

## Tragic Time in Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* and *Catiline*

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In 1601, Ben Jonson, smarting from Thomas Dekker's attack on him in *Satiromastix*, appended a new 'Apologetical Dialogue' to his own recent comedy *Poetaster*. Towards the end of this text, which appeared in print for the first time in Jonson's 1616 folio *Works*, the playwright made a momentous announcement: he had decided to abandon not only the satirical skirmishing of the so-called Poets' War, but the comic stage altogether.<sup>1</sup> 'But I leave the monsters | To their own fate', the speaker identified as 'the Author' declares,

And since the comic muse  
Hath proved so ominous to me, I will try  
If tragedy have a more kind aspect.  
(*'Apologetical Dialogue'*, pp. 178-9)

Even as he attributed this transfer of generic allegiances to a specific set of contemporary circumstances, however, Jonson also presented it more positively as an opportunity to transcend them. 'Once I'll 'say', the Author continues,

To strike the ear of time in those fresh strains  
As shall, beside the cunning of their ground,  
Give cause to some of wonder, some despite  
And unto more, despair to imitate their sound.  
(*'Apologetical Dialogue'*, p. 179)

This ambition, 'to strike the ear of time' – a figure of speech that is at once resonant and jarring – may well refer, in the first instance, to the effect Jonson hoped his embryonic tragedy would have on contemporary audiences, as it does in the passage from Tacitus that may have inspired Jonson's phrase (Seneca's style, the historian writes, was 'suited to the ears of his time').<sup>2</sup> But it also suggests a hope that tragedy might speak to and into history, in a way that comedy, in its ephemerality, could not. Jonson's tragedy might speak to, on the one hand, the accumulated literary past – T. S. Eliot's 'mind of Europe' – and, on the other, to the attentive posterity in

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<sup>1</sup> On the complicated history of the 'Apologetical Dialogue,' see *Poetaster*, edited by Gabriele Bernhard Jackson, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, edited by David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols (Cambridge, 2012), II, 168; as Jackson there notes, Jonson may have revised or rewritten the text for inclusion in the Folio. All references to *Poetaster* and the 'Apologetical Dialogue' will be to this edition of the play.

<sup>2</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, 13.3: 'temporis eius auribus accomodatum'; all quotations of this text are from *Cornelii Taciti Annalium*, edited by C. D. Fisher (Oxford, 1906), hereafter '*Annales*'. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this essay are our own.

which Jonson increasingly placed his hopes of being recognized, as he would later put it, as a poet ‘not of an age, but for all time!’.

Indeed, as we argue in this essay, time and timelessness – the relationships between past, present, and future, between tragedy and history, between progression and anachronism – are central and abiding concerns of Jonson’s two surviving tragedies, *Sejanus His Fall* (1603), the immediate fruit of the tragic turn announced in *Poetaster*, and *Catiline His Conspiracy* (1611). The longing to transcend time articulated in the ‘Apologetical Dialogue’, for example, remains very much in evidence in *Sejanus*, an uncompromisingly meticulous dramatization of the Roman emperor Tiberius’ notorious praetorian prefect. First acted by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 1603, apparently to very little acclaim, the play appeared in print in 1605, in a quarto volume clearly designed to land with a thud that would echo into eternity.<sup>3</sup> Modelled on Renaissance editions of ancient drama, it featured extensive prefatory materials, epigraphic typography, and, most strikingly, margins freighted with Latin notes referring readers to the play’s classical sources (the historians Tacitus and Cassius Dio chief among them), as well as to contemporary works of Renaissance historical scholarship.<sup>4</sup> It thus confronted its readers as a monument to Jonson’s classical erudition, one that was already endowed with the uncanny temporality of the ancient fragment: dedicating the folio version of the play to his patron Esmé Stuart, Jonson would write that ‘If ever any ruin were so great as to survive, I think this be the one I send you: *The Fall of Sejanus*’ (p. 212).<sup>5</sup>

Even as it reaches for the timelessness of the classical text, however, the quarto text of *Sejanus* begins with a defensive repudiation of the temporal structures of classical drama. ‘First, if it be objected that what I publish is no true poem in the strict laws of time, I confess it’, Jonson declares in his introductory epistle, ‘To the Readers’ (p. 213). The admission acknowledges the play’s failure to respect the so-called unity of time, the Aristotelian observation, hardened into dogma by Renaissance neo-classical critics, that tragedy ‘tries to remain as far as possible within the course of a single circuit of the sun’.<sup>6</sup> *Sejanus* explodes these limits: covering nine years of Roman history, from AD 22 to 31, its dramatic chronology bears a far more obvious resemblance to the temporally distended narratives of contemporary English historical tragedies, such as Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*, or Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, than to the artificially compressed plots of classical tragedy, or to the impeccably neo-Aristotelian design of early modern Italian and French historical tragedies.<sup>7</sup> Jonson was evidently self-conscious about this apparent abandonment of classical strictures in favour of

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<sup>3</sup> On the dating and reception of *Sejanus*’ first performance, see *Sejanus His Fall*, edited by Tom Cain, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, II, 199–200. All references to the play (hereafter ‘*Sejanus*’) and to its prefatory and dedicatory material will be to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> On the quarto’s design, see John Jowett, ‘Jonson’s Authorization of Type in “Sejanus” and Other Early Quartos’, *Studies in Bibliography*, 44 (1991), 254–65.

