

JONSON'S 'TO PENSHURST': A STUDY  
OF THE COUNTRY-HOUSE POEM

---

LINDA KIRKSEY GORDON



JONSON'S "TO PENSHURST": A STUDY  
OF THE COUNTRY-HOUSE POEM

---

An Abstract  
Presented to the  
Graduate and Research Council of  
Austin Peay State University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

---

by  
Linda Kirksey Gordon  
August 1986

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study of Ben Jonson's poem "To Penshurst" was threefold. First, the development of the country-house poem was traced, from its origins in classical literature, to the Renaissance revival in Europe, to Jonson's contribution to the genre in the seventeenth century. Secondly, Jonson's skill in imitatio, his adaptation of his sources in form and idea, was discussed. Finally, Jonson's craftsmanship as a poet in creating the unique work which is "To Penshurst" was analyzed.

A splendid example of imitatio, "To Penshurst" reveals the influence of Virgil, Horace, and Martial and the classical versions of the country-house poem. The Renaissance revival of the genre in Europe preceded Jonson's poem, the first of its kind in England. Not only did the classical and Renaissance poems influence Jonson's writing of "To Penshurst," but Edmund Spenser's allegorical houses contributed to Jonson's descriptions of the great houses of the seventeenth century. Indeed, an analysis of the complex structure and prosody of the poem revealed Jonson's skill as a poet and a builder. An apparently simple epigram, "To Penshurst" is in fact the finest example of the country-house poem in the English language.

JONSON'S "TO PENSHURST": A STUDY  
OF THE COUNTRY-HOUSE POEM

---

A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Graduate and Research Council of  
Austin Peay State University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

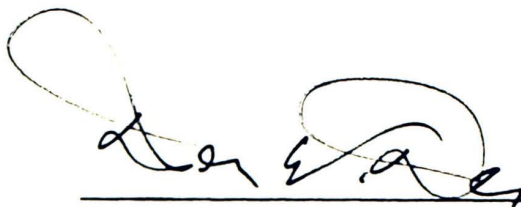
---

by  
Linda Kirksey Gordon  
August 1986



To the Graduate and Research Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Linda Kirksey Gordon entitled "Jonson's 'To Penshurst': A Study of the Country-House Poem." I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

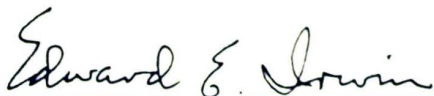


Major Professor

We have read this thesis and  
recommend its acceptance.



Second Committee Member



Third Committee Member

Accepted for the Graduate and  
Research Council:



Dean of the Graduate School

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the members of my committee, Dr. Don Der, Dr. Ed Irwin, and Dr. Lewis Tatham, all members of the Department of Languages and Literature, for their unfailing patience, guidance, and good humor during this extended, long-distance study. They have graciously and promptly answered all of my questions and have corresponded with me via letters, tape recordings, and telephone. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the high standards of excellence to which they directed and encouraged me. Dr. Der issued the initial challenge in responding to my interest in the topic of this paper. The completion of this thesis has been a lengthy process, and I hope I have not disappointed any of my professors. Certainly, I have learned a great deal about writing and about my topic in completing this study, and I appreciate their faith in my ability.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION. . . . .	1
II. THE COUNTRY-HOUSE POEM PRIOR TO JONSON. . . . .	7
Classical Origins . . . . .	7
Virgil's <u>Georgics</u> . . . . .	8
Horace's <u>Epodes</u> . . . . .	10
Martial's <u>Epigrams</u> . . . . .	11
Renaissance Revival . . . . .	12
European Country-House Poems. . . . .	13
Geoffrey Whitney's Poem . . . . .	14
III. "TO PENSHURST" AS A MODEL OF <u>IMITATIO</u> . . . . .	17
Jonson's Adaptation of the <u>Georgics</u> . . . . .	17
Jonson's Use of Horace's <u>Epode II</u> . . . . .	20
The Pervasive Influence of Martial's Epigrams . . . . .	22
Spenser's Allegorical Buildings . . . . .	29
IV. "TO PENSHURST" AS AN ORIGINAL CREATION. . . . .	33
Jonson's Theory of Architecture and Poetry. . . . .	34
The Complex Structure of "To Penshurst" . . . . .	35
Two Major Divisions . . . . .	35
Two Upward Movements. . . . .	35
Jonson's Use of Prosody to Enhance Meaning. . . . .	36
V. CONCLUSION. . . . .	43
WORKS CITED . . . . .	46

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

For England, the early seventeenth century was a time of considerable economic, political, and social turmoil which resulted in a marked depreciation of those traditional values associated with country life. Earlier, during the late sixteenth century, rural England was considered to be "functional and morally sound" (McGuire 93). In the country, the typical aristocratic landowner lived with his tenants in an interdependent relationship; in return for his tenants' labor, the landowner devoted most of his time to managing his estate and serving the community which depended upon his estate for its livelihood. However, court life and London beckoned, and throughout the sixteenth century many of the landed gentry abandoned country houses for life in the city. The accession of the Stuarts and the subsequent glamour of their court, together with economic developments that led to a decreased dependence by the aristocracy on their country estates as a source of income, greatly accelerated this migration to London. Many of the landholding aristocracy disposed of their real property and abandoned the role of lord of the manor. Consequently, ever fewer country estates functioned as autonomous communities in which patrician landowners and plebian tenants might enjoy what could be described as a wonderfully symbiotic relationship.



Just how wonderful life on the estate really was for all its members is a matter of conjecture. It very likely never approached the image Ben Jonson held in his mind as he composed "To Penshurst," the first in England of a "thin but clearly defined tradition of poems" (Hibbard 401) known as country-house poems. "To Penshurst" was a tribute to the Sidney family that praised their estate, their manor house, and their role in maintaining a moral and well-ordered society, while, at the same time, it lamented the rapidly vanishing values represented by the estate.

Although Jonson's was the first seventeenth century country-house poem in English, the genre was traditional. For centuries, as we shall see in Chapter II, poets had complained about life in the city and praised the man who happily retired to a home in the country. Examples of the country-house poem can be found in the works of Horace, Virgil, and Martial. In writing "To Penshurst," Jonson was continuing a tradition which had begun centuries earlier, the tradition of paying tribute to the aristocratic scion of an honorable and noble family whose estate was functional as well as ornamental.

But in "To Penshurst" Jonson was also participating in another time-honored tradition: imitation. The poem is a fine example of imitatio. Poets of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century who knew their Greek, Latin, French, and Italian poetic theory practiced imitatio. Jonson was the first English poet to achieve a "coherent theoretical treatment of imitatio" and to apply this theory to his writing

"in a thoroughgoing way" (Peterson 5). Jonson perceived himself to be a poet "standing in the great line of descent from Latin writers and theorists--Cicero, Horace, the two Senecas, Quintilian, and others" (Peterson 5). Indeed, Jonson imitated in his own unique style the works of Horace, Virgil, and Martial. The relationship of "To Penshurst" to its classical predecessors will be discussed in Chapter III.

But while "To Penshurst" owes much to its classical antecedents, it is nevertheless a uniquely original poem. Much of its originality can be attributed to its author's practical knowledge of architecture and masonry. As a brick mason, he understood the principles of construction, and, in creating "To Penshurst," he built a poem as carefully and methodically as he would have built a house. The originality of the poem consists in the techniques and principles employed by Jonson in its writing, and these are the subject of Chapter IV. While scholars have noted that in constructing his poem Jonson borrowed materials from classical authors, later Europeans, and even Edmund Spenser, the masterwork that is "To Penshurst" is the result of a genius's design and craftsmanship.

