

# A biting elegy: ben jonson on shakespeare



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A master of humor and satire, Ben Jonson was a playwright, poet, and actor; he was also known as one of Shakespeare's theatrical contemporaries, if not Shakespeare's prime literary rival. His poem "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare" was as an elegy to commemorate Shakespeare and his works. However, Jonson is not truly sincere in his admiration of Shakespeare. Jonson shrewdly undermines Shakespeare by hiding his criticism under the laudatory guise of the poem. Jonson subverts the expected, masterful image of Shakespeare by overtly praising him in a theatrical manner, discrediting his admirers, exposing his faults, and questioning his greatness relative to the great poets of the past.

While the poem is written as an elegy to Shakespeare and therefore is supposed to be extolling in nature, Jonson's excessive use of praise hinders the reader from fully admiring Shakespeare. The title not only overstates the obvious intention of the poem (a devotion to Shakespeare), but also is especially lengthy and superfluous that it hints insincerity. Jonson attempts to praise Shakespeare by giving him several adjectives as decorative titles. He opens with "My Beloved," an intimate and loving term. However, instead of being consistent with this level of affection, he unexpectedly distances himself and calls Shakespeare "the Author" and then formally addresses him as "Mr. William Shakespeare," with the full prefix, first name and last name, halting the reader from fully viewing Shakespeare affectionately and signaling the reader to question his relationship with Shakespeare. Such disconnect also makes it look as if Jonson cannot find any other good things to say about Shakespeare and is resorting to a fact. By using such formal term and resorting to the obvious (i. e., his profession and official name

respectively) Jonson succeeds in pretending to praise, while not evoking any admirable feelings from the reader for Shakespeare. Immediately, the title of the poem sets the premise for the rest of the poem as it makes the reader be more skeptical look for Jonson's criticism beneath his praise for Shakespeare.

Jonson continues to stage the obvious and over exaggerates his praise for Shakespeare that it verges on mockery, trivializing Shakespeare and his works. Jonson presents the poem like as with an over exaggeration of everything as if it's staged. Thus, the praises should not be taken seriously, so transitively trivializing Shakespeare's achievements. To illustrate, Jonson stops midway in the poem and announces, " I therefore will begin,"(17) referring to how he will begin eulogizing Shakespeare. The sudden change in narrative voice to first person, and the fact that the speaker is stating his intent instead of just diving into a praise creates an image of Jonson as a narrator on the stage, telling the audience that the show is about to start, the show being his applause for Shakespeare's " great" achievements. In fact, in addition to the abrupt change in narrative voice, the period at the end of the phrase also creates a dramatic pause, stops the flow of the poem, making whatever comes after the phrase forced an unnatural. Jonson further dramatizes his praise of Shakespeare through his excessive use of exclamations marks. By using exclamation marks back to back with praises like " soul of the age!" followed by " the applause, delight, the wonder of our stage!" (17/18), takes away the impact the exclamation mark usually makes. Suddenly, the praises carry less weight and is trivialized. Moreover, later in the poem Jonson tries to top his previous praise of saying Shakespeare is "

soul of the age” when he exclaims how Shakespeare “ was not of an age but for all time!” as if he is playing a game to see how more over the top he could be. Logically, these two phrases also contradicts each other, which makes both laudatory statements cancel each other out, leaving them as empty praises. Therefore, Jonson’s imagery of a stage as well as his over exaggerated compliments trivializes Shakespeare and his works.

In fact, Jonson not only demeans Shakespeare through his own hyperbolic praises, but also discredits other people’s praise for Shakespeare. Jonson understands that one of the reason Shakespeare’s popularity is because he’s celebrated for being celebrated (similar to the idea of being famous for being famous) - people admire him because a lot of other people praise him. Thus, Jonson attempts to take away this shield of praise as he explains how praise can be harmful and discredits Shakespeare’s admirers. Jonson presents the concept that praise is not always positive when he uses the “ too much” to describe praise in the line “ neither man nor muse can praise too much”(4). The phrase “ too much” strikes as rather unconventional. In contrast to using “ can praise enough” which evokes the idea of an empty space that still needs to be filled to be completed, Jonson uses “ can praise too much” which presents an image of an overload of praise, as though its gone past the point of completeness. Therefore, presenting how praises are now doing more harm than good. This slight change in wording, causes the reader to look at praises for Shakespeare differently, if not more critically.

Jonson elaborates on this idea of how praises can be more harmful than beneficial when he analyzes Shakespeare’s admirers. Jonson is introducing the fact that many of Shakespeare’s admirers are “ blind [in] affection” and <https://assignbuster.com/a-biting-elegy-ben-jonson-on-shakespeare/>

praise him out of “ seeliest ignorance,” lacking the ability and knowledge to truly appreciate his works (9). Naturally, such an argument causes the reader to look to themselves and question whether they hold Shakespeare in high regard because of others? Consequently making the reader even more critical of their views on him. At the same time, putting down some of Shakespeares admirers further gains Jonson the reader trusts as he presents himself as the few who can really understand Shakespeare’s work. Jonson does not stop there as he compares the situation to when “ some infamous bawd or whore/ Should praise a matron” (13-14). Suddenly, Jonson presents the case to be worse than it actually is as comparing someone who can’t appreciate work to a whore or bawd is rather extreme. Nonetheless, it proves effective in that it converts these praises from something positive to negative and subtracts from Shakespeare’s greatness.

