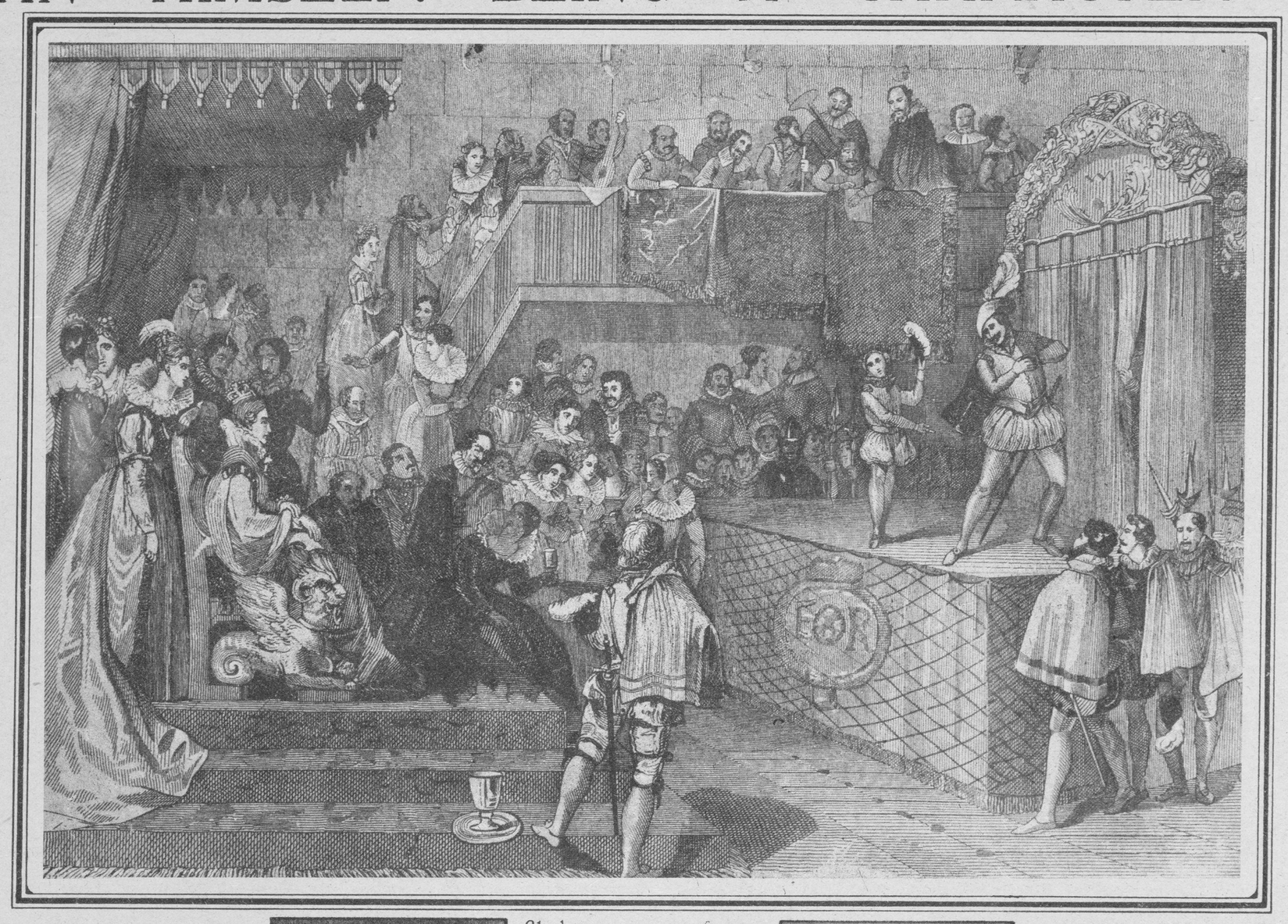
THE MAN HIMSELF: BEING A CHARACTER SKETCH



Shakespeare performing before Queen Elizabeth and her Court

"Handsome, Well-Shapt," a Wit and Good Fellow.