This study of "To Penshurst," then, will trace the development of the country-house poem from its origins in classical Greek and Roman literature, through its revival in Renaissance European literature, to its initial appearance in English literature. In addition, it will examine Jonson's specific borrowings, in the manner of imitatio, from Virgil,



Horace, and Martial. Finally, because no comprehensive study of "To Penshurst" would be complete without some discussion of Jonson's craftsmanship in constructing "To Penshurst," Jonson's poetic genius will be considered.

This treatment of "To Penshurst" differs from previously published scholarship in that it for the first time discusses three important elements of Jonson's achievement in one volume: (1) the history of the country-house poem, including Jonson's contribution to the genre; (2) Jonson's synthesis of ideas and poetic forms which he imitated in "To Penshurst"; and (3) Jonson's poetic craftsmanship. Although a considerable amount of scholarship regarding "To Penshurst" and the country-house poem has already been published, none, to my knowledge, exists which addresses itself to all three of these areas. The one text which comes closest is The Country House in English Renaissance Poetry by McClung.<sup>1</sup> But McClung's approach is primarily social. Although he touches briefly upon the classical influence and the development of the genre, McClung's major concern is with the country house itself and its place in Renaissance poetry. Also restricted in scope is G. R. Hibbard's definitive essay ("The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century") in which he (1) discusses the changes which occurred in architecture and the subsequent shift in the function of the country house in the late sixteenth and early

<sup>1</sup>William A. McClung, The Country House in English Renaissance Poetry (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1977).

seventeenth centuries and (2) traces the history of the country house poem in England from Jonson to Pope.

I am very much indebted to the scholars who translated and edited the works of Horace, Virgil, and Martial which are cited in this paper. In addition to a translation of Virgil's Georgics, Smith Palmer Bovie's introduction to Virgil's Georgics provided insight into those events in Virgil's life which influenced his writing. Similarly, The Complete Works of Horace, translated by Dr. John Marshall, was valuable not only for its translation of Epode II but also for the introductory comments on Horace's life. Walter Ker's translation of Martial's Epigrams was particularly useful in conjunction with Kathryn McEuen's analysis of Martial's influence on Jonson (Classical Influence Upon the Tribe of Ben). Paul Cubeta, in his essay "A Jonsonian Ideal: 'To Penshurst,'" also examined Jonson's debt to Martial and Virgil, pointing out similarities and differences between Jonson's work and that of his predecessors.

Wilkinson's The Georgics of Virgil provided background information on Jonson's sources in classical literature and on the evolution of the country-house poem in sixteenth-century Europe. I was led to L. P. Wilkinson's book by Kathryn Hunter's essay on Geoffrey Whitney's early country-house poem ("Geoffrey Whitney's 'To Richard Cotton, Esquire': An Early English Country-House Poem"). In her article, Hunter suggests a possible relationship between Whitney's poem and Jonson's "To Penshurst."



C. N. Manlove's Literature and Reality 1600-1800 was valuable for its analysis of Jonson's construction of "To Penshurst." Among the topics covered by Manlove are the idea of the great chain of being, which Jonson employed in his poem; Jonson's theory of architecture as it applies to poetry; and a discussion of the poetic devices which Jonson utilized. Wesley Trimpi, Richard Peterson, and Thomas Greene provided helpful information on Jonson's predilection for the "plain style" and his expertise in the practice of imitatio.

Manlove offers an accurate assessment of the genre of the country-house poem, one which reflects Jonson's attitude toward his poem, his subject, and his purpose in writing it. Manlove describes the tradition as

. . . a series of attempts, within a restricted and idealistic sphere, to shore up some fragments against the ruin in the outside world. Its concerns are both the preservation of the good society and the pleasure of retiring to it: it is at once hortatory and consolatory. . . . The appeal of the country house as an image was not only social, political, moral and emotional, but also aesthetic: as architecture it had the structural qualities to which poets responded. It was built as they saw the world built, and as they built poems. (19)

Certainly, "To Penshurst" ranks among the best in the tradition of the country-house poem.

## CHAPTER II

### THE COUNTRY-HOUSE POEM PRIOR TO JONSON

Jonson's poem "To Penshurst" belongs to a tradition of poetry which originated in classical Greek and Roman literature. A noted student of the classics, Jonson drew on his considerable knowledge of that literature when writing "To Penshurst." But he was also a student of literature written in the vernacular and drew upon his knowledge of modern poems written in the country-house tradition. Because of his use of these sources, a brief survey of the country-house poem as it appeared in western literature prior to Jonson is requisite to an appreciation of his achievement in "To Penshurst."

The tradition of the country-house poem has a solid foundation in the works of Virgil, Horace, and Martial. Country life was a popular subject among the Greek and Latin poets; witness the abundance of pastoral poetry. However, as we shall see, the classical poems which influenced the later country-house poems differed slightly from the traditional pastoral poem.

The classical tradition which evolved into the country-house poem began with Virgil's Georgics and Horace's Epodes. The Georgics were published between 37 and 30 B.C. (Chalker 4) and the Epodes in 35 B.C. (Marshall xvi). Both Virgil and Horace were honored Roman poets who enjoyed the patronage of Maecenas, the chief political advisor to Octavian, as well

as that of other leading citizens of Rome (Bovie x; Marshall xi).

Maecenas commissioned Virgil to write a "verse treatise on the subject of Roman farming" (Bovie x). With Rome in the throes of political turmoil, such an assignment must have seemed unusual to Virgil. Nevertheless, he handled the assignment with "characteristic deliberation and concern for . . . accuracy and fitness" (Bovie x). Virgil spent seven years writing the Georgics, and they reflect his concern for the effects of war and aggression (a major factor in the lives of the Romans at this time) on the peaceful farmer (Bovie xi-xiii).

Yet the farmer was, after all, the focus of the poem, and Virgil honored him in a way that was both innovative and traditional. The use of predecessors was the usual poetic practice in Roman literature, and, accordingly, Virgil used as his model Hesiod's Works and Days, a Greek poem about agriculture (Bovie xiii). To this model Virgil added his own creative touch; he drew on his knowledge of didactic poetry and Roman agricultural literature. Of the latter, Bovie lists Cato's treatise De agri cultura (circa 160 B.C.) and Varro's De re rustica (37 B.C.) as sources for the Georgics (xv).

The collation of such diverse materials resulted in a new and unique form for the traditional subject of country living. Virgil, as Jonson was later to do, combined didacticism with Greek poetry and Roman literature to create a



complex poem praising the farmer and his symbiotic relationship with nature. John Chalker states that Virgil intended the poem to be a simple one, composed of four books, each dealing with a different aspect of farming (4). Bovie provides a summary of these four books:

He deals in Book I with the soil, its qualities and its problems, with ploughing, sowing and harvesting, and the weather. In Book II he proceeds directly to the culture of the trees, to the landscape with its familiar vineyards and olive groves. He also discusses in this book many varieties of forest stand and of shrubs, and he considers various uses of lumber. Book III deals with animals, the cattle, horses, sheep, and goats, looking now, as it were, at the beings that people the land and roam over the landscape. The farm animals also impose on their keeper a variety of duties, as stockbreeder, trainer, and veterinarian, adept in pastoral care. Book IV divides into two main parts, the first a description and natural history of the honeybees, the second a mythical narrative telling how Aristaeus, "the first beekeeper," discovered the technique for regenerating a swarm. (xx-xxi)

Although Virgil reminds the reader of the hardships facing the farmer and of the facts governing the science of

agriculture, his principal message is found in his assessment of the farmer's close relationship with nature (Bowie xxii-xxiv). Virgil's farmer is a "man of action, the child of nature, the master of his environment" (Bowie xxiv). The "O Fortunato" passages at the end of Book II commend the farmer who takes pleasure in working with nature and who enjoys a bountiful harvest and a loving family (Bowie xxiv); Jonson was to express a similar attitude in "To Penshurst."

