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# Shakespeare and Biography

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## SHAKESPEARE AND BIOGRAPHY

By DR. FELIX E. SCHELLING<sup>1</sup>

A good many years ago a book which I had written attained the honor of a review at the hands of no less a personage than the late Andrew Lang, whom to designate even to a younger generation would be an affront. My book was concerned with a more or less complete account of the writings in prose, verse, and drama during the lifetime of Shakespeare, and Mr. Lang made himself very merry by a devastating pleasantry to the effect that this book is made up of an account of a great many authors of whom everybody has already heard quite enough, and of a great many more of whom nobody has ever heard or even wished to hear. That Mr. Lang should subsequently himself have written a book which equally with mine fulfilled this description, is not to our present purpose. And indeed, to be honest, how little can any of us hope to add to the iterative babble of this world, but what has been said again and again or what is really not worth the saying? In responding to Dr. Penniman's invitation that I address you, my fellow lovers of letters, I had at first planned to talk to you of the quest of books, by which I had modestly meant some account of the vicissitudes that beset the scholar in his search for the materials of his craft. But I bethought me of another, the more accepted connotation today, of the familiar phrase "the quest of books;" how it raises up the image of

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<sup>1</sup> An address delivered at a meeting of the Friends of the Library held May 15, 1934.

the assiduous collector, of princes in a world of adventure, such as trade in literary caravans over far deserts or in literary argosies over the seven seas; and my heart failed me. Let others lock up their treasures in the gilded seraglios of pleasure. The books I love are few; however, my search, like that of the bee, is for many, which, having rifled, I care not much that I own them. We are safest in this dangerous world when we stray not too far from our own little workshops. Bear with me, learned collectors of books, opulent virtuosi in Elzevirs, ye who are bookish, whether by vocation or by avocation, as I prattle once more about "familiar Shakespeare," and this time let it be "Shakespeare and Biography."

A summer or two ago, in the seclusion of a French-speaking Swiss town which I love and frequent, I ran across a paper-backed volume entitled *Le Voyage de Shakespeare*. The author is a contemporary Parisian journalist, M. Léon Daudet; save for certain revolutionary-monarchic irregularities of conduct, the undistinguished son of a distinguished father. The copy of this book which I bought is one of the eleventh edition. Evidently they read such books in France; it is even in a way readable. And it tells how Shakespeare, now twenty years of age, "a poet, and therefore subject to dreams and melancholy," sets out from Dover to Rotterdam (wife and babies left behind—presumably another mark of the poet); how he is impelled by a force which "urges him to seek the unknown" (there was nothing unknown in England to Shakespeare at twenty); how he meets with the riot and ribaldry of Dutch burgher life at a period immediately following the assassination of William the Silent, observing, meditating and moralizing; discussing endlessly politics, religion, philosophy, with publicans and sinners, with reformers and the unregenerate, with anybody, everybody—and, mark you, chiefly in German! For "Shakespeare, thanks to his father, had spoken that tongue from his infancy!" Why, I wonder, should a Frenchman imagine a German-speaking Shakespeare! The first Hebrew he meets suggests Shylock, and his daughter Jessica as well. In a drunken and obese, but companionable, Dutch host—there being none such in England—he finds Falstaff. In a distracted old beggar who imagines himself a king and whom he meets in a storm, we have Lear. Swearing by his Plutarch, which he carries in his bosom and cherishes as a breviary, a moonlit night, a fair woman, the lighted windows of a town, transport the impressionable

youth, and reduce him either to tears or to the rapid improvisation of "poetry"—in one case an eclogue on drunkenness (*un éloge de l'ivresse*), happily not preserved by our chronicler.

At Delft, Leyden, Amsterdam, amid protracted bouts of theology and drinking, this "Shakespeare" makes his experiencing way, amazed at the commonplace and enchanted with the obvious. In the upshot, true to the traditions of "Gallic life," shall we call it, or is it only Gallic fiction,? he plays a somewhat incredible Adonis to a thawed-out little Danish Venus, and at last, meeting with a troupe of wandering players at Elsinor—where we should rather have expected him to meet with a ghost—he has his genius awakened by means of a frankly sensual intrigue with a fascinating and much experienced actress, who strings him on, a momentary bead in a long necklace of like transient infatuations. Here is a recent Shakespeare! a bit of impressionistic biography for you; if serious enough to be given a name, a piece of the biography of preconception. In such, facts are not.

