

with some show of reason—that the plays which pass under his name were really written by Bacon or some one else. There is no danger of this paradox ever making serious headway, for the historical evidence that Shakspeare wrote Shakspeare's plays, though not overwhelming, is sufficient. But it is startling to think that the greatest creative genius of his day, or perhaps of all time, was suffered to slip out of life so quietly that his title to his own works could even be questioned only two hundred and fifty years after the event. That the single authorship of the Homeric poems should be doubted is not so strange, for Homer is almost prehistoric. But Shakspeare was a modern Englishman, and at the time of his death the first English colony in America was already nine years old. The important known facts of his life can be told almost in a sentence. He was born at Stratford-on-Avon in 1564, married when he was eighteen, went to London probably in 1587, and became an actor, playwright, and stockholder in the company which owned the Blackfriars and the Globe theaters. He seemingly prospered, and retired about 1609 to Stratford, where he lived in the house that he had bought some years before, and where he died in 1616. His *Venus and Adonis* was printed in 1593, his *Rape of Lucrece* in 1594, and his *Sonnets* in 1609. So far as is known, only eighteen of the thirty-seven plays generally attributed to Shakspeare were printed during his life-time. These were printed singly, in quarto shape, and were little more than stage books, or librettos. The first collected edition of his works was the so-called "First Folio" of 1623, published by his fellow-actors, Heming and Condell. No contemporary of Shakspeare thought it worth while to write a life of the stage-player. There is a number of references to him in the literature of the time; some generous, as in Ben Jonson's well-known verses; others singularly unappreciative, like Webster's mention of "the right happy and copious industry of Master Shakspeare." But all these together do not begin

to amount to the sum of what was said about Spenser, or Sidney, or Raleigh, or Ben Jonson. There is, indeed, nothing to show that his contemporaries understood what a man they had among them in the person of "Our English Terence, Mr. Will Shakspeare." The age, for the rest, was not a self-conscious one, nor greatly given to review writing and literary biography. Nor is there enough of self-revelation in Shakspeare's plays to aid the reader in forming a notion of the man. He lost his identity completely in the characters of his plays, as it is the duty of a dramatic writer to do. His sonnets have been examined carefully in search of internal evidence as to his character and life, but the speculations founded upon them have been more ingenious than convincing.

Shakspeare probably began by touching up old plays. *Henry VI.* and the bloody tragedy of *Titus Andronicus*, if Shakspeare's at all, are doubtless only his revision of pieces already on the stage. The *Taming of the Shrew* seems to be an old play worked over by Shakspeare and some other dramatist, and traces of another hand are thought to be visible in parts of *Henry VIII.*, *Pericles*, and *Timon of Athens*. Such partnerships were common among the Elizabethan dramatists, the most illustrious example being the long association of Beaumont and Fletcher. The plays in the First Folio were divided into histories, comedies, and tragedies, and it will be convenient to notice them briefly in that order.

It was a stirring time when the young adventurer came to London to try his fortune. Elizabeth had finally thrown down the gage of battle to Catholic Europe, by the execution of Mary Stuart, in 1587. The following year saw the destruction of the colossal Armada, which Spain had sent to revenge Mary's death; and hard upon these events followed the gallant exploits of Grenville, Essex, and Raleigh.

That Shakspeare shared the exultant patriotism of the times, and the sense of their aloofness from the continent of

Europe, which was now born in the breasts of Englishmen, is evident from many a passage in his plays.

This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in a silver sea,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land,
England, bound in with the triumphant sea!

His English histories are ten in number. Of these *King John* and *Henry VIII.* are isolated plays. The others form a consecutive series, in the following order: *Richard II.* the two parts of *Henry IV.*, *Henry V.*, the three parts of *Henry VI.*, and *Richard III.* This series may be divided into two, each forming a tetralogy, or group of four plays. In the first the subject is the rise of the house of Lancaster. But the power of the Red Rose was founded in usurpation. In the second group, accordingly, comes the Nemesis, in the civil wars of the Roses, reaching their catastrophe in the downfall of both Lancaster and York, and the tyranny of Gloucester. The happy conclusion is finally reached in the last play of the series, when this new usurper is overthrown in turn, and Henry VII., the first Tudor sovereign, ascends the throne and restores the Lancastrian inheritance, purified, by bloody atonement, from the stain of Richard II.'s murder. These eight plays are, as it were, the eight acts of one great drama; and, if such a thing were possible, they should be represented on successive nights, like the parts of a Greek trilogy. In order of composition the second group came first. *Henry VI.* is strikingly inferior to the others. *Richard III.* is a good acting play, and its popularity has been sustained by a series of great tragedians, who have taken the part of the king. But, in a literary sense, it is unequal to *Richard II.*, or the two parts of *Henry IV.* The latter is unquestionably Shakspeare's greatest historical tragedy, and it contains his master-creation in the region of low comedy, the immortal Falstaff.

