

from *Timber* or Discoveries Made upon Men and Matter

Ben Jonson (1572–1637)

English essayist, poet, and playwright. The publication of Jonson's *Works* in 1616 completed his ascension to a position of renown as a professional author. His early life was riddled with controversy, including imprisonment for his contribution to the plays *The Isle of Dogs* and *Eastward Ho* and a Privy Council trial for allegations of "poetry and treason" in his play *Sejanus*. By 1605, however, he had been commissioned by King James I to organize entertainment for the court; under the king's auspices, Jonson produced twenty-four masques that contributed to his growing popularity as a playwright. Jonson wrote a broad range of plays and poems, which, although diverse in style, all combined his deep classical learning, his hungry imagination, and his sharp capacity for human observation. *Timber, Or Discoveries Made upon Men and Matter* was published posthumously in his *Works* and is an important English commentary on poetics of the period.

~ *The Norton Reader 11th Edition*, edited by Linda H. Peterson and John C. Brereton

For a man to write well, there are required three necessities: to read the best authors, observe the best speakers, and much exercise of his own style. In style to consider what ought to be written, and after what manner; he must first think and excogitate his matter, then choose his words, and examine the weight of either. Then take care in placing and ranking both matter and words, that the composition be comely, and to
5 do this with diligence and often No matter how slow the style be at first, so it be labored and accurate; seed the best, and be not glad of the froward conceits, or first words, that offer themselves to us; but judge of what we invent, and order what we approve. Repeat often what we have formerly written; which beside that it helps the consequence, and makes the juncture better, it quickens the heat of imagination, that often cools in the time of setting down, and gives it new strength, as if it grew lustier by the going back. As we see in the contention of
10 leaping, they jump farthest, that fetch their race largest: or, as in throwing a dart or javelin, we force back our arms, to make our loose the stronger. Yet, if we have a fair gale of wind, I forbid not the steering out of our sail, so the favour of the gale deceive us not. For all that we invent doth please us in conception of birth, else we would never set it down. But the safest is to return to our judgement, and handle over again those things, the easiness of which might make them justly suspected So did the best writers in their beginnings; they
15 imposed upon themselves care and industry; they did nothing rashly: they obtained first to write well and then custom made it easy and a habit. By little and little their matter shewed itself to them more plentifully; their words answered, their composition followed; and all, as in a well-ordered family, presented itself in the place. So that the sum of all is, ready writing makes not good writing; but good writing brings on ready writing; yet, when we think we have got the faculty, it is even then good to resist it; as to give a horse a check sometimes
20 with a bit, which doth not so much stop his course, as stir his mettle. Again, whether a man's genius is best able to reach thither, it should more and more contend, lift, and dilate itself, as men of low stature raise themselves on their toes, and so oft-times get even, if not eminent. Besides, as it is fit for grown and able writers to stand of themselves, and work with their own strength, to trust and endeavor by their own faculties: so it is fit for the beginner and learner to study others and the best. For the mind and memory are more
25 sharply exercised in comprehending another man's things than our own; and such as accustom themselves, and are familiar with the best authors, shall ever and anon find somewhat of them in themselves, and in the expression of their minds, even when they feel it not, be able to utter something like theirs, which hath an authority above their own. Nay, sometimes it is the reward of a man's study, the praise of quoting another man fitly: and though a man be more prone, and able for one kind of writing than another, yet he must
30 exercise all. For as in an instrument, so in style, there must be a harmony and consent of parts.