[11] The fire may therefore have been only a "desk fire," destroying a few piles of papers and borrowed books. Heartbreaking enough an event for any writer, but not quite the catastrophe that has been proposed.[12]

If the fire did destroy no more than the few items listed, that might have been simply because it was quickly extinguished. But it might equally have been because Jonson did not have many books in his lodgings at the time. There is no doubt that he was a voracious reader: there are hundreds of extant books with his ownership markings (including a copy of Rabelais), and he cites many more books in his writings.[13]

9. Schanfield, "Ben Jonson's 'An Execration upon Vulcan,'" 353. Ian Donaldson uses a similar formulation in *Jonson's Magic Houses: Essays in Interpretation* (Oxford, 1997), 190, and in the notes to the poem in his Oxford Authors edition (*Ben Jonson* [Oxford, 1985], 692). He is more cautious in his biography—"a fire in [Jonson's] lodgings . . . destroyed a number of his books and papers" (*Ben Jonson: A Life*, 367)—but his account of Jonson's lost plays for the Cambridge edition refers to "The fire that destroyed part of Jonson's library in 1623" (*The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* [hereafter *CWBJ*], gen. ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols. [Cambridge, 2012], online edition https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/).

10. *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter cited as *OED* with the sense number), s.v. "library, *n*," senses 1a, 1b, 2, last modified March 2023, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/107923.

11. All references to Jonson's works are to *CWBJ*, with line or act, scene, and line numbers given in parentheses in the text.

12. Colin Burrow's headnote to the poem acknowledges that the fire may only have been a "desk fire," adding that "desk" could mean a repository for writing materials as well as a place for writing (*The Underwood*, 43, *CWBJ*, 7:165). See also Mark Bland, who refers to the fire in Jonson's library as a "myth" that can be traced to his nineteenth-century editor William Gifford; Bland, "Ben Jonson and the Legacies of the Past," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2004): 371–400 at 391.

13. See "Library Records" in *CWBJ Online*, https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/records/k/browse/library/,which updates David McPherson, "Ben Jonson's Library and Marginalia: An Annotated Catalogue," *Studies in Philology* 71, no. 5 (1974): 1–106. For a general account of Jonson's reading habits, see Robert C. Evans, *Habits of Mind: Evidence and Effects of Ben Jonson's Reading* (Lewisburg, Pa., 1995). Jonson's copy of Rabelais is discussed further below.

We also know, however, that Jonson frequently sold books to raise money, sometimes rebuying the same books later on. He exchanged books with friends (including Donne) and benefited in particular from the vast library of Sir Robert Cotton. Libraries such as Cotton's were places of scholarship and community, with Cotton himself playing a key role in establishing scholarly standards and practices.[14] That sense of community is reflected in the poem's acknowledgment not only of the materials but also of "the succour" that Cotton, along with the writer Richard Carew and the renowned jurist Sir John Selden, lent Jonson (99–100).[15] Jonson's personal collection was thus a highly fluid one.

The poem may also avoid mentioning some politically sensitive materials, even as it acknowledges others. In late 1623, King James, under intensified pressure to move to war against Spain, was increasingly concerned to prevent the public discussion of state affairs. Just a month before the fire in Jonson's lodgings, a proclamation threatened that searches would be made for "scandalous and offensive Bookes or Pamphlets."[16] One publication that had particularly upset the authorities was Thomas Scott's controversial anti-Spanish work, *Vox Populi* (1620), which Jonson, at some point, owned.[17] Had a copy of this book, for example, been on his desk in November 1623, he is unlikely to have broadcast the fact. His poem does, however, reveal that one of the works in progress destroyed in the fire was a history of Henry V. It is in this connection that Cotton, Carew, and Selden are mentioned (97–100), and we know that Cotton lent Jonson related source materials.[18] This project was a potentially incendiary one (so to speak). A history of a king renowned for achieving military triumph in Continental Europe could hardly fail to resonate with the political situation of the early 1620s. Indeed, a history of Henry V is precisely the kind of antiquarian study that seems to have worried Charles I into closing Cotton's library just

14. Summit, *Memory's Library*, 137. In the sixteenth century, John Dee's Mortlake library, much of which ended up in Cotton's, was similarly "a universal library . . . at the disposal of a wide range of students"; William H. Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst, Mass., 1995), 39. Sherman's study helped to establish critical awareness of the porous nature of early modern libraries.

15. On Jonson's book buying, selling, lending, and borrowing, see Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life*, 356–58. On Cotton's library, see Kevin Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton, 1586–1631: History and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1979); *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*, ed. Wright; Richard Ovenden, "The Libraries of the Antiquaries (c. 1580–1640) and the Idea of a National Collection," in *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*, ed. Hoare, 1:527–61 at 550–57; and Summit, *Memory's Library*, 136–96. On Selden's library, see Julia Roberts, "Extending the Frontiers: Scholar Collectors," in *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*, ed. Hoare, 1:292–321 at 315–21.

16. See *Stuart Royal Proclamations*, ed. James F. Larkin and Paul L. Hughes, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1973), 1:584.

17. See "Library Records," *CWBJ Online*.

18. See note to line 100. Summit observes that "being able to cite a Cotton manuscript became a marker of scholarly legitimacy" (*Memory's Library*, 137).

a few years later.[19] The poem is here implicitly defending the politically resonant historical interests of Jonson's circle in the face of increasing censorship. More broadly, it is carefully constructing a picture of Jonson as a reader, scholar, and author, not simply opening up his book collection to public scrutiny.

This emphasis on works in progress presents the physical space evoked as a study rather than a library. Jonson liked to locate authors in their studies. In his earlier play *Poetaster* (1601), Lupus erroneously claims to have found a libel "in this Horace his study, in Maecenas [Horace's patron] his house" (5.3.38), a setting recalled in that play's Apologetical Dialogue, which finds the Author, a figure for Jonson himself, at work in "his lodging" (6).[20] "An Execration" reveals how the study as the workspace of the scholarly author is closely and reciprocally related to the library as both book collection and physical place. Jonson's study contains books, some borrowed from others' libraries, and notes on his reading; among the materials lost in the fire are, the poem claims, "twice-twelve years' stored up humanity" (101). The phrase is suggestive of a commonplace book such as his *Discoveries* (1641).[21] Through this reading and gathering, the study is also a space in which new works, which will in turn sit in libraries, are produced. "An Execration" is itself, of course, a product of Jonson's study, which quickly entered manuscript circulation and which he continued to revise. There are eighteen surviving manuscripts, including the "Newcastle manuscript," an anthology compiled principally for Sir William Cavendish, first Earl and later Duke of Newcastle, and now held in the British Library.[22]

This two-way traffic between the study and the library also, however, goes beyond the literal. "An Execration" reveals Jonson's study to be a space from which libraries can be conceptualized, recalled, imagined, and evaluated. That imaginative exercise includes engaging playfully and creatively with the concept of the library as a marker of identity. In the works of humanists such as Sir Thomas More, as Jennifer Summit observes, "the library presents an outward manifestation of the learned mind."[23] Jonson, like Donne and others, shares this interest in the symbolic as well as material significance of libraries but takes a more skeptical view. His works

19. See Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton*, 143–46; and Summit, *Memory's Library*, 141, 188.

20. Other early modern plays bring the study onto the stage; perhaps most famously, *Doctor Faustus*, written 1588–89 by Christopher Marlowe, opens to reveal Faustus in his study with his books. Jonson's distinctive concern is with the study as the space of the scholarly author rather than the scholarly reader.

