

SHAKESPEARE: THINKER, SHOWMAN, AND ARTIST¹

I

WILL-O'-THE-WISP

HIS name was Will, as he himself announced with wearisome punning in Sonnets 135 and 136, and he is the Will-o'-the-Wisp of poets, forever alluring us, forever eluding us. The commercial playwright, the inspired artist, the thinker—they are all in his writings, but when you try to put your finger on his personality, he, like the Irishman's flea, isn't there. Edwin Arlington Robinson sensed this elusiveness of Shakespeare in his fine poem "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford":

He treads along through Time's old wilderness
As if the tramp of all the centuries
Had left no roads.

There are a number of authenticated facts about his external existence, there are many legends in varying degrees of credibility, and there is abundant evidence in his writings of his mental operations, but when we seek him in his habit as he lived we are reminded of what Keats said about the Grecian Urn:

Thou silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity.

¹A series of lectures delivered at the Rice Institute in the spring of 1929 by Stockton Axson, Litt.D., L.H.D., LL.D., Professor of English Literature at the Rice Institute.

Of course, Matthew Arnold said much the same thing in his sonnet on Shakespeare, but the purpose of this writing is contrary to the spirit of Arnold's sonnet which was the spirit of nineteenth century romantic Shakespearean criticism. It is the purpose of this writing to be as realistic as is warranted, as common-sense as the phenomena and the deductions therefrom will permit; and yet clearly recognizing the objective character of his writing, perhaps the most objective in the range of English literature, it is still true that there is something there which tempts almost every writer to speculate about the individual, the personality behind the book, the man Shakespeare.

The commentator may assume, like Benedetto Croce, the purely æsthetic attitude, or he may adopt the cool, historical method, like Stoll and Schücking, yet all, or nearly all, are betrayed into attempts to glimpse the man Shakespeare between the lines of his poetry. These three and many other moderns are emphatic in their reactions against the subjective critics who would interpret dramatic lines as personal utterances, and yet nearly all hazard occasional opinions about the man who wrote the dramas and poems.

Says Croce: "It is now time to recognize with resignation and clearly to declare that it is not possible to write a biography of Shakespeare."¹ Croce is as opposed to the historical and philological approach as to the subjective. He says in effect: here is the poetry (it is generally of poetry rather than of drama that Croce speaks), very great poetry to be understood and relished as such; nothing about the man who wrote it can be known with certitude, and if we did know anything about him it would have nothing to do with the æsthetic value of the poetry. Accept the poetry, says

¹*Ariosto, Shakespeare and Corneille*, by Benedetto Croce, translated by Douglas Ainslie, Henry Holt & Company, 1920, p. 122.

Croce, and let the elusive man who wrote it rest in obscurity.

Yet Croce is occasionally inveigled into saying something about the man Shakespeare. Echoing a remark of Goethe's, he writes: "He [Shakespeare] must indeed have been healthy and strong and free, when he created something so free, so healthy, and so strong as his poetry."¹

To know that a man was "healthy and strong and free" is to know a good deal about a man. With all his skepticism about biography, with all his impatience with those who would track the authentic steps of Shakespeare the man through the mazes of his poetry, even Croce must needs at times speculate a little about the man behind the artist.

E. E. Stoll, at the other end of the corridor from Croce, protagonist of the historical method, is in agreement on one point with Croce, the futility of trying to identify the lines in the plays with the personal thought and predilections of the man who wrote the plays. In contemporary Shakespearean criticism Professor Stoll is perhaps the most "external"—to use a word which he reiterates.

He is ruthless in his exposure of the romantic critics' fallacies, of attempts to read modern psychology into Elizabethan-Jacobean drama, and he is unsparing in his criticisms of those who seek the man Shakespeare in the writings of Shakespeare; "Othello's morals are stage morals"² is a characteristic utterance—meaning, not to be explained on human, realistic, psychological principles, but by a playwright's purpose to get a theatrical effect, suited to the unrealistic, unexacting tastes of Elizabethan-Jacobean audiences—a playwright working by the accepted methods of his age and of his stage.

¹op. cit., p. 136.

²*Othello: An Historical and Comparative Study*, by E. E. Stoll, *University of Minnesota Studies in Language and Literature*, March, 1915, p. 14.

Yet with all his acumen and clarity, Professor Stoll is betrayed into a good many self-contradictions, some of which are due to the fact that William Shakespeare, individual, will insist occasionally on intruding upon Professor Stoll's objective interpretation of the plays despite Doctor Stoll's resolution to keep him out.

