



Somberness and Artistic Endeavors: Authorship, Fatherhood, and Stoic Resilience in Ben Jonson's "On My First Sonne"

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Abstract: Ben Jonson's "On My First Sonne" is a moving elegy interweaving fatherhood, authorship, and philosophical exploration of death in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. The poem is an expression of Jonson's conflict between individual sorrow and stoic restraint over his son's death, interrogating the cultural norms of patriarchal lineage and primogeniture. With an elegiac tone, Jonson investigates the conflict between affective mourning and philosophical acceptance through the metaphor of the son's death as a possible stagnation in his writing life. The compact form of the poem reflects the shortness of the child's life, while its language, filled with commercial and Christian symbolism, highlights the commodification of existence and the weight of sin. Jonson's employment of apostrophe and numerology, specifically the figure of seven, enriches the philosophical undertones, linking individual loss with wider humanistic and theological controversies. The poem eventually moves away from despair towards acceptance, deifying the son and Jonson's artistry. The juxtaposition of paternal grieving with writerly identity blurs societal mores and asserts the timeless power of poetry as a vehicle of overcoming loss. This paper analyzes how Jonson balances these dual roles, providing insight into the cultural and philosophical nuances of his era but with a focus on Stoic philosophy as an interpretive frame for understanding how he reacts to loss.

Keywords: Fatherhood, Authorship, Philosophy, Stoicism, Elegy, Legacy

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Introduction

Ben Jonson's "On My First Sonne" is an exceptional piece of poetry when we look at his career as a known playwright whose play deals with tragicomedy to a greater extent. The theme of greed, money, and tragedy is maintained by him in this poetry as well. This poem also deals with the philosophical inquiry of death and how it intersects with fatherhood and the authorship of the poet. Jonson highlights the aftermath of his son's death through an elegiac tone, allowing readers to glimpse his emotional and philosophical struggle. The poem asks readers to question the objective of Jonson's writing, how he successfully expedites this journey of self-relaxation and comfort by convincing himself to deal with the major tragedy of his life, i.e., the death of his son. Jonson's endeavor is informed deeply by the philosophy of the Stoics, especially by rules of emotional containment and resignation in the face of fate, by which he seeks to create balance between desolating sadness and philosophic detachment (Robertson 163). Robertson's argument opens the door for the reader to look into the necessity of controlling one's emotions. Jonson's "On My First Sonne" shifts its momentum from a sardonic atmosphere to something of an adjustment between the thoughts. Jonson's works serve as a gateway to go beyond the literary syntax and find their root ingrained into the philosophical stance. The paper will also substantiate whether Jonson's son's death is the metaphoric death of his own career, or it is just stagnancy of his authorship.

Fatherhood and cultural context

The theme of fatherhood in the Elizabethan and Jacobean time period was very pertinent as it goes to the roots of creating an ideal patriarchal setup. The father, considered as the head of the family, was expected to carry forward the legacy of primogeniture, instill the moral and social values, and make the abode of the

family with emotional disconnection as per the rules governed by the society (Cannon 311). Cannon's statement highlights a mental philosophy prevalent in society that wants the writers to include all these thought processes to be included in their writings. Ben Jonson's work steps forward in fulfilling such demands, and this can be very clearly observed from his work "On My First Sonne." The question of primogeniture, legacy furthering, and social order is shattered because of the unwanted death of his son. Jonson, through this poem, presents a panoramic philosophical view of an ideal state of society that follows the doctrines of the revolutionary Golden Elizabethan and Jacobean era. The poem problematizes the aspect of the legality of having a son to carry forward one's legacy. At its forum, the poem sustains its effort to make readers understand that ties when being disjointed can transform into a revolutionary and metamorphosed identity which is ethical, moral, and guilt-free from emotional taboos. A.A. Long calls it a stage of self-perception where human beings are "thinking animals, oblivious of emotional and bodily needs but very much engrossed in mental wellness" (262). Jonson's poetry subscribes to this Stoic approach of redefining legacy in non-bodily terms, concentrating instead on his poetic endeavors.