21. On *Discoveries* as an exercise in "Jonson's production of his ethical and autobiographical voice," see Lorna Hutson's introduction to her edition (*CWBJ*, 7:483–94 at 485). On the study and its relationship to the library, see Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in His Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, Conn., 1998).

22. On the circulation and revision of the poem, see Burrow's headnote (*CWBJ*, 7:165) and "The Poems: Textual Essay" in *CWBJ Online*. In the latter, he suggests that the version that appears in the second folio of 1640–41 "represents Jonson's latest work on the poem." This version is the basis for Burrow's edition.

23. Summit, *Memory's Library*, 6.

recognize that libraries are ideological constructs as well as physical places, that they serve to create particular impressions of their owners, which may be false, and that their significance is open to interpretation and misinterpretation. In *The Masque of Owls* (1624), for example, he writes of one Captain Cox who "Had a goodly library, / By which he was discernèd / To be one of the learnèd" (26–28). The comic tone intimates that the mere fact of book ownership is not a reliable way in which to judge true learning. The increased affordability and availability of printed books in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may have meant that libraries no longer served as a way for aristocrats to display their wealth.[24] But these changes also meant that the ignorant could masquerade as the wise and that the distinction between genuine and feigned learning was not always easily "discernèd."

Developing these concerns, the first half of "An Execration" considers books that Jonson was not writing and did not possess. Though it laments actual items lost in the fire, it more vividly describes this other book collection—a collection that Jonson could have assembled and that Vulcan might more fitly have burned. This important but critically neglected feature of the poem reflects Jonson's awareness that, as Craig Dworkin has emphasized, a library may be defined more by what it excludes than by what it includes.[25] Some of the titles that Jonson's poem presents his collection as excluding are, as will be considered further later, made-up ones. Many of the others are the kinds of romances that, as the poem highlights, *Don Quixote* both reworks and features within its fiction. Nevertheless, the poem shares with Cervantes's work a deeper concern with how state authorities judge literary writing. This intertextual dialogue enables Jonson not only to situate himself in relation to some of his predecessors and contemporaries but also to highlight how texts persist and interact beyond their vulnerable material incarnation.

Jonson, Cervantes, and the Burning of Books

"An Execration upon Vulcan," like *The Masque of Owls*, uses the term *library* in reference to a fictional collection, but this time a famous one composed of real books. The persona imagines what he might have done to warrant Vulcan's attentions:

> Had I compiled from Amadis de Gaul,
> Th'Esplandians, Arthurs, Palmerins, and all
> The learnèd library of Don Quixote,
> And so some goodlier monster had begot,
> . . . . . .

24. On the shift from libraries as sites for the display of wealth in the fifteenth century to places of scholarship in the seventeenth, see Andrew Pettegree, "The Renaissance Library and the Challenge of Print," in *Meaning of the Library*, ed. Crawford, 72–90.

25. See Craig Dworkin, *The Perverse Library* (York, U.K., 2010), which features one catalogue of books he owns and one of books he would like to acquire.

> Thou then hadst had some colour for thy flames
> On such my serious follies
>
> (29–32, 40–41)

Cervantes's work, published in Spain in two parts in 1605 and 1615 and in English translation in 1612 (part 1) and 1620 (part 2), was well-known enough in England for the allusion to be readily recognizable. Jonson himself had taken an interest in *Don Quixote* even before the appearance of the first English translation.[26] In the poem he is asking his reader to compare the books that he owned and was in the process of writing to the Don's library, which mainly consists of chivalric romances, prominent among them the popular fifteenth-century Spanish work *Amadis de Gaul*. The descriptor "learnèd" clearly has an ironic charge: Jonson is using this allusion to a fictional library to suggest that books such as those the Don reads have no place in his study. Later in the poem he affirms that had he known of Vulcan's desire for a feast, he would have fed him "the whole sum / Of errant knighthood" (66–67) in order to save his own books and papers. The implication is that even unfinished works by Jonson are more deserving of preservation than chivalric romances.

As he compares what he has lost to the library of the fictional Don, so Jonson is also comparing his writing to Cervantes's writing. *Don Quixote*'s depiction of a library is highly self-conscious: the books that the Don reads are also the books that the work itself parodies. Jonson's poem implies that the Spanish author merely "compiled." That verb is a loaded one; medieval authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer presented themselves as *compilators* or compilers of other writers' texts. Cervantes ironically invokes such a model of authorship by casting himself in his prologue as "*in truth but a stepfather to* Don-Quixote."[27] But for Jonson, the true poet was a "maker" who practiced *imitation*, defined in *Discoveries* as the ability "to convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use" (lines 1752–53). In these terms, "compiling" at best was an uncreative process of assemblage and at worst might slide into plagiarism, an issue that particularly concerned Jonson.[28] The catchall phrase "some goodlier monster" simultaneously suggests that if he had joined Cervantes in relying on the romance tradition in all its excesses, he might have "begot" a worse

26. Allusions in *The Alchemist* in 1610 (4.7.40) and *Epicoene* in 1609–10 (4.1.40–42) suggest that Jonson either first encountered *Don Quixote* in the original Spanish, saw Thomas Shelton's translation in manuscript before publication, or had simply heard about the work and decided to capitalize on its imminent appearance in English.

27. *The History of The Valorous and Wittie Knight-Errant, Don-Quixote Of the Mancha. Translated out of the Spanish*, trans. Thomas Shelton (London, 1612), sig. ¶3v, italics in original. All subsequent references to *Don Quixote* are to this edition, and page numbers are given in parentheses in the text.

28. The boundaries between compilation, imitation, and plagiarism were of course blurred. On Jonson's concern with plagiarism, see Ian Donaldson, "'The Fripperie of Wit': Jonson and Plagiarism," in *Plagiarism in Early Modern England*, ed. Paulina Kewes (Basingstoke, U.K., 2003), 119–33.

character than Don Quixote and a worse book than *Don Quixote*, "serious follies" that would have given Vulcan some justification for starting the fire.

The allusion to the Don's library also, however, has more complex resonances. Much of this fictional library is burned in a deliberate and deliberative act of censorship undertaken by an opinionated Curate with the help of his friend the Barber, with the Don's housekeeper and niece acting as willing accomplices (part 1, chapter 6). Cervantes was writing under an especially repressive censorship regime in the form of the Spanish Inquisition. He ironically invokes the Inquisition's concerns with witchcraft and heresy by depicting the housekeeper as fearful of the power of the books to enchant and insistent that the library be sprinkled with holy water (37), and by personifying the seminal work *Amadis de Gaul* as "the *Dogmatizer* and head of so badde a sect" (38). The fact that the books named are real—the Curate and Barber even come across one of the earlier works of Cervantes—relates this satirical representation of censorship more pointedly to the world of the author and his readers.[29]

Jonson's poem constructs Vulcan as, like Cervantes's Curate, a kind of unjust censor, who uses fire as the state in England, too, used fire.[30] Lamenting the loss of "many my years' labours" (4), the persona tells Vulcan:

> Had I wrote treason there, or heresy,
> Imposture, witchcraft, charms, or blasphemy,
> I had deserved, then, thy consuming looks;
> Perhaps to have been burnèd with my books.
> (15–18)

Jonson is insisting on what cannot now be proven or disproven: that there was nothing treasonous, heretical, or dangerous on his desk before the fire. He is constructing his lost items—and he here uses the term "my books" without discriminating between what he was reading and what he was writing—as innocent and secret-free. The innocence of poetry and scholarship was a perennial Jonsonian concern.

