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Jonson's "To Penshurst": The Country House as Church

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Ben Jonson's famous country-house poem "To Penshurst" has come under attack in recent years. Its re-evaluation was begun in 1972 in some relatively brief remarks by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* and in 1984 reached what surely will be the pinnacle of such efforts in Don Wayne's book *Penshurst*. Williams protested that in Jonson's detailed catalog of the dynamic activity which takes place on the Penshurst estate, the long first section of the poem which occupies nearly half of its 102 lines, there is no sign of human labor producing the plenty that is described there. Fruit trees are heavily laden and their boughs bend down so that children may pluck easily their produce; carp, pikes, and eels readily betray themselves into or onto fishermen's nets and lines, fowl are "willing to be killed," and the rural population around the house is bringing a variety of cakes, fruits, nuts, cheeses, and the like to the Sidneys, the owners of the estate—but no one is working. Further, it is no different inside the house where the family resides. There Jonson describes a meal in progress, with everyone pretty much taking their ease as they feast and giving no thought about how their tables are furnished. The servants know to serve their guests cheerfully, Jonson says, for there is plenty for them to eat in their own quarters and therefore they need not envy the poet's "gluttony," as he calls his appetite. Williams concludes from all this that "there is more than a hint in the whole tone of this hospitable eating and drinking, of that easy, insatiable exploitation of the land and its creatures—a prolonged delight in an organised and corporative production and consumption."[1]

Don Wayne does not accept Williams' argument uncritically but his book nonetheless makes clear that he is in fundamental agreement with it; Williams' commentary, he says, "provides an important corrective to the other type of moral criticism, certainly in its own way anachronistic,

which has prevailed in discussions of 'To Penshurst.'"[2] In Wayne's view the poem "is an attempt to rationalize the accumulation of wealth and the maintenance of certain relations of exchange" (p. 121). Wayne interprets the poem basically from the standpoint of an economic historicism, in which Jonson's aim is to reveal the acquisitive nature of newly rich families like the Sidneys and to justify their desire for wealth. At the same time, according to Wayne, he wishes to assert (although in an ambiguous way) his own dissatisfaction as an outsider in this burgeoning capitalist society who is unable to share fully in the abundance that the "magical" nature of Penshurst provides, except by the poetic means of wish fulfillment and fantasy.[3] This last view of Jonson's poetic is shared by another critic, Jonathan Goldberg, who argues that Penshurst "presents an image of absolute totality, an inclusive fantasy of containment."[4]

Such interpretations are surprising because they contradict the plain sense of the poem, but Wayne's basic thesis is that the poem is interesting precisely "for the way in which it seems to undermine its own discourse" (p. 128). He marshals a great mass of evidence to prove his point, drawn from the "social, moral, intellectual, and psychological" (p. 3) contexts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the one area that he almost completely ignores is the one that undermines his own argument: the religious. If the religious aspects of the poem are not discussed, it may indeed appear either a trite statement of neo-classical commonplaces or a glorification of economic wealth in need of the kind of self-consuming reading that Wayne and others provide.[5] I will argue that it is neither one, that instead its picture of a "magical" nature seemingly cultivated without human labor is instead a celebration of the divine source of that nature and that Penshurst itself is not so much a counting house as it is a church.

The lack of any very complete model for Jonson's poem in either classical or English poetry—there are numerous partial echoes—has been tantalizing to critics.[6] One of the best suggestions in this regard was made by Gayle Wilson, concerning in particular the gaudy houses to which Penshurst is contrasted at the beginning of the poem:

> Thou art not, Penshurst, built to envious show
> Of touch or marble, nor canst boast a row
> Of polished pillars, or a roof of gold;
> Thous hast no lantern whereof tales are told,

> Or stair, or courts; but stand'st an ancient pile,
> And these grudged at, art reverenced the while.
> (1-6)

Wilson suggests that these houses are incarnations of the Temple of Solomon in the Bible, which was decorated with similar lavishness and that they will "eventually fall into decay, as opposed to the simplicity of Penshurst, which will continue to flourish."[7]

A more immediate model for the "prodigy" houses that Jonson attacks but probably also based on the biblical description of Solomon's temple is found in the *Book of Homilies*. The homily "Against Peril of Idolatry," for example, cites some remarks of St. Jerome that attack luxurious churches: "Many build walls, and erect pillars of churches; the smooth marbles do glister, the roof shineth with gold, the altar is set with precious stone." The same homily also reports favorably St. Jerome's condemnation of the temple and the church as mere buildings:

> God commanded both the Jews at that time, and now us who are placed in the Church, that we have no trust, in the goodliness of building and gilt roofs and in walls covered with tables of marble, and say, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." For that is the temple of the Lord wherein dwelleth true faith, godly conversation, and the company of all virtues.[8]

St. Jerome's remarks on this subject are also referred to by Richard Hooker in the fifth book of his *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1597), where he comments that the "same Jerome both in that place and elsewhere debaseth with like intent the glory of such magnificence . . . thereby to extol the necessity sometimes of charity and alms." Jonson owned and had made annotations in a copy of this book.[9]