Horace, a contemporary of Virgil, also wrote poetry in praise of country life. But while Virgil composed the Georgics in fulfillment of an assignment, Horace derived his inspiration from a genuine love for the country (Marshall viii). He grew up in the country outside Rome and spent much of his adult life on an estate in the Sabine Hills given to him by his patron Maecenas (Marshall xii). Like Virgil, Horace wrote much of his poetry at Maecenas' request. Yet his love for the country was sincere, and he alluded to his country estate in many of his writings, particularly the Epodes and the Satires (Marshall xii).

The Epodes and the first book of the Satires were published in 35 B.C. (Marshall vi), the same year Virgil was composing the Georgics. Generally, the Epodes cover a variety of subjects, but Epode II is devoted exclusively to Horace's love of country life and is often cited by scholars as a major influence on "To Penshurst."

Horace's sources are less easily ascertainable than Virgil's. Educated in Greek culture, science, and philosophy,

Horace naturally drew on his knowledge of Greek literature (Marshall ix-x). However, Thomas Greene, in The Light in Troy, says that it is difficult to isolate the specific sources of Greek influence on Horace's poetry (67). Whatever the sources for Horace's work, his contribution to the tradition of the country-house poem represents a spontaneous expression of his love for the country.

Although Jonson was influenced by Virgil and Horace, "To Penshurst" probably owes more to Martial than to the latter's Roman predecessors. Martial was Jonson's favorite classical poet, and Jonson studied his work diligently (McEuen 14). Kathryn McEuen suggests that Martial's influence on Jonson was pervasive:

The precedents set by Martial and followed by Jonson fall naturally into the categories of content, phraseology, and form. . . . Both poets have left a picture of the society in which they moved; both wrote to friends poems containing invitations, advice, or praise; both celebrated the joys of country life; both wrote tender and sincere epitaphs; both express their philosophy in reflective verse. . . . (27)

Walter Ker calls Martial "the father of the epigram as we understand it," and certain of Martial's epigrams were to influence all later country-house poems. Interestingly, two of the epigrams commonly cited by scholars as sources for



"To Penshurst" are longer than is usual for epigrams, i.e., Epigrams III.lviii and X.xxx (Ker vii). Nonetheless, as Ker states, "These are in the nature of epigrams, being written in order to lead up to the point at the end" (vii).

Book I of the Epigrams was published in 85 A.D. in Rome, where Martial was well established as a poet (Ker viii-ix). He lived in Rome for thirty-five years, and his poetry reflects the quality of life as he perceived it. He complained about his dependence on wealthy patrons and described the spartan life his poverty compelled him to live (Ker ix). Nevertheless, he seldom lacked patrons, one of whom was the Emperor Domitian (Ker ix). Following a change in government from Domitian to Nerva and Trajan, Martial decided to return to the country and his native Spain (Ker x). His poetry naturally reflected his changing attitudes toward the city and the country, and in one of the resulting epigrams which influenced Jonson (Epigram III.lviii), we see a lavish praise of country life. Written about the same time were Epigram X.xxx, which offers a description of a sea resort, and Epigram IX.lxi, which is about a grove of trees planted on Caesar's estate. Although each of these epigrams focuses on a different topic, Jonson was to combine elements of all three in "To Penshurst."

While Virgil, Horace, and Martial were largely ignored during the medieval era, the Renaissance revival of classical learning gave new life to their work, and particularly to their poems praising country life (McEuen xiv-xv). Neo-Latin

poems praising country life became increasingly popular in Europe during the late sixteenth century when many European poets strove to perpetuate the tradition begun by Horace, Virgil, and Martial (Wilkinson 296). Indeed, the "O Fortunato" passages of Virgil's Georgics and Horace's Epode II served as the primary sources for these continental country-house poems (Wilkinson 297). Bovie cites the Georgics as the "main impulse for a new kind of landscape poetry" in the seventeenth century (xxv), a genre closely associated with the country-house poem. However, unlike Virgil and Horace, the European poets wrote during an era relatively free of the political and social turmoil experienced by their Roman predecessors (Wilkinson 296).

The first of these European poems was written by an Italian but was published in 1569 in Antwerp, Belgium, in a collection entitled Poemata by Laurentius Gambara (Wilkinson 297). Written in praise of the villa Caprarola (presumably in Italy), this poem established a pattern for later European country-house poems which praised not only the wealthy gentleman and his country estate, but also country life as opposed to city life (Wilkinson 297).

The popularity of this type of poem spread from Italy to France and Germany, with no less than eight poems being published between 1570 and 1583 (Wilkinson 297). A German poet, Johann Fischart, continued the tradition with the publication of his poem "Lob desz Landlustes" in 1590 (Wilkinson 297). By this time, the Netherlands was the

center of printing and the majority of European country-house poems were consequently published there. The publication in 1613 of the Dutch country-house poem "Den Binckhorst" by Van Borsselen began a poetic era which lasted into the 1700's and which produced at least ninety country-house poems (Wilkinson 297). Wilkinson characterizes these poems as "descriptive, horticultural, moralistic and religious, with excursions on national history or peasant life as well as classical or biblical mythology and history" (297).

While these European poets were influenced by the works of Horace, Virgil, and Martial, they, in turn, influenced an English poet as early as 1586. Geoffrey Whitney, an English poet living in Leyden, the Netherlands, wrote and published A Book of Emblems in 1586 (Hunter 440). Whitney's publishers had also printed many of the popular country-house poems, and he could hardly have been unaware of the regeneration of this classical tradition. For instance, two stanzas in Whitney's book are about Richard Cotton's estate at Combermere. These particular stanzas appear in the emblem on bees and are Whitney's own creation; the rest of the emblem book is a translation of the classics rendered into English by Whitney (Hunter 438). While Whitney's stanzas on Cotton's estate lack the architectural element of "To Penshurst," they, like "To Penshurst," praise the reciprocal relationship between man and nature and suggest the importance of the country estate's function within the community (Hunter 439). Whitney remembers the estate:



. . . I call'd unto my minde  
 Your CUMBERMAIRE, that fame so farre commendes:  
 A Stately seate, whose like is hard to finde,  
 Where mightie IOVE the horne of plentie lendes:  
     With fishe, and foule, and cattaile sondrie  
         flockes,  
     Where christall springes doe gushe out of  
         the rockes.  
 There, fertile fieldes; there, meadowes large  
         extende:  
 There, store of grayne: with water, and with wood.  
 And, in this place, your goulden time you spende,  
 Unto your praise, and to your countries good:  
     This is the hive; your tennaunts, are the bees:  
     And in the same, have places by degrees.<sup>2</sup>

Whitney obviously echoes the classics in these lines; we see the fertility of Martial's villa, the abundance of animal life, the close relationship between man and nature, and, above all, the landowner who is praised for his devotion to the estate. Kathryn Hunter insists that these stanzas by Whitney exemplify the tradition of the country-house poem as surely as Jonson's "To Penshurst" does (440). While we cannot say for certain that Jonson was influenced by

<sup>2</sup>Geoffrey Whitney, "To Richard Cotton, Esquire," quoted in Kathryn Hunter's essay "Geoffrey Whitney's 'To Richard Cotton, Esquire': An Early English Country-House Poem," The Review of English Studies 28 (1977): 438-41.