The constructive art with which Shakspeare shaped history into drama is well seen in comparing his *King John* with the two plays on that subject which were already on the stage. These, like all the other old "Chronicle histories," such as *Thomas Lord Cromwell* and the *Famous Victories of Henry V.*, follow a merely chronological, or biographical, order, giving events loosely, as they occurred, without any unity of effect, or any reference to their bearing on the catastrophe. Shakspeare's order was logical. He compressed and selected, disregarding the fact of history oftentimes, in favor of the higher truth of fiction; bringing together a crime and its punishment as cause and effect, even though they had no such relation in the chronicle, and were separated, perhaps, by many years.

Shakspeare's first two comedies were experiments. *Love's Labour's Lost* was a play of manners, with hardly any plot. It brought together a number of *humors*, that is, oddities and affectations of various sorts, and played them off on one another, as Ben Jonson afterward did in his comedies of humor. Shakspeare never returned to this type of play, unless, perhaps, in the *Taming of the Shrew*. There the story turned on a single "humor," Katharine's bad temper, just as the story in Jonson's *Silent Woman* turned on Morose's hatred of noise. The *Taming of the Shrew* is, therefore, one of the least Shaksperian of Shakspeare's plays; a *bourgeois* domestic comedy, with a very narrow interest. It belongs to the school of French comedy, like Molière's *Malade Imaginaire*, not to the romantic comedy of Shakspeare and Fletcher.

The *Comedy of Errors* was an experiment of an exactly opposite kind. It was a play purely of incident; a farce, in which the main improbability being granted, namely, that the twin Antipholi and twin Dromios are so alike that they cannot be distinguished, all the amusing complications follow naturally enough. There is little character-drawing in the

play. Any two pairs of twins, in the same predicament, would be equally droll. The fun lies in the situation. This was a comedy of the Latin school, and resembled the *Menaechmi* of Plautus. Shakspeare never returned to this type of play, though there is an element of "errors" in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* he finally hit upon that species of romantic comedy which he may be said to have invented or created out of the scattered materials at hand in the works of his predecessors. In this play, as in the *Merchant of Venice*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Winter's Tale*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and the *Tempest*, the plan of construction is as follows. There is one main intrigue carried out by the high comedy characters, and a secondary intrigue, or under-plot, by the low comedy characters. The former is by no means purely comic, but admits the presentation of the noblest motives, the strongest passions, and the most delicate graces of romantic poetry. In some of the plays it has a prevailing lightness and gayety, as in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. In others, like *Measure for Measure*, it is barely saved from becoming tragedy by the happy close. Shylock certainly remains a tragic figure, even to the end, and a play like *Winter's Tale*, in which the painful situation is prolonged for years, is only technically a comedy. Such dramas, indeed, were called, on many of the title-pages of the time, "tragi-comedies." The low comedy interlude, on the other hand, was broadly comic. It was cunningly interwoven with the texture of the play, sometimes loosely, and by way of variety or relief, as in the episode of Touchstone and Audrey, in *As You Like It*; sometimes closely, as in the case of Dogberry and Verges, in *Much Ado about Nothing*, where the blundering of the watch is made to bring about the denouement of the main action. The *Merry Wives of Windsor* is an exception to this plan of construction. It is Shakspeare's

only play of contemporary, middle-class English life, and, is written almost throughout in prose. It is his only pure comedy, except the *Taming of the Shrew*.

Shakspeare did not abandon comedy when writing tragedy, though he turned it to a new account. The two species graded into one another. Thus *Cymbeline* is, in its fortunate ending, really as much of a comedy as *Winter's Tale*—to which its plot bears a resemblance—and is only technically a tragedy because it contains a violent death. In some of the tragedies, as in *Macbeth* and *Julius Cæsar*, the comedy element is reduced to a minimum. But in others, as *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*, it heightens the tragic feeling by the irony of contrast. Akin to this is the use to which Shakspeare put the old Vice, or Clown, of the moralities. The Fool in *Lear*, Touchstone in *As You Like It*, and Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida*, are a sort of parody of the function of the Greek chorus, commenting the action of the drama with scraps of bitter, or half-crazy, philosophy, and wonderful gleams of insight into the depths of man's nature.

