

# SHAKESPEARE HIS ONLY BIOGRAPHER, SAID EMERSON



The Kesselstadt Mask. COPYRIGHT, 1892, BY HARPER & BROS.

Shakespeare and His Friends. (Sylvester, Selden, Beaumont, Sackville, the Earl of Dorset, Camden, Fletcher, Bacon, Ben Jonson, Daniel, Donne, Raleigh, the Earl of Southampton, Sir Robert Cotton, and Dekker). By John Faed.

## How He Set Forth the View That Nothing Is Known of the Poet Except as Revealed in His Works.

From "Representative Men" by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

There is something touching in the madness with which the passing age mischooses the object on which all candles shine and all eyes are turned; the care with which it registers every trifle touching Queen Elizabeth and King James, and the Essexes, Leicesters, Burleighs, and Buckingham, and lets pass without a single valuable note the founder of another dynasty which alone will cause the Tudor dynasty to be remembered—the man who carries the Saxon race in him by the inspiration which feeds him, and on whose thoughts the foremost people of the world are now for some ages to be nourished and minds to receive this and not another bias. A popular player—nobody suspected he was the poet of the human race; and the secret was kept as faithfully from poets and intellectual men as from courtiers and frivolous people. Bacon, who took the inventory of the human understanding for his times, never mentioned his name. Ben Jonson, though we have strained his few words of regard and panegyric, had no suspicion of the elastic fame whose first vibrations he was attempting. He no doubt thought the praise he had conceded to him generous, and esteemed himself, out of all question, the better poet of the two.

If it need wit to know wit, according to the proverb, Shakespeare's time should be capable of recognizing it. Sir Henry Wotton was born four years after Shakespeare, and died twenty-three years after him; and I find among his correspondents and acquaintances the following persons: Theodore Beza, Isaac Casaubon, Sir Philip Sidney, Earl of Essex, Lord Bacon, Sir Walter Raleigh, John Milton, Sir Henry Vane, Isaac Walton, Dr. Donne, Abraham Cowley, Belarmine, Charles Cotton, John Pym, John Hales, Kepler, Vieta, Albericus Gentili, Paul Sarpi, Arminius, with all of whom exists some token of his having communicated, without enumerating many others, whom doubtless he saw. Shakespeare, Spenser, Jonson, Beaumont, Massinger, two Herberts, Marlowe, Chapman, and the rest. Since the constellation of great men who appeared in Greece in the time of Pericles there was never any such society, yet their genius failed them to find out the best head in the universe.

Our poet's mask was impenetrable. You cannot see the mountain near. It took a century to make it suspected; and not until two centuries had passed after his death did any criticism which we think adequate begin to appear. It was not possible to write the history of Shakespeare till now; for he is the father of German literature; it was with the introduction of Shakespeare into Germany, by Lessing, and the translation of his works by Wieland and Schlegel, that the rapid burst of German literature was most intimately connected.

It was not until the nineteenth century, whose speculative genius is a sort of living Hamlet, that the tragedy of "Hamlet" could find such wondering readers. Now, literature, philosophy, and thought are Shakespearean. His mind is the horizon beyond which at present we do not see. Our ears are educated to music by his rhythm. Coleridge and Goethe are the only critics who have expressed our convictions with any adequate fidelity, but there is in all cultivated minds a latent appreciation of his superlative power and beauty, which, like Christianity, qualifies the period.

tenances were his; that he bought an estate in his native village with his earnings as writer and shareholder; that he lived in the best house in Stratford; was intrusted by his neighbors with their commissions in London, as of borrowing money and the like; that he was a veritable farmer.

About the time when he was writing "Macbeth" he sues Philip Rogers in the borough court of Stratford for 25 shillings 10 pence for corn delivered to him at different times; and, in all



The Globe Theatre From an old Print

respects, appears as a good husband, with no reputation for eccentricity or excess. He was a good-natured sort of man, an actor and shareholder in the theatre, not in any striking manner distinguished from other actors and managers. I admit the importance of this information. It was well worth the pains that have been taken to procure it.

But whatever scraps of information concerning his condition these researches may have rescued, they can shed no light upon that infinite invention which is the concealed magnet of his attraction for us. We are very clumsy writers of history. We tell the chronicle of parentage, birth, birthplace, schooling, schoolmates, earning of money, marriage, publication of books, celebrity, death; and when we have come to an end of this gossip, no ray of relation appears between it and the goddess-born; and it seems as if, had we dipped at random into the "Modern Flutarch" and read any other life there, it would have fitted the poems as well.

It is the essence of poetry to spring like the rainbow daughter of Wonder, from the invisible, to abolish the past, and refuse all history. Malone, Warburton, Dyce, and Collier have wasted their oil. The famed theatres, Covent Garden, Drury Lane, the Park, and Tremont have vainly assisted. Betterton, Garrick, Kemble, Kean, and Macready dedicate their lives to this genius; him they crown, elucidate, obey, and express. The genius knows them not. The recitation begins; one golden word leaps out immortal from all this painted pedantry, and sweetly torments us with invitations to its own inaccessible homes.