<sup>5</sup> On the quarto as a ‘textual monument’, see Brian Patrick Chalk, ‘Jonson’s Textual Monument’, *SEL*, 52 (2012), 387–405.

<sup>6</sup> *Poetics*, 1449b: ‘ἡ μὲν ὅτι μάλιστα πειρᾶται ὑπὸ μίαν περίοδον ἡλίου εἶναι’.

<sup>7</sup> On the (non-Aristotelian) preference for historical subject matter among sixteenth-century Italian Aristotelian theorists of tragedy, and its implications for *Sejanus*, see David Farley-Hills, ‘Jonson and the Neo-Classical Rules in *Sejanus* and *Volpone*’, *RES*, 46 (1995), 153–73.

domestic precedent. In his epistle ‘To the Readers’, he defends his practice in *Sejanus* as a necessary concession to contemporary taste (‘Nor is it needful, or almost possible, in these our times, and to such auditors as commonly things are presented, to observe the old state and splendour of dramatic poems, with preservation of any popular delight’, p. 213), while also insisting on his credentials as a rigorously classicizing theorist (‘let not the absence of these forms be imputed to me, wherein I shall give you occasion hereafter, and without my boast, to think I could better prescribe, than omit the due use for want of knowledge’, p. 214).

In fact, we should not allow Jonson’s carefully wrought *apologia* for his abandonment of the unity of time to blind us to the ways in which *Sejanus* does conform to, or at least gesture towards, the temporal structures of classical tragedy. The play may not obey what the introductory epistle terms ‘the strict laws of time’ (p. 213), but Jonson has made obvious efforts to rein in or disguise its temporal sprawl, by reordering and conflating individual incidents from his historical sources (as Shakespeare and Marlowe had also done in their history plays); by avoiding explicit references to the passage of time; and by allowing scenes to run together into long sequences of continuous action, such that the action of the play seems, particularly to a spectator or reader unfamiliar with the details of first-century Roman history, to take place over the course of a few weeks, rather than an entire decade. *Sejanus* might thus be seen as a typically Jonsonian compromise between Aristotelian and neo-classical precept, and vernacular tradition, a product of the playwright’s ongoing efforts to serve, as Peter Womack puts it, ‘as European theater’s English translator, rewriting its principles for the London stage’.<sup>8</sup>

But Jonson’s engagement with the temporalities of classical tragedy in *Sejanus* also extends beyond the neo-classical theorists’ narrow concern with the unity of time. Most Greek and Roman tragedies do indeed restrict the fictional duration of their staged action to the span of a single day, but the stories that they tell always extend both backwards and forwards in time, and the past roots and future consequences of a given play’s enacted crisis are continually made present on stage through expository prologues and epilogues; through the memories and expectations of individual characters; through monodic prophecies and choral odes; and through intertextual echoes of other, older texts.<sup>9</sup> Take Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, for example, available even to Greekless Renaissance readers since Sanravius’ translation of the work into Latin (Basel, 1555): although the play’s action concerns Agamemnon’s arrival home and his death there at his wife’s hands, the play also rehearses the whole of the Trojan War and shows how its characters’ futures are shaped by that past in various ways. In principle, the relationship between this temporal extension and the temporal constraints of the tragic plot might be one of dynamic tension (as is the case in New Comedy).<sup>10</sup> In practice, however, the nature of the genre’s characteristic subject matter – stories in which the past is a source of pollution and obligation, and in which possible futures are foreclosed by death, by the inevitable recurrence

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Womack, ‘The Comical Scene’, *Representations*, 101 (2008), 32–56 (p. 46).

<sup>9</sup> Useful accounts of time in Greek tragedy include Pat Easterling, ‘Narrative on the Greek Tragic Stage’ in *Defining Greek Narrative*, edited by Douglas Cairns and Ruth Scodel (Edinburgh, 2014), pp. 226–40; N. J. Lowe, *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 164–9; Rush Rehm, *Radical Theatre: Greek Tragedy and the Modern World* (London, 2003), pp. 119–39; and Jacqueline de Romilly, *Time in Greek Tragedy* (Ithaca, NY, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> See Womack, pp. 37–40.

of intergenerational violence, or, at best, by the kind of static memorialization offered to Oedipus at Colonus – means that the two more often reinforce one another, as past, present, and future collapse into an unbroken continuum of human suffering. The result is a very different kind of tragic day, one measured out not by the regular motion of Aristotle’s sun, but by the cosmic anachrony of Seneca’s *Thyestes*, in which the sun-god ‘hesitates whether to bid the day to follow, and force it with the reins to go to its destruction’ (‘dubitat an iubeat sequi | cogatque habenis ire periturum diem’, 121-2), before ultimately reversing course at the sight of Thyestes’ unwitting consumption of his own sons (itself a horrifying image of generational regression).<sup>11</sup>

In both *Sejanus* and *Catiline*, we argue, Jonson draws on classical sources to produce a comparably complex notion of tragic time. Even as they track the narrative chronologies of their ‘official’ historiographical sources, Jonson’s tragedies are full of quotations from and reminiscences of other Roman texts and Roman histories, including Lucan’s grim ‘epic of the defeated’, the *Bellum Civile*,<sup>12</sup> and the violent invectives of Claudian, the late antique propagandist, who closes (Latin ‘claudere’) the door on Latin literature in the dying days of the Roman empire. Such allusions, of course, would only register briefly, if at all, in the ears of an audience at the Globe. But to an attentive reader – and Jonson’s tragedies, for all their theatrical virtues, very much invite this kind of readerly attention – they also serve to fold into the plays the entire span of Roman history. Their ultimate effect is to reduce Roman time to a single moment of anachronic *stasis* (in the full sense of that word), an unending tragic day as grim as any in Seneca or Sophocles.