Popular, Friendly, and Unspoiled by Admiration.

WRITTEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES BY JOHN CORBIN.

IT is the fate of most of the great ones of history to become heroes of legend—the centre of picturesque tales that simply aren't so. The world insists upon knowing more about them than is to be known. Homer as a blind singer, George Washington as a boy who, though a very bad boy at times, told the truth and took his spanking, are more vivid in the popular imagination than their merely historical personalities. Shakespeare reverses the rule. He is, indeed, the centre of a myth; but the myth is that we know nothing at all about him. Supreme and unapproached in his genius, no fact in his biography has impressed the world as in the least interesting, or even credible.

This is not merely a prejudice of the crowd. It is rather a myth of the greatest minds—an almost willfully fostered myth, it sometimes seems. "All that is known with any degree of certainty," writes Steevens—and he has often since been quoted with approval—"is, that he was born at Stratford-upon-Avon, married and had children there, went to London where he commenced acting and wrote poems and plays, returned to Stratford, made his will, died, and was buried." Said Emerson: "Shakespeare is the only biographer of Shakespeare: and even he can tell nothing, except to the Shakespeare in us." Matthew Arnold wrote:

Others abide our question. Thou art free.
We ask, and ask. Thou smilest, and art still,
Out-topping knowledge.

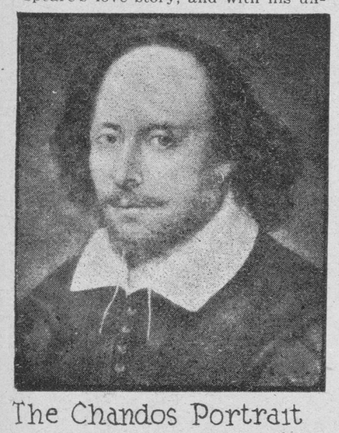
When Wordsworth ventured to suggest that Shakespeare's Sonnets are self-revealing:

With this key
Shakespeare unlocked his heart—

Browning brought him up with a round turn, exclaiming: "Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he."

In short, the world has made a god of its greatest poet, a god illimitable, inscrutable. In so doing the world has stultified itself, and wrought great injury to Shakespeare. There is a French saying that may be paraphrased thus: "To understand is to love." If we do not love Shakespeare—and, with all our obsequious reverence for his name, I am very much afraid we don't—it is because we have so abjectly refused to know him "in his habit as he lived."

Few people capable of judging have nowadays any doubt that the sonnets are, in a large measure, self-revealing. The love story they tell is perhaps the strangest and most illuminating in the whole scope of literary biography. Read in the light of the sonnets, moreover, the greatest comedies and the greatest tragedies the world has yet produced become in turn documents in the biography of their creator's soul. But with Shakespeare's love story, and with his unfolding as a dramatic artist, we have not now to do. First let us know what we can of his outward personality—the manner of man he was to his neighbors of Stratford, to his fellow-players of the Globe Theatre, and to his companion wits of the Mermaid Tavern.



The Chandos Portrait

The record they have left us is clear, unmistakable—in spite of Steevens's denial. In 1592 Robert Greene, on his deathbed, wrote a letter to certain playwrights, friends of his, warning them against the practices of actors—"buckram gentlemen, painted monsters, puppets who speak from our mouths, antics garnished with our colors." These creatures, it appears, had the presumption to revise the work of the playwrights.

Against one actor-author he especially warned his fellows. "There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tyger's heart wrapt in a Player's hide* supposes he is as well able to bumbast out a blank verse as the best of you; and being an absolute Johannes fàctotum, is, in his owne conceit, the onely *Shake-scene* in the countrie. * * * It is a pittie men of such rare wits [as Greene's fellow playwrights] should be subject to the pleasures of such rude grooms."