Legacy and Loss

The title's enigma lies in its paradox: 'First' — often linked to beginnings — becomes a haunting substitute for 'last.' Jonson thus entwines birth and death, suggesting that the anticipated legacy through the son ends prematurely, reinforcing the Stoic acceptance of fate's inevitability. The loss of a child turns out to be a loss of legacy, the ultimate question lingers around Jonson's mind: who will carry forward his profession? The journey of Jonson in this poem resonates with Odysseus's descent into Hades' kingdom and finding the purpose of life. Though being located in different cultural and age contexts, both Jonson and Odysseus go on a mental journey of seeking answers beyond themselves, towards the complexity of life is worth noticing. After bypassing a stage of suffering and grief, what remains of us? This question lingers around the whole poem, and at the end, like Odysseus's underworld journey reshapes his heroic identity, Jonson's grief-stricken journey reshapes his future.

Jonson deconstructs conventional syntactical structures, using grammar itself as a vehicle for philosophical inquiry. His poem title starts with a preposition "On," unlike other odes and sonnets, which are mostly preferred modes of poetry with a heavy emphasis on either Spenserian stanza or Shakespearean tone. Jonson's poetry stands apart from his predecessors and contemporaries. His poetry is like a 'philosophical ode' which is addressed to his 'dead son /soul.' The ode, though elegiac in its appearance and rhythm, inquires into his self-governance and determined abilities of passing internal battles of his life and his family. The second word in the title of the poem, "My," upholds the greater proximity in terms of authority, which Jonson wants to put forward if the son is like a property; he has a claim over it, and that's why mourning becomes deeply personal, as no one can relate. The grieving in this instance is also an "intellectual action" and "voluntary judgements," congruent with social constructs but interpreted according to Stoic philosophy, which values rational control of feelings (Robertson 196). Jonson's application of "My" indicates the Stoic principle of concentrating on what is under one's control—his authorship and emotional reaction—and accepting the death of the son as something beyond his power. Epictetus' comments about this in his famous discourse "Of Natural Affection," he says that death, pain, or grief are not directly a part of human action but one's own inward decisions and principles (30).

Poetic tone and Apostrophe

The word 'Farewell' at the very outset of the poem settles the tone and rhythm for the entire poem. The foregoing of the child works like a cautionary validation of Jonson's downfall in terms of his production of his work and fame, which has taken a back seat in his roller coaster journey. This validation is inserted with a sardonic rhythm in the beginning and constantly shifts throughout the poem. The poem appears argumentative in its very outcome, where the poet asks himself a series of questions. Whether it is a bid adieu to the son or is it a departure from the legacy of his life? Is this death a closure to his fame, name, and life, or will it once again give him a hope to continue forward? The way Jonson has presented his insights in the poem expands its vision from just 'the death of his son' to 'the death of his dominion in writing.' Will it be possible for him to upgrade his life after such a major loss, or will he be engulfed in the endless depression of

nothingness? This philosophy of death, in a way, ceases the present world of opportunities and makes one follow the path of barrenness. The bare life of a human is intrinsic to the fact that if it is one can never taste, feel, or experience it because one dies before experiencing it (Mason).

The farewell can also point towards the instability of the writer's thoughts, which ends in the form of a fragmented poetic vision. Jonson uses 'Apostrophe' as a kind of device to address the non-existence of his son. This usage of literary device is consistent with Stoic mental preparation techniques, where one reflects on loss to harden oneself, as Jonson addresses his son to justify his sorrow and solidify his devotion to Stoic restraint. Seneca, in his Letters, talks about this devotion: "There is nothing wrong in devotion, if done in a right way, will yield simplicity and present one as capable of handling the complexity of emotions" (131). Jonson's poetry, in a way, applies this complexity and contradiction of conflicts. The premise of poetry is laid down on his artifice of being aware of the atmosphere in which the action of the poem is taken forward, and how he is reacting towards it (Lauinger 225).