Whitney's stanzas, it is likely that Jonson would have been familiar with Whitney's tribute to Richard Cotton.

In writing his poems, Jonson is like a builder who incorporates salvaged material in his buildings. Some of his salvaged material, native in its provenance, had first been employed by Spenser. Jackson Cope, in his article "Jonson's Reading of Spenser: The Genesis of a Poem," confirms that Jonson was indeed familiar with Spenser's work. Moreover, Alistair Fowler in his article "The 'Better Marks' of Jonson's 'To Penshurst,'" mentions Spenser's House of Pride in relation to the "proud, ambitious heaps" which Jonson criticizes in his poem (269).

It is apparent that Jonson's "To Penshurst" is a poem that belongs in a long and rich tradition. Jonson's deliberate and eclectic borrowings from the works of Horace, Virgil, and Martial, as well as Spenser, reveal his awareness of his place in that tradition and his contribution to it. Like most Renaissance poets, Jonson borrowed from his predecessors to an extent modern readers, accustomed to a poetics less dependent on the past, are likely to overlook. But a just recognition of his country-house poem's use of and place in its tradition is essential to a full appreciation of its, and its author's, genius.

### CHAPTER III

#### "TO PENShurst" AS A MODEL OF IMITATIO

Jonson wrote not only in the tradition of the country-house poem but also in the tradition of imitative poetry. Consequently, fragments of preceding works can be found in "To Penshurst." As L. A. Beaurline points out in his analysis of Jonson's poem "To Celia," the ideas expressed in the poem are not entirely original; nevertheless, the poem remains an original work of art, different from its sources and yet very much like them (253). The same might be said of "To Penshurst." Many of the ideas expressed in Jonson's poem echo the sentiments expressed in the poems of Horace, Virgil, and Martial. A detailed examination of these borrowings from classical and modern authors reveals Jonson's expertise in adapting others' sources to his own distinctive style.

Because Jonson had a comprehensive knowledge of the classics, he chose only those passages from them which best suited his purpose. Although Virgil's Georgics dealt in part with the effects of war on the farmer as well as the hardships facing this noble creature, Jonson focused primarily on the "O Fortunato" passages. In these passages, Virgil suggests that the farmer labors to support his family and to provide for future generations of his family. Yet the farmer's honest labor also yields him a loving family and a decent, pure home:



The farmer drives his curved plough through  
the earth:

His year's work lies in this; thus he sustains  
His homeland, his diminutive descendants,  
His herds of stock, his much deserving bullocks.  
(Virgil 52)

. . . . .

Meanwhile, sweet children hang on the farmer's  
kisses,

His decent home preserves its purity. . . . .  
(Virgil 53)

Near the end of "To Penshurst," Jonson echoes the sentiment expressed by Virgil in the "O Fortunato" passages. However, Jonson adapts his source to a contemporary view of family life, and we see not Virgil's family of pre-Christian times but rather a remnant of the medieval nobility whose lives revolved around their estates. While Sidney is not a farmer in the sense that Virgil described, he nonetheless is concerned with the productivity of his estate and the preservation of his family's heritage. Like Virgil's farmer, Sidney is rewarded with a virtuous, loyal, and loving family.

These, Penshurst, are thy praise, and yet not all.

Thy lady's noble, fruitful, chaste withal.

His children thy great lord may call his own,

A fortune in this age but rarely known.

They are and have been taught religion; thence

Their gentler spirits have sucked innocence.

Each morn and even they are taught to pray  
 With the whole household, and may, everyday,  
 Read in their virtuous parents' noble parts,  
 The mysteries of manners, arms, and arts.

(89-98)

Elsewhere, Virgil implies a reciprocal relationship between man and nature.

He plucks the fruits which his boughs, which  
 his ready fields, of their own free will have  
 borne.<sup>3</sup>

This relationship is imitated and extended by Jonson:

Then hath thy orchard fruit, thy garden flowers,  
 Fresh as the air, and new as are the hours.  
 The early cherry, with the later plum,  
 Fig, grape, and quince, each in his time  
 doth come:  
 The blushing apricot, and woolly peach  
 Hang on thy walls, that every child may  
 reach. (39-44)

No one familiar with Virgil could deny his influence on  
 "To Penshurst."

<sup>3</sup>Virgil, Georgics, Book II, lines 500-01, trans.  
 H. Ruston Fairclough, quoted in Paul Sabeta's article "A  
 Jonsonian Ideal: 'To Penshurst,'" Philological Quarterly  
 42 (1963): 20-21.

Jonson also uses Horace. Horace's Epode II endorsed the simplicity and serenity of country life:

Happy the man, who far from town's affairs,  
 The life of old-world mortals shares;  
 With his own oxen tills his forbear's fields,  
 Nor thinks of usury and its yields. (Horace 1-4)

What joy, beneath some holm-oak old and grey  
 Or on thick turf, one's limbs to lay;  
 While streams past toppling banks roll down  
 their flood,  
 And the birds croon in every wood,  
 And fountains murmur with their gushing streams  
 Sounds that shall soothe to sleep and  
 dreams. (Horace 23-28)<sup>4</sup>

Jonson echoes Horace's feelings about the serenity of country life in "To Penshurst":

Thou joy'st in better marks, of soil, of air,  
 Of wood, of water; therein thou art fair.  
 Thou hast thy walks for health, as well as sport;  
 Thy Mount, to which the dryads do  
 resort. . . . (7-10)

<sup>4</sup>All references to Horace's Epode II are from the translation by Dr. John Marshall.



Thy copse, too, named of Gamage, thou hast there,  
 That never fails to serve thee seasoned deer  
 When thou wouldst feast, or exercise thy  
 friends. (19-21)

Both poets describe the atmosphere of relaxation and recreation which awaits the man who retires to his country estate to escape the pressures of town life. Horace's country gentleman takes pleasure in plowing his fields and relaxing on the banks of a stream under a "holm-oak old and grey." Similarly, the residents and guests of Penshurst Place enjoy leisurely walks through the hills surrounding the house and find relaxation in hunting the deer which inhabit the estate.

Horace also praises the loyal wife who makes a home for her family:

Nay if a modest wife be there to cheer  
 The home, and tend the children dear,  
 As stout Apulia's sunburnt women do,  
 Or Sabines, and at evening strew  
 The sacred hearth with logs well-aged, to burn  
 Against her jaded man's return. (39-44)

Jonson pays tribute to Lady Sidney in a similar manner:

. . . and what praise was heaped  
 On thy good lady then! who therein reaped  
 The just reward of her high huswifery;

To have her linen, plate, and all things nigh,  
 When she was far; and not a room but dressed,  
 As if it had expected such a guest! (83-88)

. . . . .

Thy lady's noble, fruitful, chaste withal. (90)

While Jonson imitated Virgil and Horace sparingly in "To Penshurst," he borrowed extensively from Martial, not only drawing on the subject matter of three of Martial's epigrams but also imitating the form and style used by Martial (McEuen 18-22). Certainly, there were differences between Martial's and Jonson's compositions, but the influence of the Roman poet is quite apparent.

