
Biography of Ben Jonson

Born in early June of 1572 (probably the 11th) in London, Ben Jonson never knew his father, a minister, who had died two months before he was born. No real trace of Jonson's father has been found; the name was hardly uncommon, and its spelling was Ben's invention—his father was likely one of many Johnsons in London at this time. His mother remarried early in his childhood. His stepfather was a bricklayer named Robert Brett.



Jonson was educated briefly at Westminster School, where he was introduced to the humanist culture which dominated English thought at the time. Jonson said later that he was "taken from" his education and "put to another craft," which was likely an apprenticeship of some description, followed by a short spell as a soldier at war in the Netherlands.

Jonson returned to London about 1594 and married Anne Lewis on November 14, 1594. Nothing is known of her except from a contemporary source that she was "a shrew yet honest." It is thought that Jonson outlived all of his children, and some of the poems he wrote on the occasion of their deaths suggest that he was much affected by them. It is possible that Jonson's marriage was unhappy and perhaps even the object of a legal separation later in his life.

Jonson had begun to write in 1597, perhaps with a play called *The Case is Altered* for the Pembroke's Men company, and during 1598 and 1599 he wrote *Every Man In His Humour* and *Every Man Out of His Humour*, expounding his famous theory of humors, which has become synonymous with his name and his work. In the play, Jonson personified the four humors, or bodily fluids, which were believed to determine a person's demeanor. It has been suggested that Shakespeare was an actor in this play at some point.

Days after the first performance of *Every Man In His Humour*, Jonson killed an actor, Gabriel Spencer, in a duel and only narrowly escaped execution by pleading "benefit of the clergy." He had a T for "Tyburn" branded on his thumb as a reminder of what would happen should he commit further crimes (Tyburn was a famous execution site). During his stint in jail, Jonson converted to Catholicism.

From 1605 to 1634, Jonson produced popular masques (works combining drama, song and spectacle) for the courts of James I and Charles I. He was granted a royal pension in 1616 and thus made, effectively, Poet Laureate of England. Jonson became one of the most successful writers of his era.

In addition to writing numerous masques, including *Entertainment at Althorpe* and *The Masque of Blackness*, Jonson wrote his four most famous plays, considered his "major comedies": *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, *Epicoene*, and *Bartholomew Fair*, all within eight years. At this point, Jonson's popularity as a playwright in England was second only to Shakespeare's, and many

contemporaries wrote in print that they preferred Jonson.

After his personal library burned in 1623, Jonson hit a low point in his life. He fell out of favor with the court and suffered several strokes, which made writing extremely arduous. He also suffered ridicule for compiling and carefully editing a folio of his *Workes*. It was utterly unheard of for a writer to elevate plays—which were considered vulgar productions—alongside poems, but that is precisely what Jonson did, subjecting his masques, poems, and plays to the same meticulous critical standard. Without a doubt, Jonson's *Workes* provided the model for Shakespeare's posthumous *First Folio*.

Jonson died on August 16, 1637, and he was buried in Westminster Abbey with an inscription recording perhaps the original spelling of his name: "O Rare Ben Johnson."

Study Guides on Works by Ben Jonson

The Alchemist (Jonson) Bartholomew Fair Ben Jonson

The Alchemist is one of Ben Jonson's four great comedies. The earliest recorded performance of the play occurred in Oxford in 1610. It was also entered into the Stationers' Register in this year, though it might have been written and performed...

Interestingly, the very first performance of Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* was on Halloween. Of course, it is imperative to realize that Halloween wasn't the same in 1614 as it is today. Even so, Ben Jonson—who briefly enjoyed stature as a...

Cynthia's Revels Ben Jonson

Epicene, or the Silent Woman Ben Jonson

Epicœne, or The Silent Woman by Ben Jonson might well be termed *The Crying Game* of Renaissance drama. Every act, every scene and, indeed, every single word of Jonson's comedy leads to the culminating act which reveals the Epicene is not only...

Every Man in His Humour Ben Jonson

The Masque of Blackness Ben Jonson

Volpone Ben Jonson

Volpone was published first in 1607 as a quarto and then in 1616 as part of Jonson's collected *Workes*. In the later edition, the date of the first performance of *Volpone* is listed as 1605. However, many scholars speculate that the first...