Mourning vs Melancholia

The Early Modern tradition of mourning is often involved with layers of mysticism and practices that were partaken in by the common masses. Mourning is not only a simple word, but a grandeur of grief is being showcased to provide a prayer for the deceased soul and share the burden of sorrow of the family (Gittings 24). People seclude themselves from the everyday happenings and observe a period of absolute detachment from the proceedings of the world. Lady Constance in Shakespeare's *King John*,¹ Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, and Hieronimo in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* are all perfect examples to look at the mourning and grief in the Early Modern World. Jonson's work traces all these developments in his poetry and gives us a nuanced understanding of the dichotomy between his personal mourning and displaying it in the form of poetry.

When we look at the length of the poem, it is concise like his son's journey on earth. Interestingly, here, one could argue very clearly whether he is mourning or he is under melancholy after witnessing the departure of the little child from his life. Johnson's attempt to classify the angst of the situation merits an understanding of attachment and detachment. The 'son' here also works as a kind of metaphor in determining the author's thought process while writing a work for the times. The situation surrounding him makes it very difficult to express his emotions. Through this dirge, Johnson enables a door to navigate between the psychological and physical illness prevalent in his personal life as well as society. Poetry also mirrors Jonson's evolving ideology in response to personal and societal challenges. The word melancholy becomes a complete substitution; it's not only that he mourns for the loss, but he gradually adopts stoicism in his life. Sigmund Freud, in his *Mourning and Melancholia*, states the obvious difference, which is that Mourning is for the loss of a loved one, and Melancholia is for the loss of the object and discontinuation of interest in the outside world (243-244). For Jonson, it is 'Paternal Mourning' as it enables him to understand the gravity of the mental suffering caused after the death of his beloved son. This is similar to 'Fraternal Mourning' used by Catullus in his "Elegy 101,"² while Auden mourns for his friend, W. B. Yeats³, and John Donne⁴ instead of mourning celebrates this as a symbol of love. Jonson's elegy, in a way, mixes mourning with the notion of sin and burden, where parental expectations become great sin, such that due to its burden son has to knock on the gates of heaven.

¹ Lady Constance though being declared as wild by the society states that Grief has filled her room but still the presence of her son Arthur is not yet fulfilled.

² Catullus 101: A Fraternal Farewell

³ The poem referred to here is "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"

⁴ The reference hints at John Donne's famous poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," where love transcends all the physical boundaries of death.

The notion of sin in Christianity and its repercussions on life and the afterlife are focused on in this poem. John Calvin's unconditional approach regarding the predestination of man's suffering because of being born as an original sinner (due to Adam's sin) points towards the fact that Jonson's son will be the sacrificial Adam. Calvin's observation on the "Fall of Man" is analogous to Jonson's "fall of son," which is being carried forward by the intense level of misguided self-interest. This causes a shift in identity that transforms into a completely different state (Helm 100). This same level of fall can be seen in Jonson's work, as the father in the poem succumbs to this misconception of blaming a life of misery and cannot get back to the correct path. Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus turns out to be the best example to understand how Faustus could not get repentance from his sin at any cost. Faustus, like the father of Benjamin in the poem, banged all doors of last resort, but "Even half a drop of blood could not save their miseries/ themselves" (Marlowe 202).