Martial's Epigram III.lviii praises the country home of Faustinus in contrast to the townhouse of Bassus. Faustinus' farm, we learn, is productive and useful, whereas Bassus' townhouse is unproductive and its gardens serve merely as ornate decoration (Cubeta 15-16). Martial's description of the noisy farmyard may seem chaotic to the modern reader, but such was the poet's ideal (Cubeta 16-17). Jonson's concept of the ideal country life actually combined the merits of Bassus' townhouse (its "patterned, formal beauty") with the "vitality and fertility" of Faustinus' villa (Cubeta 16-17). In addition, Martial's country visitors bear striking resemblance to the guests who visit Penshurst (Cubeta 22).

Nor does the country visitor come empty handed:  
 that one brings pale honey in its comb, and a

pyramid of cheese from Sassina's woodland; that one offers sleepy dormice; this one the bleating offspring of a shaggy mother; another capons debarred from love. And the strapping daughters of honest farmers offer in a wicker basket their mother's gifts. (Martial 1:199)<sup>5</sup>

Jonson's guests clearly resemble Martial's:

Some bring a capon, some a rural cake,

Some nuts, some apples; some that think  
they make

The better cheeses, bring 'hem; or else send

By their ripe daughters, whom they could  
commend

This way to husbands; and whose baskets bear

An emblem of themselves, in plum, or pear. (51-56)

Moreover, as the following passages show, Martial and Jonson praised the host whose guests were generously fed and "well-drunken" (McEuen 55).

When the work is done a cheerful neighbor is asked to dine; no niggard table reserves the feast for the morrow; all take the meal, and the full-fed attendant need not envy the well-drunken guest. (Martial 1: 201)

<sup>5</sup>All references to Martial's Epigrams are from the translation by Walter Ker.



Jonson notes that the guests at Penshurst Place are also treated well:

Where comes no guest but is allowed to eat,  
 Without his fear, and of thy lord's own meat;  
 Where the same beer and bread, and selfsame wine  
 That is his lordship's shall also be mine,  
 And I fain not sit (as some this day  
 At great men's tables), and yet dine away.  
 Here no man tells my cups; nor, standing by  
 A waiter doth my gluttony envy,  
 But gives me what I call, and lets me eat;  
 He knows below he shall find plenty of meat.  
 Thy tables hoard not up for the next day. (61-71)

Jonson's notion that the game, fish, and fowl willingly sacrifice themselves for the Sidney's exactly parallels Martial's description of a sea resort in Epigram X.xxx (Cubeta 20).

The fishpond feeds turbot and home-reared bass;  
 to its master's call swims the dainty murrey;  
 the usher summons a favourite grey mullet, and,  
 bidden to appear, aged surmulletts put forth  
 their heads. (Martial 2: 175)

Jonson characterizes the wildlife at Penshurst Place in a similar manner:

The painted partridge lies in every field,  
 And for thy mess is willing to be killed.  
 And if the high-swollen Medway fail thy dish,  
 Thou hast thy ponds, that pay thee tribute fish,  
 Fat aged carps that run into thy net,  
 And pikes, now weary their own kind to eat,  
 As loath the second draught or cast to stay,  
 Officiously at first themselves betray;  
 Bright eels that emulate them, and leap on land  
 Before the fisher, or into his hand. (29-38)

Jonson's ability to convert Martial's simple, direct statements into lavish expressions of praise is obvious, illustrating his mastery of imitatio. Yet Jonson did more than simply transform Martial's words into his own. The following passages reveal Jonson's understanding of the sentiment Martial wished to convey in Epigram IX.lxi (Cubeta 18).

In the middle of the house, shadowing all the  
 abode, stands with dense leafage Caesar's plane,  
 which an unconquered Guest's propitious hand planted  
 and which - then but a shoot - began from that hand  
 to grow. It seems to feel who was its creator and  
 lord; so green it is, and with its boughs it climbs  
 high heaven. Ofttimes under this tree sported  
 Fauns flown with wine, and a late-blown pipe  
 startled the still house; and, while o'er lonely

fields she fled by night from Pan, oft under  
these leaves the rustic Dryad nestled his. (1: 119)

Cubeta contends that Martial wanted to suggest a sense of "universal harmony, playfully relaxed yet ceremonious, between Caesar and the gods" (18). Compare Jonson's version:

Thy Mount, to which the dryads do resort,  
Where Pan and Bacchus their high feasts have made  
Beneath the broad beech and the chestnut shade;  
That taller tree which of a nut was set,  
At his great birth where all the Muses met.  
There in the writhed bark are cut the names  
Of many a sylvan taken with his flames;  
And thence the ruddy satyrs oft provoke  
Thy lighter fauns to reach thy Lady's oak.  
(10-18)

Not only do Jonson's lines parallel Martial's description of a grove of trees on Caesar's estate, complete with romping mythological creatures, but they also echo Martial's sentiment that a "universal harmony" exists between the owner and his estate and his creator (Cubeta 18).

Jonson also borrowed style and form from Martial (McEuen 18). Like Epigrams III.lviii and X.xxx, "To Penshurst" exceeds the usual length of an epigram. Yet it is, as Ker says in reference to Martial's longer poems, in the nature of the epigram. Further, Kathryn McEuen suggests that in "To Penshurst" Jonson adhered to Martial's example even to



the point of "concluding an epigram with an aphorism" (27). Consider the following closing lines of three of Martial's epigrams. In reference to Bassus' townhouse, Martial quips, "Ought this to be called a farm or a town-house away from town?" (Epigram III.lviii) In Epigram IX.lxi, he concludes, "O tree of mighty Caesar! fear not the steel and sacrilegious fires. Thou mayst hope thy leafy honours shall endure for ever: it was not Pompey's hands set thee there!" Finally, as to the pleasures to be found at the sea resort, Martial writes, "O happy porters and bailiffs! Those delights are procured for your masters, they belong to you!" (Epigram X.xxx) Jonson ends "To Penshurst" in this manner:

Now, Penshurst, they that will proportion thee  
 With other edifices, when they see  
 Those proud, ambitious heaps, and nothing else,  
 May say, their lords have built, but thy lord  
 dwells. (99-102)

Thus, the poem's closing aphorism imitates Martial's manner.

Although significant parallels exist between Martial's Epigrams and Jonson's "To Penshurst," a number of differences exist as well. For example, Martial's purpose in writing these epigrams differed from Jonson's. In Epigram III.lviii, Martial was simply praising Faustinus' country villa by contrasting it with Bassus' townhouse (Cubeta 16). He did not suggest that morality and virtue could be found only on the country estate; nor did he intend for the country villa to

represent a vanishing lifestyle, as did Jonson. In addition, Cubeta points out that Martial's description of Faustinus' farm lacks the "racy colloquial idiom" and the humor which Jonson's poem possesses (22). Also, Martial usually uses light satire to attack vice and corruption, but Jonson attacks such faults vigorously and candidly (McEuen 16). Jonson's style of censure can be seen in his criticism of the nouveau riche. He describes the country houses they have built primarily to display their wealth as "proud, ambitious heaps" (100) constructed of "touch or marble" and incorporating new-fangled, ostentatious features such as rows of pillars or golden roofs or cupolas or elaborate staircases (1-6). Such houses may excite interest because they cost fortunes to construct, but, Jonson says, any comparison of them to Penshurst will reveal the important and obvious superiorities of the Sidneys (99-102). The same forthright style marks his implicit criticism of those whose hospitality is marred by their concerns about its costs. Such meanness is unknown at Penshurst with its "liberal board" (59); there the guest never need beg for a fire, candles, or servants (72-73). Jonson's candor constitutes a significant and fundamental difference between his and Martial's writing. Certainly both poets were keenly aware of the effect of their poetry on their patrons. Yet Martial often flattered his patrons and minimized their faults, while Jonson refused to compromise his values (McEuen 15). As a consequence, Martial's praise often seems fulsome and dishonest, while Jonson's is as

sincere as his censure. Nevertheless, "To Penshurst" owes much to Martial.