Right from *Sejanus*’ opening lines, it is clear that the past weighs heavily on the Tiberian present of Jonson’s Rome. As small huddles of dissident Germanicans – doomed followers of the murdered imperial prince – and loyal supporters of Sejanus circle each other warily in the play’s opening scene, attention soon settles on the historian Cremutius Cordus. He is ‘a gentleman of Rome’, in the words of the informer Latiaris, ‘one that has writ | Annals of late ... of Pompey’s [times], | and Caius Caesar’s, and so down to these’ (1.75-8) – a history, that is, of civil strife and autocratic rule. The point is not lost on his companion, Pinnarius Natta. ‘How stands h’affected to the present state?’, he wonders, since ‘Those times are somewhat queasy to be touched’ (1.79-82). Natta is an opportunistic agent of a paranoid regime, but his fears are immediately borne out by the use to which the Germanicans put Cordus’ history. While Sabinus resignedly observes that ‘these our times | Are not the same’ (1.85-6), his friend Arruntius is blunter: ‘There’s nothing Roman in us, nothing good, | Gallant or great. ’Tis true, that Cordus says, | “Brave Cassius was the last of all that race” ’ (1.102-4).

In endowing his characters with this kind of anxious historical consciousness, Jonson is following the lead of his historical sources: Cordus’ praise of Cassius (and Brutus) is taken directly from Tacitus, who reports that it led to his eventual prosecution by none other than Pinnarius Natta (Cordus’ trial, including a lengthy defence speech translated directly out of the *Annales*, 4.34, will take up much of *Sejanus*’ third act). But *Sejanus*’ characters also invoke the

<sup>11</sup> On temporal disorder in *Thyestes*, see Alessandro Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play: ‘Thyestes’ and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 177-220.

<sup>12</sup> On Lucan as the progenitor of an early modern tradition of ‘epics of the defeated’, see David Quint, *Epic and Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 1993), Chapter 4.

Roman past with an intensity not displayed by their historical models. Later in the same scene, Cordus remarks that he once thought of drawing a historical parallel between Germanicus and Alexander the Great, ‘Considering their forms, age, manner of deaths, | The nearness of the places where they fell’ (1.137-8), a comparison recorded, though not attributed to Cordus, by Tacitus (2.73). In response, Sabinus angrily rejects the comparison of Germanicus’ life ‘with that voluptuous, rash, | Giddy, and drunken Macedon’s’ (1.145-6) and offers his own canon of Roman parallels for Germanicus:

But he had other touches of late Romans,  
That more did speak him: Pompey's dignity,  
The innocence of Cato, Caesar's spirit,  
Wise Brutus' temperance and every virtue,  
Which, parted unto others, gave them name,  
Flowed mixed in him.

(1.149-54)

Jarringly, this encomium joins together some of Roman history’s most famous enemies, the last defenders of the old Republic with its would-be destroyer; only moments earlier, Arruntius had praised ‘god-like Cato ... that durst be good | When Caesar durst be evil’ and ‘the constant Brutus’ who ‘did strike | So brave a blow into the monster’s heart | That sought unkindly to captive his country’ (1.90-6). Sabinus surely intends this concatenation to figure Germanicus as a hopeful *concordia oppositorum*, but the effect is to inscribe a history of internecine violence at the heart of the dead princeling’s exemplary *Romanitas*.

Even as Sabinus presents Germanicus as an embodiment of the recent Roman past, moreover, his language links the prince to a distant Roman future. As commentators have long observed, Sabinus’ description of Germanicus as a mingled stream of virtues is closely modelled on the late antique Latin panegyrist Claudian’s praise of his patron Stilicho, the *de facto* ruler of the Western Roman Empire from AD 395-408: ‘sparguntur in omnes, | In te mixta fluunt’ ([blessings] are sprinkled upon all men, but flow mixed in you).<sup>13</sup> In fact, allusions to Claudian constitute something of a leitmotif in *Sejanus*’ opening act. Thus, Sabinus attacks Sejanus using language drawn from Claudian’s *In Rufinum*, an invective against one of Stilicho’s political rivals:

The gain, or rather spoil, of all the earth,  
One, and his house, receives.

(1.223-4)

congestae cumulantur opes orbisque ruinas  
accipit una domus: populi servire coacti  
plenaque privato succumbunt oppida regno.

(*In Rufinum*, 1.193-5)

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<sup>13</sup> Claudian, *De Consulatu Stilichonis*, 1.33-4, quoted from *Claudian*, edited by M. Platnauer (London, 1922); all quotations of Claudian are from this edition.

(Massed riches are gathered together and one house  
Receives the spoils of the world: peoples are forced into slavery  
And crowded cities bow down to a private tyranny.)

Later in the same act, Silius echoes Claudian's praise of Rufinus' enemy Stilicho as 'a virtuous prince' (1.408) in order to highlight Tiberius' contrasting vices (and, in the process, transmutes the Germanican senator's longing for a Republican past into a desire for an imperial future):

Men are deceived who think there can be thrall  
Beneath a virtuous prince. Wished liberty  
Ne'er lovelier looks, than under such a crown.  
(1.407-9)

Fallitur egregio quisquis sub principe credit  
servitium. numquam libertas gratior exstat  
quam sub rege pio.  
(*De Consulatu Stilichonis*, 3.113-15)

(He errs who thinks that submission to a noble prince is slavery; never does  
liberty show more fair than beneath a good king.)

