
Did Shakespeare know Jonson?

By Kevin Gilvary

Most narratives contain a foil to the protagonist, some kind of rival or opponent. Often, this person is originally a friend or relative. In Joseph Campbell's *Hero of a Thousand Faces* (1949), the protagonist has to overcome this antagonist, the friend-turned rival to achieve the goal set out. In the plays of Shakespeare, the protagonists often have friends and allies who become rivals and opponents: Hal has to compete with Hotspur, Macbeth has to eliminate Banquo, and Hamlet has to confront Laertes. In the recorded events of the life of William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon, however, there is no person or entity to stand in the way of Shakespeare's success. Various attempts have been made to identify such an antagonist as the "rival poet" in the sonnets, including Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton and Barnabe Barnes, but there is no evidence that any of these were Shakespeare's rival in love or in any other sense.

Thus critics after the Restoration when writing about the life of Shakespeare, cast Ben Jonson (1573-1637) in the role of Shakespeare's friend-turned-rival. Despite the misgivings of Gifford, this notion of rivalry persists in modern biographies. Holland is typical in referring to Shakespeare's "close friendship and genial rivalry with Jonson" ("William Shakespeare" *ODNB* 2004). In the commendation to Shakespeare's First Folio, Jonson calls him "Soul of the age! The applause, delight, the wonder of our stage" and "Sweet swan of Avon" suggesting that he admired Shakespeare for his achievements. However, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, writers increasingly described an unfriendly relationship between them, with Jonson thought to show envy. A review of allusions, however, shows that few records (if any) link Jonson directly with Shakespeare, and that there is only limited evidence to suggest that Shakespeare and Jonson were personally acquainted. As with Southampton, biographers imagine that Shakespeare had a far closer relationship with Jonson than is evident in the records.

The biographical material for Ben Jonson differs enormously both in kind and in extent from the material about Shakespeare. Anne Barton (whose biography of Jonson appeared in 1984) explains in a review of various Shakespeare biographies:

Our knowledge of Jonson's year-by-year existence is not only enormous compared with the totality of what can be gleaned (mostly from scattered

and laconic legal or church records) about Shakespeare's but of a strikingly different provenance and kind.¹

Barton continues:

We have many of the private letters Jonson wrote, a detailed record of his conversation, and an impressive body of explicitly self-revelatory poetry and prose. We know exactly who Jonson's many friends and patrons were, where he travelled and with whom he stayed, when and why he suffered prison sentences, and when his private library (along with several as yet unpublished works) was destroyed by fire.

These personal writings by and about Jonson have allowed four additional literary biographies in the last thirty years.² Despite all this material, Donaldson is tempted to say "that his life is mainly a matter of gaps, interspersed by fragments of knowledge" (2011, 9).

Born in 1573, Ben Jonson was about nine years younger than Shakespeare. He was a member of Pembroke's Men in the 1590s and was arrested in 1597 for contributing to the play *Isle of Dogs*. His earliest publication was *Every Man out of his Humour* (EMO), which was performed in 1599, entered into Stationers' Register on 8 April 1600 (Arber iii, 159) and published in 1600 (STC 14768). Although Jonson published fewer plays in the next decade, eight compared to about fifteen of Shakespeare's,³ he also published various masques and panegyrics.⁴ By 1616, with the publication of a folio of his works, more of Jonson's plays and poems had appeared in print than Shakespeare's. Jonson's popularity remained greater until the Restoration (Bentley 1944). Given their inter-related activities and overlapping careers, it is obvious that biographers should look for contacts between them. After the Restoration, the tendency was to depict Jonson's pique at his own inferiority. Fuller imagined the "wit-combats" between Shakespeare and Jonson (1662 iii. 284). Dryden doubted Jonson's sincerity in his commendation (1693, vii). Rowe asserted that Jonson was proud, insolent and very jealous of Shakespeare (1709, i. viii). Steevens claimed that Jonson was overly critical of Shakespeare while Malone declared that Jonson viewed Shakespeare with "scornful and yet jealous eyes" (1778 iv. 153). Not all critics at this time took such a view: Betterton repeatedly stated that no rivalry existed between Shakespeare and Jonson.⁵ This envy was re-imagined in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when critics tended to depict a friendly relationship. Octavius Gilchrist in 1808 showed that Jonson's comments about Shakespeare were capable of a positive interpretation. Similarly, William Gifford

described “the uncommon fondness of Jonson for Shakespeare” (1816, viii 332). Lee saw the two as close friends (1899, 176) and many modern commentators follow this. Holden asserts that “Shakespeare and Jonson show every sign of having remained firm friends until Shakespeare’s death” (1999, 158). Donaldson imagines “the two men working and talking together, watching and pondering each other’s inventions, observing and retaining certain phrases, ideas, names, turns of plot” (2006, 249). Most modern biographers continue to see them in opposition, (*e. g.*, Shapiro *Rival Playwrights*, 1991, and Bednarz *Shakespeare and the Poets’ War*, 2001). Just a few biographers of Shakespeare find little or no suggestion of any significant relationship between the two playwrights, scarcely mentioning Jonson, most notably Levi (1988) and Stephen Greenblatt (*Will in the World* 2004).

