

Dr.Raman Kumar Rajesh  
Department of English  
Cmj College Donwarihat Khutauna, Madhubani  
[ramanrajeshlnmu@gmail.com](mailto:ramanrajeshlnmu@gmail.com)  
[www.smartenglishclasses.com](http://www.smartenglishclasses.com)

BA(ENGLISH)  
Part 1st

### **Ben Jonson**

The second place among the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists is universally assigned, on the whole justly, to Ben Jonson, who both in temperament and in artistic theories and practice presents a complete contrast to Shakespeare. Jonson, the posthumous son of an impoverished gentleman-clergyman, was born in London in 1573. At Westminster School he received a permanent bent toward classical studies from the headmaster, William Camden, who was one of the greatest scholars of the time. Forced into the uncongenial trade of his stepfather, a master-bricklayer, he soon deserted it to enlist among the English soldiers who were helping the Dutch to fight their Spanish oppressors. Here he exhibited some of his dominating traits by challenging a champion from the other army and killing him in classical fashion in single combat between the lines. By about the age of twenty he was back in London and married to a wife whom he later described as being 'virtuous but a shrew,' and who at one time found it more agreeable to live apart from him. He became an actor (at which profession he failed) and a writer of plays. About 1598 he displayed his distinguishing realistic style in the comedy 'Every Man in His Humour,' which was acted by Shakespeare's company, it is said through Shakespeare's friendly influence. At about the same time the burly Jonson killed another actor in a duel and escaped capital punishment only through 'benefit of clergy' (the exemption still allowed to educated men).

The plays which Jonson produced during the following years were chiefly satirical attacks on other dramatists, especially Marston and Dekker, who retorted in kind. Thus there developed a fierce actors' quarrel, referred to in Shakespeare's 'Hamlet,' in which the 'children's' companies had some active but now uncertain part. Before it was over most of the dramatists had taken sides against Jonson, whose arrogant and violent self-assertiveness put him at odds, sooner or later, with nearly everyone with whom he had much to do. In 1603 he made peace, only to become involved in other, still more, serious difficulties. Shortly after the accession of King James, Jonson, Chapman, and Marston brought out a comedy, 'Eastward Hoe,' in which they offended the king by satirical flings at the needy Scotsmen to whom James was freely awarding Court positions. They were imprisoned and for a while, according to the barbarous procedure of the time, were in danger of losing their ears and noses. At a banquet celebrating their release, Jonson reports, his 'old mother' produced a paper of poison which, if necessary, she had intended to administer to him to save him from this disgrace, and of which, she said, to show that she was 'no churl,' she would herself first have drunk.

Just before this incident, in 1603, Jonson had turned to tragedy and written 'Sejanus,' which marks the beginning of his most important decade. He followed up 'Sejanus' after several years with the less excellent 'Catiline,' but his most significant dramatic works, on the whole, are his four great satirical comedies. '**Volpone**, or the Fox,' assails gross vice; 'Epicoene, the Silent Woman,' ridicules various sorts of absurd persons; 'The **Alchemist**' castigates quackery and its foolish encouragers; and '**Bartholomew Fair**' is a coarse but overwhelming broadside at Puritan hypocrisy. Strange as it seems in the author of these masterpieces of frank realism, Jonson at the same time was showing himself the most gifted writer of the Court masks, which now, arrived at the last period of their evolution, were reaching the extreme of spectacular elaborateness. Early in James' reign, therefore, Jonson was made Court Poet, and during the next thirty years he produced about forty masks, devoting to them much attention and care, and quarreling violently with Inigo Jones, the Court architect, who contrived the stage settings. During this period Jonson was under the patronage of various nobles, and he also reigned as dictator at the club of literary men which Sir Walter Raleigh had founded at the Mermaid Tavern (so called, like other inns, from its sign). A well-known poetical letter of the dramatist Francis Beaumont to Jonson celebrates the club meetings; and equally well known is a description given in the next generation from hearsay and inference by the antiquary Thomas Fuller: 'Many were the wit-combats betwixt Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, which two I behold like a Spanish great galleon and an English man-of-war: Master Jonson, like the former, was built far higher in learning; solid, but slow in his performances; Shakespere, with the English man-of-war, lesser in bulk, but lighter in sailing, could turn with all tides, tack about and take advantage of all winds, by the quickness of his wit and invention.' The last dozen years of Jonson's life were unhappy. Though he had a pension from the Court, he was sometimes in financial straits; and for a time he lost his position as Court Poet. He resumed the writing of regular plays, but his style no longer pleased the public; and he often suffered much from sickness. Nevertheless at the Devil Tavern he collected about him a circle of younger admirers, some of them among the oncoming poets, who were proud to be known as 'Sons of Ben,' and who largely accepted as authoritative his opinions on literary matters. Thus his life, which ended in 1637, did not altogether go out in gloom. On the plain stone which alone, for a long time, marked his grave in Westminster Abbey an unknown admirer inscribed the famous epitaph, 'O rare Ben Jonson.'