There is no doubt that the attack is on Shakespeare. The three parts of "Henry VI." were first written by several collaborators, of whom Greene was one. They were revised by Shakespeare, then a young man of some 27 years. One of the most vigorous passages contains the line,

Oh, Tiger's heart wrapt in a woman's hide,

apparently a contribution of Shakespeare's, which Greene travesties. From other sources we have the statement that Shakespeare was first employed about the theatres as a "groome," to hold the horses of spectators. "Shake-scene" is a manifest pun on his name. Greene and his fellows were scholars and gentlemen of the universities, and they found their profession, their fame, and their profits diminished by the competition of a "buckram gentleman," a "groome" of much humbler birth and education.

Greene presently died a pauper, the victim of a riotous life. Almost immediately his publisher, Henry Chettle, who himself wrote plays, printed an apology for giving currency to Greene's attack. "I am sory as if the original fault had been my fault, because myselfe have seene his [Shakespeare's] demeanour no lesse civill than he exelent in the qualitie he professes, [that is, as an actor;] besides, diverse of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing that aprooves his art." Again and again, throughout his life, Shakespeare's fellows testify to his gentlemanly bearing, his honesty, his wit and grace in conversation, and his facile skill as a poet.

Of Shakespeare as master of vast and profound tragic power, as the portrayer of all the deep passions of the human soul, nothing is said. At this time, to be sure, he had written at most his first and comparatively crude draft of "Romeo and Juliet." "Hamlet," "Lear," and "Othello" were still a decade and more in the future. But to the end of his life the kindly, free, and honest traits which Chettle emphasizes were those which mainly, almost exclusively, impressed his contemporaries.

The lighter side of his temperament was emphasized in the following year, 1593, by the publication of "Venus and Adonis," and again in 1594 by "The Rape of Lucrece." These were the first of his works to be printed, and, with the public of readers, remained apparently the most popular of all. The magic sweetness of the verse, the limpid flow of the narrative, and the vivid color of the imagery were clearly recognized by the discerning. William Covell, a Cambridge don, gave, in 1594, "all praise" to "sweet Shakespeare"; and Edmund Spenser in the same year wrote:

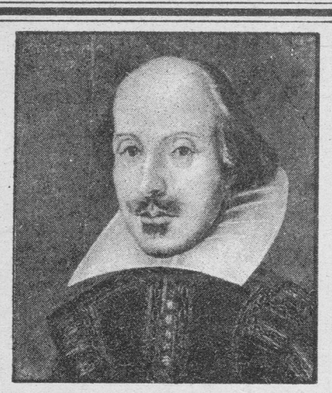
A gentler shepheard may no where be found.

Others called him "honey-tongued Shakespeare," and praised his "honey-flowing vein." But the great success of the poems seems clearly to have been due to what the modern magazine editor calls sex-appeal. This popular impression of the poet seems to have been intensified, not corrected, by the tragedy of "Romeo and Juliet." Shakespeare, in short, appeared first as the Robert W. Chambers of his time.

This is clearly evident in the Parnassus trilogy of comedies, written and performed at St. John's College, Cambridge, in the years 1597-1601. Gullio, a pretended gallant and an ignorant and empty aspirer to poetic taste, is rapturous in Shakespeare's praise; lards his sentences with quotations from the poems, and from the amorous phraseology of "Romeo and Juliet"; resolves to sleep with "Venus and Adonis" under his pillow, and exclaims, "Sweet Mr. Shakespeare! I'le have his picture in my study at the courte." The height of this Gullio's gullibility was that he cried: "Let this duncified world esteem of Spenser and Chaucer. I'le worshipp sweet Mr. Shakespeare!" The play also suggests that, like Robert Greene, the university playwright looked down on Shakespeare for his lack of education, and in general regarded him as an upstart who had succeeded not so much by real merit as by a rather low appeal to the prurient. In the third play of the trilogy, one Judicio renders a fairer judgment, but still with the air of moral and academic disapproval.