There is a strong case, then, for the Old Testament temple as the model for Renaissance critics such as Jonson who attacked homes built for "envious show" (like William Cecil's Theobalds) which were not made for hospitality but for entertainments staged for the royal court on one of its "progresses" through the countryside.[10] But what is the model for Penshurst? For it is Jonson's principal concern in the poem not to describe the false luxury of homes which are "proud, ambitious heaps" but rather that true house where, as St. Jerome said, "dwelleth true faith,

godly conversation, and the company of all virtues." Gayle Wilson attributes the dynamic interaction of man and nature at Penshurst, which is one of the poem's most attractive features, to Jonson's use of the Great Chain of Being, which was "a physical metaphor for the religious truths that man should abhor material wealth and conspicuous display" (p. 81). This view, however, destroys the poem's symmetry: prodigy houses are embodiments of the biblical temple, but the very concrete house Penshurst, with its copious nature anxious to furnish its master's table and its gracious hosts eager for their guests who need give no advance notice nor be scrupulous about how much they eat or drink, is reduced to the abstract Chain of Being.

In the New Testament, however, the building which is the antitype to the temple is the church, which, of course, is not essentially a building at all but rather a group of individual Christians, called by St. Paul "the temple of the living God," to whom "God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them" (II. Cor. 2:16). As the *Book of Homilies* pointed out, this church in England "glistereth with no marble, shineth with no gold nor silver . . . but [is] gloriously decked with inward ornaments."[11] Jonson, too, is not interested at all in Penshurst as a building; he describes none of its architectural features, which is all that he describes of the other houses, and he makes a final comparison between the two in the last line of the poem by saying: "Their lords have built but thy lord dwells." The word "dwells" in this context has, as Alastair Fowler says, "a remarkable resonance"[12] and is one of the keys to the church-like nature of Penshurst. Even Solomon after he had built the great temple for the Israelites knew that the building itself could not be the actual dwelling place of Yahweh. His prayer of consecration repeats again and again that God cannot be housed in any man-made habitation: "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded" (I Kings 8:27).

The temple and the tabernacle of Moses, where the Ark of the Covenant was first kept, were in the words of Jonson's contemporary Joseph Hall "similitudes of God's house rather than the house itself."[13] The First Epistle of St. Peter had claimed that the Christian "house," the church, was spiritual in nature; St. Peter calls Christians "lively stones" who are "built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices" (I Peter 2:5). In the New Testament the divine presence was not known by the signs given in the Old Testament, such as a cloud descending onto the tabernacle or temple; rather, there was an actual indwelling of God in the faithful.[14] Perhaps the best text to describe the

way the church transforms the image of the temple and the one most relevant to Penshurst is St. Paul's discussion of the "household of God":

> Now therefore we are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto a holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

There are a number of ways in which the "living stones" of Penshurst manifest this indwelling Spirit, but before turning to the poem in detail I must first note briefly how Jonson's contemporaries, in both speech and practice, thought of the church as a house.

The two greatest preachers of the time, Lancelot Andrewes and John Donne, frequently addressed in what ways a home might be a church. Andrewes delivered a sermon before King James on March 24, 1611, probably very near the time Jonson was writing "To Penshurst,"[15] in which he considered the various ways in which every man is a builder of spiritual edifices. The man living alone should "in himself and of himself" build God an "oratory"; those who have a "household" should "build Him a chapel," those "with a larger circuit" should build a church, and those who possess a country or kingdom should build a "basilica." Every man, says Andrewes, who is within "God's building," that is the church, is a builder: "Builders, in regard of ourselves first: then, such as are committed to us, by bond either of duty or charity, every one being, as St. Chrysostom saith well . . . 'of those under his charge, to make God an house.'"[16]

Jonson's friend John Donne shared Andrewes' views of the wide scope where a church may be found. In one sermon he stated:

> When I pray in my chamber, I build a Temple there, that home; And, that minute, when I cast out a prayer, in the street, I build a Temple there . . . And God, who knowes what I am doing in these actions, erecting these Temples, he comes to them, and prospers, and blesses my devotions.[17]

In a sermon given prior to the building of the chapel at Lincoln's Inn Donne told the assembled lawyers that the master of a family is a "Bishop in his house" and that he should "call his family together, to humble, and pour out their souls to God [and] let him consider, that when he comes to kneele at the *side of his table*, to pray, he comes to build a Church there" (II, 222). Commenting upon St. Paul's remarks in Ephesians about the "household of God," Donne said that Christians were so called because "we are . . . the family of the faithful; and therefore out of a contemplation, and ordinary acquaintance with the parts of families, we are apter to conceive any such thing in God himself, as we see in a family" (V, 46-47). Thomas Wilson also agreed with this general notion; after citing in his *Christian Dictionary* (1612) a passage from Acts, "God dwells not in Temples made with hands" (7:48), he said that God dwells in a "spirituall Temple" which is the "bodies and soules of the faithful, wherein God dwelleth, as in a house or Temple."[18]