Although Claudian goes unacknowledged in *Sejanus*' margins here, Jonson could expect many of his readers to catch these allusions: Victoria Moul has recently highlighted the 'wealth of evidence that Claudian's political verse was very widely read, quoted and discussed' in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.<sup>14</sup> To such readers, these echoes of the late antique poet serve as grim foreshadowings: as the court politics of Tiberius' Rome merge with those of Theodosian Constantinople, Roman history collapses into an unending – or, perhaps, always-ending – cycle of factional conflict. This history now stretches through the centuries from Cassius and Germanicus to that half-German regent whom one of Cremutius Cordus' greatest successors would dub, in his turn, 'the last of the Roman generals'.<sup>15</sup>

Moments like these, in which Jonson's classical intertexts multiply and complicate his tragedy's temporal frames, recur throughout *Sejanus*. When Sejanus denounces Cordus to Tiberius in the play's second act – an exchange without Tacitean precedent – as 'a most tart | And bitter spirit' who 'doth tax the present state' and 'parallels | The times, the governments; a professed champion | For the old liberty –' (2.306-12), the emperor's response sets off a cascade of historical entanglements and ironies:

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<sup>14</sup> Victoria Moul, 'England's Stilicho: Claudian's Political Poetry in Early Modern England', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* (2019), DOI 10.1007/s12138-019-00529-z, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols (London, 1776-89), III, 184.

A perishing wretch!  
As if there were that chaos bred in things,  
That laws and liberty would not rather choose  
To be quite broken, and ta'en hence by us,  
Than have the stain to be preserved by such.  
(2.312-16)

Jonson's unacknowledged source for these lines is the Neronian poet Lucan's epic retelling of the war between Caesar and Pompey, the *Bellum Civile*. Confronted, in the third book of the epic, by the tribune Metellus' attempts to prevent him from ransacking the state treasury, Lucan's Caesar declares contemptuously:

te uindice tuta relictā est  
libertas? non usque adeo permiscuit imis  
longus summa dies ut non, si uoce Metelli  
seruantur leges, malint a Caesare tolli.<sup>16</sup>

(Has liberty been left for safekeeping with you as its champion? The long day has not so completely confused the highest with the lowest things that the laws, if they are to be preserved by Metellus' voice, would not prefer to be destroyed by Caesar.)

Thus, even as he condemns Cordus, *Sejanus*' exemplary maker of historical parallels, Tiberius does so in terms that set up a regime-spanning series of textual correspondences: he assimilates himself to Julius Caesar, the founder of his dynasty, through the invocation of a poet forced to commit suicide by Nero, the last Julio-Claudian emperor. Soon, of course, Cordus himself will be driven to suicide by his own imperial persecutor.

However, Jonson saves his most devastating concatenation of present and future for the final moments of both *Sejanus*, the play, and its eponymous villain. After Macro, Tiberius' new henchman, has orchestrated Sejanus' denunciation before the Senate, and had his defeated rival hauled off to prison, Terentius, Sejanus' least objectionable follower, returns to the stage to tell the surviving Germanicans of his patron's ultimate fate. Sentenced 'by the Senate | To lose his head', he explains, Sejanus was no sooner decapitated than his corpse was 'seized | By the rude multitude', who, 'with violent rage | Have rent it limb from limb' (5.787-93). There follows a lengthy description of this popular *sparagmos*, and of the crowd's mistreatment of Sejanus' body, in which these lines are the goriest:

These mounting at his head, these at his face,  
These digging out his eyes, those with his brain,  
Sprinkling themselves, their houses, and their friends.

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<sup>16</sup> Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, 3.137-40, quoted from *M. Annaei Lucani Belli civilis libri decem*, edited by A. E. Housman (Oxford, 1950). All quotations from the *Bellum Civile* are from this edition.

Others are met have ravished thence an arm,  
 And deal small pieces of the flesh for favours;  
 These with a thigh; this hath cut off his hands;  
 And this his feet; these, fingers, and these, toes;  
 That hath his liver; he his heart.

(5.800-7)

As Jonson notes in his margins, Sejanus' dismemberment is reported, briefly, in Seneca's *De tranquillitate animi* (11.11). For the gory details, however, he turns, once again, to Claudian: Terentius' account of the grisly scene draws heavily on the late imperial poet's description of the murder and dismemberment of Rufinus outside the walls of Constantinople in AD 395.<sup>17</sup> The choice reflects Jonson's careful engagement with Claudian, as well as, perhaps, his sense that the Senecan resonances of Claudian's excess might well suit a tragedy, especially those kinds of bloody tragedies to which London's theatre audiences had become accustomed. Like Sejanus, Rufinus rose from relatively obscure origins to become praetorian prefect and, briefly, the power behind the imperial throne; like him too, at least according to Claudian's account, he fell from power precisely at the moment he expected to be crowned co-emperor. As Claudian's full-throated celebration of Rufinus' murder destabilizes Terentius' calls for tragic reconciliation ('O you whose minds are good ... pity guilty states, when they are wretched', 735-8), Sejanus' end thus becomes a prefiguration of the violence waiting at the end of empire. And, perhaps, of the violence of the end of empire. Written in the last years of the fourth century AD, against the background of the empire's rapidly worsening security, *In Rufinum* charges its eponymous villain, *inter alia*, of conspiring with Rome's barbarian enemies. 'An empire obtained with so much blood, with so much | kept', Claudian laments, 'one idle traitor overturned in the blink of an eye' ('imperium tanto quaesitum sanguine, tanto | servatum ... proditor unus iners angusto tempore vertit', *In Rufinum*, 2.50-3).