It may well be imagined that M. Daudet would make no serious claim for his production. And nobody about whom it matters in the least is likely to be troubled, much less deceived, by such trifles of an unskilled imagination, or by the unhappy persistency of those strange people who still search variously and hysterically for somebody of at least the rank of a lord as the author of productions so dignified as are these Shakespearean dramas.

Less preposterous, and for that very reason perhaps the more dangerous, are the biographies of purpose written to prove or disprove something or other which might have well astonished the subject, or to sustain some theory with which the author has become obsessed. A recent example of such a book is a novel about Shakespeare by Clara Longworth, Countess de Chambrun, who is much addicted to this sort of thing; it is rather cleverly conceived as supposedly derived from the recollections of John Lacy, an old Elizabethan actor, and communicated to John Aubrey the anecdotist.<sup>2</sup> It accepts most of the exploded traditions, among them that stubborn Restoration slander of worthy Mistress Davenant as "the dark lady;" but the purpose of the book is to show the poet as existing in the midst of the recusants' perils that beset the

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<sup>2</sup> *Two Loves I Have*, 1934.



religious intrigues and persecutions of the reign, and to prove Shakespeare—as has often been argued—a devotee of the Roman Church. Of course we need not believe, unless we prefer to, that a confession of the older faith alone could have rendered possible these works of dramatic genius; and there are more damaging obsessions and more dangerous theories than such as these. Within a very few years there died a man of brilliant journalistic ability, who wrote a book on the basis of a conviction that the white heat of genius must necessarily scorch the soul of man. The journalist was generalizing from his personal and petty experiences, and, mistaking that clever poseur, his friend Oscar Wilde, for an exemplar of genius, found in his despicable criminality and his awful fate an analogue, if not a parallel, for what he determined must have been the misconduct and the fate of Shakespeare. In this book, by the exercise of the reporter's trained sense for scandal and the bias which a search for any definite kind of thing must always entail, we reach the outrageous conclusion: that the price which the world has paid for these highest manifestations of drama and poetry, the plays of Shakespeare, was the moral overthrow and wreck of the greatest of human minds. It is deplorable that this was, not long since, the cheapest "Life" of Shakespeare on the American book market; and, for its dragging of a great name in the mire, not the less read.<sup>3</sup>

Biography is a diverse and difficult art; as diverse as are the bare annals of a chronicle and the highly finished products of the fine art of the novelist or the dramatist. And, like all historical writing, biography swings from the gathering, the ordering, and the labeling of what we rejoice to call "facts," to delicate apprehensions of taste, to subtle distinctions in matters of the spirit, and those larger relations to the elements of space and time by means of which we set in order the possessions of the mind. If one is to build a house—and the writing of a biography is much such an undertaking—there is, of course, first of all the material. At times it is scanty, at others embarrassingly rich. Whether one or the other, all must be known and considered; and grateful we are to those indefatigable scholars who seek courageously in the dust bins of time for every little trifle that may add to the sum of our knowledge, correct what has been misapprehended, and lead to a truer understanding. For, after all, what is a trifle? Or, at

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Harris, *The Man Shakespeare and his Tragic Life-Story*, 1909.