Such remarks, then, are widespread in Reformation England and continue the traditions of the Bible and the Church Fathers.[19] They are also a reflection of contemporary social practice. England's abolition of the Catholic Mass required many Catholics to turn their homes into churches, hiding fugitive priests there so that they could celebrate Mass whenever possible.[20] Jonson quite possibly attended such services, as the years that he was a Catholic (1598-1610) included the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 which reinvigorated official attack on Catholic worship. But Catholics already had long regarded their home as their parish. In response to government objections in 1581, for example, that he was not attending worship in his Anglican parish church at Harrowden, the Catholic Lord Vaux claimed that he, "his household and familiars and divers servants" were "a parish by itself."[21] Protestants held similar views. In *A Godly Forme of Household Government* (1600) Robert Cawdry claimed that a man who was the head of a family should have "a church in his house."[22] And Henry Hastings, Earl of Huntingdon and uncle of Robert Sidney, the owner of Penshurst, ordered his home as "a Protestant seminary in miniature, with prayers, fastings, and catechizings."[23]

Granted, then, that Jonson had ample historical and contemporary warrant to see the lord, lady, children and tenants of Penshurst as the "living stones" of a spiritual house, what is present in the poem to indicate it is a place of religious activity? First and foremost what Williams and Wayne have noticed: no work is performed on the place. In contrasting the prodigy houses to Penshurst in both the first and last lines of the poem Jonson each time emphasizes that it is only the latter that are

"built." Because the signs of the labor which made them are so palpable they are envied and "grudged at" by contemporaries. Penshurst instead is "reverenced" because it "stand'st an ancient pile"; that is, there are no conspicuous signs of labor and wealth having been lavished upon it.[24] In contemplating Penshurst—for that is what Jonson does as opposed to the envious calculations he or anyone might be expected to conduct on the luxurious modern houses—he is not interested in the details of its construction but rather in finding its indwelling lord.

As the models for the two kinds of houses that Jonson is comparing are found in the Old and New Testaments, so are the models for what actually takes place in the poem, which is largely of a festive nature. The bulk of the poem has two main divisions: lines 7-56 (a total of fifty)[25] in which the grounds, flora and fauna, and tenants of Penshurst are described, and lines 57-88 in which the inhabitants of the place are shown inside the house eating at table and where is praised the "high housewifery" of Barbara Sidney, which had managed to have the family's "linen, plate, and all things nigh" (l. 86) when King James had paid an unexpected visit. In the first section Jonson portrays the abundance of animals and fruit at Penshurst, all of which are available for the feast inside the house. "The painted partridge . . . is willing to be killed" (ll. 29-30), "fat aged carps," tired of eating "their own kind," now "run into thy net" (ll. 33-34), and the eels which "leap on land / Before the fisher, or into his hand" (ll. 37-38) are only a portion of what nature provides. Don Wayne comments that "the magical way in which Nature gives itself to the Sidneys is fantasy" but that the things that it gives are real. He then concludes that there is hoarding at Penshurst: "while the poem opposes use and 'free' exchange to ostentation and hoarding, the possibility of 'freely' using and exchanging the bounty of nature depends on the existence of a real surplus which could be derived only through accumulation" (p. 125). Such is a reasonable conclusion for a naturalistic critic, but it makes the poem subtle to the point of unintelligibility. For its "true" meaning then becomes the opposite of its plain statement. But I think rather that Jonson is following a quite definite biblical model in his picture of nature at Penshurst.

In the Old Testament the law provided for a sabbatical rest not only on the seventh day of the week but also during every seventh year, when the people were neither to sow their fields nor plant their vineyards nor do any other kind of work. For food during this time Yahweh promised, "I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth fruit for three years" (Leviticus 25:22). Then after a "week of years," seven times seven years, plus one more, in the fiftieth year, Yahweh

ordained a Jubilee year during which any man whose freedom or possessions had been forfeited were returned to him. He promised that if these sabbaticals and the Jubilee year were observed, then "I will set my tabernacle among you: and my soul shall not abhor you" (Leviticus 26:11).

Another Old Testament festival was connected with this number fifty, the Feast of Weeks. This feast began with the first harvest ("When ye be come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest unto the priest"—Leviticus 23:10) and reaches its climax on the fiftieth day, the end of harvest, when Yahweh says the people "shall offer a new meat offering unto the Lord" (v. 16). In Christianity, of course, fifty is the number of days after Christ's resurrection when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples to take up his dwelling place with them.

Jonson, then, begins his narration of Penshurst's soil, air, wood, and water at line 7 and spends exactly fifty lines developing it,[26] portraying a nature filled with an overwhelming plenty which is not presently being cultivated and with farmers and tenants and their daughters bringing offerings to the manor house ("all come in, the farmer and the clown . . . to salute / Thy lord and lady"—ll. 48-50). In these lines he reflects the Jubilee year of the Israelites when the people rested from their labors and contemplated and celebrated the source of creation. This Yahweh had done on the seventh day of his own work of creation, of course, when He pronounced all that He had made as "very good" (Genesis 1:31). "To Penshurst" does not deny the fact of labor; it rather affirms a rest from that labor so that its fruitfulness may be known as well as enjoyed and so that man will remember that he does not live by work alone.

