Ben Jonson

(1572-1637)

Ben Jonson was an English Stuart dramatist, lyric poet, and literary critic. He is generally regarded as the second most important English dramatist, after William Shakespeare.

Ben Jonson was born by name of Benjamin Jonson in London on June 11th , 1572, two months after his father died. His stepfather was a bricklayer, but by good fortune the boy was able to attend Westminster School. His formal education, however, ended early, and he at first followed his stepfather's trade, then fought with some success with the English forces in the Netherlands.

On returning to England, he became an actor and playwright, experiencing the life of a strolling player. He apparently played the leading role of Hieronimo in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. By 1597 he was writing plays for Philip Henslowe, the leading impresario for the public theatre. With one exception (*The Case Is Altered*), these early plays are known, if at all, only by their titles. Jonson apparently wrote tragedies as well as comedies in these years, but his extant writings include only two tragedies, Sejanus (1603) and Catiline (1611).

The year 1598 marked an abrupt change in Jonson's status, when *Every Man in his Humour* was successfully presented by the Lord Chamberlain's theatrical company (a legend has it that Shakespeare himself recommended it to them), and his reputation was established.

In 1606, Jonson and his wife (whom he had married in 1594) were brought before the consistory court in London to explain their lack of participation in the Anglican church. He denied that his wife was guilty but admitted that his own religious opinions held him aloof from attendance. The matter was patched up through his agreement to confer with learned men, who might persuade him if they could. Apparently it took six years for him to decide to conform.

For some time before this he and his wife had lived apart, Jonson taking refuge in turn with his patrons Sir Robert Townshend and Esmé Stuart, Lord Aubigny. During this period, nevertheless, he made a mark second only to Shakespeare's in the public theatre. His comedies *Volpone or the Foxe* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610) were among the most popular and esteemed plays of the time.

In 1623, his personal library was destroyed by fire. By this time his services were seldom called on for the entertainment of Charles I's court, and his last plays failed to please. **Ben Jonson** died in London on August 6th, 1637.

Jonson exerted a great influence on the playwrights who immediately followed him. In the late Jacobean and Caroline years, it was he, Shakespeare, and Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher who provided all the models. But it was he, and he alone, who gave the essential impulse to dramatic characterization in comedy of the Restoration and also in the 18th and 19th centuries.[1]

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[1] "Ben Jonson", **Encyclopaedia Britannica Online**,
   www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/306058/Ben-Jonson

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