Commercial Language and Numerology

Jonson very artistically uses this customary aspect of sin and burden in his poem. The son was sent on a lease by God for seven years. "Seven years tho' were lent to me" (Jonson 3). Such commercial usage of the word 'lent' shows materiality, and the boy's corporeality is depicted as transaction. The body of his son here becomes a site of undertaking the end of the 'bodies of work' which he has enlisted in his whole life. This image of corporeal representation and attaching it to the commercialized language helps us to understand the author's perspective laid forward on capitalist ground. Jonson's works here appeal to the global audience to connect to the site of mourning. The passage created by Jonson unravels how capitalism is entangled with the theme of emotional tranquility. Again, the number 'seven' is like a verdict for the reader to understand that the child was a liability to the author. It has just become the next equivalent to a mere statistic of nonfulfillment of the deed or pact which he has signed with god. Once the tenure is over, its value is automatically forfeited. The number seven also denotes completeness, wholeness, or the seven sacraments, the core of Christian philosophy. Johnson's use of the numerology of seven not only indicates the age of the son but also the purpose that has been accomplished. The detachment from the son is not the only mode of understanding the mental instability of the father, but also a disconnect between the habitat in which he is living. Still, the poet has tried to maintain the philosophical temperance in his full extreme that he is controlling the pent-up emotions recollected in his mind. The foundational thought here also addresses how the author has foreshadowed the pre-determined duration of his son's life as a natural cycle rather than mourning over the physical death (Long 42). This continuity of the cycle of birth, death, or formation is related to the cosmic development of the universe. For Jonson, this cosmological development is in a way linked to the death of his son and a new beginning of his literary career.

Gender Dynamics and Legacy

This lets us question whether he is mourning his son's death or not. When we look at his other poem like "On My First Daughter," Jonson's paternal affection seems to be lost in the mist when it comes to his daughter's death (Mohany 75). Son will continue the legacy of Jonson if he gets a chance to survive, but daughter is heaven's love. The bias of paternal affection questions the gender subjectivity. The legacy, as discussed earlier, was also a very common trope in many of Jonson's plays. Interestingly, he used 'Legacy hunting' in *Volpone*, and in *Every Man in his Humor* Old Knowell is focused on the moral legacy of values to be passed on, Edward Knowell, instead of material wealth as well. Now, some of the lines in the poem reflect his "rite of passage" through which he is going, "Could I lose all father now" (Jonson 5). These lines indicate how he himself is questioning the loss of fatherhood over his profession or authorship. There is a stigmatization of emotional connection, which can be seen in these lines. It also indicates a possibility of how two different meanings can be elicited from this line: Should I stop feeling like a father from now on? And now that I have lost my son, is it my part also to get detached after the son's death? This line is the entry point of understanding how 'Jonson's stoic mode' activates. The ambiguity in the line prompts us to understand the shift in linguistic, psychological, and literary changes that shape within the rubrics of Jonson's life.

When Jonson says " thou child of my right hand" (Jonson 1), it sounds as if he has created an exact replica and classifies him as a legal heir, or in other words, "his son as his right hand". Jonson is the author of the son and <https://reviewofconphil.com>

of himself. The imagery of "hand" also evokes a shattering of the support system. The admiration of the author which are attached to the child holds no ground when the reality of death has surmounted. Also, the child of my right hand evokes that the child was supposed to be an exact replica of his father. The uniqueness of a son's talent or his ideological construct often is mired under the self-begotten validation, which Jonson very accurately does in his writing (Epictetus 15). This self-beneficial conformity is one for the withdrawal from the external environment and enables him to rectify the loopholes (Epictetus 15).

The temporal existence of the son in the poetic lines gives us a lot of new understanding regarding the treatment of children in Jonson's time period. This poem, being autobiographical on its first glance, serves a dual purpose. The purpose is not to just talk about the death or its after effects, but how death has become an instrument of bypassing the harsh truth about the transience of life. Jonson, through this poem, is also making a pertinent point about humanism and its ethos. The human-centric approach towards life is being put in tandem with including the concept of sin and exacted fate. Moreover, Jonson's verdict in the poem advances from god centric to human-centric and maintains an equilibrium between both. Central to this is the concept of predestination that god has already decided someone's death. In contrast, Mirandola⁵ was very much against this rudimentary thought. He says: "This very human is central to the world, worthy of all the greatest pleasure and admiration, and naturally will die one day (5). Jonson's Stoic perspective is in line with Mirandola's humanism through rational acceptance of fate, enabling him to show love and care without wavering spiritually, as Stoicism promotes living virtuously within one's power (Seneca 243). Jonson uses this stoic mentality to talk about the virtuous accomplishment carried forward through rational decisions and unprecedented loss. His poetry upholds a spiritual power in terms of language, argument, and representation of the sad events with utmost sincerity.