For Claudian the court poet, of course, Rufinus' killing ultimately represents a providential restoration of order: *In Rufinum* ends with the descent of its villain's soul to the Underworld, where Rufinus is sentenced by Rhadamanthus, the judge of the dead, to spend eternity in the lowest pit of Hell, 'where the foundations of dark night lie hid' ('qua noctis opacae | fundamenta latent', 2.525-6). Jonson offers his readers no such consolation (unlike, say, Thomas Kyd, who consigns his wrongdoers to Hell at the end of *The Spanish Tragedy*). No sooner has Terentius finished speaking than another messenger arrives, bringing news of the judicial murders of Sejanus' young son and daughter, a killing preceded, in the latter case, by a rape ordered by 'the wittily and strangely cruel Macro', 'because our laws | Admit no virgin immature to die' (5.831-3). 'Oh, act most worthy hell and lasting night, | To hide it from the world!' (5.837-8), the gentle and long-lived senator Lepidus cries out, echoing the closing lines of Claudian's poem, quoted above. In vain: as *Sejanus* ends, Hell is here on earth in Macro's Rome, where tragic days can last a very long time indeed. Upon finding her children's bodies, the Nuntius reports, their mother uttered 'such black and bitter execrations | As might affright the gods and force the sun | Run backward to the east' (5.848-50), an unmistakable echo of Seneca's *Thyestes*. It is left to Terentius to restore some semblance of temporal order

<sup>17</sup> See *In Rufinum*, 2.410–53.



in the play's closing lines:

Let this example move th' insolent man  
 Not to grow proud and careless of the gods.  
 It is an odious wisdom to blaspheme,  
 Much more to slighen or deny their powers.  
 For whom the morning saw so great and high,  
 Thus low and little, 'fore th' even doth lie.  
 (5.880-5)

Terentius' final couplet is another Senecan tag, translated, once again, from the Roman tragedian's *Thyestes*.<sup>18</sup> The sentiment is something of a commonplace in classical tragedy, a self-conscious reflection, as N. J. Lowe argues, of 'the form and span of typical tragic action'.<sup>19</sup> Here, it also serves as a rejoinder to Jonson's opening repudiation of 'the strict laws of time': a defiant assertion of the classical and tragic unity of Jonson's untimely play.

In *Sejanus*, as we have seen, the forms of classical tragedy are absent presences, invoked only to be dismissed in the play's Preface, and re-emerging as intertextual echoes at its close. In his second Roman tragedy, *Catiline His Conspiracy* (1611), in contrast, Jonson is both more confident and more conventional in his neo-classical convictions. No longer, he suggests in his dedication of the folio text of *Catiline* to William Herbert, third earl of Pembroke, and the nephew of Sir Philip Sidney, is he willing to break the timeless laws of dramatic form in order to satisfy contemporary tastes; rather, 'Posterity may pay your benefit the honour and thanks when it shall know that you dare, in these jig-given times, to countenance a legitimate poem.'<sup>20</sup> Jonson seems to be using 'legitimate' here in its original, Latinate sense of 'lawful': 'legitimate poem' is a painfully faithful translation of Horace's 'legitimum ... poema' (Ep. 2.2.109). (Jonson's entire characterization of Herbert also owes an obvious debt to Horace's praise of the Pisones in the *Ars Poetica*, as men who, in Jonson's translation of the poem, 'know the right way | To part scurrility from wit, or can | A lawful verse [ 'legitimumque sonum' ], by th' ear or finger scan').<sup>21</sup>

Jonson's new commitment to tragic legitimacy in *Catiline* is also evident in his embrace of the classical tragic models that he largely eschews in *Sejanus*. To be sure, *Catiline* shares with the earlier play a rigorous fidelity to its principal historiographical sources, in this case Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*, Cicero's four orations *In Catilinam* ('Against Catiline'), and the anti-Sallustian *Historia coniurationis Catilinae* ('History of the Catilinarian Conspiracy')

<sup>18</sup> Seneca, *Thyestes*, 613-14: 'quem dies uidit ueniens superbum, | hunc dies uidit fugiens iacentem' ('the man whom the coming day sees proud, | the day in flight sees lying low').

<sup>19</sup> Lowe (n. 9), p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> Ben Jonson, *Catiline His Conspiracy*, edited by Inga-Stina Ewbank, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, IV, 25. All references to the play (hereafter '*Catiline*') and to its prefatory and dedicatory material will be to this edition.