29. See also Anthony J. Cascardi, who suggests that we are supposed to recognize the Curate as the kind of learned cleric responsible for deciding which books should be entered onto the Inquisition's lists (*Cervantes, Literature, and the Discourse of Politics* [Toronto, 2012], 39); and Margaret Bald, who finds it "unaccountabl[e]" that the censors let pass this satire on censorship (*Banned Books: Literature Suppressed on Religious Grounds*, rev. ed. [New York, 2006], 83). Bald also notes that as recently as 1981, in General Pinochet's Chile, *Don Quixote* was banned (84).

30. On the prominence in Jacobean England of book burning as an act of official censorship, see Cyndia Susan Clegg, "Burning Books as Propaganda in Jacobean England," in *Literature and Censorship in Renaissance England*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (Basingstoke, U.K., 2001), 165–86. For an account of Jonson's various depictions of book burning, which emphasizes "the shaping influence of the penal" on his authorship, see Joseph F. Loewenstein, "Personal Material: Jonson and Book-Burning," in *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson: Text, History, Performance*, ed. Martin Butler (Basingstoke, U.K., 1999), 93–113 at 105.

Epigram 101, "Inviting a Friend to Supper," for example, promises the friend that Jonson's man "Shall read a piece of Virgil, Tacitus, / Livy, or of some better book to us." Jonson and his friend will "speak [their] minds" of these books without being made "guilty men" (21–23, 37). This ongoing concern may have been intensified in the early 1620s by how, as noted above, the state was attempting to clamp down further on "offensive" books. Even as he defends his books, however, Jonson is rehearsing the concerns that drove contemporary censorship and that, in the cases of heresy and witchcraft, the scene in Don Quixote's library also explores. Crucially, he is claiming for himself the right to judge what does or does not constitute such offenses.

Jonson is thus joining Cervantes in imagining a body of material that could attract the attention of censoring authorities as a way of exploring a series of key questions: whether books are in themselves dangerous, whether their destruction can ever be justified, what kinds of literature are most worth preserving, who has the right to make such decisions, and on what grounds such decisions should be made. Cervantes takes the more radical position. He makes the Curate a ridiculous figure who tries to take both moral and literary considerations into account but whose judgments are inconsistent and driven by personal motives (he even saves one book because "the author is my very great friend" [44]). The reader is encouraged to laugh at the Curate and sympathize with the hapless hero, sleeping peacefully in a nearby room while intruders destroy his cherished library. As Anthony J. Cascardi argues, the scene is part of Cervantes's critique of categorical judgments and forms of absolute authority.[31] Jonson's works, by contrast, appear to suggest that the burning of books is in some circumstances legitimate. In the final scene of *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), the magistrate Clement orders the public burning of writing he exposes as bad, plagiarized poetry (5.3.216–312). The play is evoking the practices of political censorship and substituting an aesthetic model within which judgment is made by one who understands the nature of the "true poet," described in the scene by Lorenzo (260–91).[32] This is the model that Jonson upholds in "An Execration": despite the comic tone, the poet here effectively becomes a kind of censor, deciding what kinds of writing could more reasonably have been destroyed in the fire and implying that he has the authority to make such judgments. In this way, the poem's allusion to *Don Quixote* risks aligning not only Vulcan but also Jonson himself with Cervantes's Curate.

The poem does not, however, wholly endorse the destruction of the books that it disparages. It suggests that if Jonson's works had contained treason and other such offenses, he had "Perhaps" deserved "to have been burnèd with my books." Through that word *perhaps*, Jonson invites the reader to consider that even writing that is perceived to be treasonous, heretical, or dangerous does not necessarily warrant the

31. Cascardi, *Cervantes, Literature, and the Discourse of Politics*, 164.

32. See also Donaldson, *Jonson's Magic Houses*, who suggests that Jonson through Clement acts "as a kind of comic censor" (202–4).

burning of books. At the same time, the line identifies the destruction of books with the destruction of their author. Jonson is not simply reflecting the actual methods of state censorship (authors might be punished but were not usually burned with their books) but implying that his identification with his works is such that to cast them into the fire is to destroy him.

Indeed, comparing the second folio version of the poem to the manuscript versions reveals that Jonson revised the poem to strengthen his physical and material identification with his works. For example, the word *them*, referring to his works, is replaced with *me* in several lines, including "Thou mightst have had me perish, piece, by piece" (51).[33] Cervantes also imagines the destruction of books in terms of human suffering; *The Exploits of Esplandian*, for example, is thrown into the yard "to expect with all patience the fire which he was threatned to abide" (39). But whereas the Spanish author personifies books, Jonson imagines as a book his own person. For Joseph Loewenstein, the revisions to the poem reflect Jonson's "psychic involvement in book culture."[34] One might add that the process of ongoing revision and dissemination serves to give "An Execration" itself multiple lives, and thus affirms by extension its author's own survival. Jonson's self-identification with books is also, however, strategic. By emphasizing the harm inflicted upon the author, he underlines how disproportionate an act book burning is and how it not only destroys existing books but also threatens books not yet written that might have been inspired or informed by the reading of those lost.

The poem also suggests that even if Jonson had "compiled" from romances, that would have given Vulcan merely "some colour for thy flames." Here we have not only the qualifier "some" but also an ambiguous term: "colour" could mean either "Fair or reasonable excuse" (*OED*, s.v. "colour, *n.*[1]," sense 10) or "A specious reason, ground, or argument; a pretext" (*OED*, sense 9). Jonson is adjudicating between books that he sees as more or less deserving of preservation, in pointed contrast to the indiscriminate Vulcan, but he is not suggesting that the god would have had absolute justification for destroying any of the books that the poem imagines. At the same time, "colour" may invoke the "colours of rhetoric," underlining the sense that Vulcan is consuming some of the raw materials that Jonson utilizes in the construction of his works. For as the term *timber*—used in the full title of his commonplace book, *Timber, or Discoveries*—suggestively captures, the fuel for literary creation might feed the flames of censorship.

Moreover, Jonson's reference to Don Quixote's library underlines the futility of censoring books that have already been published and read. Within the story, the destruction of the library makes little difference to the hero, who has internalized the narratives contained in his books. For the reader, it is the account of the library's destruction that enables its mental construction; Cervantes thus suggests

33. See Burrow, "The Poems: Textual Essay," in *CWBJ Online*.
34. Loewenstein, "Personal Material," 104.

that censorship merely draws attention to the material censored. As well as living in the imaginations of *Don Quixote*'s readers, this fictional library is revived in works, such as Jonson's poem, that allude to it. The intertextual link helps "An Execration" to emphasize that, while books as material objects are vulnerable to fire and other destructive forces, texts can transcend that material incarnation to survive in memory, imagination, and allusion.