Did Shakespeare / Oxford purge Jonson?

Whatever is claimed about this relationship originates in Jonson’s biographical record since Shakespeare never mentions or alludes to Jonson (or any other writer). He left no record of what he thought about Jonson or any other writer. In his will, Shakespeare did not remember Jonson or the Jonson child sometimes claimed as his godson. While Shakespeare was named among the members of the newly-formed King’s Men in 1603, Jonson was not mentioned in any document concerning them.

The only allusion linking Shakespeare in his lifetime to Jonson occurs in the anonymous Cambridge play *Return to Parnassus* Part 1, (4.3), where the following speech is assigned to Will Kempe:

Why heres our fellow Shakespeare puts them all downe, I [aye] and Ben Jonson too. O that Ben Jonson is a pestilent fellow, he brought up Horace giving the Poets a pill, but our fellow Shakespeare hath given him a purge that made him beray his credit (Leishman 1949, 337).

Various interpretations have been offered as “the purge” which Shakespeare is said to have given Jonson. The passage seems to be part of a broader ‘War of the Poets’, a view elaborated by James Bednarz (2001, 19-52). Bednarz is unsure whether Shakespeare was directly involved or was merely an observer. The *Return to Parnassus* seems to have been performed in 1602 (there is a reference to Elizabeth as still alive) but it was not published until 1606. Edmond Malone expressed the opinion that the purge did not refer to any particular play: “In what manner Shakespeare put him down or made him bewray his credit, does not appear. His retaliation, we may well be

assured, contained no gross or illiberal abuse” (1790 i. ii. 321). Lee agreed that the purge meant “no more than that Shakespeare had signally outstripped Jonson in popular esteem” (1898, 219-20). Chambers wondered whether the author of the Parnassus plays was mistaken and that the ‘purge’ was administered to Jonson not by Shakespeare but by Dekker in *Satiromastix* (1923, iv, 40). Donaldson doubts whether Shakespeare’s purge was anything more than “a passing quip” and he makes no attempt to identify which play or character it might have been (2011, 173-4).

A number of passages in Shakespeare’s plays have been seen as covert references to Jonson but these are not secure and do not command wide recognition. In the late nineteenth century, Fleay identified Shakespeare’s “purge” of Jonson with his description of Ajax in *Troilus and Cressida* at 1.2.19 (1886, 45). E. K. Chambers accepted that this passage might parody Jonson as it “seems unnecessarily elaborate for its place, refers to ‘humours’, and has not much relation to the character of Ajax as depicted in the play” (1930, i. 72). Fleay also declared that “Sir Toby represents Jonson and Malvolio Marston” (1886, 220). G. Sarrazin in 1904 argued that Jonson was portrayed as the insignificant Nym in *Henry V* and in *Merry Wives of Windsor* as he rarely speaks without using the word ‘humour’, a point accepted by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in 1921. David Riggs (1989) also sees Malvolio as a comic satire on Ben Jonson, especially with Malvolio’s conversion in prison mirroring Ben Jonson’s. Henk Gras (1989) agreed that *Twelfth Night* was a direct response to overt criticisms made by Jonson in his Humours plays, an interpretation developed by Janet Clare in 2005. Tyson (1978) suggested that *Othello* and *Volpone* were composed at much the same time.⁶

Henry Gray (1915) suggested that *Hamlet* was Shakespeare’s purge on Jonson. However, any reference to the so-called War of the Poets is very brief:

Rosencrantz: *Faith, there has been much to do on both sides; and the nation holds it no sin to tar them to controversy: there was, for a while, no money bid for argument unless the poet and the player went to cuffs in the question.*

Hamlet: *Is't possible?*

Guildestern: *O, there has been much throwing about of brains.*

Hamlet 2.2.352-9 (Folio 1623, not in Q2).

Arthur Gray (1928) put forward the view that the melancholic Jaques in *As You Like It* was Shakespeare’s satire on Jonson.⁷ Duncan-Jones accepts this and believes that

Shakespeare “engaged in increasingly fierce and hostile competition with Jonson” in the late 1590s and early 1600s (2001, 123-4; 136).

There is little in these lines to suggest that Shakespeare is specifically referencing Jonson in any of these passages. It seems that almost any unfavourable depiction of a character in a Shakespeare play can be interpreted as an attack on Jonson.