least, who can tell? In Professor Hotson's recent most interesting discovery as to Shakespeare, we have, to begin with, a trivial fact, to wit, that Shakespeare was bound over with an associate in theatrical ventures, one Francis Langley, not unknown to dramatic annals, to keep the peace as to a certain complainant.<sup>4</sup> Leaving it there, we have nothing of any apparent importance. But who exactly was Langley, and who was the complainant? A quarrel usually precedes such a binding over to keep the peace. What was it that led up to this quarrel? what were its consequences? and a score of such queries, each offering a lead; questions which can be put and intelligently followed out to a logical issue only by a scholar of Professor Hotson's trained competency—and deeply worthy of consideration become the results. Professor Hotson finds in these, his results, the probable locality of Shakespeare's residence at nearly the height of his activity; his association through Francis Langley with a theatre, the Swan, with which we have not hitherto associated him; a quarrel of these two with a notoriously corrupt local justice of the peace, one William Gardiner, and his stepson and dupe, the variety of human creature that Shakespeare calls a "natural." The interesting inference that associates these two opponents of the poet with the characters Justice Shallow and Simple, which is perhaps not wholly made out to our satisfaction, and the reference of two, if not three, important plays—*Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—to dates decidedly earlier than those usually accepted, with the very occasion of the first performance of the latter pointed out on arguable grounds: these are some of the products derivable from this seemingly trifling matter, the suggestion of which and the manner of it all are a credit to biographical scholarship.<sup>5</sup>

I have just said that to the proper equipment of the biographer a complete acquaintance with all of the material concerning his subject is a *sine qua non*. And as to any subject in these days of the multiplicity of books, this is asking much. Wherefore our admiration goes out unreservedly to such a scholar as Sir Edmund Chambers, in recognition of his stupendous work in gathering together and ordering the vast material which forms the basis not only of the biography of Shakespeare himself, but of that of his many fellows, together

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie Hotson, *Shakespeare versus Shallow*, 1931.

<sup>5</sup> See, too, a forthcoming article by Mr. Henry N. Paul, Dean of the Philadelphia Shakespeare Society, entitled "The First Performance of the *Merry Wives of Windsor*."

with the data necessary to a reconstruction of the background of it all, constituting a history of the stage and the drama of his time.<sup>6</sup> And yet, precious as are these admirable volumes, and beyond praise for their order, arrangement, and the accessibility of the multiplicity of detail that they contain, is it altogether captious to suggest, returning to our figure, that we have here, after all, merely the material, the piled up, sorted and carefully labeled stuff out of which to construct a veritable biography of Shakespeare and history of the drama of his time? This difference is readily discernible by a comparison of these later works of Sir Edmund with his earlier, wholly admirable book on mediaeval drama,<sup>7</sup> in which not only is the material presented and appraised, but the whole is rationalized into the continuity of an historical narrative that reads like the work of art that it is.

The discovery of fact, the classification and labeling of material, however admirably accomplished, is not biography. The dates by which we set such store—birth, death, marriage, publication, even those happy illustrative anecdotes that, like straws, indicate just what straws may indicate and no more—all of these are only the material with which to construct such biographical edifices as this, that, or the other architect-in-lives may be at the pains to erect. There are those who are content to pull out a board or two from the pile of lumber and discuss minutely its dimensions; there are those who merely criticize the piling of the lumber; and those who, like the late Frank Harris, unearth something unclean or rotting which they affect to have found under a seemingly decorous exterior. This last is biography with a thesis to sustain, not biography to realize the subject to our understanding. The biographer with a thesis is likely to feel that Shakespeare, the man or his work, is in need of interpretation, historical or esoteric, which he, the biographer, alone can give, and he makes out the dramatist a mere journalist, allegorically and allusively risking his head in treasonable parallels, or he interprets Shakespeare as a transcendent philosopher armed with a prophetic grasp of Hegelianism and all the “isms” that have branched out of it, a species of mouthpiece speaking forth, like an oracle, things beyond his comprehension, to be grasped and elucidated only after 350 years by a genius, the

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<sup>6</sup> E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare, a Study of Facts and Problems*, 2 vols. 1930; also his *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. 1923.

