

Ben Jonson (1573 - 1637)

Personally Jonson is the most commanding literary figure among the Elizabethans. For twenty-five years he was the literary dictator of London, the chief of all the wits that gathered nightly at the old Devil Tavern. With his great learning, his ability, and his commanding position as poet laureate, he set himself squarely against his contemporaries and the romantic tendency of the age. For two things he fought bravely, to restore the classic form of the drama, and to keep the stage from its downward course. Apparently he failed, the romantic school fixed its hold more strongly than ever; the stage went swiftly to an end as sad as that of the early dramatists. Nevertheless his influence lived and grew more powerful till,

aided largely by French influence, it resulted in the so-called classicism of the eighteenth century.

Life - Jonson was born at Westminster about the year 1573. His father, an educated gentleman had his property confiscated and was himself thrown into prison by Queen Mary; so we infer the family was of some prominence. From his mother he received certain strong characteristics and by a single short reference in ~~to~~ Jonson's works we are led to see the kind of woman she was. It is while Jonson is telling Drummond of the occasion when he was thrown into prison, because some passages in the comedy of Eastward Ho! gave offense to King James and he was in danger of a horrible death after having his ears and nose cut off. He tells us how, after his pardon, he

was banqueting with his friends, when his "old mother" came in and showed a paper full of "lusty strong poison" which she intended to mix with his drink just before the execution. And to show that she "was no churl", she intended first to drink of the poison herself. The incident is all the more suggestive from the fact that Chapman and Marston, one his friend and the other his enemy, were first cast into prison as the authors of *Eastward Ho!* and rough Ben Jonson at once declared that he too had had a small hand in the writing and went to join them in prison. Jonson's father came out of prison, having given up his estate and became a minister. He died just before the son's birth and two years later the mother married a bricklayer of London. The boy was sent to a private

School, and later made his own way to Westminster School where the Submaster, Camden, struck by the boy's ability, taught and largely supported him. For a short time he may have studied at the University in Cambridge but his stepfather soon set him to learning the bricklayer's trade. He ran away from this, and went with the English army to fight Spaniards in the Low Countries. His best known exploit there was to fight a duel between the lines with one of the enemy's soldiers while both armies ~~looked~~ looked on. Jonson killed his man and took his arms and made his way back to his own lines in a way to delight the old Norman troubadours. He soon returned to England and married precipitately when only nineteen or twenty years old. In his first

great play, 'Every man in his Humour' (1598), Shakespeare acted one of the parts and that may have been the beginning of their long friendship. Other plays followed rapidly. Upon the accession of James, Jonson's masques won him royal favor and he was made 'poet laureate'. He died poverty stricken in 1637. Unlike Shakespeare's his death was mourned as a national calamity and he was buried with all honor in Westminster Abbey. On his grave was laid a marble slab, on which the words "O rare Ben Jonson" were his sufficient epitaph.

The end.

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