As a man Jonson, pugnacious, capricious, ill-mannered, sometimes surly, intemperate in drink and in other respects, is an object for only very qualified admiration; and as a writer he cannot properly be said to possess that indefinable thing, genius, which is essential to the truest greatness. But both as man and as writer he manifested great force; and in both drama and poetry he stands for several distinct literary principles and attainments highly important both in themselves and for their subsequent influence.

Most conspicuous in his dramas is his realism, often, as we have said, extremely coarse, and a direct reflection of his intellect, which was as strongly masculine as his body and altogether lacking, where the regular drama was concerned, in fineness of sentiment or poetic feeling. He early assumed an attitude of pronounced opposition to the Elizabethan romantic plays, which seemed to him not only lawless in artistic structure but unreal and trifling in atmosphere and substance. (That he was not, however, as has sometimes been said, personally hostile to Shakespeare is clear, among other things, from his poetic tributes in the

folio edition of Shakespeare and from his direct statement elsewhere that he loved Shakespeare almost to idolatry.) Jonson's purpose was to present life as he believed it to be; he was thoroughly acquainted with its worser side; and he refused to conceal anything that appeared to him significant. His plays, therefore, have very much that is flatly offensive to the taste which seeks in literature, prevailingly, for idealism and beauty; but they are, nevertheless, generally speaking, powerful portrayals of actual life.

Jonson's purpose, however, was never unworthy; rather, it was distinctly to uphold morality. His frankest plays, as we have indicated, are attacks on vice and folly, and sometimes, it is said, had important reformatory influence on contemporary manners. He held, indeed, that in the drama, even in comedy, the function of teaching was as important as that of giving pleasure. His attitude toward his audiences was that of a learned schoolmaster, whose ideas they should accept with deferential respect; and when they did not approve his plays he was outspoken in indignant contempt.

Jonson's self-satisfaction and his critical sense of intellectual superiority to the generality of mankind produce also a marked and disagreeable lack of sympathy in his portrayal of both life and character. The world of his dramas is mostly made up of knaves, scoundrels, hypocrites, fools, and dupes; and it includes among its really important characters very few excellent men and not a single really good woman. Jonson viewed his fellow-men, in the mass, with complete scorn, which it was one of his moral and artistic principles not to disguise. His characteristic comedies all belong, further, to the particular type which he himself originated, namely, the '**Comedy of Humors.**'

The meaning of this term can be understood only by some explanations of the history of the word '**Humor.**' In the first place this was the Latin name for '**liquid.**' According to medieval physiology there were four chief liquids in the human body, namely blood, phlegm, bile, and black bile, and an excess of any of them produced an undue predominance of the corresponding quality; thus, an excess of phlegm made a person phlegmatic, or dull; or an excess of black bile, melancholy. In the Elizabethan idiom, therefore, '**humor**' came to mean a mood, and then any exaggerated quality or marked peculiarity in a person.

Aiming in these plays to flail the follies of his time, he makes his chief characters, in spite of his realistic purpose, extreme and distorted '**humors,**' each, in spite of individual traits, the embodiment of some one abstract vice--cowardice, sensualism, hypocrisy, or not. Oftenly, the unreality is increased because Jonson takes the characters from the stock figures of Latin comedy rather than from genuine English life.

In opposition to the free Elizabethan romantic structure, Jonson stood for and deliberately intended to revive the classical style; though with characteristic good sense he declared that not all the classical practices were applicable to English plays. He generally observed unity not only of action but also of time (a single day) and place, sometimes with serious resultant loss of probability. In his tragedies, 'Sejanus' and 'Catiline,' he excluded comic material; for the most part he kept scenes of death and violence off the stage; and he very carefully and slowly constructed plays which have nothing, indeed, of the poetic greatness of Sophocles or Euripides but which move steadily to their climaxes and then on to the catastrophes in the compact classical manner. He carried his scholarship, however, to the point of pedantry, not only in the illustrative extracts from Latin authors with which in the printed

edition he filled the lower half of his pages, but in the plays themselves in the scrupulous exactitude of his rendering of the details of Roman life. The plays reconstruct the ancient world with much more minute accuracy than Shakespeare's; the student should consider for himself whether they succeed better in reproducing its human reality, making it a living part of the reader's mental and spiritual possessions.

Jonson's style in his plays, especially the blank verse of his tragedies, exhibits the same general characteristics. It is strong, compact, and sometimes powerful, but it entirely lacks imaginative poetic beauty--it is really only rhythmical prose, though sometimes suffused with passion.

The surprising skill which Jonson, author of such plays, showed in devising the court masks, daintily unsubstantial creations of moral allegory, classical myth, and Teutonic folklore, is rendered less surprising, perhaps, by the lack in the masks of any very great lyric quality. There is no lyric quality at all in the greater part of his non-dramatic verse, though there is an occasional delightful exception, as in the famous '**Drink to me only with thine eyes.**' But of his non-dramatic verse we shall speak in the next chapter.

Last but not least: Jonson's revolt from romanticism to classicism initiated, chiefly in non-dramatic verse, the movement for restraint and regularity, which is making slow headway during the next half century, was to issue in the triumphant pseudo-classicism of the generations of **Dryden** and **Pope**. Thus, he was significant also as one of the moving forces of a great literary revolution.