<sup>7</sup> *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols. 1903.



commentator, obviously greater than he whom he so interprets to an ignorant world. That I am not setting up straw men for the pleasure of bowling them over, I may name such works as those of a certain Miss Winstanley, who in one entitled *Hamlet and the Scottish Succession* contends, for example, that that great play is merely an allegory of political events involving James, a scholarly prince of thirty, who is Hamlet, of whom the English really knew very little except that he was the likely successor to their throne; involving Mary of Scotland, who is Gertrude, his mother, one who had married Bothwell-Claudio, the murderer of her kingly husband, Darnley—*alias* the elder Hamlet.<sup>8</sup> Miss Winstanley even finds a parallel between the curious mode of this last monarch's death, by poison poured into his ear, and the actual manner in which one of the relations of Mary's first husband, Francis of France, came to his death. Mr. G. Wilson Knight is the esoteric interpreter of Shakespeare in several books, such as *Myth and Miracle, an Essay on the Mystic Symbolism of Shakespeare* (1929) and *The Wheel of Fire* (1930), which interprets for the uninitiated "Shakespeare's sombre tragedies," as he calls them, with a brilliancy and conviction quite transcendental to the normal comprehension.<sup>9</sup> Nor are these alone in theirs and kindred aberrations from the highways of biography.

"Not to interpret, nor disclose, still less to discode, or decypher; but to realize the subject to our understanding:" after all, is not this much the function of the biographer, that he shall make his subject so live that we may come to know him as we might come to know someone whom we have met, with whom we have become more or less intimately acquainted; even more, one whom we have had extraordinary opportunities to know, the more especially in those things which have marked him out above other men? The happiest crown to a life of distinction is an understanding biographer. Even the great Dr. Johnson would live less illustriously for us but for his incomparable Boswell. And with the mention of Boswell, the arch-biographer, we have modulated naturally from our material piled high and orderly to the architect himself, the artist-in-lives.

In every biography there is what the chemists call a by-

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<sup>8</sup> Lilian Winstanley, *Hamlet and the Scottish Succession*, 1921.

<sup>9</sup> See also his *The Imperial Theme; Further Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedies, Including the Roman Plays*, 1931.



product: it is often almost as important as the product itself. And in biography that by-product manifests itself, often only too unconsciously, in a display of the characteristics, the personality, the prejudices of the biographer. Let us take some of the earliest Shakespearean biographers and critics. Nobody now remembers one William Winstanley, who published his *Lives of the Most Famous English Poets* in 1686, when the fourth folio of Shakespeare was new on the stalls. But when this biographer tells us of Shakespeare: "by keeping company with Learned persons, and conversing with jocular Wits, whereto he was naturally inclin'd, he became so famously witty, or wittily famous, that by his own industry, without the help of Learning, he attained to an extraordinary height in all strains of Dramatick Poetry," we know that Winstanley was a condescending Oxford don, and a coxcomb. To read Nicholas Rowe's *Some Account of the Life of Mr. Shakespeare*, prefixed to the first attempt to edit the dramatist's works, is to learn to know a kindly, liberal-hearted gentleman, amateur though he is according to the rigorous standards of complaisant modern scholarship. We feel as to "Mr. Pope, the foremost poet of Europe," that it was a considerable condescension on his part when he undertook to edit the works of a common player of a ruder age, to add judiciously to Shakespeare's beauties with little black splotches of criticism like the moons and stars with which contemporary court ladies heightened their complexions. Whilst to read Dr. Johnson's *Preface* to his *Shakespeare* is to attend humbly a magisterial court, in which respect for learning and common sense mingles with a feeling of awe for the size of the judge's wig and the thunder of his voice. We feel that Shakespeare is being tried at the bar—and hope that he may be acquitted; for such a judge in a hanging mood would be a terror to behold. There are contemporary books into which this by-product, the personality of the biographer as a critic, obtrudes. Recognizing the abiding rottenness of things in Denmark, unlike Hamlet such a biographer finds it no cursed spite that he was born to set things right. With the historic beagles sniffing out deep political allusion in what we had innocently believed to be harmless comedy, and the high priests declaring to our inferior understandings the inner meanings of "the sombre tragedies;" with one of the critics telling us just what Shakespeare wrote and what he did not write, and another doubting if he really could write at all, we are driven to the extremity of holding all

books about Shakespeare in suspicion and to declaring, "I want no interpreter betwixt me and the puppets."