Raymond Williams asks about this part of the poem: "What kind of wit is it exactly—for it must be wit; the most ardent traditionalists will hardly claim it for observation—which has the birds and other creatures offering themselves to be eaten?"[27] From the standpoint of "wit" the answer is hyperbole, a (slight) exaggeration of the common experience of fishermen who find at certain times that fish do indeed strike their lines almost as if they were waiting to be caught. Is the partridge "waiting to be killed"? So it sometimes seems on the hunter's lucky days. But there is more behind these passages than wit. The personification Jonson uses in attributing volition to animals is based on statements in Genesis that man has dominion over the creatures of nature (1:26 and 9:2), as Wilson and Fowler have pointed out, and on statements such as St. Augustine's that

man is able to tame the beasts because not only "the body of the beast, but even its soul has been made subject to man, so that it serves man's will by a kind of sense and habit."[28]

Williams remarks that at Penshurst the "magical extraction of the curse of labour is in fact achieved by a simple extraction of the existence of labourers" (p. 32), a comment with which Wayne agrees (p. 126). But there are laborers in the poem; they are simply not laboring at the moment. In the tradition within which Jonson is writing it is God who ultimately sustains creation; St. Augustine noted that even on the first sabbath God's "power ceased not from ruling heaven and earth and all that He had made, for otherwise they would have perished immediately."[29] The *Book of Homilies* also affirmed that God was responsible for the produce of nature, citing the biblical book of Wisdom, "It is not the increase of fruits that feedeth men, but it is thy word, O Lord, which preserveth them that trust in thee" (Wisd. 16:26), and commenting: "It is not therefore the power of the creatures which worketh their effects, but the goodness of God which worketh in them."[30] Jonson, then, had biblical and theological support for showing a nature that may be fruitful even when man rests from his labor.

The second major section of the poem, lines 57-88, recounts what goes on inside the house and who is present there. Again, no work is being done, as Robert Sidney is freely entertaining his guests, serving them his own meat, beer, bread, and wine. Jonson is also present and comments that he is able to eat and drink his fill; no man "tells my cups" and no waiter, standing by, tells him to stop eating (ll. 67-68). He is provided with fire and lights and livery and in general "all is there, / As if thou then wert mine, or I reigned here" (ll. 73-74). Finally, Jonson notes that on the recent unexpected visit to Penshurst by King James and his "brave son," Prince Henry, all was prepared for them—"not a room but dressed / As if it had expected such a guest!" (ll. 87-88)—and as a result the "good lady" of the house, Barbara Sidney, "reaped / The just reward of her high housewifery" (ll. 84-85).

As the previous section of the poem was modeled upon the sabbatical festivities of the Pentateuch, so this one is an image of the Christian sabbath, the "eighth" day of the week, the day upon which Christ was resurrected and which is hence the perfect day which succeeds the Jewish sabbath and which is also the symbol of the future life. Some early Christian exegetes connected this Christian sabbath to the Feast of Weeks. The "week of weeks" (49) represented history, the present age, and the one additional day added to reach the end of the Feast signified

the future age, the same relation that the Christian "eighth day" stood to the historical seven-day week.[31] As he had in the previous section Jonson uses number symbolism to highlight his theme here, ending his account of the hospitality of Penshurst's lord and lady at line 88 to indicate the eschatological application of what he is relating.

In *Paradise Lost* Milton said the progress from the Old Testament law to the New Testament faith was one of "shadowy types to truth" (12:303); in "To Penshurst" the movement between the two major sections of the poem is similar. The feast inside the house makes concrete and actual what was allusive or anticipatory in the festal procession to the house. Outside the house Jonson tells of Pan and Bacchus, the gods who symbolize bread and wine, making their feasts beneath Penshurst's "Mount" (ll. 10-11); inside the house it is the lord himself who serves bread and his "self-same" (l. 63) wine to his guests. Outside the house there are the "painted partridge," the "purpled pheasant," and the various fish and conies and fruit, while inside there is simply the "lord's own meat" (l. 62); outside there is the copse "named of Gamage" (l. 19), Lady Sidney's maiden name; inside, there is Barbara Gamage herself and her high housewifery; outside there is the tree which was planted at the birth of the poet Phillip Sidney (ll. 13-14); inside there is the living poet Jonson; and finally, the general fecundity of nature outside the house is imaged inside by what Jonson calls his "gluttony" (l. 168).