I remember I went once to see the Hamlet of a famed performer, the pride of the English stage; and all I then heard, and all I now remember of the tragedian, was that which

the tragedian had no part; simply Hamlet's question to the ghost:

What may this mean, That thou, dead corpse, again in complete steel Revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon?

That imagination which dilates the closet he writes in to the world's dimension, crowds it with agents in rank and order, as quickly reduces the big reality to be the glimpses of the moon. These tricks of his magic spell for us the illusions of the green-room.

Who ever read the volume of the Sonnets without finding that the poet had there revealed, under masks that are no masks to the intelligent, the lore of friendship and of love; the confusion of sentiments in the most susceptible, and, at the same time, the most intellectual of men? What trait of his private mind has he hidden in his dramas? One can discern, in his ample pictures of the gentleman and the King, what forms and humanities pleased him; his delight in troops of friends, in large hospitality, in cheerful dining. Let Timon, let Warwick, let Antonio the merchant answer for his great heart.

So far from Shakespeare being the least known, he is the one person, in all modern history, known to us. What point of morals, of manners, of economy, of philosophy, of religion, of taste, of the conduct of life has he not settled? What mystery has he not simplified his knowledge of? What office or function, or district of man's work, has he not remembered? What King has he not taught state, as Talma taught Napoleon? What maiden has he not found him finer than her delicacy? What lover has he not outlived? What sage has he not outseen? What gentleman has he not instructed in the rudeness of his behavior?

Some able and appreciating critics think no criticism on Shakespeare valuable that does not rest purely on the dramatic merit; that he is falsely judged as poet and philosopher. I think as highly as these critics of his dramatic merit, but still think it secondary. He was a full man, who liked to talk; a brain exhaling thoughts and images, which, seeking vent, found the drama near at hand. Had he been less, we should have had to consider how well he filled his place, how good a dramatist he was—and he is the best in the world. But it turns out that what he has to say is of that weight as to withdraw some attention from the vehicle; and he is like some saint whose history is to be rendered into all languages, into verse and prose, into songs and pictures, and cut up into proverbs; so that the occasions which gave the saint's meaning the form of a conversation, or of a prayer, or of a code of laws, is immaterial compared with the universality of its application.

So it fares with the wise Shakespeare and his book of life. He wrote the air for all our modern music; he wrote the text of modern life, the text of manners; he drew the man of England, the man of Europe, the father of the man in America; he drew the man and described the day, and what is done in it; he read the hearts of men and women, their probity, and their second thought and wiles, the wiles of innocence, and the transitions by which virtues and vices slide into their contraries; he could divide the mother's part from the father's part in the face of the child, or draw the fine demarcations of freedom and of fate; he knew the laws of repression which make the police of nature; and all the sweets and all the terrors of human lot lay in his mind as truly but as softly as the landscape lies on the eye. And the importance of this wisdom of life sinks the form, as of Drama or Epic, out of notice. 'Tis like making a question concerning the paper on which a King's message is written.

Shakespeare is the only biographer of Shakespeare; and even he can tell nothing except to the Shakespeare in us; that is, to our most apprehensive and sympathetic hour. He cannot step off from his tripod, and give us anecdotes of his inspirations. Read the antique documents extricated, analyzed, and compared by the assiduous Dyce and Collier; and now read one of those sickly sentences—acrotiles—which seem to have fallen out of heaven, and which, not your experience, but the man within the breast, has accepted as words of fate; and tell me if they match; if the former account in any manner for the latter; or, which gives the most historical insight into the man.

Hence, though our external history is so meagre, yet, with Shakespeare for biographer, instead of Aubrey and Rowe, we have really the information which is material, that which describes character and fortune; that

which, if we were about to meet the man and deal with him, would most import us to know. We have his recorded convictions on those questions which knock for answer at every heart—on life and death, on love, on wealth and poverty, on the prizes of life, and the ways whereby we come at them; on the characters of men, and the influences, occult and open, which affect their fortunes; and on those mysterious and demoniacal powers which defy our science, and which yet interweave their malice and their gift in our brightest hours.

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Shakespeare is as much out of the category of eminent authors as he is out of the crowd. He is inconceivably wise; the others, conceivably. A good reader can, in a sort, nestle into Plato's brain, and think from



Stothard's painting of Shakespeare's interview with Queen Elizabeth

thence, but not into Shakespeare's. We are still out of doors.

For executive faculty, for creation, Shakespeare is unique. No man can imagine it better. He was the furthest reach of subtlety compatible with an individual self—the subtlest of authors, and only just within the possibility of authorship. With this wisdom of life is the equal endowment of imaginative and of lyric power. He clothed the creatures of his legend with form and sentiments, as if they were people who had lived under his roof; and few real men have left such distinct characters as these fictions. And they spoke in language as sweet as it was fit.

Yet his talents never seduced him into an ostentation, nor did he harp on one string. An omnipresent humanity co-ordinates all his faculties. Give a man of talents a story to tell, and his partiality will presently appear. He has certain observations, opinions, topics, which have some accidental prominence, and which he disposes all to exhibit. He crams this part and starves that other part, consulting not the fitness of the thing, but his fitness and strength. But Shakespeare has no peculiarity, no importunate topic; but all is duly given; no veins, no curiosities; no cow painter, no bird fancier, no mannerist is he; he has no discoverable exotism; the great he tells greatly; the small, subordinately.