The tragedy of the situation that the poem recounts, of course, is that Vulcan has destroyed works that have not yet been published and so cannot be preserved on other shelves or in other minds. Yet "An Execration" remembers through description the lost works. It defies Vulcan's act of indiscriminate censorship and affirms what Jonson had reworked Tacitus to proclaim in his early Jacobean play *Sejanus* (1603, 1605): the destruction of books does not "extinguish / The memory of all succeeding times!" (3.473–74).[35] "An Execration" makes this point explicitly in relation to historical documents: referring to the burning down of the office of the six clerks of Chancery in 1621, it claims that the lost records, even "were all chronicles gone, / Will be remembered by six clerks to one" (171–72). That assertion may seem to be undercut by the following lines, which recognize that the records that the clerks remember provide no "writ," "injunction," "order," or "decree" against Vulcan (174–76). But the larger point is that Vulcan, although he cannot be prevented from causing trouble, will not ultimately triumph, because texts can be remembered and rewritten. In another subtle challenge to state censorship, memory (which was itself conventionally figured as a kind of library) is here presented as more powerful than the law itself.[36]

Imagining a library and its partial destruction thus allows Jonson, as the scene in Don Quixote's library had enabled Cervantes, to display his breadth of reading, to offer his opinions on his predecessors, and, above all, to explore issues of literary judgment and censorship. While Cervantes appears skeptical about any such judgment, Jonson maintains that poets such as he can discriminate between different kinds of books. Nevertheless, exploring the dialogue between the two works helps us see that Jonson is engaging more seriously and sympathetically with *Don Quixote* than it may at first appear, and that his insistence on a hierarchy of texts does not amount to a wholehearted endorsement of the right of censoring authorities to destroy books. Both authors emphasize that censorship has a brutal human cost, that books may be vulnerable as material objects but not as texts that can be remembered, and that state censorship is thus as futile as it is cruel. These shared interests may be partly explained by the deeper roots that both texts have in the work of Rabelais.

35. Ironically enough, *Sejanus*, which depicts the Senate's deciding to burn the books of the historian Cremutius Cordus, got Jonson into trouble with the authorities. On censorship in *Sejanus*, see Cynthia Bowers, "'I Will Write Satires Still, in Spite of Fear': History, Satire, and Free Speech in *Poetaster* and *Sejanus*," *Ben Jonson Journal* 14, no. 2 (2007): 153–72; and Tom Cain, "Jonson's Humanist Tragedies," in *Ben Jonson and the Politics of Genre*, ed. A. D. Cousins and Alison V. Scott (Cambridge, 2009), 162–89.

36. On representations of memory as a library, see Summit, *Memory's Library*, 1.

Jonson, Rabelais, and the Mock Library Catalogue

Rabelais's *Pantagruel*, first printed in Lyons in 1532, was well-known across early modern Europe.[37] This comic and satirical work helped to establish the library as a key setting for fictional adventures and encounters. Here we have a chapter devoted to the title character's visit to the Library of Saint-Victor in Paris, a real library. The giant Pantagruel finds it "to be quite superb, above all for some of the books he came across there."[38] This device gives Rabelais the opportunity to satirize scholastic learning. Cervantes, in having the Curate and Barber visit Don Quixote's library, and Jonson, in reflecting on Vulcan's visit to his lodgings, are making use of the same device. Moreover, the fire that threatens books in those two works also appears here as a metaphor for the giant's voracious reading: Pantagruel "was so burning to improve himself even further that if you had seen him improving himself by study you would have said that his mind was so tireless and keen among his books that it was like a flame among the heather" (50). In all three texts, the visitors to the libraries are characterized as consuming, even destructive readers.[39]

Within this fictional framework, most of Rabelais's chapter takes the form of a list of 139 fictitious books. These are titles mainly without authors in seemingly random order, some in French and some in Latin, parodying real books and genres or making wider satirical comments. Rabelais's primary targets are church practices, conservative theology, scholastic commentary, and learned error, but of course there is also much scatological humor and wordplay. The Latin entry "*On the Art of Discreetly Farting in Company, by Magister-Noster Ortuinus*" (39), for example, combines broad comedy with humanist satire, the name "Ortuinus" evoking the German scholar and theologian Ortuinus Gratius (Ortwin), who was an enemy of progressives such as Johann Reuchlin and had already been the target of another satirical work, the *Epistles of Obscure Men*.[40] The made-up title accuses Ortwin of expertise in slipping obnoxious views past others while, in its indirection, the entry is itself "discreetly" retaliating. While individual entries thus have specific satiric targets, the

37. *Gargantua* was printed in 1535; the third and fourth books appeared in 1546 and 1548 respectively; the fifth book, which is of doubtful authorship, not until 1562. Revised editions were also printed during this period.

38. François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. and ed. M. A. Screech (London, 2006), 39. All subsequent references are to this edition unless otherwise specified, and page numbers are given in parentheses in the text.

39. In Umberto Eco's more recent development of the theme, it is the librarian rather than a visitor who consumes the library: desperate to prevent anyone from reading the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics* on the subject of comedy (another made-up book), the librarian tries to eat it, then, in the ensuing struggle, sets the library building on fire; *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (London, 1984), 480–83.

40. On Rabelais and Ortuinus, see Barbara C. Bowen, *Enter Rabelais, Laughing* (Nashville, Tenn., 1998), 98; and Anne Lake Prescott, *Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 168. Rabelais's book was placed on the Council of Trent's *Index of Forbidden Books* in 1562 (see *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, ed. Screech, xxvi).

list as a whole is a parody of the book catalogues that, with the expanding print market, were increasingly widely available and increasingly sophisticated in their organization.[41] Rabelais's chapter not only highlighted the potential of the library as a fictional setting but also, as noted above, initiated the minor comic genre of the mock library catalogue.[42]

Jonson himself owned and annotated a copy of the 1599 edition of Rabelais's works, which is now held in the British Library.[43] As Anne Lake Prescott noted in 1997, this book had been omitted from modern attempts to catalogue Jonson's library. In an essay exploring the Frenchman's influence on Jonson, Prescott observes that Jonson added many lexical glosses to the margins of the first twenty-one chapters of the first book in the volume (*Gargantua*). She provides evidence that Jonson's glosses draw on Randle Cotgrave's *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (1611) and emphasizes how thoughtfully he selects definitions. The volume's inscription suggests that Jonson gave it to one Thomas Skynner in 1628, raising for Prescott the possibility that the glosses were primarily for the edification of this other reader. Maintaining that there are none after the first twenty-one chapters, she decides that these glosses do not "reveal much about what in Rabelais most interested Jonson. He is, after all, beginning at the beginning, not choosing passages to work with."[44] But Jonson did choose a passage to work with. The seventh chapter of the second book (*Pantagruel*) in which Pantagruel visits the Library of Saint-Victor is heavily glossed. Such glossing appears nowhere else after the opening section of the book. Jonson appears to have made a beeline for the list of fictitious books, which is buried deep within the volume (199–201).[45]

Jonson's marginal glosses in this chapter are also lexical and reliant upon Cotgrave's dictionary. They are exclusively concerned with the list of books, not the

41. On the accelerated production of library catalogues in the early modern period, see Roger Chartier, "Libraries without Walls," *Representations*, no. 42 (1993): 38–52.

42. Interest in this genre persists and has developed. For example, Eliot Weinberger's "The Cloud Bookcase" (*London Review of Books* 33, no. 15 [2011]: 29) is a poem consisting of made-up book titles. The "total" library that Jorge Luis Borges famously imagined in "The Library of Babel" (1944), in *Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London, 2000), includes thousands of false catalogues.