The earliest of Shakspeare's tragedies, unless *Titus Andronicus* be his, was, doubtless, *Romeo and Juliet*, which is full of the passion and poetry of youth and of first love. It contains a large proportion of riming lines, which is usually a sign in Shakspeare of early work. He dropped rime more and more in his later plays, and his blank verse grew freer and more varied in its pauses and the number of its feet. *Romeo and Juliet* is also unique, among his tragedies, in this respect, that the catastrophe is brought about by a fatality, as in the Greek drama. It was Shakspeare's habit to work out his tragic conclusions from within, through character, rather than through external chances. This is true of all the great tragedies of his middle life, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, in every one of which the catastrophe is involved in the character and actions of the hero. This is so, in a special sense, in *Hamlet*, the subtlest of all Shakspeare's plays, and, if

not his masterpiece, at any rate the one which has most attracted and puzzled the greatest minds. It is observable that in Shakspeare's comedies there is no one central figure, but that, in passing into tragedy, he intensified and concentrated the attention upon a single character. This difference is seen even in the naming of the plays; the tragedies always take their titles from their heroes, the comedies never.

Somewhat later, probably, than the tragedies already mentioned were the three Roman plays, *Julius Cæsar*, *Coriolanus*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. It is characteristic of Shakspeare that he invented the plot of none of his plays, but took material that he found at hand. In these Roman tragedies he followed Plutarch closely, and yet, even in so doing, gave, if possible, a greater evidence of real creative power than when he borrowed a mere outline of a story from some Italian novelist. It is most instructive to compare *Julius Cæsar* with Ben Jonson's *Catiline* and *Sejanus*. Jonson was careful not to go beyond his text. In *Catiline* he translates almost literally the whole of Cicero's first oration against Catiline. *Sejanus* is a mosaic of passages from Tacitus and Suetonius. There is none of this dead learning in Shakspeare's play. Having grasped the conceptions of the characters of Brutus, Cassius, and Mark Anthony, as Plutarch gave them, he pushed them out into their consequences in every word and act, so independently of his original, and yet so harmoniously with it, that the reader knows that he is reading history, and needs no further warrant for it than Shakspeare's own. *Timon of Athens* is the least agreeable and most monotonous of Shakspeare's undoubted tragedies, and *Troilus and Cressida*, said Coleridge, is the hardest to characterize. The figures of the old Homeric world fare but hardly under the glaring light of modern standards of morality which Shakspeare turns upon them. Ajax becomes a stupid bully, Ulysses a crafty politician, and swift-footed Achilles

a vain and sulky chief of faction. In losing their ideal remoteness the heroes of the *Iliad* lose their poetic quality, and the lover of Homer experiences an unpleasant disenchantment.

It was customary in the 18th century to speak of Shakspeare as a rude though prodigious genius. Even Milton could describe him as "warbling his native wood-notes wild." But a truer criticism, beginning in England with Coleridge, has shown that he was also a profound artist. It is true that he wrote for his audiences, and that his art is not every-where and at all points perfect. But a great artist will contrive, as Shakspeare did, to reconcile practical exigencies, like those of the public stage, with the finer requirements of his art. Strained interpretations have been put upon this or that item in Shakspeare's plays; and yet it is generally true that some deeper reason can be assigned for his method in a given case than that "the audience liked puns," or, "the audience liked ghosts." Compare, for example, his delicate management of the supernatural with Marlowe's procedure in *Flaustus*. Shakspeare's age believed in witches, elves, and apparitions; and yet there is always something shadowy or allegorical in his use of such machinery. The ghost in *Hamlet* is merely an embodied suspicion. Banquo's wraith, which is invisible to all but Macbeth, is the haunting of an evil conscience. The witches in the same play are but the promptings of ambition, thrown into a human shape, so as to become actors in the drama. In the same way, the fairies in *Midsummer Night's Dream* are the personified caprices of the lovers, and they are unseen by the human characters, whose likes and dislikes they control, save in the instance where Bottom is "translated" (that is, becomes mad) and has sight of the invisible world. So in the *Tempest*, Ariel is the spirit of the air and Caliban of the earth, ministering, with more or less of unwillingness, to man's necessities.

Shakspeare is the most universal of writers. He touches

more men at more points than Homer, or Dante, or Goethe. The deepest wisdom, the sweetest poetry, the widest range of character, are combined in his plays. He made the English language an organ of expression unexcelled in the history of literature. Yet he is not an English poet simply, but a world-poet. Germany has made him her own, and the Latin races, though at first hindered in a true appreciation of him by the canons of classical taste, have at length learned to know him. An ever-growing mass of Shaksperian literature, in the way of comment and interpretation, critical, textual, historical, or illustrative, testifies to the durability and growth of his fame. Above all, his plays still keep, and probably always will keep, the stage. It is common to speak of Shakspeare and the other Elizabethan dramatists as if they stood, in some sense, on a level. But in truth there is an almost measureless distance between him and all his contemporaries. The rest shared with him in the mighty influences of the age. Their plays are touched here and there with the power and splendor of which they were all joint heirs. But, as a whole, they are obsolete. They live in books, but not in the hearts and on the tongues of men.