This last statement by the poet about his appetite serves a number of functions. First, it makes clear that Jonson is not talking about an idyllic golden age; excess is possible at Penshurst, although certainly not the law of the place. The Jubilee year, however, allowed the Israelites to "eat your fill, and dwell therein in safety" (Lev. 25:19), because of the divine guarantee of abundance, which is exactly what Jonson indicates he is doing. Insofar as he means his appetite to be regarded as excessive the festive nature of the place and occasion described in the poem allow for forgiveness; economic debts, again, were forgiven during the Jubilee year and the Christian adaptation of that feast, Pentecost, also provided for the forgiveness of sins.[32]

As does, too, the Eucharist, which is of course the highlight of the Christian Sunday and which is a ceremony whose double perspective mirrors Penshurst's activities: it takes place in time and also points to the end of time. Penshurst's lord serves his own meat and wine, which along with the earlier references to Pan and Bacchus suggest that this is a eucharistic meal.[33] For Jonson Pan especially is a type of both Christ and

King James, and he had celebrated them both under this figure in his masque *Pan's Anniversary*, saying that Pan is "our all, by him we breathe, we live, / We move, we are."[34] But even more than this, the whole inventory of plant and animal life at Penshurst, from the wood which serves seasoned deer to the fruit trees so heavily laden that their boughs may be reached by hungry children, is relevant to the Lord's Supper. For this sacrament was regarded by Reformation and Counter-Reformation writers alike as not just including bread and wine among its natural elements but also the whole of creation. Nicholas Sander wrote in *The Supper of Our Lord* (1565) that the eucharistic body of Christ, "wherein also the fulness of Godhead dwelleth," is a "composition most delicate" made up of

> herbes, fysshe, byrds, beasts, of reasonable men, and of God hym selfe. No kind of salit, meate, sauce, fruyts, confection, no kynde of wyne, aqua vite, aqua composita, liquors, syrops can be found in nature, made by arte, devysed by wyt, but it is all set uppon this table.[35]

The most comprehensive of Renaissance biblical commentators, Cornelius Lapide, referring to the banquet which Wisdom spreads inside her house in the Book of Proverbs and to which she invites man to "come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled" (9:5), a banquet which is a type of the Eucharist, says that in setting forth her table Wisdom "wants it to be composed of all the things in nature on wet or dry land."[36] And Lancelot Andrewes, speaking of how Christ dwells in the sacrament, says that in it

> we do not gather to Christ or of Christ, but we gather Christ Himself; and gathering Him, we shall gather the tree and fruit and all upon it. For, as there is a recapitulation of all in Heaven and earth in Christ, so there is a recapitulation of all in Christ in the Holy Sacrament.[37]

"To Penshurst," in its survey of the soil, air, wood, and water of the Sidney, does contain representatives of all the things that dwell on "wet or dry land." If the table which this plenty is to furnish is that of the Christian indwelling Lord in the Eucharist, its consumption is a sign of the inexhaustible source from which it comes rather than of the "exploitative" use of the land. The gifts that Penshurst's visitors bring can

only express their love, as Jonson says the house's "free provisions [is] far above / The need of such" (ll. 58-59). In exchange of these offerings of "prayse and thankesgeuing," to use a phrase from the Eucharistic service in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer (and Jonson's own offering is this very poem of praise), Penshurst's guests eat and drink the bread and wine and meat of both the estate's and nature's lord in the hope, again in the words of the Prayer Book, that they may "euermore dwel in him, and he in us."[38]

The unannounced visit of King James and Prince Henry when they test Barbara Sidney's hospitality (ll. 76-88) is the climax of this second central section of the poem. Fowler has aptly pointed out some of the eschatological implications of the passage, citing the parable in Matthew of the wise virgins and the foolish virgins who await the coming of the bridegroom at the end of time.[39] I would add that the theme of the Last Judgment was also associated with the arrival of the eighth day, the everlasting Christian Sunday. St. Augustine says in his explication of one of the Psalms that eight is a figure for "the Day of Judgment, for the end of the world will admit us to life everlasting, and then the souls of the just will no longer be subject to the vicissitudes of time."[40] And St. Paul had remarked that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night (I. Thess. 5:2). The King arrives at Penshurst with his son also at a late hour—he was "hunting late this way" (l. 76). Lady Barbara Sidney was away from home at the time but having "her linen, plate, and all things nigh / When she was far" (ll. 86-87) enables her to receive the "just reward of her high housewifery" (l. 85). Lady Sidney thus finds herself with the sheep rather than the goats.

In this second major section of the poem, then, actions performed by specific persons at a definite place and time (the lord's serving of his own dishes, the poet's free indulgence at table, the king's visit and the lady's preparedness) make even more concrete what had been related earlier of Penshurst's family and natural history and in addition reveal a divine activity. Jonson's theme is festivity and rest and his patterns for treating this theme are some of the major biblical images which relate to them. This is a good example of what Erich Auerbach called "figural realism"; two aspects of that theory apply particularly to this poem. "Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons," says Auerbach, "the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first." Both events, he adds, "are within time, within the stream of historical life,"[41] and this is a good description of the relation between the two principal parts of

Jonson's poem, for in both of them he is extraordinarily faithful to the facts of the house he is celebrating.[42]

In addition, Auerbach says that in a figural interpretation of reality, the "individual earthly event is not regarded as a definitive self-sufficient reality . . . but primarily in immediate vertical connection with a divine order which encompasses it, which on some future day will itself be concrete reality" (p. 72). Robert Sidney, for example, was certainly the lord who lived at Penshurst but he did not dwell there in the sense of one who abided or stayed in residence; he was away from home much of the time, a fact Jonson knew very well.[43] In the poem, then, Sidney is also the image or figure of the indwelling lord of the New Testament, just as the concrete house Penshurst is the figure of the church which that lord vivifies. These analogies to the "real reality that will unveil and preserve the figura" is what gives the poem its simultaneous sense of immediacy and of stability.[44]