43. Francois Rabelais, *Les Oeuvres de M. Francois Rabelais* (Lyon, 1599). Jonson's copy is British Library, shelfmark 1081.k.2.

44. Anne Lake Prescott, "Jonson's Rabelais," in *New Perspectives on Ben Jonson*, ed. James Hirsh (London, 1997), 35–54 at 36–39. This discussion also appears in Prescott, *Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England*, 53–55. Jonson's copy of Rabelais was subsequently listed in "Library Records," *CWBJ Online*.

45. Prescott admits that she "worked from a microfilm of the relevant section" ("Jonson's Rabelais," 51n7), which would seem to explain the oversight. Hugh Roberts has also noted these glosses ("Previously Unnoticed Annotations to Jonson's Copy of Rabelais," *Notes and Queries* 61, no. 2 [2014]: 270–73). He provides a table of the annotations but concludes only that they "strongly suggest a sustained engagement on Jonson's part with often highly challenging Rabelaisian lexis" (273).

character: ignoring the opening paragraphs of the chapter, which describe Pantagruel going to Paris, the glosses begin with the first title in the list of books he encounters. Of the first sixty items in the list, covering three pages, forty-five have some underlinings and thirty-four have some words glossed in the margins. Four of the last five items marked have words underlined but not glossed, and there are no markings on the remaining three pages of the catalogue, suggesting that the marking and glossing was done page by page and never completed. Jonson's glosses find colorful English equivalents to Rabelais's distinctive language and draw out subtle nuances. For example, in glossing "foriboles" from the entry "Les foriboles de droict" (200) (translated by M. A. Screech as "*Niggles of the Law*" [39]), Jonson selects "flim-flams" and "nifles" from Cotgrave's list of synonyms, ignoring the more familiar "trifles."[46] Alongside "lunettes" from the entry "Les lunettes des Romipetes" (200) (translated by Screech as "*The Eye-glasses of Romiseekers*" [40]), he writes not only "spectacles" but also "merry thought," using an obscure definition Cotgrave provides for the singular form "lunette."[47] Jonson's glosses of "foriboles" and "lunettes" indicate his use of Cotgrave, his favoring of less familiar terms, and his recognition of nuance that seems entirely Rabelaisian but is difficult to retain in translations.

This isolated cluster of annotations tells us that Jonson, whenever he first encountered *Pantagruel*, took a close interest in its mock library catalogue at some point between 1611, when Cotgrave's dictionary became available, and 1628, when he gave this copy away. That evidence sheds new light on "An Execration." The poem has elements of the mock-library-catalogue genre, most directly in the fact that Jonson's list of books that Vulcan should have consumed instead of his includes two made-up works: "*The Art of Kindling the True Coal*, by Lungs, / With Nicholas Pasquil's *Meddle With Your Match*" (76–77). The first uses the formulation "the art of," which several of Rabelais's fictitious titles incorporate and which continued to be popular in advice books.[48] The author of this made-up book is "Lungs," "One who blows the fire; a chemist's assistant" (*OED*, sense 3). Jonson's *The Alchemist* also uses the word in this

46. Randle Cotgrave attributes "Foriboles" to Rabelais and cross-refers the reader to "Fariboles" (the more usual spelling, which appears in some editions of Rabelais), the definition of which begins "*Trifles, nifles, flim-flams*" (*A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* [London, 1611]). The popular earlier dictionary, Claudius Hollyband's *A Dictionarie of French and English* (London, 1593), also used by Prescott for comparison, has an entry only for "Fariboles," which it defines as "*trifles, tales, or like trash*."

47. Cotgrave, unlike Hollyband, includes the singular form of *lunettes* and defines it as "*The merrie-thought; the forked craw-bone of a bird, which we use, in sport, to put on our noses*." Hugh Roberts misses this definition, leading him rather to underestimate Jonson: he writes that the annotations "contain seemingly straightforward items of vocabulary like 'lunettes'" and that the phrase "merry thought" does not "obviously apply to any French or Latin word or phrase" ("Previously Unnoticed Annotations to Jonson's Copy of Rabelais," 271).

48. The decade before Jonson's poem saw the appearance of such advice books as Thomas Cooper, *The Art of Giuing* (London, 1615); Robert Robinson, *The Art of Pronuntiation* (London, 1617); Francis Rous, *The Arte of Happines* (London, 1619); and John Willis, *The Art of Memory* (London, 1621).

unusual sense: Sir Epicure Mammon knows Face as Subtle's "fire-drake, / His lungs, his Zephyrus, he that puffs his coals" (2.1.26–27) and repeatedly addresses him as "Lungs."[49] For any reader making the connection, *The Art of Kindling the True Coal* is thereby associated with the fictional conman Face, extending the implication that such advice books represent a form of false learning.

The second made-up work, "Nicholas Pasquill's *Meddle With Your Match*," has a more specific target: the writer Nicholas Breton, who adopted the persona of Pasquil the plain and was fond of alliterative titles and proverbs.[50] Again, there may be an element of self-reference here: the alliterative phrase "meddle with your match," suggesting "contend with your equal," was proverbial but apparently only after Jonson, who had given it to comic characters in *Every Man in His Humour* (3.2.89) and *Bartholomew Fair* (1.4.77).[51] The effect is to align the real author Breton with Jonson's fictional creations. The title also makes an ingenious play on words: "match" already had the common modern meaning of a device for lighting fuel (*OED*, s.v. "match, *n.*²," sense 2a). Part of the joke is the appropriateness of both of these made-up books to the rampaging god of fire who is interested in kindling and lighting but should learn to interfere only with his equals.[52] Like Rabelais with his multiple satiric targets, Jonson is here making fun of popular advice books, an identifiable contemporary author, and Vulcan himself. At the same time, the subtle echoes of Jonson's plays extend the poem's interest in the relationship between the real and the fictional, and in the capacity of authors to create networks of meaning that Vulcan cannot disrupt.

"An Execration" may even reflect the impact of Jonson's careful study of Rabelais's language. The list of "serious follies" that would have given Vulcan "some colour for [his] flames" continues with "trifles" such as "anagrams, / Or eteostichs, or those finer flams" of verses in various fanciful shapes (35–38). The word "flams" not only plays on "flames" but also denotes "A fanciful composition; a conceit" (*OED*,

49. The only examples of the word being used in this sense listed in the *OED* are *The Alchemist* and a work by Abraham Cowley from the 1660s (which is also cited in *CWBJ*, note to 2.1.27); it may be Jonson's own joke.

50. See note to line 77. Breton is named in several manuscript versions of the poem (see the collation for line 77 in *CWBJ*). This variation suggests that either Jonson wavered on how explicit to make the satire or that those copying the poem identified Breton.

51. See note to line 77 and Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1950), M747. *Every Man In*, first performed in 1598 and first published in quarto in 1601, is the earliest example that Tilley lists. Subsequent usages by other authors include Robert Snawsel, *A Looking Glasse for Maried Folkes* (London, 1610), sig. C1v.