Jonson's work reflects the ideas of Virgil and Horace, and we know that he borrowed directly and extensively from Martial in particular. However, he does not seem to have directly alluded either to any of the continental authors who preceded him or to native English artists before Spenser. The architectural elements of "To Penshurst," however, clearly resemble Spenser's use of architecture in The Faerie Queene. Indeed, a closer look at Spenser's allegorical houses reveals his interest in architecture and its importance as a reflector of society's values, an interest which was shared by Jonson.

The most important instances of Spenser's use of architecture are in The Faerie Queene where such structures as the House of Pride, the House of Temperance, Busyrane's Palace, and the Castle Joyous appear (Hard 299). Spenser describes these buildings allegorically and symbolically, but his careful attention to architectural detail makes them more than just symbols (Hard 301). Consider, for example, his description of the House of Pride:

A stately Pallace built of squared bricke,  
Which cunningly was without mortar laid,  
Whose walls were high, but nothing strong,  
nor thick,  
And golden foile all over them displaid,



That purest skye with the brightnesse they  
dismaid;

High lifted up were many loftie towres  
And goodly galleries farre over laid,  
Full of faire windowes, and delightful bowres;  
And on the top a Diall told the timely howres.

It was a goodly heape for to behould,  
And spake the praises of the workmans wit;  
But full great pittie, that so faire a mould  
Did on so weake a foundation ever sit:  
For on a sandie hill, that still did flit,  
And fall away, it mounted was full hie,  
That every breath of heaven shaken it:  
And all the hinder parts, that few could spie,  
Were ruinous and old, but painted cunningly.<sup>6</sup>

While obviously allegorical in its location and ornamentation, the House of Pride also resembles many of the great English country houses built of brick and containing "many loftie towres," "goodly galleries," and "delightful bowres" (Hard 299-300). Jonson's "house of pride" to which Penshurst is contrasted owes something to Spenser:

Thou are not, Penshurst, built to envious show  
Of touch, or marble; nor canst boast a row

<sup>6</sup>Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams, Major Authors edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1975), 340.

Of polished pillars, or a roof of gold;  
 Thou hast no lantern, whereof tales are told,  
 Or stair, or courts; but stand'st an ancient pile,  
 And, these grudged at, are revered the  
     while. (1-6)

Now, Penshurst, they that will proportion thee  
     With other edifices, when they see  
 Those proud, ambitious heaps, and nothing else,  
     May say, their lords have built, but thy lord  
     dwells. (99-102)

Jonson, like Spenser, used architecture to express his concept of the social ideal. Frederick Hard contends that Spenser's use of architecture reflects the poet's approval of the "Elizabethan feeling that the great houses and castles, rightfully maintained, are proper attributes of true nobility" (309). The House of Pride, like Jonson's "proud, ambitious heaps," represents a degeneration of these "proper attributes." For Jonson, Penshurst Place represents the ideal aristocratic estate, and he contrasts it with the more fashionable, opulent mansions of the day (Cubeta 15). As Mary Ann McGuire says, Penshurst, for Jonson, is "a timeless ideal which is not disrupted by transition of power from one generation of owners to the next. The community renews itself biologically, but also morally. . . ." (97).

Further, Spenser believed that "magnificence" (which is "the perfection of all the rest, and containeth in it

them all")<sup>7</sup> was embodied in the magnificence of the great English country houses (Hard 309). Jonson suggests a similar relationship between the Sidneys and their country estate. As Paul Cubeta notes, Jonson implies the "integrity, endurance, and tradition of the Sidneys" through his architectural appraisal of Penshurst Place (15). "To Penshurst" is, in fact, a lament for the passing of an era characterized by the "magnificence" of the nobility and their country estates.

As we have seen, Jonson borrowed from both classical and modern poets, particularly from Martial and Spenser. Such borrowing was characteristic of poetry at that time and indeed an obligation of the poet. Thomas Greene admits that such borrowing frequently led to "sterility" but also, less frequently, to a "series of masterpieces" (2). Such was the case with Jonson: although he borrowed much, he contributed much that was his own in creating that masterpiece of imitative poetry, "To Penshurst."

<sup>7</sup> Edmund Spenser, "A Letter of the Authors," from The Faerie Queene, in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, Major Authors edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1975), 332.

## "TO PENSHURST" AS AN ORIGINAL CREATION

In writing "To Penshurst," Jonson participated in a tradition which dated back to classical Greek and Roman literature, and he was indeed indebted to some of his predecessors in that tradition. However, while Jonson certainly imitated some of the poems in the tradition of the country-house poem, "To Penshurst" is, nonetheless, a unique and original creation. Jonson's prosodic contributions (rhyme and rhythm), his diction, and his incorporation of philosophical ideas into the structure of the poem (the two movements upward) contribute to the originality of the poem.

Superficially, however, "To Penshurst" appears to be a simple epigram praising the integrity of the Sidney family and the productivity of their estate. Yet a closer examination of the poem reveals a complex structure which, as Manlove says, is belied by its "seemingly relaxed, conversational" tone (19). Manlove also notes that "the careless care with which the poem itself is built" is a frequent trait of Renaissance literature and cites Sidney's Arcadia, II, 5; Spenser's Pastorell and Colin Clout; Shakespeare's later plays; and Marvell's poetry as other exemplars of this literary style (20). The fact that the poem is highly organized, is appropriately formal, and is nevertheless conversational in tone reveals Jonson's achievement of his "poetic aim," i.e., "a diligent kind of negligence" (qtd. in Manlove 26).



Indeed, Wesley Trimpi contends that Jonson was strongly influenced by classical writers, such as Horace and Martial, who advocated using the plain style in poetry (21). The plain style allowed the writer great flexibility in choice of subject and style of treatment, and Jonson felt that such an approach was best for him (Trimpi 21-26). Certainly, his choice of the plain style permitted Jonson to concentrate on those aspects of the poem that were of greater importance to him.

In all of his work, Jonson was concerned with the way in which a poem was constructed. In constructing "To Penshurst," he applied the basic architectural principles to which he adhered so faithfully. Trained as a brick mason, Jonson applied his knowledge of building and architecture to his poetry. In his treatise on poetry, Timber, or Discoveries, he defines his attitude toward architecture in poetry:

. . . if a man, would build a house, he would first appoint a place to build it in, which he would define within certain bounds, so in the constitution of a poem. (332-26)<sup>8</sup>

For as a house, consisting of diverse materials, becomes one structure, and one dwelling; so an

<sup>8</sup> Both passages are from Jonson's Timber, or Discoveries qtd. in Manlove 18.

action, composed of diverse parts, may become one fable, epic or dramatic. (3454-55)

Not surprisingly, then, do we find in "To Penshurst" a well-designed, carefully organized structure in which the bricks and lumber of poetry are artistically fitted together.

