

Shakespeare Tercentenary: 1616-1916

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The World Today Commemorates the Great Life That Ended 300 Years Ago.



Edwin Booth as Hamlet

PHOTO BY SARONY

SHAKESPEARE died on April 23, 1616, either on or soon after his fifty-second birthday; and that date in 1916 is to mark the climax of an observance, which has already begun, of one of the great events of history. It will then be 300 years since there ended a life which has had an effect altogether incalculable not only upon the literature of the whole world, but upon the subsequent life and history of the world. His existence on this earth was one of the profound influences upon human development; and it is as such, not solely as a great poet, that the tercentenary of that existence is being commemorated everywhere.

THE NEW YORK TIMES will present to its readers each Sunday a Shakespeare section, of which this is the first number. There will be ten of these issues, coming out weekly, the last one on April 23. Each will contain articles on various phases of the subject, written by men and women who are qualified to speak with authority on the topics chosen by them; poets, essayists, teachers, critics, editors, actors, men who have made the study of Shakespeare a lifetime study professionally or as an avocation.

In addition there will be given each week carefully chosen selections from the great wealth of Shakespearean criticism. From the eighteenth century to our own time there has grown up a body of literature on this subject to which contributions have been made by men bearing the most eminent names in letters. Everybody knows of these works, but the general reader is not likely to have seen all or perhaps many of them. He has heard of Dr. Johnson's famous preface, of the adverse criticism of Voltaire, of the introduction of Shakespeare by Lessing and Herder to the Continent, but to get an idea of the whole he must spend many hours in libraries.

It is, of course, not possible to give more than a fraction of these criticisms in a newspaper; but THE TIMES has chosen such extracts as will give the general reader a comprehensive idea of Shakespearean literature by the time the ten numbers are completed. The series will, at any rate, constitute an anthology of Shakespearean criticism, containing not all, but the cream, of what has been said about his works. In making these selections care has been taken to choose them so as to cover many fields; essays on the tragedies have been taken from one writer, on the comedies from another, on the female characters from a third, and it may be said in general that this anthology is not a mere reiteration of praise of Shakespeare by great writers, but covers different phases of his work, so as to give, at the conclusion, a general and well-rounded view of his work from the most eminent authorities.

This number, the first, is an introductory one, devoted to the man himself and his genius, and does not deal with any set of plays or with any of the questions arising out of them. The first paper is one written for THE TIMES by William Lyon Phelps, Lampson Professor of English Literature at Yale and eminent as a Shakespearean authority. It deals with the subject of Shakespeare's overwhelming predominance in English literature, and traces the history of his recognition.

The second article, by John Corbin, well known as dramatic critic and author, treats of Shakespeare's personality. Mr. Corbin has made a special study of the subject, and there is no man better qualified to treat of it. He holds that Shakespeare's personality, so far from being vague, is as clear and definite as that of any man in history, and paints it as he sees it.

This has not been the view generally taken. That view is the one set forth so brilliantly in Emerson's essay on the poet, in which he declared that Shakespeare was his own and his only biographer—a view from which Mr. Corbin, in the light of modern investigation, dissents. Emerson's view of the subject, as set forth in his essay, is presented in this number as the first chapter in the anthology of Shakespearean criticism.

The second selection is from the famous preface by Dr. Johnson, for which the great Samuel has been so furiously belabored by most of the critics who came after him. Heine, to whom Johnson was John Bull personified, says derisively that Queen Mab must have cut many a caper on the Doctor's nose while he was laboriously undertaking to cope with the genius he did not understand. But Johnson did Shakespeare much service; for the hostile criticism of Voltaire, then an autocrat among men of letters, was being accepted as final, and it did, in fact, prevent a real appreciation of him in France, at least, for many years. When Johnson wrote, Shakespeare had not come to his full measure of appreciation; and if he did not wholly understand the great genius whom he tried—somewhat audaciously it seems now—to explain, he sincerely admired him. The Johnson preface, at any rate, is one of the landmarks of Shakespearean criticism.

The illustrations for this number have been chosen with a view to its general subject. They undertake to illustrate the man and his life, and we think none of them will be found more interesting than those which present the different conceptions of him in different lands which all pay tribute to his genius, but in which national temperaments conceive him in different ways.