52. For all the playful tone here, the humor is dark: as Keith Thomas has emphasized, this was a period in which "Next to plague, perhaps the greatest single threat to security was fire" (*Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* [London, 1971], 17). On the many libraries that have been lost to fires over the centuries, see Lucien X. Polastron, *Books on Fire: The Tumultuous Story of the World's Great Libraries*, trans. Jon E. Graham (London, 2007).

sense 2).[53] This definition is closely related (and cross-referenced in the *OED*) to "flim-flam," "A piece of nonsense or idle talk; a trifle, a conceit" (*OED*, sense 1). Jonson's poem is the first example given in the *OED* of "flam" being used in this crossover sense, and he, as noted above, had found "flim-flams" in Cotgrave's dictionary as an alternative synonym to "trifles" for Rabelais's "foriboles." It is possible that in writing his list of literary "follies," Jonson considered Rabelais's satire and the kinds of words he had used, and adapted "flim-flams," shortening it to "flams" but keeping the alliteration ("finer flams"). If so, this would suggest that Jonson completed his study of Rabelais's library catalogue before November 1623 and perhaps even that he consulted his annotated copy or notes digested from that copy—in which case here was material that did survive the fire in his lodging—as part of the process of writing his poem.

Jonson, then, engaged closely with aspects of Rabelais's work, finding in it a linguistically rich reflection of his own concern with the relationship between genuine learning and false scholarship or destructive study, not just a romance to poke fun at, as he does elsewhere.[54] Even prior to his annotation of this copy of *Pantagruel*, however, Jonson seems to have encountered the genre of the mock library catalogue via Donne's *The Courtier's Library*. This satirical work bears close connections with "An Execration" and is perhaps the most illuminating of its intertexts.

Jonson, Donne, and Satirizing the Reader

John Donne was familiar with Rabelais's work, but he changes the focus of the library catalogue from the monastic world to the world of the court.[55] *The Courtier's Library* was not printed until 1650, but there are two early manuscript witnesses: the Trinity manuscript, which shows some variations, and the recently discovered Westminster manuscript, which is earlier and gives essentially the same text as the printed edition.[56] While Evelyn Simpson, the work's first modern editor, proposed that it was

53. "Flams" (spelled "flammes" in the second folio) appears as "flames" in the 1640 Benson quarto as well as in a number of manuscripts (see the collation for line 36 in *CWBJ*). This variant brings out the play on fire but loses the double meaning as well as the rhyme with "anagrams."

54. In Jonson's 1629 play *The New Inn*, Lovel praises his former patron Lord Beaufort for not owning various romances, including *Pantagruel* (1.6.123–28). As Prescott suggests, however, Lovel may be being made to appear snobbish in his interests (*Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England*, 123).

55. For evidence of Donne's acquaintance with Rabelais's work, see Prescott, *Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England*, 95–98; and *The Courtier's Library, or Catalogus Librorum Aulicorum Incomparabilium et Non Vendibilium*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and trans. Percy Simpson (London, 1930), 1–26. Simpson's edition had a limited print run, but most of the introduction is reprinted in the more easily accessible *A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne,* 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1948), 149–58.

56. The most recent translation, provided in Piers Brown, "'Hac ex consilio meo via progredieris': Courtly Reading and Secretarial Mediation in Donne's *The Courtier's Library*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2008): 833–66 at 858–63, follows the 1650 edition, with the

written and revised between 1603 and 1611, there is evidence of manuscript circulation as early as 1604–5. Daniel Starza Smith and Matthew Payne's recent article includes a new translation of Donne's Latin letter to Sir Henry Goodere, asking him to return "my Latin epigrams and satirical Catalogue of Books." The article dates the letter to early 1605 and, largely on this basis, proposes a narrower date range for the composition of Donne's work of 1603–4.[57]

Donne's work begins with a preface addressed to the courtier who, because of "the natural occupations of court," lacks "the leisure for literature." "[H]ow much time," the preface asks this imagined courtly reader, "is left over in your life for reading and the improvement of your mind?" The following list of books, Donne's persona promises, will help this reader "to appear learned."[58] The list is divided into thirty-four entries, each describing one or more imaginary books mainly ascribed to real authors. While the work as a whole satirizes the type of the vain and ignorant courtier, these individual entries satirize actual thinkers, writers, preachers, and politicians of the day. As Simpson argued back in 1930, *The Courtier's Library* "throws a brilliant light on Donne's opinion of many of his contemporaries," and yet it has largely been neglected by his editors and critics.[59]

Jonson not only appears to have been one of those few acquaintances to see Donne's catalogue but may also have been involved in its conception. The first entry reads:

> Nicolas Hill, On Distinguishing the Sex and Hermaphroditisms of Atoms; The same, On their Anatomy, and How to Aid in their Births when they are buried. To which is added The Art of Making Fire-Pots, and all the equipment necessary for that purpose, by his countryman and contemporary Master Plat. (861)

emendations suggested by Simpson from her collation of that text with the Trinity manuscript (see *The Courtier's Library*, ed. Simpson, 79–93). The Westminster manuscript, the earliest surviving witness, was discovered in 2016: see transcription and discussion in Daniel Starza Smith and Matthew Payne with a translation by Melanie Marshall, "Rediscovering John Donne's *Catalogus librorum satyricus*," *Review of English Studies* 70 (2018): 1–33. Marshall's translation is of a Latin letter by Donne, which provides the title "*Catalogus librorum satyricus*" adopted by this article.

57. Smith and Payne, "Rediscovering John Donne's *Catalogus librorum satyricus*": for the translation of Goodere's letter, see 31–33 (quotation 32); for the dating of the letter to early 1605, see 16–18; for the dating of Donne's work itself, see 6–7.

58. Brown, "Hac ex consilio meo via progredieris," 859. All subsequent quotations are from Brown's translation, and page numbers (line numbers are not supplied) are given in parentheses in the text. The variations found only in the Trinity manuscript are discussed below.

59. *The Courtier's Library*, ed. Simpson, 6. Simpson's edition was the first since 1719, and no further translation was published until Brown's in 2008. Smith and Payne's recent article, "Rediscovering John Donne's *Catalogus librorum satyricus*," emphasizes that *The Courtier's Library* contains a "wealth of information" about Donne's thinking and reading, and that its "literary qualities deserve much more credit and attention" (2–3).

Nicholas Hill was a contemporary philosopher. The two made-up titles attributed to him parody his 1601 treatise, *Philosophia Epicurea, Democritiana, Theophrastica*, and ironically put it alongside the rather more practical style of work associated with the inventor Sir Hugh Plat. Hill's treatise advocated a Copernican solar system, advanced the theory of a plurality of worlds, and promoted Epicurean atomism. Printed in Paris, it "attracted remarkably little attention at the time."[60] Jonson was one of the few to respond: his Epigram 133, "On the Famous Voyage," refers to "all those atomi ridiculous / Whereof old Democrite and Hill Nicholas / One said, the other swore, the world consists" (127–29). Hugh Trevor-Roper's account of Hill cites only these allusions in Donne and Jonson, and one other in a work by their friend John Hoskyns, and suggests that for over thirty years Hill's work was "apparently unnoticed in England" beyond their circle.[61] This shared interest in an obscure figure strongly suggests that Jonson was part of the intended audience for Donne's catalogue. Moreover, as Brown observes, Donne owned a copy of Hill's treatise that had previously belonged to Jonson and that has an inscription mocking the obscure style of the book, which may be in Jonson's hand. The inscription reads, "non lectore tuis opus est, sed Apolline libris [your books do not need a reader, but (rather) Apollo]." This material evidence suggests, Brown writes, that the "copy was either an inspiration for Donne's list of books or a gift commemorating it."[62]

Such an exchange, whether inspiration or commemoration, is consistent with what we know about the relationship between Jonson and Donne. The two may have met as early as the 1590s, and Jonson appears to have greatly admired Donne's satires of that decade.[63] Donne supplied a commendatory verse for the print edition of *Volpone* (1607), a play that has been identified as reflecting some of his interests and even input.[64] Jonson praised Donne in turn, and his epigrams record him both sending his own work to Donne to "judge" (Epigram 96, line 3) and acting as a conduit for his friend's work (Epigram 94 is addressed to "Lucy, Countess of Bedford, With Master Donne's Satires"). Both men borrowed books from Cotton's library, while Goodere was a mutual friend and fellow member of the Mermaid Club.[65] This

60. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans: Seventeenth-Century Essays* (London, 1987), 2–3.