I have been employing the term biography, I am aware, with perhaps an indefensible looseness, to denote not only the formal written life of a man, but any image or reconstruction of him and of what made him the man and the force which he was, from a portrait by pen or pencil, to the idea or ideal which each of us holds in his mind of the personality, the entity that he was. I have never been able to rid myself of the conviction that what we are really after in seeking to know the life of any man is the discovery, or at least an approximation to the understanding of the essentials in which he rose above other men, not the trivialities in which he showed characteristics common to the mass of mankind. Is it altogether relevant to our knowledge of the novelist called Walter Scott or the poet named Byron to learn that each was lame? (Unless one desires to push the inquiry as to the latter to the point of ascertaining, as someone once suggested, if one of his Lordship's feet was not perhaps actually cloven?) And is it not almost a pity that our search for the only celibate poet in the range of English literature must now halt not even at the young Wordsworth?<sup>10</sup> The literacy, or was it the illiteracy, of Shakespeare's father or daughter, the exact degree of the relationship of Shakespeare's mother to the Ardens and back to King Alfred, the absence or the degree of the poet's Latinity, the derivations of his name, and the incredible number of variations in its orthography—these are topics to war over and endlessly to discuss. Just where he lived in London, the dangerous vicissitudes conceivable from the dark eyes of a slandered Mistress Davenant in his stopping at Oxford, how he died—was it of too much revelry with Ben Jonson or because of the unhygienic conditions of Stratford?—had he the palsy when he signed his will and why, oh why—let be said in anguish—did he leave his wife his second-best bed as an afterthought in an interpolated passage of his will? Here are some of the topics that fill the pages of Halliwell-Phillipps, admirable delver into the dust-heaps of the past that he was; such small deer disport in the biographical underbrush and fall prey, the quarry of informative arch-biographers such as the late Sir Sidney Lee.<sup>11</sup> And yet in any portrait, what to omit

<sup>10</sup> George M. Harper, *Wordsworth's French Daughter*, 1921.

<sup>11</sup> J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps, *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare*, first printed in 1881 and grown to unwieldy proportions by a fifth ed. in 1885; Sidney Lee, *A Life of William Shakespeare*, 1898, with several subsequent enlargements and re-writings also.

is almost if not quite as difficult as what to include. We are thrust back again on our architect-in-lives; for the only difference between a notable artist in portraiture and you or me, lies in the simple and obvious fact that he knew where to put the strokes; you and I do not. The material is there, the subject is there; it is the sense of design, the knowledge, the skill, the humble sinking of self in the subject, that alone can produce the portraiture, the veritable life that we are seeking.

Biography indeed is not unlike theology, constructive as each must be, in the main, of the unknowable. There is a theology that mythologizes, sometimes very beautifully as did the Greek; and there is a theology that takes us deeply into the consideration of sin and evil, that delights to play at loggats with the bones of long-forgotten scandal, and reduce to a mediocrity of morals, at least, the men of genius who tower intellectually above us. For whether you are an avowed theologian in your biographical processes or a mere layman, we are all of us myth-makers, fashioning often strange gods out of stranger materials, adding our little contributions of worship, of explanation, of invention and distortion; posing as the clever detective, the regenerator who will set things right, the know-all who carries a solution of every mystery in his waistcoat pocket, and—not wholly to be forgotten in his unvocal honesty—the devout and understanding worshipper of heroes.

I confess to a deep-seated preference for that architect-in-lives who makes out of his edifice, circumstances permitting, something in the nature of a place of worship. And by this I do not in the least mean to limit biography to eulogy or to those sugared nothings dressed with opportune obliviousness which we serve only after death. I have in mind as to this phase of biography such an engaging book as that which Fulke Greville wrote and called *The Life of Sir Philip Sidney*.<sup>12</sup> There, in a wilderness of delightful irrelevance, there stand out two objects of the author's devotion: Sir Philip, his boyhood's friend, and their incomparable queen, Elizabeth, both, let us confess, perhaps dilated here to heroic stature, yet both essentially true to those lines of portraiture that are significant as opposed to the trivialities which, emphasized, distort and misrepresent. For example, take this much-quoted passage of Greville as to Sidney: "This was it which,

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<sup>12</sup> First published, 1652.