Who loves not Adon's love, or Lucrece rape?
His sweeter verse contains heart-throbbing line,
Could but a graver subject him content
Without love's foolish, lazy languishment.

The only anecdote of Shakespeare that is positively known to have been recorded in his lifetime indicates even more clearly his reputation for levity. A citizen's wife who had been deeply impressed with Richard Burbage's impersonation of Richard III. made an appointment to meet him after the performance. Shakespeare heard of this, and was already there when Burbage arrived; he shut Burbage out of the house, saying that William the Conqueror came before Richard III. The anecdote bears the familiar marks of popular invention, but for that very reason is the more significant as to Shakespeare's contemporary reputation. The dignity of the poet's mind, its exquisite sensibility, its passionate love of truth and purity, were less evident to his contemporaries than the light good-fellowship of the man.



The Droeshout Original Portrait — (From John Corbin's "New Portrait," John Lane)

To the end the high passions of the tragedies and their sombre, deep imagination seem not to have been associated with Shakespeare's personality. The favorite adjective for his muse was "sweet" and for himself "gentle." Even Milton, who of all men might be expected to appreciate the sombre, tragic words of his great predecessor, sang:

* * * Sweetest Shakespeare, fancy's child,
Warbles his native woodnote wild.

Milton was a boy of 8 when Shakespeare died, and wrote these lines some eighteen years after his death.

Of Shakespeare's wit and good-fellowship there is abundant testimony; and it is probably significant that it appears at its best in encounters with Ben Jonson, who, though a stanch friend and in the main a just and generous critic, "esteemed himself," as Emerson puts it, "out of all question the better poet of the two," and especially prided himself on the superiority of his classical education. "Many were the wit combats," wrote Fuller in his "Worthies," 1662, "betwixt him and Ben Jonson, which two I behold like a Spanish great galleon and an English man-of-war; Master Jonson (like the former) was built far higher in learning, solid but slow in his performance. Shakespeare, with the English man-of-war, lesser in bulk but lighter in sailing, could turn with all tides, tack about, and take advantage of all winds by the quickness of his wit and invention."

Only a few years after Shakespeare's death an instance was recorded on the authority of John Donne, poet and Dean of St. Paul's. It should perhaps be explained that "latten" was a metal, resembling brass, of which cheap spoons were made. "Shakespeare was godfather to one of Ben Jonson's children, and after the christening, being in a deep study, Jonson came to cheer him up and asked him why he was so melancholy. 'No, faith, Ben,' says he, 'not I: but I have been considering a great while what should be the fittest gift for me to bestow upon my godchild, and I have resolved at last.' 'I prithee, what?' says he. 'I faith, Ben, I'll e'en give him a dozen good Lattin spoons, and thou shalt translate them.'"

Volumes of controversy have not indicated more clearly the relations that existed between the two—intimate comradeship of two good fellows who respected each other, even while one deprecated the half-negligent facility of his friend and suffered in retort nimble satire that was half a compliment.

The first critical estimate of Shakespeare which to our thinking is in any way adequate was made in 1598 by Francis Meres, a divine and schoolmaster, graduate of Cambridge. In his "Palladis Tamia" Meres undertakes "a comparative discourse of our English poets with the Greek, Latin, and Italian poets." Like his contemporaries, it is true, he is most eloquent about the poems. "As the soul of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras, so the sweet wittie soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare, witness his 'Venus and Adonis,' his 'Lucrece,' his sugared sonnets among his private friends."

Yet very soberly he expresses the opinion of Gullio—that Shakespeare was the foremost man of letters of the day: "The muses would speak Shakespeare's fine filled phrase, if they could speak English. * * * Among the English he is most excellent in both kinds for the stage, rivaling the fame of Seneca in the one kind and of Plautus in the other."