In a sense, Jonson constructed a two-story building, with the division of the poem into two major sections. He framed the structure, at the beginning and at the end, with references to those "proud, ambitious heaps" which were "built to envious show" (Manlove 23). Once inside the framework, we find two levels connected by a stairway which leads to a roof, or the top, of the structure. The first half of the poem deals with the exterior of Penshurst Place, and the second half with the interior (Cubeta 17). An overall upward movement originates in the initial description of the landscape and culminates in the panegyric to Lady Sidney (Cubeta 17).

Within the structure of the poem, Jonson fitted all the parts together smoothly. Manlove suggests that Jonson's concern was that all the elements together formed a completed and harmonious whole:

. . . what matters is that the parts do not jut out, that they make a whole by adding to and merging into one another, not that each has a role in the formation of a pattern which may be contemplated for its own sake. (18)

That is, like any good builder, Jonson concentrated on the total effect of his structure; each part was considered for its contribution to the whole, although no detail was neglected.

To ensure that all parts of the poem dovetailed, Jonson devised an appropriate meter and rhyme scheme. His interest in experimenting with meter is well documented. Beaurline, among others, notes that Jonson first wrote the content of a proposed poem in prose, then went about discovering its appropriate rhyme and rhythm (524). "To Penshurst" illustrates Jonson's careful use of prosody to enhance meaning. The entire poem is composed of heroic couplets which, Cubeta suggests, denote the harmony and order in existence at Penshurst, both inside and out (21). The rhymed couplets of iambic pentameter suggest an orderly existence, and the relationship of the ideas expressed in each couplet reflects the harmony of life on the estate; for example, the pasture land described in one couplet sustains the wildlife described in subsequent couplets. Moreover, Manlove adds that the rhyme in the first half of the poem is more emphatic and more formal, indicative of the orderly, step-like, upward movement toward the house (26). The relaxed, informal atmosphere which prevails within the home is reflected in the more open, natural speech pattern of the second half of the poem (Cubeta 22). The less formal rhyme and the more conversational tone afford a marked contrast to the formality of the first half of the poem.

Note the difference in tone between the two sections,  
from the more formal first half of the poem which describes  
the grounds and exterior of the estate:

Thy mount, to which the dryads do resort,  
Where Pan and Bacchus their high feasts have made,  
Beneath the broad beech and the chestnut shade;  
That taller tree, which of a nut was set  
At his great birth where all the Muses met.  
There in the writhed bark are cut the names  
Of many a sylvan, taken with his flames;  
And thence the ruddy satyrs oft provoke  
The lighter fauns to reach thy Lady's oak. (10-18)

And from the second, more conversational half which deals with  
the interior of the estate:

And I not fain to sit (as some this day  
At great men's tables), and yet dine away.  
Here no man tells my cups; nor, standing by,  
A waiter doth my gluttony envy,  
But gives me what I call, and lets me eat;  
He knows below he shall find plenty of meat. (65-70)

The references to classical mythology contribute to the formal,  
serious tone of the first half of the poem, while a subse-  
quent catalogue-like listing of the wildlife reflects the  
order and harmony of the estate. The use of the first-person  
pronoun in the second half contributes to the conversational



tone. Within the framework of the heroic couplets, Jonson's use of diction and rhyme established the moods he wished to convey, from formal to informal, impersonal to conversational.

In order to avoid the forced rhythm often associated with the heroic couplet, Jonson carefully planned his rhyme scheme. He employed open-ended lines, caesuras, and half-rhymes to achieve the natural speech pattern he desired both in the formal first half and in the less formal second half of the poem (Cubeta 22; Manlove 25).

. . . or the country came,  
With all their zeal, to warm their welcome here.  
What (great, I will not say, but) sudden cheer  
Didst thou then make them! . . . . (80-83)

Although "cheer" and "here" rhyme, the formal break between the sentences, as well as the parenthetical interruption in the second sentence, modulates the iambic pentameter of the poem. Further, in this example, the run on line (82) creates the natural rhythm of informal speech. This technique is evident in the first part of the poem, as well. Consider these lines:

Each bank doth yield thee coney; and the tops  
Fertile of wood, Ashore and Sidney's copse,  
To crown thy open table, doth provide  
The purpled pheasant with the speckled side. . . .  
(25-28)

Here "tops" and "copse" nearly rhyme, sounding enough alike to be used together but also different enough to afford significant variation in the couplet rhyme scheme. In addition, "and the tops" runs on naturally and smoothly into the next line. A semicolon after "coney" indicates an intentional caesura in the middle of the line which also varies the rhythm.

Often one rhyming word receives less emphasis than its "partner" (Manlove 25), as is the case with "provide" and "side" in the passage cited above. That "provide" is part of an open-ended line and runs on into the next line reduces the emphasis which would otherwise be placed on it. Instead, the emphasis shifts naturally to "side," the last word in the sentence. Here, again, Jonson succeeds in establishing a natural speech pattern by deliberate underemphasis of formal prosodic elements. At the same time, Jonson achieves through a restrained formality the dovetailed effect he sought. Each line is carefully fitted into the next, and most lines are end-stopped, but the breaks are not abrupt. As Manlove says about Jonson's prosody in "To Penshurst": "Jonson both retains the formality of rhyme and is informal with it, just as 'To Penshurst' emphasizes hierarchy and equality alike" (26).

That Jonson was concerned with hierarchy and equality at Penshurst Place is revealed in the overall upward movement within the poem. The movement manifests itself in two ways. The more obvious manifestation occurs in the progression from

lower ground to the higher wooded area, closer to the house (Cubeta 19):

The lower land, that to the river bends,  
 Thy sheep, thy bullocks, kine, and calves do feed;  
 The middle grounds thy mares and horses breed.  
 Each bank doth yield thee coney; and the tops  
 Fertile of wood, Ashore and Sidney's copse,  
To crown thy open table, doth provide  
 The purpled pheasant with the speckled  
 side. . . . (22-28)<sup>9</sup>

Jonson's description of the grounds progresses upward from "the lower land," to "the middle grounds," to "the tops" of the trees, and culminates in a reference to the King with the words "to crown." The second, and more subtle, manifestation of upward movement in the poem creates a "hierarchy of particulars," a chain of being (Cubeta 19). Cubeta maintains that by building a hierarchy into the poem, Jonson was suggesting the existence of an underlying harmony, a "natural order and design," at Penshurst (19). The entire estate exists to provide for the Sidneys: the land becomes pasture for the livestock, the woods offer food and shelter for the game, and the animals, in turn, provide food for the family. This harmonious existence becomes a hierarchy as the movement progresses up the chain of being from land to animal

<sup>9</sup>The emphasis is my own.

life to the humans on the estate.

As we have seen, Jonson begins a "ladder-like structure" (Manlove 19) with a description of the grounds around Penshurst. From the land, he progresses to the animal life on the estate and then moves into the orchards. As Manlove indicates, this move might appear to be a step backwards on the hierarchy since it refers to a form of landscaping (19-20). However, the orchard and gardens are actually one step higher, not only because of their close proximity to the house, but also because they reveal the presence of man (Manlove 19-20). Someone has carefully planted and tended the fruit trees and the flowers which grow there, thus distinguishing this part of the estate from the wild and natural woodlands and meadows. Jonson next introduces the country folk and, at approximately the half-way point, the scenario moves indoors. Once inside the house, we learn that all guests are treated equally, King and commoner alike. The upward movement continues with the introduction of the country folk, their host, and the unexpected arrival of the King. However, Jonson reaches the top of his hierarchy with his tribute to Lady Sidney and those virtuous elements which characterize the Sidney family. As Cubeta suggests, Lady Sidney epitomizes the moral and natural quality of the estate (24), and it is therefore appropriate that she should be placed at the top of this metaphorical ladder.