Not only does Jonson cancel out many of Shakespeare’s ignorant and thus fake admirers, but he also decreases the praise of Shakespeare’s top admirers like Queen Elizabeth and King James I. Instead of addressing them formally with their respective titles of “ Queen” and “ King,” Jonson refers to them as “ Eliza and our James” (74). Jonson reference to the Queen and King in such casual terms may on the surface show Shakespeare’s close relationship with them. However, by using informal language, Jonson also reduces the monarchs, something so high and unreachable, to familiars, which takes away from the awe inspiring fact that Shakespeare is under the patronage of the highest ranking person in the country. Thus, by discrediting Shakespeare’s blind admirers and familiarizing his high ranking admirers, Jonson is stripping Shakespeare from the praises that make him so great,

consequently reducing Shakespeare to the shadow of his former, admirable self. Like how Jonson makes the monarchs seem more relatable, he also tries to pull Shakespeare from his pedestal by familiarizing Shakespeare and presenting him as an imperfect commoner who make mistakes as opposed to an unreachable literary genius. Jonson starts by exposing Shakespeare's low educational background as he superficially commends Shakespeare for being able to make it this far when Shakespeare "hadst small Latin and less Greek" (31). Although it seems like Jonson is praising Shakespeare for becoming successful despite his educational background, the reader cannot fully admire Shakespeare. The reason for this incomplete admiration is due to Jonson's use of superlatives. Jonson could just said "hadst small Latin and Greek" without the "less Greek" and it would still have relayed the same point across. However, by adding the extra superlative he creates a descending imagery, which conflicts with the idea of Shakespeare inclining in position, consequently halting the reader from truly admiring Shakespeare. In fact, Jonson is rather biased in his commentary, as Jonson is known for his grasp of the classics and is judging Shakespeare from his own high standard. Already Shakespeare's educational background creates a hole in the prior image of a perfect Shakespeare.

Moreover, Jonson tears at an image of a genius Shakespeare when he reveals that Shakespeare can makes mistakes, like any other ordinary person. Jonson states how "who casts to write a living line, must sweat (such as thine are)" referring to how hard Shakespeare had to work to produce a prose so good that it is "living." Such a statement is meant to compliment Shakespeare's hard work ethic, but Jonson's real motive is attribute

Shakespeare's success to his hard work and not his genius as a way of brining him down from the pedestal. Jonson also uses brackets as a means of demoting Shakespeare to an ordinary citizen when puts "(such as thine are)" in brackets. Although "Thine" could be referring to Shakespeare, it could also be referring to the reader. The brackets allow Jonson to break the fourth wall and address the readers as it creates a space for an aside, as it doesn't cut the flow of the poem. By exposing Shakespeare's educational backstory and showing that Shakespeare can make mistakes, Jonson is able to take away Shakespeare's pedestal as he presents as ordinary. Jonson acknowledges Shakespeare's abilities. However, he attempts to shrink Shakespeare's greatness as he poses the question of how great Shakespeare relative to the great poets in history as he calls Shakespeare's burial location into question. Jonson pretends to be indignant of how Shakespeare is buried in Stratford and not buried where "Chaucer, or Spencer, or bid Beaumont lie" (20) in Westminster Abbey. However, Jonson's true motive for protesting is to shed light on this issue so that reader, naturally, would be inclined to ask why he wasn't buried there in the first place? Did the authorities see something they didn't? Or was Shakespeare good, but just not exemplary enough to be buried with other great poets?"

After creating this gap of doubt in the readers mind, Jonson shows Shakespeare's inadequacy by challenging Shakespeare himself and filling in the gap of doubt with an image of Shakespeare trying to squeeze himself into the poet's corner. Jonson starts off by mockingly challenging Shakespeare to find himself a space when he cries "Shakespeare rise!" By using the word "rise", Jonson conjures an image of a dead Shakespeare "

rising” from the dead, which is not only disrespectful to Shakespeare, but also paints Shakespeare in a very weak and disturbing state, an image that makes Shakespeare seem even farther away from the poetic martyr.

Moreover, by using a one-syllable verb followed by an exclamation mark, Jonson treats Shakespeare as an inferior, someone he can command.

Therefore, making Shakespeare seem even less deserving to be buried by the greats. Most importantly, Jonson ends with a relatively weak sentence “to make thee a room” (21). The phrase is weak because it lacks a subject and thus presenting an imagery of a limited space that Shakespeare has to force and squeeze himself into it as opposed to a more definitive phrase of “a room will be made” where the subject is present and in the beginning, creating an image of a room that must be present for him. By challenging Shakespeare on his burial space and building an undeserving image of him, Jonson succeeds in making Shakespeare’s accomplishment become relatively less great.

Throughout the poem, Jonson fervently praises Shakespeare and his works. However, there is always an underlying motive to undermine Shakespeare beneath all of them. Jonson criticizes Shakespeare through the superfluous title of the poem, his theatrical praises, attempts to discredit Shakespeare’s admirers, revealing his faults as well as questioning his burial location. In a way, by hiding his attacks behind his praises, the reader is led to actually listen and be swayed by Jonson and his attempts to subvert Shakespeare’s great legacy.