

“Anachronic Jonson: Intertextual Histories in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*” (with L. Grek), “Long Reach of Antiquity,” Columbia University, Society of Fellows in the Humanities, April 28, 2012.

Classical (a)Temporalities in Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus* and *Catiline*

In 1603 the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, performed a play by the young Ben Jonson and a now-unknown collaborator about the career and downfall of Lucius Aelius Sejanus, the infamous praetorian prefect of the Emperor Tiberius. *Sejanus, His Fall* was a dangerous flop. Jonson would later recall the play “suffered no less violence from our people here, than the subject of it did from the rage of the people of Rome”;ⁱ and its author was summoned before the Privy Council on the suspicion that his portrait of palace corruption had treasonous contemporary application. Apparently undeterred, Jonson revised the play for publication in 1605. The resulting quarto edition of *Sejanus* is a remarkable artifact of late Renaissance classicism. Insisting, in an allusion to his legal difficulties, on his need [and here I’m quoting again] “to show my integrity in the story,”ⁱⁱ Jonson freighted his margins with Latin notes referring readers to both his classical sources (chiefly, Tacitus and Dio Cassius), and to contemporary scholarship. The play itself is, in Anne Barton’s words, a “learned and uncompromising” dramatization of Roman history,ⁱⁱⁱ a work in which the emperor speaks casually in Greek, and in which major speeches are often translated directly out of Tacitus.

Undeterred by *Sejanus*’s failure, Jonson returned to Roman tragedy in 1611 with *Catiline, his Conspiracy*, essentially a dramatic rendering of Sallust’s *Bellum Catilinae*. In *Catiline*, Jonson dispenses with marginal notes and wears his learning somewhat more lightly, but his love of painstaking detail and faithful translation is very much intact: while *Sejanus*’s longest Tacitean speech stretches only fifty-two lines, in *Catiline*, Jonson gives almost three hundred lines to his translation of Cicero’s First Catilinarian. *Catiline*, too, was a dismal failure on stage, in part because of this speech.^{iv} In the 1611 quarto’s preface, “To the Reader in Ordinary,” Jonson writes, “Though you dislike the oration of Cicero, in regard that you read some pieces of it at school and understand them not yet, I shall find the way to forgive you.”^v

In published form, then, *Sejanus* and *Catiline* seem in many ways to belong less to the commercial world of the London stage than to the spheres of Renaissance classical scholarship and historiography. Accordingly, the scholarship of the last three decades has tended to see Jonson’s Roman tragedies as sophisticated interventions in contemporary debates about Roman history, historiographical methodology, and the relationship between drama and history. Richard Dutton and Blair Worden have argued that *Sejanus* constitutes a challenge to Sidney’s separation of the functions of poet and historian. Annabel Patterson and Worden associate *Sejanus* with the Taciteanism of the Essex circle and the historiography of William Camden and John Selden. Worden and Bruce Bohrer also connect *Catiline* with the contemporary debate over Sallustian and anti-Sallustian historiographic traditions. The portrait of Jonson that emerges of a historian-playwright whose Roman plays are each constituted, as Dutton puts it, “of two texts – one, the text of a play performed on the public stage, and the other, a serious history.”^{vi}

In this paper we want to argue that this historiographical reading takes a one-dimensional view Jonson’s use of sources. On the surface allusions to classical authorities do contribute to the seriousness and accuracy of Jonson’s historical drama. But when one follows those allusions to their sources, when one accounts for the original context they bring with them, and when considers the varying distances between those original contexts and how they function as quotations in Jonson’s plays, one finds that Jonson’s authorities produce a wide range of temporal effects. They are caught between the dramatic chronology of Jonson’s scripts,^{vii} the historical chronology of the events which those scripts portray, and the literary chronology of their sources. This paper will pursue these interlocked and conflicting