

Shakespeare and the Tribe of Ben

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We tend to think of William Shakespeare as a singular genius, whose work is universally appreciated more than four centuries after his death. It is true that he has no peers, but he did have serious rivals in his own time. He lived, after all, in the Elizabethan Age, when the English language was being transformed by a variety of writers into masterpieces of poetry and prose, when England was described as “a nest of singing birds.” He was the foremost singer, but he was not alone. There were poets and dramatists whose talents were appreciated almost as much as his, although his superiority would outlast them all. Chief among his rivals was Ben Jonson, whose reputation as poet and playwright was second only to Shakespeare’s. It was Jonson, six years younger than Shakespeare, who honored him after his death with a poem entitled “To the Memory of my Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare.” In it, he predicted that Shakespeare would prevail far beyond the poets of his age:

Thou art a monument without a tomb,
And art alive still while thy book doth live
And we have wits to read and praise to give.

Jonson’s poem is not only a tribute to Shakespeare’s genius; it remains the surest proof we have that Shakespeare really *was* Shakespeare, a middle class citizen of Stratford upon Avon, not the Earl of Oxford, or some other educated aristocrat later proposed as the true author of his plays and poems. Shakespeare did not lack recognition in his own lifetime. He even had the blessing of Queen Elizabeth herself, for whom the Elizabethan Age was named. She had seen some of his plays performed at court, rather than at the Globe Theatre, where Shakespeare made his reputation as a playwright, actor, and member of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. The queen did not go to public entertainments, but she certainly heard about them from those who went. A

persistent rumor circulated that she saw a court performance of *Henry IV, Part I*, in which Falstaff was the comic hero, and liked it so much she wanted Shakespeare to write another Falstaff play. He responded with *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, one of his most hilarious comedies, which was staged at the Globe Theatre in 1602, the year before she died. Her successor on the throne was King James the 6th of Scotland, who became King James 1st of England, causing the name of Shakespeare's company to be changed from the Lord Chamberlain's Men to the King's Men, and proving that King James was also a patron of the arts. Jonson must have accepted the rumor about the queen, for in his poem he praised the

Sweet Swan of Avon! what a sight it were
To see thee in our waters yet appear,
And make those flights upon the banks of Thames,
That so did take Eliza and our James!

Ben Jonson's tribute carries weight, because his plays and poems were admired in the Age of Elizabeth almost as much as Shakespeare's. He so excelled among Shakespeare's contemporaries that some of them strove to follow his example. They became the Sons of Ben, or more often the Tribe of Ben, who praised him in their poems and recognized him as their leader. Ben Jonson's reputation would live after him, as did that of Samuel Johnson, for whom, a century later, The Club would be founded with a different Johnson as its head. The Club is thought by many to be the first Literary Club of London, but it was not the first. The first authentic London Literary Club was the Tribe of Ben. They were a group of talented poets attracted to Ben Jonson's poetic achievement, which was much admired but patently different from Shakespeare's. Ben Jonson was classically educated, schooled in the tradition of Greek and Latin poetry, while Shakespeare suffered in Jonson's opinion from knowing "small Latin and less Greek." However, Jonson acknowledged in his tribute that Shakespeare was a greater poet than the Classical poets he himself admired,

Of all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome
Tri'umph, my Britain, thou hast one to show
Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.
To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe.
He was not of an age but for all time!

To Jonson, Shakespeare was a natural writer, who in his poetry and plays had become the master of his native tongue. The Tribe of Ben chose to follow Jonson's more educated practice, believing him the best model to emulate. They met in London taverns in the early 17th Century, just as Samuel Johnson's club would meet in the later 18th century. Their favorite gathering place was the Apollo Room of the Devil Tavern near Temple Bar, though they also met from time to time at the Mermaid Tavern, where other poets often joined them. They can be said to set the pattern for literary clubs ever since, a congenial group of writers who gathered frequently to converse and share their work, while consuming generous amounts of food and drink.