Don Wayne considers the final fourteen lines of the poem an epilog, "enumerating the virtues that give to the house that ethical essence that distinguishes it as a *home* in which a family and its lord-father dwell" (p. 46). The poem surely does reach the climax of its argument at line 88 but this last passage is not an afterthought. Lines 89-98 represent a return to literal history alone, without any eschatological implications, as they concern entirely moral virtues and ideals, and the number of lines spent upon them, ten, mirrors the Old Testament decalogue. Barbara Sidney, says Jonson, is "noble, fruitful, chaste" (l. 90), her children are taught religion, say their morning and evening prayers in company with the whole household, and "read in their virtuous parents' noble parts / The mysteries of manners, arms and arts" (ll. 97-98). Such purely moral, practical matters are only appropriate at the end of the poem. As a Christian Jonson knew that the "letter killeth but the spirit giveth life" (II Cor. 3:6) and that St. Paul had also affirmed throughout his epistles that without Christ's sacrifice the law would condemn all men to death. But within the context of that sacrifice the New Testament is untiring in urging virtuous conduct, Christ even proclaiming that he came not to abolish the law but to fullfill it. After his discussion of Christians as a spiritual house St. Peter beseeches his audience to "abstain from fleshly lusts, which was against the soul" (I Pet. 2:11). It is, though, only after the formation of a spiritual life that such moral combat can possibly be successful, so Jonson places his own account of the moral life of Penshurst after he has shown the "lively stones"—the lord and lady, guest and servant, king and prince—which compose the spiritual

household of the place. And then, finally, at the very end he returns to where he had begun, to those other houses that were "proud, ambitious heaps" which had no spiritual animation and whose lords may boast of the ostentation of their building but who have no leisurely dwelling.

Debate over the nature of the Christian Church was the critical question of Jonson's age. The Catholic Church in England was at a low ebb in the early seventeenth century after the martyrdoms of Campion, Southwell and other Jesuits in the last quarter of the sixteenth century and was turning towards a contemplative posture, giving up hope of re-evangelizing England.[45] Jonson himself returned to the Church of England in 1610 after his twelve years as a Catholic but the Puritan attacks on its ritual and liturgy made continuing instability there, too. His writing "To Penshurst," unlike any previous poem in classical or English literature and his "most famous and least characteristic poem,"[46] as Isabel Rivers has called it, was an effort to find Christian ecclesiastical values in a non-controversial setting, in a place where many Englishmen had long been practicing their religion and where it was sanctioned by Christian scriptures and commentaries. Many of the seventeenth-century country-house poems have church and religious imagery connected to the house, and the last of them, Andrew Marvell's "Upon Appleton House," praises the home by saying, "'Twas no religious house till now" (l. 280; Appleton House had been a convent before the Reformation). It is significant that the genre dies out when religious stability is basically restored to English life with the return to the throne of Charles II in 1660.

"To Penshurst" is different in important ways, though, from the poems with which it is conventionally grouped.[47] The religious imagery is more overt and less convincing in Thomas Carew's two country-house poems, the ones most closely modelled upon Jonson, and Marvell's poem is more diffuse and ecclectic. Perhaps Jonson wrote at a more propitious time. His poem embodies a moving contemplative vision, characteristic of Catholic spirituality at the time and with affinities to other secular literature such as Shakespeare's late romances, as well as the healthy and confident Anglican spirituality of Donne's and Andrewes' sermons. Jonson, having just ended his years as a devout Catholic (there had been assiduous efforts by the government to convert him which had failed) and become an enthusiastic Anglican, was able to draw from the best of both traditions. Later Anglicans such as Nicholas Ferrar had to seek out isolated retreats like Little Gidding for their

domestic religious communities. But about 1612 Ben Jonson did find and commemorate one great country estate that was also a spiritual house composed of living stones.

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Notes

All quotations from Jonson's poetry are from the edition of Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), a "modernized version of that [text] established by Herford and Simpson" (p. xvii).

[1] *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 30.

[2] *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place and the Poetics of History* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 17.

[3] Jonson says of the hospitality Penshurst extends to him:

> Nor, when I take my lodging, need I pray
> For fire or lights or livery: all is there,
> As if thou then wert mine, or I reigned here:
> There's nothing I can wish, for which I stay. (ll. 72-75)

Wayne says there is in these lines "a profound sense of the poet's desire for all that is celebrated in the poem as the property of Sir Robert Sidney and his lady (and perhaps, too, the sense that he deserves it). This 'wish' is barely hidden in the lines which conclude the passage referring to the poet himself" (p. 77). The plain sense of line 75, though, is that Jonson does have all he wants while he is a guest. What he is offered he could of course steal to make his own property but there is surely no "profound sense" that he wishes to do that.

[4] *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983), p. 226.