Father and Author Dichotomy

The dichotomy of speech and silence, addresser and addressee, is very poignantly connected to this Author/father relation, where the son is a silent voice. The linguistic absence of the son in the poem and just being referred to only through the father points out the agency of children in the poem. The son is being made to be looked through Jonson's lens; the son, though not being described through his physical demeanor or any other relevant information, is like a mysterious identity for the readers to construct upon. Moreover, the son is the ultimate source of understanding how the poet has created a diversity in caricaturing him through the reference to his death. Jonson has penned down an epitaph where he intermingles between his personas as 'Poet' with that of his 'Son', "Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry" (Jonson 10). Here, Ben is both Benjamin the son and the 'poet' himself. Gregory noticed that children are the best gift and blessings provided by god to their parents (Lyon). They have unique characteristics and notions. The statement also points out what Peter Sacks says, that "this death is like no other death". One can also look into how John Donne's ideology regarding death is taking shape in this poem. There is a prudence in the tone of Jonson, it exclaims a kind of wisdom which instills a kind of pattern in which decisions are not taken in mere impulse but of constant mulling over their importance. These cardinal virtues of Jonson present him in an exemplary light where the ultimate decision is elicited from the action, not attached to the fear of being labeled as "unwanted" in society.

Jonson's son's epitaph draws our attention to the fact that this art is like no other art. His authorship is being reflected within the disguise of paternal mourning. W.H. Auden, in his poem, too, talks about how Yeats may be silly like them, but his gift for poetry survives even after his death (36). Jonson, too, in a way, is reflecting the same point here, whether they both live or die, still, his poetry will remain the best piece of art. Jonson's understanding of the continuity of the profession of writing and the unending status of art makes one reconsider his effort to make us understand that art once created can never be erased from one's mind until one forces it to do so. This stoic acceptance of death by Jonson aligns with the ideology of liberation of the soul, which in turn will lead one to come to the stage of acceptance of fate (Robertson 220). Robertson's

⁵ The work here referred to is *Oration on the Dignity of Man* by Giovanni Picco Della Mirandola

argument also enables a route for looking into Jonson's poetry as a model for understanding the politics of the human mind and its continuous changes.

John Donne's exclamation of countering death with a fearless attitude, "Death Be Not Proud," makes an entry point here, where death is not the last resort to weaken his resolution. But it is a way towards moving in the right direction of authorship. The death of a son in Jonson's work serves as a self-assessment for the author to understand what else has been done and what needs to be followed. This self-curating tactics adapted by Jonson not only edit the errors of the poet's personal life but also shows his accountability for owning the mistakes and moving forward in his life (Lauinger 233). This accountability changes the atmosphere of poetry and makes the author's worth more relevant in front of the eyes of the world.

Moreover, the death of his son has enabled him to look at the greatest work of art which he has created with his mighty thoughts; it is "worth the ivy" (Prendergast). The poem does represent a kind of tussle between presenting the likeable and limited scope of living too much. Son is not only the first one but also the best subject of Jonson's poetry. At first, the son appears to be a dark and thriving emblem as the poet gets caught up in a web of despair; however, it eventually turns out to be a source of 'sun' or light. Jonson's attempt to write this dual binary within the strict tonal patterns of poetry makes his stance very clear that poetry is for the expression as well as experience. The experience gained by the poet through his son's death is beyond imagination; this has led him to crack the tough altitudes of incongruity and purposelessness as the hazy layers fell beyond the layers of misery. Jonson moves away from the blame theory of culminating himself as the culprit behind the act of his son's death. His poetry immortalized his child or self, which will be forever engraved not only on the tombstone of his son but also will navigate through many generations. The way Jonson has restored justice and stayed firm towards his decision emphasizes the point that life is like a spiral web of complexities, wherein consistency in morality is necessary in confronting urgent issues.