He is wise without emphasis or assertion; he is strong, as nature is strong, who lifts the land into mountain slopes without effort, and by the same rule as she floats a bubble in the air, and likes as well to do the one as the other. This makes that equality of power in farce, tragedy, narrative, and love-sonnets; a merit so incessant, that each reader is incredulous of the perception of other readers.

This power of expression, or of transferring the innermost truth of things into music and verse makes him the type of the poet, and has added a new problem to metaphysics. This is that which led him into natural history, as a main production of the globe, and as announcing new eras and ameliorations. Things were mirrored in his poetry without loss or blur; he could paint the fine with precision, the great with compass, the tragic and the comic indifferently and without any distortion of favor. He carried his powerful execution into minute details, to a hair point; finishes an eyelash or a dimple as firmly as he draws a mountain; and yet these, like nature's, will bear the scrutiny of the solar microscope.

In short, he is the chief example to prove that more or less of production, more or fewer pictures, is a thing different. He had the power to make one picture. Daguerre learned how to let one flower etch its image on his plate of iodine, and then proceeds at leisure to etch a million. There are always objects, but there was never representation. Here is perfect representation at last; and now let the world of figures sit for their portraits.

His lyric power lies in the genius of the piece. The sonnets, though their excellence is lost in the splendor of the dramas, are as inimitable as they—and it is not a merit of lines, but a total merit of the piece; like the tone of voice of some incomparable person, so is this a speech of poetic beings, and any clause as unproducible now as a whole poem.

Though the speeches in the plays, and single lines, have a beauty which tempts the ear to pause on them for their euphony, yet the sentence is so loaded with meaning, and so linked with its forewords and followers, that the logician is satisfied. His means are as admirable as his ends; every subordinate invention, by which he helps himself to connect some irreconcilable opposites, is a poem too.



An old print of Anne Hathaway's Cottage

And now, how stands the account of man with this bard and benefactor, when in solitude, shutting our ears to the reverberations of his fame, we seek to strike the balance? Solitude has austere lessons; it can teach us to spare both heroes and poets; and it weighs Shakespeare also, and finds him to share the halfness and imperfection of humanity.

Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, Chaucer saw the splendor of meaning that plays over the visible world; knew that a tree had another use than for apples, and corn another than for meal, and the ball of the earth, than for tillage and roads; that these things bore a second and finer harvest to the mind, being emblems of its thoughts, and conveying in all their natural history a certain mute commentary on human life. Shakespeare employed them as colors to compose his picture. He rested in their beauty, and never took the step which seemed inevitable to such genius, namely, to explore the virtue which resides in these symbols, and imparts this power—what is that which they themselves say? He converted the elements, which waited on his command, into entertainments. He was master of the revels to mankind.

Is it not as if one should have, through majestic powers of science, the comets given into his hand, or the planets and their moons, and should draw them from their orbits to glare with the municipal fireworks on a holiday night, and advertise in all towns, "very superior pyrotechny this evening!" Are the agents of nature and the power to understand them worth no more than a street serenade, or the breath of a cigar? One remembers again the trumpet-text in the Koran—"The heavens and the earth, and all that is between them, think ye we have created them in jest?"

As long as the question is of talent and mental power the world of men has not his equal to show. But when the question is of life, and its materials, and its auxiliaries, how does he profit me? What does it signify? It is but a Twelfth Night, or Midsummer Night's Dream, or a Winter Evening's Tale; what signifies another picture more or less?

The Egyptian verdict of the Shakespeare Societies come to mind, that he was a jovial actor and manager. I cannot marry this fact to his verse. Other admirable men have led lives in some sort of keeping with their thought; but this man, in wide contrast. Had he been less, he had reached only the common measure of great authors, of Bacon, Milton, Tasso, Cervantes, we might leave the fact in the twilight of human fate; but that this man of men, he who gave to the science of mind a new and larger subject than had ever existed, and planted the standard of humanity some furlongs forward into Chaos—that he should not be wise for himself—it must even go into the world's history that the best poet led an obscure and profane life, using his genius for the public amusement.

Well, other men, priest and prophet, Israelite, German, and Swede, beheld the same objects; they also saw through them that which was contained. And to what purpose? The beauty straightway vanishes; they read commentaries, all-excluding mountainous duty and obligation; a sadness, as of piled mountains, fell on them, and life became chastity, joyless, a pilgrim's progress, a probation, beleaguered round with doleful histories of Adam's fall and curse, behind us; with doomsday and purgatorial and penal fires before us; and the heart of the seer and the heart of the listener sank in them.

It must be conceded that these are half views of half men. The world still wants its poet-priest, a reconciler, who shall not trifle with Shakespeare the player, nor shall grope in graves with Swedenborg the mourner; but who shall see, speak, and act with equal inspiration. For knowledge will brighten the sunshine; right is more beautiful than private affection, and love is compatible with universal wisdom.