<sup>21</sup> Ben Jonson, 'Horace, or The Art of Poetry' edited by Colin Burrow, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, VII, 44. Jonson doubtless appreciated Horace's binding together of poet and patron here: 'ego et vos | scimus inurbanum lepido seponere dicto | legitimumque sonum digitis callemus et aure' (*Ars Poetica*, 272-4).

by the Italian humanist Costanzo Felici (Constantius Felicius Durantinus).<sup>22</sup> Although there are no Latin notes in the margins of the 1611 quarto, Jonson devotes almost 300 lines in *Catiline*'s third act to a close translation of Cicero's first Catilinarian, a bold choice that, if Jonson's own reports are to be believed, seems to have contributed substantially to the play's failure on stage (see his prefatory address entitled 'To the Reader in Ordinary', p. 26). But Jonson also fits out his second Roman tragedy with a neo-Senecan dramatic framework, including a malevolent *umbra* and a fully-fledged chorus of Roman citizens. In its treatment of time, too, *Catiline* is stricter than *Sejanus*. Although the historical events depicted in the play took place between July 64 BC and January 62 BC, Jonson squeezes them into a few days of dramatic time (though admittedly this discipline does sag somewhat amid the military manoeuvring of the play's fifth act).

Beneath its more conventionally neo-classical facade, however, *Catiline* also reflects Jonson's continued engagement with disordered uses of time. This much is already apparent in his choice of historical subject. In pairing Catiline with Sejanus in his tragic diptych, Jonson is following Tacitus' lead: behind the historian's Sejanus, with his 'animus audax' and his ambitions towards monarchy ('parando regno'),<sup>23</sup> lies Sallust's Catiline with his 'animus audax' and monarchical conspiracy ('dum sibi regnum pararet').<sup>24</sup> Jonson's pairing, however, effects a striking folding of time: while Tacitus' allusions to Catiline and Sallust look straightforwardly to the past, Jonson's ordering puts historical chronology in reverse, with his 1603 imperial favourite anticipating his 1611 republican scoundrel, and *Catiline* serving as what John Henderson has called a 'prequel to fallen *Sejanus*'.<sup>25</sup>

This is all to say that the Rome of Jonson's second tragedy remains haunted by its intertextual pasts and futures. Literally so: the play opens with the apparition of Roman civil discord, and Roman civil war poetry, both past and future, in the form of 'Sulla's Ghost'. The dictator's spirit is a spectral reminder of the brutal internecine violence of the 80s BC, which took place twenty years before *Catiline* is set. It is also a portent of the yet more deadly conflicts waiting twenty years in the future: as Caesar crosses the Rubicon in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, 'the shade of Sulla sang sad prophecies' in Rome ('tristia Sullani cecinere oracula manes').<sup>26</sup> Urged by the ghost to 'Make all past, present, future ill thine own, | And conquer all example in thy one' (1.i.53-4), Catiline's enthusiastic response similarly looks forward to the already written beginnings of the next Civil War, when Lucan records that 'a powerful people | turned its victorious right hand into its own guts' ('populumque potentem | in sua uictrici conuersum

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<sup>22</sup> On Jonson's use of these sources, see Blair Worden, 'Politics in *Catiline*: Jonson and his Sources', in *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson: Text, History, Performance*, edited by Martin Butler (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 152-173; and Bruce Boehrer, 'Jonson's *Catiline* and Anti-Sallustian Trends in Renaissance Humanist Historiography', *SP*, 94 (1997), 85-102.

<sup>23</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, 4.13, 4.1.

<sup>24</sup> Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, 5.4, 5.6.

<sup>25</sup> John Henderson, 'Jonson's Too Roman Plays: From *Julius Caesar* to *Sejanus* and *Catiline*', in *Tragedy in Transition*, edited by Sarah Annes Brown and Catherine Silverstone (Oxford, 2007) pp. 103-22 (p. 118).

<sup>26</sup> *Bellum Civile*, 1.581. Our discussion of *Catiline*'s Lucanian allusions is indebted throughout to the comprehensive but uncritical catalogue in Lynn Harold Harris, 'Lucan's *Pharsalia* and Jonson's *Catiline*', *MLN*, 34 (1919), 397-402.

uiscera dextra', *Bellum Civile*, 1.2-3). Preserving the classical poet's visceral imagery, Jonson's Catiline declares that if Rome 'can lose her nature', 'I can lose | My piety, and in her stony entrails | Dig me a seat' (1.i.92-4).

Indeed, as Jonson's play unfolds, Catiline's conspiracy frequently shades into Caesar's, and *Catiline* into the *Bellum Civile*. Not only does Jonson follow anti-Sallustian Renaissance historians in presenting Caesar as unquestionably implicated in Catiline's conspiracy, as Bruce Boehrer has shown, but he also transforms Catiline and his associates into Lucan's Caesar.<sup>27</sup> After Catiline's defeat in the consular election, Cethegus rejoices in the moment of extremity, 'When danger stops and ruin makes the way' (3.i.193); similarly Lucan describes Caesar, on the brink of war, 'rejoicing to make his way by ruin' ('gaudensque viam fecisse ruina', *Bellum Civile*, 1.150). Cicero, freshly installed as consul, worries about Catiline, 'for unto whom | Rome is too little, what can be enough?' (3.ii.47); in Lucan, Caesar's troops, mutinous and tired after his victory over Pompey's legates in Spain, ask their general, 'what is enough, if Rome is too little?' ('quid satis est, si Roma parum est?', *Bellum Civile*, 5.274). After Cicero has delivered his first oration against Catiline, the latter responds, in Lucanian terms familiar from Jonson's own *Sejanus*:

He save the state? A burgess' son of Arpinum?  
The gods would rather twenty Romes should perish  
Than have that contumely stuck upon 'em  
That he should share with them in the preserving  
A shed, or sign-post.