[5] Alastair Fowler remarked that "'To Penshurst' is a more religious poem than most have taken it to be" and gives some evidence for this; see "The Locality of Jonson's 'To Penshurst,'" in *Conceitful Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1975), p. 134 and passim. W. David Kay commented in 1971 that "Jonson was more theologically inclined than many of his critics acknowledge him to have been" ("The Christian Wisdom of Ben Jonson's 'On My First Sonne,'" *SEL* 11 [1971], 128), a statement equally true today. Jonson wrote in 1623 that his

> . . . twice twelve years' stored-up humanity,
> With humble gleanings in divinity,
> After the fathers, and those wiser guides
> Whom faction had not drawn to study sides
> ("An Execration upon Vulcan," ll. 101-04)

had been destroyed by fire. Thus he would have begun keeping his divinity commonplace book in 1599, right after his conversion to Catholicism. Assuming a date between 1610 and 1612 for the composition of "To Penshurst," he would have been pursuing his studies "After the fathers" for over a decade when he wrote the poem.

[6] There are verbal allusions to classical authors, especially Martial and Juvenal, in the poem but they do not shape what I am studying here. G. R. Hibbard, for example, comments about one of Martial's epigrams which Jonson used ("Baiana nostri villa, Basse, Faustini," Bk. III, No. LVIII): "Where Martial's poem rests on a simple contrast between the crude but solid comforts of the farm and the sophisticated hollowness . . . of the suburban villa, Jonson sees Penshurst in a bigger and more interesting context" ("The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century," in *Essential Articles for the Study of Alexander Pope*, ed. Maynard Mack [Hamden, CT: Archon, 1968], p. 447; orig. pub. in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19 [1956], 159-74). Concerning the fish which run into the fishermen's nets at Penshurst, Paul Cuberta says, "There are flickering suggestions of this metaphor of devoted service in classical pastorals although they are never

developed into anything like the systematic scheme Jonson creates" ("A Jonsonian Ideal: 'To Penshurst,'" *PQ* 42 [1963], 20).

[7] "Jonson's Use of the Bible and the Great Chain of Being in 'To Penshurst,'" SEL 8 (1968), 79. Subsequent references are in the text.

[8] *The Two Books of Homilies* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1859), p. 258; first published 1574. St. Jerome's remarks are taken from his *Treaty of the Life of Clerks to Nepotian.*

[9] (London: Dent, 1964), v.15.5 (II, 51). Herford and Simpson list the book as being in Jonson's library (*Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, XI [Oxford: Clarendon, 1952], 597).

[10] Some of these houses are discussed in William McClung, *The Country House in English Renaissance Poetry* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977), pp. 46-103.

[11] "Against Peril of Idolatry," in *The Two Books of Homilies*, p. 261.

[12] *Conceitful Thought*, p. 128.

[13] From a sermon preached by Hall on New Year's Day, 1613, entitled "A Farewell Sermon," about the death of Prince Henry, the son of James I; in *The Works of the Right Reverend Joseph Hall, D.D.*, ed. Philip Wynter (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1863), V, 87-88.

[14] For example, St. Paul expressed his hope to the Ephesians that they may be strengthened in the "inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith" so that they may be "rooted and grounded in love" (3:17).

[15] J. A. C. Rathmell finds evidence for a 1612 date for the poem in the rearing of the walls of "country stone" in line 45, as such a wall was being constructed in that year; see "Jonson, Lord Lisle, and Penshurst," *English Literary Renaissance* 1 (1971), 252-53. Based on the description of the visit of the King and Prince Henry in lines 77-88, Donaldson says "The poem was written before the death of Prince Henry in November 1613" (p. 671).

[16] *Ninety-Six Sermons* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), II, 227.

[17] *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. Evelyn Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1962), VII, 291. Subsequent references are in the text.

[18] (London: William Inggard, 1616), p. 592; first published 1612.

[19] Cf. St. Augustine: "This house [the temple] do we build, by living well, and the Lord by giving us power to live well" (*City of God*, 17:12; trans. John Healey [London: Dent, 1967], II, 165).

[20] John Bossy comments that "the order of the household, the integration into it of the practice of religion, and the preservation of its integrity, were the subjects with which the Elizabethan Catholic gentry were largely occupied." He also notes that in the "bigger houses the liturgical cycle merged indistinguishably with the cycle of hospitality" ("The Character of Elizabethan Catholicism," in *Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660*, ed. Trevor Aston [New York: Basic Books, 1965], pp. 227, 225). Such considerations could have influenced Jonson in his general presentation of the hospitality of Penshurst, which is quite ceremonial, although of course the Sidneys were a famous Protestant family. Jonson's intimacy with Recusants is indicated by his dinner with Robert Catesby and several other Gunpowder Plot conspirators about a month before the discovery of the plot, which Jonson was not implicated in. But he did refuse to abjure his Catholic faith at the time, despite the best efforts of some government-appointed Anglican divines to convert him (see Herford and Simpson, I, 42 and XI, 578).

[21] See Bossy, p. 225.

[22] See Conrad Russell, "Arguments for Religious Unity in England, 1530-1650," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 18 (1967), 208.

[23] Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. 737.

