

Ben Jonson on Shakespeare

Ben Jonson was primarily a dramatist, a poet than a critic. A strict follower of classical rules of literature, he disdained the extravaganza of Elizabethan poetry. His critical essays have appeared in *Poetaster* and *Discoveries* (1641). His critical remarks on his contemporaries such as Spenser, Bacon, Shakespeare are of considerable interest. He is also one of the first to put Shakespeare on the high pedestal from where 'the bard' still commands. In his tribute poem for Shakespeare for the preface of the First folio of 1623, Jonson is all praises for his talent and legacy. He unhesitatingly calls Shakespeare "soul of the age" and even compares him with the Greek dramatists of the classical period.

"De Shakespeare Nostrati" is probably a brief remembrance of Shakespeare that appeared in *Discoveries* (1641). Jonson declares his love for Shakespeare quite candidly when he says, "for I do lov'd the man and do honour his memory". He also adds that Shakespeare was honest, open and of free nature and had an excellent imagination. He displayed in his work "brave notions and gentler expressions". However, being a classicist Jonson does criticise the superfluosness of expression in Shakespeare's writings. Jonson finds many passages of Shakespeare's ridiculously redundant.

Most of the critics including Dryden and Dr Johnson have found Shakespeare's style to be excessive and bombastic on many occasions. Yet all concede that Shakespeare's writings have a universal appeal. At times, Jonson holds his classical concepts too rigidly, and even dogmatically. However, it appears that Jonson could throw off his classical yardstick in favour of aesthetics; he could acknowledge and appreciate beauty when he finds one. Jonson puts his final seal of approval for Shakespeare when he says: "But he redeemed his vices with his virtues. There was ever more in him to be praised than to be pardoned."

Suggested Readings:

Dutton R. (1996) Jonson and Shakespeare. In: Ben Jonson Authority Criticism. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