(4.ii.421-5)

As Catiline casts himself as Lucan's Caesar confronting a Cicero cast in the verbal garb of Lucan's Metellus, Jonson fuses together *Catiline's* dissolute villain, a Neronian Republican anti-hero, with his own Renaissance portrait of Tiberius (who, as we saw above, uses these same lines in reference to Cremutius Cordus). The total effect is deeply pessimistic. Even as Cicero's allies extravagantly proclaim him saviour of the Republic, echoes of the *Bellum Civile* remind readers of his coming failure to avert its fall. Once again, Jonson's Roman history begins to look less like a progression from one event to the next, than a closed circle of endless civil war, a phantasmagoria of literary massacres and remembered traumas redolent of Senecan tragedy, in which each conflict simultaneously is engendered by the last war, and triggers and fulfils the next.

This tragic vision of history, of course, is already present in Lucan's epic (Lucan was, we should recall, Seneca's nephew).<sup>28</sup> The *Bellum Civile's* account of the war between Caesar and Pompey is also the story of the war between Sulla and Marius, the war between Augustus

<sup>27</sup> See esp. Boehrer (n. 22), pp. 87-93.

<sup>28</sup> On Lucan's relationship to tragedy, Senecan and otherwise, see Annmarie Ambühl, 'Thebanos imitata rogos (BC 1,552): Lucan's *Bellum Civile* und die Tragödien aus dem Thebanischen Sagenkreis', in *Lucan im 21. Jahrhundert*, edited by Christine Walde (Leipzig, 2005), pp. 261-94; and Nandini B. Pandey, 'Dilemma as a tragic figure of thought in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*', *Illinois Classical Studies*, 39 (2014), 109-38.

and Antony, and the degradation of Roman liberty under the emperors. A careful reader of Lucan, Jonson is alert to this dimension of the epic: Cethegus' and Catiline's reminiscences of 'the days | Of Sulla's sway, when the free sword took leave | To act all that it would' (1.i.229-31) rely heavily on the long retrospective account of the Sullan-Marian conflict which Lucan juxtaposes with Caesar's invasion of Italy, in Book 2 of the *Bellum Civile*. Here, an unnamed Roman, 'seeking examples in his great fear' ('magno quarens exempla timori', *Bellum Civile*, 2.67), goes through a long litany of Sulla's and Marius' crimes, before concluding that 'these things remain to be endured again, through this sequence of war we shall pass, this will remain the issue of civil arms' ('haec rursus patienda manent, hoc ordine belli | ibitur, hic stabit civilibus exitus armis', *Bellum Civile*, 2.223-4). The allusions to time here are especially layered: as Cethegus transforms a Neronian rendition of a 40s BC recollection of the civil wars of the 80s BC into a programme for violence in 63 BC, Jonson turns Lucan's consideration of *exempla* into Catiline's celebration of the eternal recurrence of civil war: 'And this shall be again, and more, and more' (1.i.254).

In *Catiline*, as in *Sejanus*, Jonson's folding of Roman time reaches its inevitable climax at the close. In the play's final scene, Petreius, the Republic's victorious general, appears on stage to tell the story of Catiline's final defeat, 'The sad relation of the civil strife' (5.v.203). As he does so, the play explodes a final time with Lucanian references. Catiline and his party are no longer simply Caesar and Caesarians, but every party in the coming calamity: at the very moment at which one civil war is averted, the next one – the Big One – is born on stage. Petreius' Catiline, like Sulla's, is a figure out of time, whose 'count'nance was a civil war itself' (5.v.225). His army, 'standing in their looks | The paleness of the death that was to come' (5.v.226-7), is akin to Pompey's army before Pharsalia, where 'on many faces was the pallor | of coming death' ('multorum pallor in ore | mortis uenturae', *Bellum Civile*, 7.129-30). At the same time, ignorant of 'what a crime their valour was' (5.v.240), they are also Scaeva, the Caesarian hero at Dyrrachium, 'who did not know how great a crime was valour in civil strife' ('qui nesciret, in armis | quam magnum uirtus crimen ciuilibus esset', *Bellum Civile*, 6.147-8). Catiline himself, Petreius reports, struck the first fatal blow of the battle:

Which cut, it seem'd a narrow neck of land  
Had broke between two mighty seas, and either  
Flow'd into the other, for so did the slaughter.  
(5.v.232-4)

He thus re-enacts the death of Crassus, the trigger for Lucan's Civil War:

nam sola futuri  
Crassus erat belli medius mora. qualiter undas  
qui secat et geminum gracilis mare separat Isthmos  
(*Bellum Civile*, 1.99-101)

(For Crassus, between them, was the only check on the war to come, like the slender Isthmus which divides the waves, and separates the twin seas)

At last, in his final charge, Catiline once again becomes Caesar crossing Lucan's Rubicon: realizing his cause was lost, Petreius reports, Catiline

Collected all his fury and ran in,  
Armed with a glory high as his despair,  
Into a battle like a Libyan lion  
Upon his hunters, scornful of our weapons,  
Careless of wounds, plucking down lives about him.  
(5.v.251-5)

Lucan reports of Caesar:

inde moras soluit belli tumidumque per amnem  
signa tulit propere; sicut squalentibus arvis  
aestiferae Libyes uiso leo comminus hoste  
subsedit dubius, totam dum colligit iram;  
mox, ubi se saevae stimulavit uerbere caudae  
erexitque iubam et uasto graue murmur hiatus  
infremuit, tum torta leuis si lancea Mauri  
haereat aut latum subeant uenabula pectus,  
per ferrum tanti securus uolneris exit.  
(*Bellum Civile*, 1.204-12)

(Then he loosed the stays of war, and through the swollen stream bore his standards in haste; just as when, in the barren fields of burning Libya, a lion who has seen his enemy at hand crouches down uncertain, while he collects all his fury; soon, when he has goaded himself with the lash of his cruel tail and raised his mane, and bellowed from his gaping jaws a deep roar, then, if the spinning lance of light-armed Moor sticks, or a hunting spear pierce his broad breast, he passes on along the weapon, careless of so great a wound.)

