

Shakespeare and Ben Jonson: A comparison

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Shakespeare and Ben Jonson are the two great dramatists of the Elizabethan Age. The fame and name of Shakespeare has steadily increased with the passage of time, till he has begun to be considered perhaps the greatest dramatist for all times to come. In all ages and in all times, there has been nothing but a warm and hearty applause for Shakespeare and he is recognised even today as the greatest dramatic genius that England has ever produced. But the same can not be said about Ben Jonson, the contemporary of Shakespeare. Ben Jonson, is no doubt, a great force in the Elizabethan drama particularly in the sphere of Comedy but he is not so great as Shakespeare and his genius not so multifaced as that of Shakespeare. Essentially a writer of comedies, Ben Jonson does not scale those heights of tragic excellence and those peaks of tragic grandeur which are attained by Shakespeare in his tragedies. The range of Ben Jonson as a dramatist is limited. It is a writer of comedy that he shines.

Ben Jonson's contribution to tragedy except for *Sejanus* and *Catiline* is not at all significant. His historical plays are not so popular and appealing as the historical plays of Shakespeare. Ben Jonson has scarcely succeeded in romances and romantic comedies and tragic comedies. Shakespeare provides us a rich and wide circle - comedies, tragic-comedies, romances, historical plays and tragedies, all worked in the excellence of their art, but Ben Jonson merely reveals in the world of realistic comedy of humours hardly ever ascending in the heights of tragic grandeur and tragic intensity.

It should be noted that Ben Jonson steals a march over Shakespeare as far as originality is concerned. Ben Jonson's genius is more for that suddy originality of conception and

and execution, which we fail to notice in Shakespeare. In one sense, if the mark of originality be resilience to the general current, Ben Jonson is more original than Shakespeare. Shakespeare accepts the conditions of the stage of his times, is aware of its shortcomings, but resigns himself to them. His relations with his public remain sympathetic. Jonson, however, is angry and stands in arrogant opposition to the Elizabethan stage, and sets up his own tastes, ideas and theories, all derived from the ancients, against the popular taste.

Ben Jonson's originality is best noticed in his plots and stories and here he stands contrasted with Shakespeare. The plots of Shakespeare are mostly borrowed from foreign sources. The myriad minded genius of England made bold and open degradations in the kingdoms of the Italians, the French, and the Scottish writers, novelists and historians. He adapted their plots for the use of his plays and scarcely ever took the trouble of conceiving an original plot except in *Love's Labour's Lost*, which is one of his immature plays. Ben Jonson did not borrow his plots from foreign sources, but conceived them in his own way. He pictured the life of his times, and as such he could gather sufficient matter from the ways and manners, the habits and customs, the freaks and whim of the people of his times. Ben Jonson's plots are the most original and reveal the fecundity of his creative imagination.

Ben Jonson is essentially a realist and a satirist, and his peculiar excellence in drama lies in his realism and satire. He is through and through an Elizabethan dramatist interested in the study of real life and real manners of his times only. He believes that the purpose of drama is to make a searching and critical study of the times, and castigate the foibles and weaknesses of the age with a whip of iron so that some improvements may be brought about in the decadent state of social and moral life. Thus Ben Jonson is essentially by

theory and practice a realist and satirist attempting to portray in his plays -

"Deeds and language, such as men do use"
with a clear and distinct purpose to satirise them.

The treatment of character in the drama of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson shows a wide diversity. Characters in Shakespeare's hands assume a masterly delineation and his tragic heroes and heroines are in comparable to the whole range of English drama. Shakespeare exhibits equally the master's hand in presenting characters drawn from the higher as well as lower strata of society. His characters have a natural grace about them. In the case of Ben Jonson, we notice a lack of grave and sober characters. All his characters belong to the lower circle of society. Jonson gives us full gallery of gamesters, rogues, cut-purses, gulls and bawds. They are his best creations. His comic characters, and characters bent on villainy and mischief are better portrayed than characters having gravity, sobriety and moral grandeur. Further there is one very striking difference in the portrayal of characters in the two dramatists. The characters of Ben Jonson do not grow and develop. They are mere humours and lack development. They are of the static type and there is little dynamism in them. The characters of Shakespeare grow and develop. There is a wonderful evolution in Shakespearean heroes.