The tragedies on which Meres bases his claim of rivalry with Seneca are "Richard II.," "Richard III.," "Henry IV.," "King John," "Titus and Andronicus," and "Romeo and Juliet"; and the passage is of interest as indicating how far Shakespeare's tragic genius had unfolded at the age of 34. It indicates also the critical standards of the time. To the early Elizabethan Seneca was the great tragic poet. Today he is in disrepute, and Plautus is of interest mainly in the fact that he borrowed so much from the Greek comedian Menander, whose work but for these borrowings would have been lost. To us the clasical rivals of Shakespeare are Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. Yet the fact remains that Meres said all that a rather dull Elizabethan could in praise of his great contemporary.

The fact was that the author of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and of "Romeo and Juliet" had injected into the spirit of this old world a thing which was wholly new and very far from easy to appreciate duly. "As You Like It" and "Hamlet," "The Winter's Tale" and "Lear," "The Tempest" and "Othello" intensifed and developed the phenomenon. This new spirit we now call romantic, as opposed to classical, and on the whole we value it more highly. The Elizabethan enjoyed it, applauded it, instinctively felt its greatness, but was rather at a loss to weigh and value it. By far the most formidable, critical apparatus of the time was in the bullet skull of Ben Jonson. Let us see what he made of the new spirit of romanticism! He was the big gun of his time, and though his contemporaries delighted to poke fun at his seriousness—was it not he who first regarded his plays as works?—they found no appeal from his pronunciamentos.

All his life he had measured the utterances of the muses by his classical yardstick. Now he had to use it to appraise the value of an aery vapor, the glinting of a Winter moon, the mad sweep of a whirlwind, the raging of cosmic passions set free. No wonder it seemed to him that Shakespeare "lacked art." The actors at the Globe reported of their playwright that "whatsoever he penned he never blotted out (that is, struck out,) a line." Ben Jonson answered, "Would he had blotted thousands," and gave instances of what seemed to him loose phrasing.

Many were his strictures upon Shakespeare's fantastic inventions. The "Induction" to his "Bartholemew's Fair" glances at the servant Caliban of "The Tempest" and the dance of satyrs—"Antics"—in "The Winter's Tale." "If there be never a servant-monster in the Fair [Jonson's play,] who can help it? * * * nor a nest of Anticks? He [that is, the author, Ben Jonson,] is loath to make nature afraid in his plays, like those that beget Tales, Tempests, and such like Drolleries."

There were those who accused "honest Ben" of envying his comrade. Even today Sir Sidney Lee attributes to him in his attitude toward Shakespeare a surly, difficult and jealous disposition. To do so is, I think, to fail wholly in understanding the critical temperament. Jonson was a classicist, and took himself very seriously as a critic. He had to speak the truth as he saw it. After Shakespeare's death, as if in answer to this charge of envy, he wrote: "I loved the man and do honor his memory, on this side idolatry, as much as any. He was indeed honest, and of an open and free nature." When the Folio was published, (1623,) he wrote the first tribute to Shakespeare's genius that surpassed the verdict of Francis Meres in insight and in admiration.

Mask, taken from the Stratford Bust. (In the possession of Princeton University)

He begins with a vigorous disclaimer on the one hand of any attempt at malicious overpraise, and on the other hand of ignorance or merely friendly superlatives. If he is extreme in eulogy, it is simply because "I confesse thy writings to be such as neither man, nor Muse, can praise too much."

In what he goes on to say, however, he evinces the keenest discrimination. Shakespeare is, to begin with, the greatest of all English poets.

My Shakespeare, rise; I will not lodge thee by
Chaucer or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lye
A little further, to make thee a roome;
Thou art a Moniment without a tombe,
And art alive still, while thy booke doth live,
And we have wits to read, and praise to give.

Then follows a passage which has very strangely been held to contain a sneer at Shakespeare's lack of classical knowledge. Quite obviously the purpose is to characterize as well as eulogize—which is the prime task of criticism. Shakespeare was not learned, and did not write according to the classical rules; yet, when it comes to comparisons with the ancients, there can be question only of the greatest, and Jonson was quite modern in his preference of the great Greeks to Seneca.