Against this ‘offensive Shakespeare’, some critics have seen Shakespeare writing in a ‘defensive’ or ‘reactive’ mode against Jonson. Ernst Honigmann (1982, 111) sees Shakespeare defending himself against Jonson’s demand to maintain the unities with this speech: “The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact” (*Midsummer Night’s Dream* 5.1.7-8), but this play is usually dated to 1595-6, earlier than Jonson’s first recorded play. Honigmann also sees a response in *A Winter’s Tale* where the Chorus asks the audience: “Impute it not a crime / To me or my swift passage that I slide / O’er sixteen years.” (4.4.90). In these passages, as in the speeches by the Chorus to *Henry V*, Shakespeare may have been answering more general criticism by writers such as Philip Sidney, whose *Apologie for Poetrie* was published in 1595.

Overall, there is no record in which Shakespeare mentioned Jonson and no confirmed allusion to any of the works. Jonson might, or might not, have been satirised in the portrayal of Ajax, Sir Toby, Corporal Nym or Malvolio, or in the plays *Troilus and Cressida*, *As You Like It*, *Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare might, or might not, have been answering Jonson’s criticism in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *A Winter’s Tale*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*. Whichever allusion is selected, none constitutes evidence of any respect, rivalry or even acquaintance on the part of Shakespeare.

Oxford, Jonson and the Jacobean Masque

It is very significant that Jonson came to the fore as a writer of courtly masques from 1604, the year of Oxford’s death. The masque had emerged in the Elizabethan period as a form of courtly entertainment where royalty and aristocracy could mingle and participate. Such masques involved music, singing and dancing. Although Shakespeare did not seem to have written any masques, they were included in several plays, notably *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Henry VIII* and *The Tempest*.

It was well-known that James did not enjoy serious drama and he only encouraged it as a form of court entertainment to impress foreign dignitaries. When his inherited court dramatist died in 1604, James was thus able to instruct his replacement, Ben Jonson, to concentrate on masques and to employ artists such as Inigo Jones to design, construct and decorate the scenery.

Notes

1. Anne Barton. 2006. "The One and Only." *New York Review of Books*, 11 May (Collective Review of Shapiro, 1599, Richard Wilson *Secret Shakespeare*, Clare Asquith *Shakespeare Hidden Beliefs*, Peter Ackroyd *Shakespeare*, David Ellis *That Man Shakespeare*).
2. Anne Barton. 1984 *Ben Jonson: dramatist*. Rosalind Miles. 1986. *Ben Jonson: his life and work*. David Riggs. 1989. *Ben Jonson: a life*. W. David Kay. 1995. *Ben Jonson: a literary life*. Ian Donaldson. 2011. *Ben Jonson, a Life*. Donaldson also contributed the entry in the ODNB (2004).
3. Jonson's plays were published as follows: *Every Man out of his Humour* (1600), *Every Man in his Humour* (1601), *Cynthia's Revels* (1601), *The Poetaster* (1602), *Seianus his fall* (1605), *Eastward Ho!* (with Chapman and Marston, 1605), *Volpone* (1607), *The Case is Altered* (1609), *Catiline* (1611).
4. Jonson's first six masques were published as follows: *Arch's of Triumph* (with Dekker, 1604); *King James Royal Entertainment* (1604), *Hymenaei* (1606), *The Masque of Blackness* and *The Masque of Beauty* (1608), and *The Masque of Queens* (1609).
5. Joseph Spence. 1820. *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men*. London: John Murray (page 81 in an entry for 1728). Spence (1699-1768) collected various opinions about writers such as Pope. His manuscript was read by Dr. Johnson. Betterton died in 1710 when Pope was about twenty-two years old. It is possible Betterton's comments were passed to Spence by a third party, perhaps Rowe.
6. G. Sarrazin. 1904. "Nym und Jonson". *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, 40 213. Arthur Quiller-Couch, ed. 1921. *Merry Wives of Windsor*. CUP xxxi. Henk Gras. 1989. "Twelfth Night, Every Man Out Of His Humour, and the Middle Temple Revels of 1597-98." *MLR* 84, 545-64. Janet Clare. 2005. "The Complexion of Twelfth Night." *S. Survey*, 58, 199-207. Brian F. Tyson. 1978. "Ben Jonson's Black Comedy: A Connection between *Othello* and *Volpone*." *SQ*, 29.1, 60-66.
7. Arthur Gray. 1928. *How Shakespeare Purged Johnson: A Problem Solved*. CUP. Henry David Gray. 1932. "The Date of Hamlet". *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 31, 51-61

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- Malone, Edmund *Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare* (1790, 10 vols)
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