Shifts from Personal to Aspirational

In consideration of the apparent reasons for Jonson's oscillation between the positions of Author and Father, it is apparent that this dualism is a result of a loss of his 'experimental energy' for writing (Pritchard 50). Thus, when we look at the words "Exacted by Fate" (Jonson 4), it has two meanings. One for Son, to whom he has addressed that his fate has given his son an exact day of judgement. This also has a Christian connotation when Christ was to be crucified on the Day of Judgment. This points out how this son is being linked to Jesus Christ. He, in a way, becomes a 'Scapegoat' who is taking the burden of his father's sin. Linking the death of the son or the suffering of him with the Christian religious norms undertakes a shift in Jonson's way of understanding his son as a martyr. Interestingly, here the martyrdom has nothing to do with a greater cause of the world. Jonson has used it like a pinch of salt to eulogize the spirit of his son. Also, son here is pedestalized by the dexterous effects created by the poet to make the world understand how herculean it would have been for him to get over this gigantic misery fallen upon him. The lines, though being used in a religious connotation, do offer an ironic stance of the poet's acumen. Jonson's Stoic religious acceptance allows him to transform his son's death into a poetic achievement, easing out the culpability through rational disconnection. According to Epictetus, this religious or divine acceptance is layered within the parameter of justice, which individuals experience in his or her lives (44). The justice that Jonson has provided in the

poetry is guised in the spiritual semblance of maintaining his inner sanity vs extreme bleak reality.

The way Jonson is imitating his role as a 'Father' at the same time as a 'Poet' leads us to wonder whether this piece of art is not only for personal consumption. The personal becomes the public when it comes to poetry as a piece of art read by the audience. Thus, not only is his son's name immortalized through Epitaph, but also his art and pieces of writing. The lamenting tone of poetry thus changes its tone to something more aspirational. This is one of the characteristics of Elegy given by M.H. Abrahams, where he says that there is a lyric reversal from grief and despair to joy. The sudden shift from being fearful to being indifferent and finding pleasure in it underscores the deep thought of tranquility. This philosophical shift perceived in

Jonson's poetry can be defined as Ataraxia⁶, where guilt-free life renders a spirit of moving on without attaching bondage to the world of sufferings. It is not only a "Farewell" to his 'Son' but a farewell to the miseries of life. This comes with ultimate acceptance at the end line of the poem "what he loves may never like too much" (Jonson 12).

Conclusion

Ben Jonson's "On My First Sonne" comes forth as an intense paradigm of sorrow elevated to artistic legacy, whereby individual loss is elevated to a cultivated poetic contemplation of death, authorship, and philosophical acceptance. By its condensed elegiac form, Jonson expresses the pain of a grieving father while at the same time probing Stoic and Christian traditions regarding fate and salvation. His capacity to universalize his grief places him in a larger tradition of poets who have made mourning into lasting literary memorials. Like Jonson, W.H. Auden in "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" makes death a place of poetic renewal, claiming that 'poetry makes nothing happen' (36), but it lasts in the 'valley of its making' (37), just as Jonson's poetry becomes a vehicle of continuity and memory. Likewise, John Donne's Holy Sonnets challenge death not in despair but in metaphysical questioning, asserting in defiance, 'Death, thou shalt die' (14). These poets, as Jonson, redefine death not as an ending but as a productive force—one that refines artistic creation and broadens the emotional and philosophical reach of poetry. Therefore, "On My First Sonne" not only mourns a child but engraves Jonson's literary resilience, confirming the long-term function of literature in negotiating and overcoming human loss.

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