And though thou hadst small Latine, and lesse Greek,
From thence to honour thee, I would not seek
For names; but call forth thundering Æschilus,
Euripides and Sophocles to us.

As for comedy—"when thy Sockes were on," as the quaint phrase ran—Jonson would

Leave thee alone, for the comparison
Of all, that insolent Greece, or haughtie Rome
Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.
Triumph, my Britaine, thou hast one to showe,
To whom all Scenes of Europe homage owe.
He was not of an age, but for all time.

The source of Shakespeare's great power is found not in observance of the methods of the ancients, but in the poet's own nature—the spontaneous abundance of his native genius.

Nature her selfe was proud of his designes,
And joy'd to weave the dressing of his lines!
Which were so richly spun, and woven so fit,
As, since, she will vouchsafe no other Wit.

The Greek tragic poets Jonson had "called forth" merely to live again and witness the work of a rival. The comic poets he regards as quite dead in the comparison.

The merry Greek, tart Aristophanes,
Neat Terence, witty Plautus, now not please;
But antiquated, and deserted lye
As they were not of Nature's family.

Jonson will not, however, attribute everything to Shakespeare's "nature." He had often criticised the abandon of his friend's style; but he now renders justice to his diligence and skill as an artist.

Thy Art,
My gentle Shakespeare, must enjoy a part.

The poet "sweat, and struck the second heat upon the Muses' anvil." And, indeed, we know that he rewrote and re-rewrote his plays.

For a good poet's made, as well as born,
And such wert thou. Looke how the father's face
Lives in his issue. Even so, the race
Of Shakespeare's mind and manners brightly shines
In his well torned, and true-filled lines.

In Jonson's conception, the romantic, as compared to the classical, drama was "nature" triumphing in defiance, or neglect, of the methods of antiquity. But he clearly saw that it had an "art" of its own, and that, in its way, it was as truly poetry and drama.

These lines were written, of course, some seven years after Shakespeare's death. But there is reason to believe that the verdict they so finely voice was current in the crude in the poet's lifetime. The Globe was by far the most successful of the Bankside theatres, and the plays of Shakespeare were the chief part of its repertory. The company enjoyed the patronage of Elizabeth and James, who regularly called Shakespeare and his fellows to play the leading pieces in its stock at Court. It attained the very height of fame and fortune. Jonson could brandish the critical big stick, but his plays were far less popular and he was often in straits for money. In his early strictures on his friend there was probably more of the spirit of an unsuccessful, though "correct," playwright than of the condemnation of an acknowledged superior.

In Shakespearean demeanor toward Jonson we see him only as a loyal friend. When his company rejected Jonson's first comedy he intervened and had it produced. When Jonson was imprisoned for killing his man in a duel, Shakespeare helped to have him set free. But to all this critical rumbling he answered nothing, as far as we know, beyond the careless, amiable jest already cited—certainly he printed no retort. That he had a critical mind of very high order is evident. Hamlet's advice to the players is the subtlest as well as the earliest critique in the language on the art of the actor. His revisions of his plays bespeak severe self-criticism, and from play to play can be observed a development in technique that can scarcely have been unconscious. But on the art of the dramatist, as far as we know, he uttered not one word.

The fact seems to be that he took himself far less seriously than others took him. I have spoken of his plays as something quite new in the world, and from our point of view they were. Yet they were in the popular fashion of the time, and it was a fashion which others created, not Shakespeare. Almost every element in the romantic drama he took over from his predecessors. Lily, Kyd, Greene, Peele, Marlowe, and Fletcher all contributed to swell the tide on which he rode supreme. With two exceptions out of thirty-seven, his very plots were borrowed. The fact that Greene had blackguarded him did not prevent him from appropriating a novel of his to make "The Winter's Tale." There are probably thousands of lines in the Folio from other pens. To him what he wrote were popular plays—not works. His two poems he published and proofread; but not one of his dramas received the like attention. He left the theatre, retired to Stratford and died, without making any provision for the publication of the dramas that have placed him supreme and unchallenged above all mankind. His, certainly, was the genius that is unself-conscious. He was as modest as he was amiable, and otherwise gentlemanly.