Jonson's insistence that all pieces fit together



smoothly applied to his construction of the hierarchy also. Each piece of the hierarchy dovetails with the next to create a smoothly interwoven pattern, from the beginning of the poem, where references to the landscape alternate with descriptions of the animal life, to the final statements joining Lady Sidney and her family with the enduring dignity of the estate itself (Cubeta 24).

While the subject and purpose of the poem are classical in origin, the composition of "To Penshurst" is certainly unique. Jonson has addressed a timeless subject, that of the country gentleman and his relationship with nature and his estate, and applied a highly organized verse form, the heroic couplet, to create a poem which appears to be a simple tribute to an honorable gentleman. Yet the underlying structure of the poem is indicative of Jonson's theory regarding poetry. He makes certain that all the pieces fit together smoothly, that the pieces dovetail for strength and unity, and that no one part receives more emphasis than another. He has applied familiar principles of construction and architecture to the craft of poetry to create a poem that is at once imitative and original.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The country-house poems written in England during the seventeenth century were symptomatic of the dramatic changes which were taking place at that time. Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" set the standards for other later English country-house poems. Amidst the political, economic, and social turmoil of the early 1600's, English poets expressed their concern over the depreciation of traditional values associated with the country estate and the decline in the importance of the estate. Yet Jonson's poem was not the beginning of that tradition in poetry. Rather, Jonson was continuing a tradition which began with the classical poets, Virgil, Horace, and Martial. Classical writers had similarly signaled their dissatisfaction with social change. Virgil's Georgics, Horace's Epode II, and Martial's Epigrams praised the farmer (or the country gentleman), his country home, and his close relationship with nature. At times, the farmer's family was also included in the tribute to country living. Certainly, Jonson found inspiration for his poem in the works of Virgil, Horace, and Martial. In addition, Jonson must have been inspired by the European country-house poems which were part of the revival of classical literature in the late sixteenth century. Although Jonson did not borrow directly from these poems, this revival may have influenced his decision to compose such a poem.

Jonson, as almost all Renaissance writers did, also wrote in the tradition of imitative poetry. A detailed study of "To Penshurst" and the works of Virgil, Horace, and Martial reveals the similarities between Jonson's poem and those of his predecessors. Jonson eclectically imitated both the content and the form of Virgil's Georgics, Horace's Epode II, and Martial's Epigrams. Of the three classical poets, Martial had the greatest influence on Jonson's poetry. Throughout "To Penshurst" we see evidence of Martial's style and form.

The materials Jonson employed in constructing "To Penshurst" were drawn from native as well as European and classical sources. Spenser's House of Pride in The Faerie Queene seems to have furnished the floor plan for the "proud, ambitious heaps" which provide the odious contrast to Penshurst. Moreover, Jonson shared in Spenser's belief that architecture reflected social values, and that those palaces which were "built to envious show" represented a degeneration of the "proper attributes of true nobility."

Further, Jonson's interest in architecture extended to his craftsmanship as a poet. In fact, Jonson's knowledge of construction and architecture are what makes "To Penshurst" a unique and original work of art. He constructed every poem with a master builder's skill in planning and construction, and "To Penshurst" was no exception; every part of the poem had to fit together as smoothly and solidly as every brick in a well-constructed wall might. One of the ways in which

Jonson accomplished this task was by crafting a meter and a rhyme scheme appropriate to his poem. He also developed a complex, interwoven, "ladder-like structure" (Manlove 19) which bound together all the elements of the poem. Within the poem, the narrative progression upward toward the house and higher ground is matched by a philosophical progression upward through the chain of being, from land, to animals, to man, and finally to Lady Sidney who epitomizes virtue and nobility. The surprising complexity of the poem's prosody and structure manifests Jonson's ability as a master builder who has converted the simple epigram into the complex, well-designed, carefully organized, and artistically appealing structure that is "To Penshurst."

Jonson's poem can easily be understood by the unsophisticated reader to be a simple, and perhaps even unremarkable, poem praising the Sidney family and their estate. Yet the poem is much more complex than it appears and is as much a tribute to the poet's knowledge and ability as it is a tribute to the Sidneys. Written in the tradition of the country-house poem, "To Penshurst," when read perceptively, reveals Jonson's knowledge of classical poetry, his practice of imitatio, his knowledge of architecture, and his consummate art. The poem became the standard for all later country-house poems. It is to this day the finest example of the country-house poem in the English language.



# WORKS CITED

- Beaurline, L. A. "The Selective Principle in Jonson's Shorter Poems." Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets. Ed. Hugh Maclean. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1974. 516-25.
- Bowie, Smith Palmer. Introduction. Virgil's Georgics. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956. vii-xxx.
- Chalker, John. The English Georgic. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969.
- Cope, Jackson. "Jonson's Reading of Spenser: The Genesis of a Poem." English Miscellany 10 (1959): 61-66.
- Cubeta, Paul. "A Jonsonian Ideal: 'To Penshurst.'" Philological Quarterly 42 (1963): 14-24.
- Fowler, Alistair. "The 'Better Marks' of Jonson's 'To Penshurst.'" The Review of English Studies 24 (1973): 266-69.
- Greene, Thomas. The Light in Troy. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.
- Hard, Frederick. "Princelie Pallaces." The Sewanee Review 42 (1934): 293-310.
- Hibbard, G. R. "The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century." Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes. Vol. 19 (1956): 159-174. Rpt. in Essential Articles: Alexander Pope. Ed. Maynard Mack. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1964. 401-28.
- Horace. Epode II. Trans. Dr. John Marshall. The Complete Works of Horace. Ed. Ernest Rhys. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1923. 113-14.

- Hunter, Kathryn. "Geoffrey Whitney's 'To Richard Cotton, Esquire': An Early English Country-House Poem." The Review of English Studies 28 (1977): 438-41.
- Jonson, Ben. "To Penshurst." Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets. Ed. Hugh Maclean. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1974. 21-23.
- . Timber, or Discoveries. Manlove 26.
- Ker, Walter, trans. Introduction. Martial's Epigrams. Vol. 1. 1919. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968. i-x. 2 vols.
- Manlove, C. N. Literature and Reality 1600-1800. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978.
- Marshall, John, trans. Introduction. The Complete Works of Horace. Ed. Ernest Rhys. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1923. i-xvi.
- Martial. Epigrams. Trans. Walter Ker. Martial's Epigrams. 2 vols. 1919. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968.
- McClung, William A. The Country House in English Renaissance Poetry. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.
- McEuen, Kathryn. Classical Influences Upon the Tribe of Ben. New York: Octagon Books, 1968.
- McGuire, Mary Ann. "The Cavalier Country-House Poem: Mutations on a Jonsonian Tradition." Studies in English Literature 1500-1900 19 (1979): 93-108.
- Spenser, Edmund. "A Letter of the Authors." From The Faerie Queene. The Norton Anthology of English

Literature. Eds. M. H. Abrams, et al. Major Authors edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1975. 302.

---. The Faerie Queene. Abrams 302-456.

Trimpi, Wesley. "Jonson and the Neo-Latin Authorities for the Plain Style." PMLA 77 (1962): 21-26.

Virgil. Georgics. Trans. Smith Palmer Bowie. Virgil's Georgics. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956.

Whitney, Geoffrey. "To Richard Cotton, Esquire." Hunter 439.

Wilkinson, L. P. The Georgics of Virgil. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.