I profess, I loved dearly in him, and still shall be glad to honour in the great men of this time: I mean, that his heart and tongue went both one way, and so with every one that went with the Truth; as knowing no other kindred, partie, or end." Here is an essential feature in Greville's portrait of Sidney, perhaps the essential feature, emphasized with lingering words; and that Sidney was the idol of his time becomes a matter accountable. You may abuse the memory of Queen Elizabeth and accumulate all the petty evidences as to her vanity, her parsimony, her Machiavelian turns and evasions and the like. Having done so to the content of scandal, think of Greville, now an aging and honored counsellor of King James, recalling in his study the long-gone days when he and Sidney had run a tilt before their queen, and describing now himself as one "who hath ever since been dying to all those glories of Life which he formerly enjoyed, under the blessed, and blessing presence of this unmatched Queen and woman." A sovereign who could inspire such loyalty in such a man is proof against the malignity of time; for here is an essential feature in the portrait of the great queen, and a great woman.

Considering the difficulties that beset historical writing, I am almost persuaded that the contemporary, he who has known the man personally and lived with him, is your only true biographer. Such was the admirable Boswell. For where again shall we find that nice balance between adoration and criticism, that delicate confusion of the keenness of observation with the obtuseness of the affections? I fear that if we must have a contemporary for our ideal biographer, we shall be forced over into the neighboring realm of autobiography. There at least we have a certain inevitable kind of truth that will out despite the subterfuges of egotism. Benvenuto Cellini could not conceal in his celebrated autobiography of a great artist, the autobiography of a ruffian and a braggart; nor could Lord Herbert of Cherbury, in his "self-portrait"—horrible word!—of a model gentleman and philosopher, hide the coxcomb and the poseur. Only too well do we know that the contemporary biographer may write his story with a bias; although the deliberate writing up of the life of a man with the purpose of convicting him of as much breakage in the china shop of the ten commandments as possible, appears to be almost a contemporary invention.

And here let us leave biography with all its confidences and reticences. I had once thought that I too at the latter end of

a long life of studentship might dare to try my hand at a full length portrait of the greatest personality that I have ever known, for I have dabbled many a sketch of that great figure in my time and in sundry postures. But it will not do, for I should be proclaimed an idolator, and idolatry is out of date in these, our days. Besides there are two other excellent reasons. Why could I dare to hope for success where so many have failed? And lastly, why should I lose the proud distinction which is mine as the only English or American scholar dealing with the Elizabethan age and reaching, shall we say, the age of literary discretion, who has not perpetrated a full length *Life of William Shakespeare*?

## THE GIFT OF LOUIS XVI

By C. SEYMOUR THOMPSON

(Continued from the October Number)

Readers of the first installment of this article will remember the dispute which arose over the value of the books presented to the University by Louis XVI. Francis Hopkinson, representing the Trustees, characterized the gift as "a valuable and elegant collection of books." M. Boinod, one of the editors of the *Courier de l'Amérique*, asserted that the selection did little credit to the literary knowledge and taste of Vergennes and Chastellux, on whose joint recommendation the King had made the gift. In the controversy which followed Boinod proposed that the question be submitted to the tribunal of public opinion. "Let the catalogue be printed," he urged, "and the public will decide whether you or we are the best judges of French books."

In belated acceptance of this challenge the "catalogue" is here printed; the first time, we believe, that the complete list has ever been published. The public can now determine whether Hopkinson or Boinod was the better judge of French books. Though frankly upholding the opinion expressed by Hopkinson, as self-appointed trial judge we present the case solely on its merits; thinking it proper, however, to charge the jury on two points. First, the collection must be evaluated with due consideration of the literary standards of 1784 and of the entire body of French literature then available. Second, the jury must not be influenced by the scornful remark of M. Boinod: "All these books are in excellent condition, and we have no doubt that they will be preserved a long time in the