One reason may be given for not publishing the plays, and we have reason to think it was of a kind to appeal to Shakespeare. There was no copyright, and to publish the plays was to lessen their financial value to his company. This "gentle Will," this "sweetest Shakespeare," this "Swan of Avon," was an admirable man of business. If we had only the records of the law courts, in fact, we might not be able to think so very well of him. He had a keenness for litigation which he seems to have inherited from his father. As a taxpayer he was slow, if not positively evasive. He was apparently negligent of a debt contracted by his wife. Like many men of property he evaded the restrictions against brewing malt liquor for his private use—being in his way a moonshiner.

Liberal in giving aid and lending money to his friends in need, he was strict in collecting debts. At about the time he wrote the final version of "Hamlet" he sued the village apothecary at Stratford to recover a small loan, and while he was at work on the world tragedy of "Antony and Cleopatra" he engaged in litigation that brought him in conflict with the village blacksmith—a state of affairs that Emerson relates with something akin to horror. He conspired with his father to secure from the conniving Herald's College a shady coat of arms and the right to subscribe himself "Gent."; and, while apparently not actively aiding an attempt to inclose Stratford common lands, in defiance of the rights of the people, he at best remained strictly neutral toward the project.

Careless as he seems to have been as to his fame as a dramatist, he was in business by no means above current standards of conduct. One gathers that the chief interest of his later years was to live at ease as a gentleman and provide well for his family. It is related on pretty good authority that he died of "a feavour" after "a merry meeting" at Stratford with his old friend Ben Jonson and the poet Drayton. But it is not unlikely that the true cause of his fever was not drink, but the insanitary condition of the street in which he lived.

Aubrey, Shakespeare's earliest biographer, records that he was "a handsome, well-shapt man." Rowe records a legend that he played the Ghost in "Hamlet." If so he must have had an imposing figure and a voice of no common impressiveness. The only other part with which he can be clearly associated is old Adam in "As You Like It," in which his brother, Gilbert, when an old man with failing memory, said he had seen him in his youth. He was clearly not a great actor, but he seems to have performed more or less regularly until he quit London.

The Ely Palace Painting — (From John Corbin's "New Portrait of Shakespeare" John Lane)

Of the dozens of reputed portraits only two are known to have been acknowledged by Shakespeare's contemporaries, and both were executed after his death. The bust over his grave was presumably placed there by his family before 1623. It is the work, not of a sculptor, but of a "maker of tombs," and the nose seems to have been very early broken and remodeled, leaving the feature shorter and the upper lip longer than they would otherwise have been. It has been frequently repaired and repainted. Yet the fact remains that it was accepted by his family as a likeness, and no doubt gives a rough impression of the genial, well-living dramatist who was content to die a provincial gentleman.

The print by Martin Droeshout, prefixed to the folio of 1623, seven years after his death, is almost as crude artistically. A remark of our friend Gullio suggests that portraits of Shakespeare were current in his lifetime, and the print was perhaps executed from one of these. Ben Jonson's poetic note on it has been generally misunderstood, even by Sir Sidney Lee. Jonson says, it is true, that the "graver" has "hit" the poet's "face," but the contact shows that he refers merely to the dead external forms of the features. The lines that follow say explicitly that Shakespeare's "wit" (that is, his mental powers) are not adequately rendered; that for any idea of it one must read the plays. The couplet about the graver's "strife" was a hackneyed locution which meant, in plain prose, that the graver did what he could in a difficult undertaking. It is asserted that he strove—not that he conquered!