[24] The additions that Henry Sidney, Robert's father, made to Penshurst were modest by the great house standards of the time. They were designed to emphasize continuity with the house's medieval origins (it was first built in the fourteenth century) and not to draw attention to any modern innovations in architecture; see Marcus Binney, "Penshurst Place, Kent," *Country Life* 151 (April 27, 1972), 998.

[25] Wayne divides the poem at line 44 where Penshurst's walls are first mentioned and Fowler at line 48, after which the procession of the tenants through the walls to the house is described. But the major division in the poem concerns what happens outside and inside the house itself, not its walls, and that occurs at line 56.

[26] The Reformation's "positive attitude toward nature allowed for using that setting as either a center for worship and spiritual ascension in contrast to stone churches or a 'situation' to build in because especially conducive to solitude and religiosity. Nature and cosmos as temple [served]...

as the vehicles for lifting man to God" (A. C. Chaudier, "Literary and Spiritual Architecture in Seventeenth Century," Diss. Wisconsin 1976, p. 180).

[27] *The Country and the City*, p. 29.

[28] *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Anna S. Benjamin (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), p. 16.

[29] *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman, 1982), Bk. IV, Ch. 12 (p. 117).

[30] *The Two Books of Homilies*, p. 475. The homily is entitled "That All Good Things Come from God."

[31] St. Gregory of Nazianzen was one who interpreted the Feast of Weeks in this manner; see Jean Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1961), p. 268.

[32] See Danielou, p. 325.

[33] Both Fowler (p. 129) and Wilson (p. 85) also find eucharistic symbolism here. Thomas Carew, in "To My Friend G. N. from Wrest," a country-house poem modelled on "To Penshurst," says of Bacchus at the feast at Wrest: "We press the juicy God, and quaff his blood" (l. 67).

[34] *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques*, ed. Stephen Orgel (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), ll. 170-71 (p. 313).

[35] In A. C. Southern, *Elizabethan Recusant Prose: 1559-1582* (London: Sands, 1950; rpt. 1978), p. 97.

[36] *Commentarii in Scripturam Sacram* (Paris: Berche and Tralin, 1875), IV, 216. Lapide became Professor of Exegesis at Louvain in 1596, although some of his commentaries were not published until later in the seventeenth century. His comments on Proverbs are especially detailed. I am indebted to Joan McCool for translations of Lapide. Geoffrey Hill says that "It is not unreasonable to suppose . . . that Lapide's seventeenth-century *Commentaries* drew upon the kind of Biblical exegesis prevalent in Jesuit circles in the closing years of the previous century" (*The Lords of Limit* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984], p. 29).

[37] *Sermons on the Nativity*, Sermon XVI, in *Anglicanism*, ed. Paul Elmer More and Frank Leslie Cross (London: Society for Preservation of Christian Knowledge, 1962), p. 465.

[38] From the 1552 Book of Common Prayer in *Liturgies of the Western Church*, ed. Bard Thompson (New York: World, 1961), pp. 281, 280. The 1559 Book, in use in Jonson's time, did not change these phrases; see Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre, 1945), p. 674.

[39] *Conceitful Thought*, pp. 124-25.

[40] *On the Psalms*, trans. Dame Scholastica Hebgin and Dame Felicitas Corrigan (New York: Newman, 1960), I, 62.

[41] "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1959), p. 53.

[42] The correspondence from Robert Sidney to his wife makes this clear; see Rathmell, passim.

[43] During the first decade of the seventeenth century, Robert Sidney was busy as Queen Anne's Lord Chamberlain: "His new duties kept him away from home. He continued to report to Lady Sidney his frustration at not being with her" (Millicent V. Hay, *The Life of Robert Sidney* [Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1984], p. 216). Rathmell comments; "Contrary to what a too literal reading of the last line of [the] poem might suggest, Lord Lisle was only intermittently at home" (p. 252).

[44] This reading of "To Penshurst" is also consistent with what Ira Clark has called "neotypology" in seventeenth-century lyric poetry: in certain "sacred English lyrics . . . the poets had embodied contemporary personae and settings inside Old Testament figures and situations so that both were illuminated by a New Testament perspective" (*Christ Revealed: The History of the Neotypological Lyric in the English Renaissance* [Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1982], p. ix). The Reformers' new understanding of typology, according to Clark, "fostered a new, more intense identification with Old Testament figures by considering types in relationship to—they would say by applying types to--their own lives" (p. 19). Although Clark's book is not concerned with poems like "To Penshurst," his remarks about "neotypology" could very well be applied to it. Fowler commented in passing in *Conceitful Thought* that "the interaction of real and ideal that characterizes 'To Penshurst' is in a word typological" (pp. 133-34).

[45] See Bossy, p. 245.

[46] *The Poetry of Conservatism, 1600-1745* (Cambridge: Rivers, 1973), p. 40.

[47] In addition to "To Penshurst," G. R. Hibbard includes in the genre Jonson's "To Sir Robert Wroth," Carew's "To Saxham" and "To My Friend G. N. from Wrest," Robert Herrick's "A Country Life: to his Brother Mr. Thomas Herrick" and "A Panegerick to Sir Lewis Pemberton," and Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" (p. 439).