61. Trevor-Roper, *Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans*, 4.

62. Brown, "Hac ex consilio meo via progredieris," 838. Brown cites Mark Bland's view that the inscription may be in Jonson's hand but is definitely not in Donne's. On Donne's book collection, see Hugh Adlington's forthcoming study *John Donne's Books: Reading, Writing, and the Uses of Knowledge*.

63. Dennis Flynn, "Donne's 'Amicissimo, Et Meritissimo Ben: Jonson' and the Daring of *Volpone*," *Literary Imagination* 6, no. 3 (2004): 368–89 at 372; see also Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life*, 150.

64. Flynn, "Donne's 'Amicissimo, Et Meritissimo Ben: Jonson' and the Daring of *Volpone*," 375–87.

65. On the use of Cotton's library, see the records provided in G. C. Tite, *The Early Records of Sir Robert Cotton's Library* (London, 2003) (on Donne, 217; on Jonson, 31, 34, 35, 37,

evidence suggests that Jonson and Donne were accustomed to exchanging work in manuscript. It also provides a precedent for Jonson's continuing to be in possession of work by Donne long after it was composed (the epigram accompanying Donne's satires was probably not written before 1607, but the satires belong to the 1590s).[66]

As Simpson pointed out, Hill is not the only topical reference to appear in Jonson's Jacobean works and in Donne's catalogue. In the epigram naming Hill, Jonson also jokes about John Harington's punningly titled treatise on the jakes, *The Metamorphosis of Ajax* (196); the tenth entry in Donne's catalogue reads, "The Hercules of John Harrington, or Concerning the method of emptying the dung from Noah's Ark" (861). Doll Common, pretending to be mad, names the Jewish scholar Kimchi and the Proselyte Onkelos (*The Alchemist* [1610], 4.5.31), both of whom also appear in the catalogue's seventh entry as the subject of a book about "Peace in Jerusalem" (861). The noted divine and Hebrew scholar Hugh Broughton, named in *The Alchemist*, where he, too, is ridiculed by Doll's performance (2.3.238, 4.5.1–32), and in *Volpone*, where Peregrine compares the strange language of Volpone as mountebank to that of "Broughton's books" (2.2.102), is presented in Donne's twelfth entry as "enlightened, but barely enlightening" (861).[67] Moreover, the overarching satiric target of Donne's work—the courtier who would rely on a catalogue to achieve an appearance of up-to-date knowledge rather than read actual books—is also the target of Jonson's Epigram 92. Here Jonson mocks misguided "statesmen" who "at every mart / Are sure to con the catalogue by heart" and who visit booksellers only to buy "the names of books" (3, 21–22, 24). It is difficult to determine the direction or extent of influence, especially given the uncertain date of composition of *The Courtier's Library* and the possibility that Donne saw Jonson's works in manuscript before they were first performed or printed. What does seem likely is that all of these works reflect an ongoing exchange of ideas, jokes, books, and work in manuscript between the two writers in the early Jacobean period.

Jonson's apparent acquaintance with Donne's mock library catalogue forms another important context for "An Execration." While the poem in some ways draws directly on Rabelais, its specific satiric targets recall *The Courtier's Library* more closely than they do Rabelais's list of made-up titles. Jonson's dismissal of "follies" such as "anagrams, / Or eteostichs, or those finer flams" of verses in fanciful shapes (35–38) not only is colored by Rabelaisian language but also echoes Donne's sixteenth entry, which includes "The holiday work of Sir John Davies, On the Making of Approximate Anagrams, and of Writing Little Mottoes in Rings" (863). As both works mix the frivolous with the serious, Jonson's proposal of feeding the Talmud

93, 128). On the Mermaid Club, which began to meet "some time before 1611," see Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life*, 262–65 at 263.

66. *Ben Jonson*, ed. Donaldson, 659.

67. *The Courtier's Library*, ed. Simpson, 10–11, and explanatory notes on individual items (54–78).

(the corpus of Jewish law), along with the Koran, to Vulcan (65) recalls the satire of Broughton that appeared in Donne's catalogue as well as in Jonson's comedies.

"An Execration" also has a more fundamental connection with Donne's work in its concern to satirize a certain type of reader. By listing the valuable books and works in progress Vulcan did destroy and the worthless items that were absent but more deserving of destruction, Jonson not only constructs himself as a man of learning and discernment but also constructs Vulcan as his opposite. The god is made into a figure for the undiscriminating reader who will consume (a metaphor for reading that runs through the poem) at random unless otherwise directed.[68] Vulcan, in other words, serves the same satiric function as Donne's generic courtly reader. The parallel may have its origins in Rabelais: Pantagruel, as noted above, is characterized as a consuming reader. Rabelais does not, however, develop this aspect of his work and provides little framework for interpreting the long list of books. Both Jonson and Donne are much more concerned than Rabelais with representing a misguided reader in order to guide their readers' judgments, thereby displaying their ability as scholars to categorize and mediate knowledge. Brown has read this aspect of *The Courtier's Library* in relation to Donne's experience as a secretary and the culture of mediated learning in which he worked, observing that the catalogue suggests "the frustration experienced by scholars who were condemned to subordinate positions despite their superior learning."[69] As a court writer, subordinate to patrons less learned than himself, Jonson may well have shared this sense of frustration.

Moreover, Donne, like Jonson, was troubled by the reading that the state conducted through officials, spies, and informers. The ninth item in his catalogue reads, "What you please out of what you please; *Or the art of decyphering and finding some treason in any intercepted letter*, by Philips" (861). Thomas Phelips worked for Walsingham and was famous for his skill in deciphering intercepted letters.[70] Using the "art of" formulation favored by Rabelais and continued in "An Execration," Donne is satirically suggesting that over-reading—finding treason in *any* document—is part of the training that such men undertake. Jonson's Epistle to

68. Jonson repeatedly uses food metaphors (some drawn from classical sources) to define different kinds of reading. In *Discoveries*, for example, he writes that the poet should read "Not as a creature that swallows what it takes in crude, raw, or indigested, but that feeds with an appetite, and hath a stomach to concoct, divide, and turn all into nourishment" (1755–57). As in "An Execration," the distinction is between mere consumption and actual digestion. For further discussion, see Bruce Boehrer, *The Fury of Men's Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal* (Philadelphia, 1997).