The end of one civil war thus rushes quickly, seamlessly back into the beginning of the next.

Yet, if Catiline's final stand foreshadows both the end of the Republic, and, through Lucan's implied presence, the bloody conclusion of the Julio-Claudian dynasty that succeeded it, his death, like Sejanus', enfolds a far larger span of imperial and cosmic time. Catiline's last, Caesar-like charge carried him through the ranks of Republican troops, Petreius explains,

Till he had circled in himself with death;  
Then fell he, too, t' embrace it where it lay.  
And as in that rebellion 'gainst the gods,  
Minerva holding forth Medusa's head,  
One of the giant brethren felt himself  
Grow marble at the killing sight and, now  
Almost made stone, began t' inquire, what flint,  
What rock it was that crept through all his limbs,

And, ere he could think more, was that he feared,  
So Catiline, at the sight of Rome in us,  
Became his tomb; yet did his look retain  
Some of his fierceness, and his hands still moved,  
As if he laboured yet to grasp the state  
With those rebellious parts.

(5.v.256-69)

Petreius' simile, of course, points back into the deep recesses of mythological time, likening Catiline's failed revolution to the revolt of the giants against the Olympian gods; it thus inscribes the events of the play with a cosmic significance (although the comparison of Rome to the Gorgon's head necessarily unsettles any providential reading of Catiline's defeat). More disquietingly, however, it also looks forward, once again, to the end times of Roman history. Jonson's petrified giant is translated from Claudian's fragmentary Latin *Gigantomachia*, perhaps the last poem by the man whom the Florentine humanist Cristoforo Landino identified as the last poet laureate of classical antiquity:

Tritonia uirgo  
prosilit ostendens rutilę cum Gorgone pectus;  
adspectu contenta suo non utitur hasta  
(nam satis est uidisse semel) primumque furem  
longius in faciem saxi Pallanta reformat.  
ille procul subitis fixus sine uulnere nodis  
ut se letifero sensit durescere uisu  
(et steterat iam paene lapis) 'quo uertimur?' inquit  
(*Gigantomachia*, 91-8)

(The Tritonian maiden sprang forth, showing her chest with its red-glowing Gorgon; content with showing this, she makes no use of the spear (for it is enough to have looked but once), and he first of all, raging, is reformed from afar into the appearance of a rock. Transfixed from afar with sudden knots but without wound, he feels himself hardening through this death-bringing face, and as he stood there, now all but stone, 'To what am I transforming?' he says)

Brought to a close through evocation of Claudian, both of Jonson's classical tragedies thus reflect in miniature a vision of classical history and the classical canon. They also seem to feed one into the other. Catiline's twitching hands here recall our final glimpse of Rufinus' mutilated body in *In Rufinum*: 'his right hand ... imitating its living clutches | is forced, by drawing up of sinews, to bend its fingers'.<sup>29</sup> Confronted by this monstrous tradition – 'the sight of Rome in us' (5.v.265) – and petrified beneath its layers of textual sediment, the temporal structures of Jonson's play collapse into a black hole of tragic anachronism. Eternally suspended, like

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<sup>29</sup> *In Rufinum*, 2.436-9: 'dextera ... uiuosque imitata retentus | cogitur adductis digitos inflectere neruis'.

Oedipus at Colonus, between life and death, Catiline becomes his own tomb, an image which returns us to the Thyestean and gigantomachic horror of the play's opening scene, and to Catiline's fervent wish to excavate his way back to his own always already petrified origins: to 'dig me a seat' within Rome's 'stony entrails' (1.i.94, 93)

where I will live again,  
The labour of her womb, and be a burden  
Weightier than all the prodigies and monsters  
That she hath teemed with, since she first knew Mars.  
(1.i.94-7)

By the time we reach *Catiline*'s final, monstrous conclusion, we, and Jonson, have come a long way from the title-page of the *Sejanus* quarto, with its epigraph from Martial (*Epigrams*, 10.4.9-10): 'Non hic Centauros, non Gorgones Harypasque | Invenies: Hominem pagina nostra sapit' ('You will not find here Centaurs, nor Gorgons and Harpies: my page tastes of what is human').<sup>30</sup> Jonson's tragic project had, indeed, evolved: from the freer form of the earlier drama, he moved closer to the classical tragedy in form and in content, enlisting the chorus, the mythological imagery avoided by Martial, and even the Senecan 'shade'. Yet, in the process, the hopeful note sounded by *Poetaster*'s 'Apologetical Dialogue' also seems to have been transformed into the creative impasse that would make *Catiline* Jonson's last tragedy: having begun by promising 'to strike the ear of time', Jonson can only leave his readers with 'the killing sight' of his tragic Rome.

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<sup>30</sup> Martial's Latin is quoted from the quarto title-page of *Sejanus* (1605), in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, II, 211.