The most remarkable of the dramatists contemporary with Shakspeare was Ben Jonson, whose robust figure is in striking contrast with the other's gracious impersonality. Jonson was nine years younger than Shakspeare. He was educated at Westminster School, served as a soldier in the low countries, became an actor in Henslowe's company, and was twice imprisoned—once for killing a fellow-actor in a duel, and once for his part in the comedy of *Eastward Hoe*, which gave offense to King James. He lived down to the time of Charles I. (1635), and became the acknowledged arbiter of English letters and the center of convivial wit combats at the Mermaid, the Devil, and other famous London taverns.

What things have we seen
Done at the Mermaid; heard words that have been
So nimble and so full of subtle flame,
As if that every one from whom they came
Had meant to put his whole wit in a jest,
And had resolved to live a fool the rest
Of his dull life.¹

The inscription on his tomb in Westminster Abbey is simply

O rare Ben Jonson!

Jonson's comedies were modeled upon the *vetus comœdia* of Aristophanes, which was satirical in purpose, and they belonged to an entirely different school from Shakspeare's. They were classical and not romantic, and were pure comedies, admitting no admixture of tragic motives. There is hardly one lovely or beautiful character in the entire range of his dramatic creations. They were comedies not of character, in the high sense of the word, but of manners or humors. His design was to lash the follies and vices of the day, and his *dramatis personæ* consisted for the most part of gulls, impostors, fops, cowards, swaggering braggarts, and "Pauls men." In his first play, *Every Man in his Humor* (acted in 1598), in *Every Man Out of his Humor*, *Bartholomew Fair*, and, indeed, in all of his comedies, his subject was the fashionable affectations, the whims, oddities, and eccentric developments of London life. His procedure was to bring together a number of these fantastic humorists, and "squeeze out the humor of such spongy souls," by playing them off upon each other, involving them in all manner of comical misadventures, and rendering them utterly ridiculous and contemptible. There was thus a perishable element in his art, for manners change; and, however effective this exposure of contemporary affectations may have been before an audience of Jonson's day, it is as hard for a modern reader to detect his points as it will be for a reader two hundred

¹ Francis Beaumont. *Letter to Ben Jonson.*

years hence to understand the satire upon the æsthetic craze in such pieces of the present day as *Patience*, or the *Colonel*. Nevertheless, a patient reader, with the help of copious foot-notes, can gradually put together for himself an image of that world of obsolete humors in which Jonson's comedy dwells, and can admire the dramatist's solid good sense, his great learning, his skill in construction, and the astonishing fertility of his invention. His characters are not revealed from within, like Shakspeare's, but built up painfully from outside by a succession of minute, laborious particulars. The difference will be plainly manifest if such a character as Slender, in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, be compared with any one of the inexhaustible variety of idiots in Jonson's plays; with Master Stephen, for example, in *Every Man in his Humor*; or, if Falstaff be put side by side with Captain Bobadil, in the same comedy, perhaps Jonson's masterpiece in the way of comic caricature. *Cynthia's Revels* was a satire on the courtiers and the *Poetaster* on Jonson's literary enemies. The *Alchemist* was an exposure of quackery, and is one of his best comedies, but somewhat overweighted with learning. *Volpone* is the most powerful of all his dramas, but is a harsh and disagreeable piece; and the state of society which it depicts is too revolting for comedy. The *Silent Woman* is, perhaps, the easiest of all Jonson's plays for a modern reader to follow and appreciate. There is a distinct plot to it, the situation is extremely ludicrous, and the emphasis is laid upon a single humor or eccentricity, as in some of Molière's lighter comedies, like *Le Malade Imaginaire*, or *Le Médecin malgré lui*.

In spite of his heaviness in drama, Jonson had a light enough touch in lyric poetry. His songs have not the careless sweetness of Shakspeare's, but they have a grace of their own. Such pieces as his *Love's Triumph*, *Hymn to Diana*, the adaptation from Philostratus,

Drink to me only with thine eyes,

and many others entitle their author to rank among the first of English lyrists. Some of these occur in his two collections of miscellaneous verse, the *Forest* and *Underwoods*; others in the numerous masques which he composed. These were a species of entertainment, very popular at the court of James I., combining dialogue with music, intricate dances, and costly scenery. Jonson left an unfinished pastoral drama, the *Sad Shepherd*, which contains passages of great beauty; one, especially, descriptive of the shepherdess

Earine,
Who had her very being and her name
With the first buds and breathings of the spring,
Born with the primrose and the violet
And earliest roses blown.

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