Weigh Me as a Friend: Jonson’s Multiple Constructions of the Fat Body

Ben Jonson’s body is often palpably present in his poetry. In his late poetry, especially, Jonson repeatedly offers what appears to be vivid descriptions of his body that are to many people’s minds simply grotesque. We are told, then, that he has a “rocky face,” a “mountain belly,” and even such details as he “doth hardly approach / His friends, but to break chairs, or crack a coach.” Jonson gives us his age to the very year or his weight to what appears to be the nearest pound. In such moments, Jonson provides for early modern and late modern readers what Sara van den Berg has called “damning enumeration.” He tells us that “[h]is weight is twenty stone, within two pound” and that he is a “[f]ull twenty stone, of which I lack two pound.”

Such enumerations are likely to be especially damning for the late modern reader given the extent to which we are asked in our daily lives to identify ourselves by such vital statistics. We think we know something important and essential about Jonson when we know that he weighed 278 pounds, significantly a number that only seems precise. (In reality, he may weigh sometimes more, sometimes less, or he may be using the figure symbolically, as one scholar reasons Jonson does with his age when he specifies in the same collection that it is fifty.) Such a figure can be damning when it is taken to be a simple objective statement of fact that is, nonetheless, taken to say something of central importance about the
character of the person. We know, or think we know, that Jonson was excessive and immoderate, given that number on the scale.

Such assumptions are evident in statements by several critics. Bruce Boehrer, in his criticism, uses this approximate reckoning to damn Jonson. Having just discussed the excesses of the Jacobean court, he uses this number to prove that Jonson is the perfect emblem of this courtly excess. As Boehrer concludes, “Hence the sad case of Ben Jonson: he cannot successfully assert his notion of moral value without transgressing it in the same gesture; he cannot become the monarch of literary moderation without weighing 280 pounds.” It is tempting, of course, given the way that Boehrer confidently announces this figure, to correct him by citing the lines above and announcing that, in fact, Jonson clearly weighed only 278 pounds. Obviously, it would be absurd for me to do so since I would, in doing this, be participating in the very cultural discourse that I am here decrying. I would be giving such enumerations too much power, and I would be falling victim to the terms that Jonson all too knowingly mocks in his poetry. The figure that Jonson dances around and plays with in ways designed to mock certain readers becomes much too concrete and telling for Boehrer as when he cites it to communicate something essential about Jonson. This number supposedly tells us beyond doubt that Jonson was excessive, immoderate, and a fat hypocrite if he audaciously dared to recommend moderation. Jonson, well aware of the tendency to read bodies, including his fat body, in this way, mocks those that do in his poetry. Such conclusions, Jonson’s poetry insists, tell us more about the reader than they can ever tell us about the poet. In late modernity, our own damning enumerations tell us more about ourselves: numbers that can be quantified, charted, and assessed demographically have come to say it all. Indeed, certain numbers have come to acquire magical connotations, such as 200 or 300 pounds. We feel we know something important about the person who weighs one of these numbers.

Jonson makes himself palpably present in his poetry in a way that challenges the reader to weigh his fat body in other than objectivist ways. Many will see his fat body as an obstruction that conveys something fundamentally important and essential about him. Such a reader cannot go beyond those vital statistics, whether they be Jonson’s age, the size of his waist, the number of his gray hairs, or his weight. Jonson gives such a judgmental reader the statistics they need, even as he urges others to understand him differently.

As we will see, the word “weight” is important to Jonson. He urges the reader to weigh him, yet he understands weight in a very different, humanistic sense. He encourages the reader to “weigh” him in the sense