69. Brown, "Hac ex consilio meo via progredieris," 848.

70. *The Courtier's Library*, ed. Simpson, 61. Simpson's introduction notes that this aspect of the catalogue connects it with Donne's satires of the 1590s (12). What is lost in translation is that in the original, the title and attribution are in English. The only other title given in English comes in the second entry, which concerns the informer Richard Topcliffe. The strategic use of English in an otherwise Latin text pointedly makes these two men who sought to expose others stand out.

Volpone makes a similar assertion: "there are [interpreters] that profess to have a key for the deciphering of everything" (49–50). Donne's concerns were such that he seems to have tried to limit circulation of *The Courtier's Library* itself (as noted above, there are only two surviving contemporary manuscript witnesses, and it was not printed until after his death). He or one of his readers also seems to have revised the work to remove some explicit satire on Sir Francis Bacon, which could, had the work got into the wrong hands, have made Donne the target of the kind of state-sanctioned reading he mocks.[71] While Donne localizes that mocking in one entry, Jonson makes the state's search for treason intrinsic to his poem, combining in the single figure of Vulcan elements that Donne distributes between his generic courtly reader and Phelips as a representative of the state. Comparing the two works thus helps to reveal the full complexity of Jonson's figuration of Vulcan: the god of fire is simultaneously a figure for the accidental or incidental destruction of material artifacts, for unthinking reading, and for the state censorship of literature. What this enables Jonson to add to Donne's satire is a strong sense of the equivalence of these different forms of indiscriminate consumption.

Jonson's poem may, then, be seen as a development of Donne's mock library catalogue and of the satiric interests that the two writers shared. At the same time, the poem, extending well beyond engagement with this comic genre, offers a fuller and more explicit consideration of positive models of reading. Donne's preface invokes learning only as an absence, lamenting that in the present age there is "nothing more rare than to be fully learned [plene doctis]" and then wryly advising the imaginary courtly reader to abandon "those authors that they call the Classics to academics and schoolmasters to wear out." This reader may instead "avoid both the shame of ignorance and the bother of reading" by citing in conversation only works from the catalogue provided. By being "difficult for others to locate"—that is, they do not exist—these books will impress with their novelty and be hard to contest (859). The actual reader is thereby asked to imagine a virtual library that exists not just in the mind of the individual but in social discourse. Donne, wearing his own considerable learning lightly, is ironically suggesting that pretended reading might be as socially effective as real scholarship, at least in some courtly circles. He gives his readers the opportunity not just to enjoy some in-jokes about contemporary figures and to feel reassured about their own superior learning but to laugh in recognition. For, while being unlikely to identify with the gullible courtier addressed, Donne's acquaintances may have recognized in themselves the urge to find shortcuts to the appearance of learning and the possibility of being taken in by such feigning in

71. In the catalogue as printed in 1650, there are two entries that satirize Bacon for the role he played in the trial of the Earl of Essex in 1601. The Trinity manuscript shows evidence of an attempt to remove both of these entries. *The Courtier's Library*, ed. Simpson, argues that this is an instance of authorial revision (83–86). Smith and Payne counter that these changes are not authorial but may give evidence of the work's reception ("Rediscovering John Donne's *Catalogus librorum satyricus*," 10–11, 19–22).

others. Rabelais with his giant and Cervantes with his Curate similarly satirize false, feigned, or impossible learning but do not explicitly depict—though as authors they display—an alternative of genuine learning.

Jonson, however, maintains a clear distinction between false and true learning as he explicitly lays claim to the latter. He creates in Vulcan a consumer of books who is in no danger of being mistaken for a true scholar—and therefore poses no threat to Jonson's self-presentation—and offers a careful defense of his own scholarly endeavors. This concern is especially evident in the opening lines of the section describing the works in progress that have been lost:

> I dare not say a body, but some parts
> There were of search and mastery in the arts:
> All the old Venusine in poetry,
> And lighted by the Stagirite, could spy
> Was there made English
> (87–91)

"[T]he old Venusine" is Horace, born in Venusia, and "the Stagirite" Aristotle, born in Stagira. Jonson translated and commented on Horace's *Art of Poetry* in the light of Aristotle's *Poetics*, from which it was thought to derive.[72] By alluding to Horace's esteemed work, he intensifies his mockery of contemporary advice books, which, by also using the "art of" formulation, rhetorically lay claim to a value they lack. By using the obscure nicknames "Venusine" and "Stagirite," he signals to his more learned readers that through intimate acquaintance with these classical authors, he has approached the kind of "mastery in the arts" that Donne presents as such a rarity. It may be tongue-in-cheek, but Jonson is making a serious point about his scholarly achievement.

Looking at "An Execration" through the lens of *The Courtier's Library* illuminates Jonson's concern to defend his scholarship in this way. For Donne, though he is focusing on a courtier not a court writer, highlights the ease with which a (socially valuable) veneer of learning may be painted. Jonson, facing the loss of both material evidence of his genuine learning and raw materials for the production of further writing, provides a compensatory description of his burned books and papers, and of the "labours" he has undergone. And it is significant that he describes rather than names his lost works. Jonson is denying lazy readers such as those satirized in Epigram 92 and *The Courtier's Library* the opportunity simply to consume his works in the form of titles. "An Execration," while incorporating elements of the mock library catalogue, does not function as a catalogue but rather gives its readers a more meaningful kind of access to the books that Jonson has carefully digested and was in the

72. Jonson's translation was printed in 1641, but the preface or commentary he supposedly wrote is lost. Burrow's headnote to "An Execration" suggests that these lines "may refer" to the lost preface (7:165).

process of writing. Engaging with issues that also concerned Cervantes, Rabelais, and Donne, the poem powerfully asserts the resilience of art (and the value of the laughter it can provoke) in the face of material, social, and political threat.

This emphasis on the life of the text provides an opportunity to reconsider our critical and historical relationship with the early modern library. Heidi Brayman Hackel's study of reading exemplifies current interest in reconstructing actual libraries. Her meticulous work has even allowed her to assemble the book collection of the Countess of Bridgewater and take a photograph.[73] Seeing that photograph is thrilling; many scholars interested in the history of books and reading have surely dreamed of re-creating the libraries of the people whom they study. And yet the writers explored in the present essay remind us that libraries are volatile and unstable. All four suggestively combine the real and the imagined: Rabelais gives us a real library of made-up books, Cervantes a fictional library of real books, Donne a library catalogue of made-up books by real authors, and Jonson, combining all of these elements, a real desk piled with real books and books-to-be, and a list of absent items, both actual and made-up. These writers highlight how book ownership is so bound up with social identity that an actual library or library catalogue may itself be a kind of fiction, carefully constructed to convey a particular self-image. Jonson's poem gives us less an insight into what was really on that desk in November 1623 than a warning against over-reliance on the material. It emphasizes that what matters is not books but how books are read. To consume a book without understanding or judgment is in a sense to destroy it, as epitomized by Vulcan. But, conversely, to read well—to pick up allusions, to make intertextual connections, to store in the memory, to find fuel for new writing—is to keep a text alive. In this sense "An Execration" is a kind of library itself, which preserves, categorizes, and provides an introduction to some of the classical and contemporary books that Jonson himself had digested, and to his work in progress. It thus reminds us that to uncover the life of texts is not merely to consult material artifacts but to explore the processes of writing and reading that generate and are generated by them.

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73. Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England*, 247.