

THE MAN HIMSELF: BEING A CHARACTER SKETCH

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

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 myth. 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 Stevens—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:

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 objectly refused to know him "in his habit as he liveth."

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 un-



The Chandos Portrait

folded 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 fellow-players of the Globe Theatre, and to his companion wits of the Mermaid Tavern.

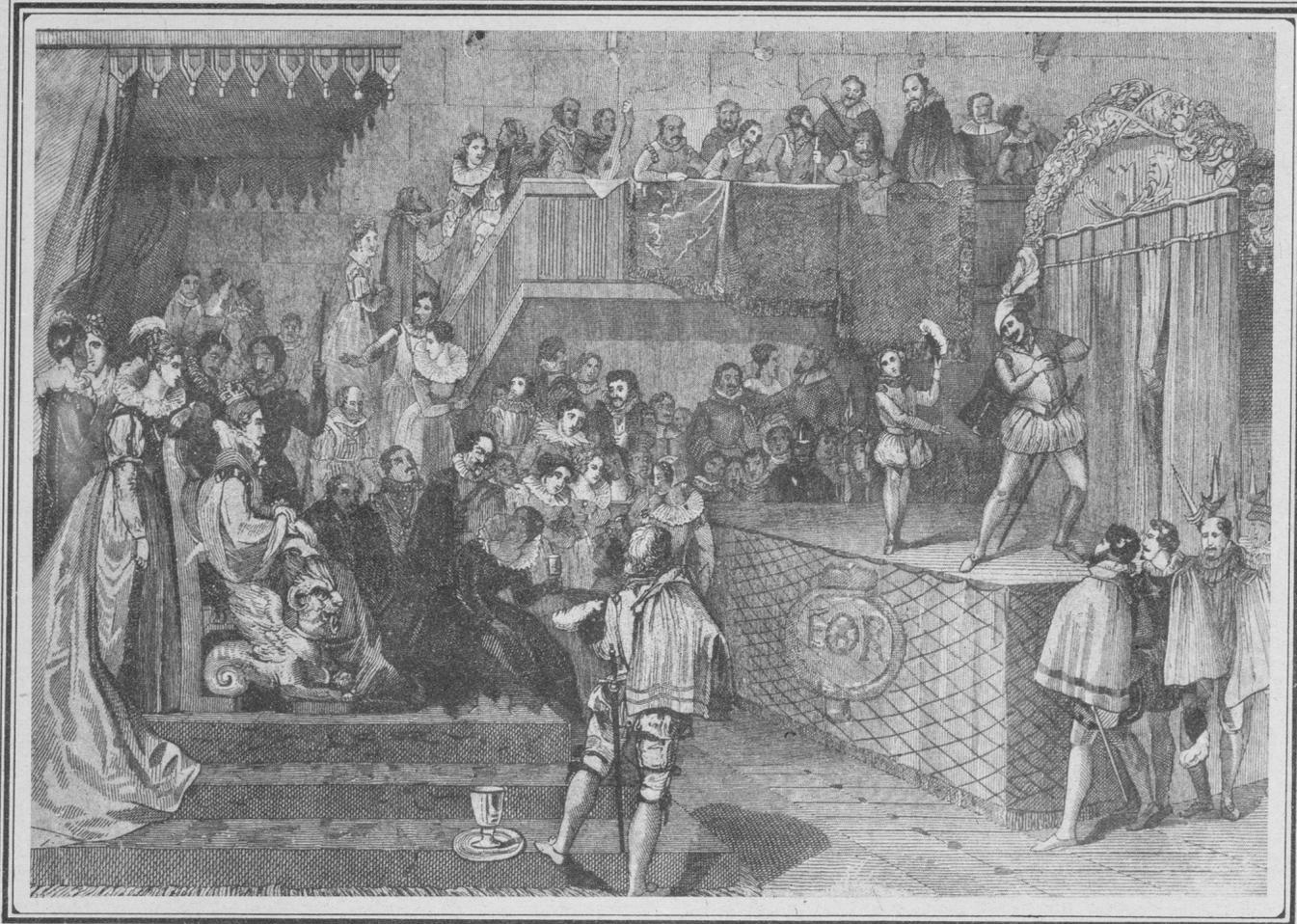
The record they have left us is clear, unmistakable—in spite of Stevens's denial. In 1592 Robert Greene, on his deathbed, wrote a letter to certain playwrights, friends of his, warning them against the practices of actors—"buckram gentlemen, painted monsters, puppets who speak from our mouths, antics garished 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 Tiger's heart wrapt in a Player's hide supposes he is as well able to bust out a blank verse as the best of you; and being an absolute Johannes factotum, is, in his own conceit, the only Shake-scene in the country."

It is a little 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,



Shakespeare performing before Queen Elizabeth and her Court

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 witte soul of Ovid lives in me!" 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 III.," "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 no more than a name. Today he is no more than a name. Today he is no more than a name.

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. "As You Like It" and "Hamlet," "The Winter's Tale" and "Lea," "The Tempest" and "Othello" invented 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 pronouncements.

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 airy 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 that seemed to him loose phrasing."

Many were his strictures upon Shakespeare's fantastic inventions. The "Induction" to his "Bartholomew'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?" (That is, 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



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

attributes to him in his attitude toward Shakespeare a surly, difficult and jealous disposition. To do so, I think, to fall 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.

It 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 confess, 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 lie. A little further, to make thee a roome; Thou art a Monument without a tombe, And art alive still, whilet thy booke is. 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 Greeke, From thence to honour thee, I would not seek For names; but call forth thundering Æschylus, 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.

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 by 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 re-wrote and re-re-wrote his plays.

For a good poet's made, as well as born. And such wert thou. Looke how the Father's face, Even so, the eyes Of Shakespeare's mind and manners brightly shined, and true-fried 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 of 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 inter-vened 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 rumberling 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 black-guarded him did not prevent him from appropriating a novel of his to make "The Winter's Tale." There are probably thousands of

Popular, Friendly, and Unspoiled by Admiration.

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. 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 Collier a shady coat of arms and the right to subscribe himself "Gent.," and, while apparently not actively aiding an attempt to defraud 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 fever" after "a merry meeting" at Stratford with his old friend Ben Jonson and the poet Drayton. But it is not unlikely that his true cause of his fever was not drink, but the insupportable 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



The Ely Palace Paint-Ing - (From John Corbin's 'New Portrait of Shakespeare' John Lane)

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.

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 short 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!