The Club which Samuel Johnson and Joshua Reynolds founded in the later 18th Century thus had a predecessor. It was the Tribe of Ben, who initiated the custom of meeting regularly in comfortable surroundings to discuss their work. The later club also had a favorite pub. It was the Turks Head, though they sometimes chose other London taverns, where they too would freely converse over plenteous quantities of food and drink. Samuel Johnson's Club flourished in what we know as the Neo-Classical Age, which followed the Elizabethan Age, and has credit for attracting a larger number of the leading artists and writers of their time than did Ben Jonson's Tribe, all of whom were poets. The Club did not limit its membership to poets, though one of them was Oliver Goldsmith, a writer widely renowned in his time for a long poem called "The Deserted Village," as well as for a play that is often performed on the modern stage, called *She Stoops to Conquer*. Samuel Johnson was also a poet and all around man of letters, famed as an essayist and dictionary maker. His companions ranged from the renowned painter Sir Joshua

Reynolds to the Parliamentary orator Edmund Burke, to David Garrick, the star of the London stage, to the acclaimed Economist Adam Smith, to Edward Gibbon, historian of the Roman Empire, and to the budding biographer James Boswell. It was Boswell who would immortalize them all, taking copious notes on their conversations and quoting them in the *Life of Samuel Johnson*, which is justly regarded as the finest literary biography ever written.

The Tribe of Ben was less varied and numerous, but no less distinguished, than the Club, since its members were some of the brightest Elizabethan poets, including Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, Sir John Suckling, and Thomas Carew. They were often called the Cavalier poets, because they were writing in the age of King Charles the First. Their best known poems are in every anthology of Elizabethan poetry today. They include “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,” (the familiar first line of a *carpe diem* poem by Robert Herrick, the full title of which is “To the Virgins to Make Much of Time”) and “Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage” (often quoted lines from a poem entitled “To Althea, from Prison” by Richard Lovelace) and the witty love poem “Why so pale and wan, fair lover? Prithee why so pale?” by Sir John Suckling, and a tribute “To Ben Jonson, upon Occasion of his Ode of Defiance” by Thomas Carew.

Ben Jonson (without the “h”): was the leader of the earlier club, as Samuel Johnson (with the “h”) was the acknowledged head of the later club. Though the earlier club called itself the Tribe of Ben, it is clear from Jonson’s poetic tribute that he regarded Shakespeare as the superior poet and playwright. Jonson was a younger admirer of Shakespeare who looked up to him, but Shakespeare himself never belonged to the Tribe of Ben. Shakespeare had no close followers; he was content to write his own plays and sometimes act in them, and to carve out his own career independent of any major literary influence.

We know that Shakespeare, who began writing plays as early as 1590, retired from the London stage in 1610, after only two decades, having stayed long enough to see his last play, *The Tempest*, produced at The Globe. He died in his home at Stratford upon Avon in 1616, just six years after his retirement, leaving an unequalled poetic and dramatic legacy to the world. Little is known of his life in Stratford, but we know he is buried there. It was after his death that Ben Jonson wrote his poetic tribute to celebrate “a poet of nature” whose work owed no debt to Classical poets, yet was more original and spontaneous than his own,

Yet must I not give Nature all: thy art,
My gentle Shakespeare, must enjoy a part.

Jonson’s praise was from the leader of the Tribe of Ben, a poet and playwright who might have claimed first honors himself if he had not lived in the time of Shakespeare. To his credit, he unselfishly praised the man he called “Sweet Swan of Avon” as

Soul of the age!
The applause, delight, the wonder of our stage!

Jonson’s poetry was certainly original in its own right, but it reflected the Classical tradition in which he had been educated, along with a command of the English tradition in which he wrote. His style was formal and elegant, infused with images of the Greco-Roman gods and goddesses he had learned to respect. He was well aware of how the rhythm of the English language differed from the rhythm of Greek and Latin, and he wrote many songs that were set to music by English composers. His most famous song, was “Drink to me only with thine eyes,” set to music by Henry Lawes, still sung today with the same familiar tune. He addressed one of his finest poems to the Goddess of the Moon, whose Latin name was Cynthia, whom the Romans had once worshipped as Queen of the night. She was no longer worshipped in seventeenth

century England, but Ben Jonson imagined what the Latin poets must have believed, and demonstrated it in his graceful

Song: To Cynthia

Queen and huntress, chaste and fair,
Now the sun is laid to sleep,
Seated in thy silver chair,
State in wonted manner keep:
Hesperus entreats thy light,
Goddess excellently bright.

