

Question 39

What do we learn about Shakespeare from Ben Jonson?

Gregory Doran

Ben Jonson loved Shakespeare this side idolatry, calling him “Thou star of poets” and of course: that he was “Not for an age but for all time”.

But he was also critical of his friend: he insisted that Shakespeare lacked art, citing how he had described a sea-shore in landlocked Bohemia. The players say he never blotted a line, “would he had blotted a thousand” he writes. And he even gets in a dig at his fellow grammar school boy’s poor grasp of the Classics “And though thou hadst small Latin, and less Greek”.

Jonson was not a man to keep a secret. William Drummond recorded his friend’s drunken conversation, late at night before he sank into a stupor, imagining Tartars fighting Turks around his great toe, and he could be pretty indiscreet. But in all his writing, Jonson never reveals even the slightest hint that the man he refers to fondly as “My gentle Shakespeare” is anything other than the “Sweet Swan of Avon”.