Earth, let not thy envious shade
Dare itself to interpose;
Cynthia's shining orb was made
Heaven to clear, when day did close:
Bless us then with wished sight,
Goddess excellently bright.

Lay thy bow of pearl apart,
And thy crystal-shining quiver;
Give unto the flying hart
Space to breathe, how short soever:
Thou that mak'st a day of night,
Goddess excellently bright.

It is easy to see why Jonson had an audience second only to Shakespeare's, and why it was he the Tribe of Ben wanted to emulate in their own poems. Each was an accomplished poet in his own right, but Jonson was their guide, inspiration, and model of excellence. No doubt they would have found it easier to write in the classical tradition of Ben Jonson than to mimic the more personal wit and sophistication of William Shakespeare, whose exceptional literary gifts are conspicuous in the hundred and fifty-four sonnets he wrote, while he was composing thirty-seven poetic tragedies and comedies for the stage. One of Shakespeare's love sonnets is especially comparable to the love songs of Jonson and seems particularly relevant to the Tribe of Ben. It is

Sonnet 107: Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul

Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come,
Can yet the lease of my true love control,
Suppos'd as forfeit to a confin'd doom.
The mortal moon hath her eclipse endur'd
And the sad augurs mock their own presage;
Uncertainties now crown themselves assur'd
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.
Now with the drops of this most balmy time
My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes,
Since, spite of him, I'll live in this poor rhyme,
While he insults o'er dull and speechless tribes;
And thou in this shalt find thy monument,
When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent.

The imagery of this sonnet portrays the moon, not as a goddess to be worshipped, as Ben Jonson strove to do, but as “mortal,” a natural wonder in the night sky, which was periodically eclipsed by the earth in its rotation around the sun, but always emerged as brightly as before. Shakespeare presents a more modern and scientific image of the moon, temporarily darkened by the shadow of the earth, but soon shining as it recovered its light. Eclipses were a natural phenomenon that superstitious people often thought prophetic, foreshadowing some catastrophe about to occur on earth. Shakespeare reassures the reader that there is nothing to worry about, since “the sad augurs mock their own presage” and “peace proclaims olives of endless age.” He sees the resilient moon as emblematic of his love, which is undying, and like the sonnet he has written, it defies mortality, as the moon survives its eclipse, for in his eyes

My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes,
Since, spite of him, I'll live in this poor rhyme,
While he insults o'er dull and speechless tribes;

The meaning here is clear: there are “speechless tribes” on earth incapable of writing poems like his, but he belongs to another kind of tribe, the English tribe, capable of creating what he calls his “poor rhyme” (obviously ironic), because it has a long tradition of artistic works to glorify and prolong its beauty. He could have been thinking of the Tribe of Ben drinking and celebrating poetry in a London tavern, but whatever he thought, he was implying in this sonnet that he took pride in the resources of his own native language, which enabled him to write such a beautiful sonnet. He was the natural poet Ben Jonson praised, and in his song to Cynthia demonstrated that he too belonged to the exalted tribe of English poets, whose work was capable of lasting endless generations, guaranteeing earthly immortality through their literary art. What Ben Jonson voiced in his tribute to Shakespeare was the perennial theme of literature, *Ars longa, vita brevis*, “*Art is long, life is short.*” which is the main theme of all Shakespeare’s sonnets. Both could write love poems in a language which was inherently beautiful, because it had long preserved and enriched its inherent power of expression. In his sonnet, Shakespeare took pride in being born into one of those fortunate “tribes” who had the capacity to know and speak and understand the full potentiality of their native language. If Shakespeare was not one of the Tribe of Ben, he was fully aware of the possibilities of eloquence in the common language they shared. Ben Jonson and his tribe of poets contributed as much to the English tongue in their time as Samuel Johnson and his club of writers would contribute in a later age, but it was the singular genius of Shakespeare to make full use of the creative genius of the English language, and add a further dimension of greatness to it through his poetry and plays.