Let one example suffice for illustration. On page 13 of *Shakespeare Studies*¹ occurs the statement: "Even what may seem to be his aversions are not personal, but wholly traditional and inherited:—his aversion to Jews if he had any; his disgust for the sweaty, ill-smelling mob, frequently given expression, which belonged to many of the writers of his time; his patriotic contempt for the French. He was prejudiced only as England was prejudiced, or the ruling classes of England."

In that mere statement there are suggestions of an individual (we are coming back to the contradiction presently). According to the statement Shakespeare was "patriotic," and he shared the prejudices of "the ruling classes of England." If we know that a man is patriotic and that his prejudices are patrician rather than democratic, we know a little about the man.

Perhaps Sidney Lee contrives to hold the objective attitude as consistently as any Shakespearean scholar. Commenting on the much-discussed question whether or not we can learn anything of Shakespeare's own political predilections from his dramatic attitude toward the crowd, Lee warns us against accepting an "artistic and purely objective ambition" to create "dramatic plausibility" as evidence of the author's "personal malice" or "political design."²

¹ In the noble essay entitled "On the Anniversary of the Folio."

² *A Life of William Shakespeare*, by Sir Sidney Lee, New Edition, Rewritten and Enlarged, Macmillan, 1916, p. 413. Lee, Stoll and many other

Yet even Lee speaks of "Shakespeare's detached but inveterate sense of justice;"¹ this point must not be pressed too hard, for Lee is thinking of Shakespeare as artist rather than man when he makes this statement; but there would seem to be some relationship between a "detached" artist with an "inveterate sense of justice" and a man himself with a similar habit of mind. Mr. John Galsworthy, for instance, reveals precisely these traits in his plays, in his novels and in his critical and expository writing, and, it is said, in his personal bearing on the lecture platform.² In other words Mr. Galsworthy's habits of mind and personal bearing appear in his work as a dramatic artist, and it is surely no extravagant metaphysical fancy to infer that there may have been in Shakespeare a similar relationship between the artist-dramatist and the man.

To remove to more solid ground: Doctor Stoll involves himself in a contradiction when the passage just quoted from him is compared with his essay "Shylock" in the same volume, *Shakespeare Studies*: "His aversion to Jews *if he had any*" is a clause in the essay "On the Anniversary of the Folio;" but much of the learned and interesting essay on "Shylock" is an argument that Shakespeare had emphatic prejudices against Jews, the prejudices of his contemporary fellow-countrymen, the argument summed up in a question:³ "Why should we refuse to recognize it [racial and social prejudice against Jews] in Shakespeare, who, *more than any*

modern commentators call attention to the fact that such expressions as "strong breaths" and "greasy caps" were conventional phrases in Elizabethan-Jacobean drama.

¹*Life*, p. 414.

²See *Conversations on Contemporary Drama*, by Clayton Hamilton, Macmillan, 1924.

³*Shakespeare Studies: Historical and Comparative in Method*, by Elmer Edgar Stoll, Macmillan, 1927, p. 280.

other poet, reflected the settled prejudices and passions of his race?"

Prejudices "if he had any;" he "more than any other poet reflected the settled prejudices and passions of his race."

This is only one of several contradictions in Doctor Stoll's peptic pages. Attention is called to this contradiction not for perverse joy in catching Doctor Stoll in bad logic, but rather in proof that if one is absorbingly interested in Shakespeare as poet or dramatist it is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid some sort of notion, however wavering in outline, of the sort of man William Shakespeare himself was.

Croce is right in calling attention to the triviality and unilluminating quality of most of the biographical facts which are laboriously repeated in one book after another. Stoll is right in rejecting the subjective portraiture of Shakespeare the man which make him what the disposition of the writer leads him to think Shakespeare was—was it Samuel Butler who said that every portrait is a picture of the artist himself?

Doctor Edward Dowden sentimentalized Shakespeare too much,¹ even as he sentimentalized Shelley too much. Doctor Dowden was a great gentleman and an accomplished scholar, and we at least who belong to the "mauve decade" are ungrateful if we forget what he did to inspire us with enthusiasm for Shakespeare. He led our judgments wrong in many ways, but he stimulated in us an affection for Shakespeare's writings without which our lives would have been poorer. He may have done as much as any of the eulogists to ignite the counterblasts of Tolstoy and Shaw, but he knew much more about Shakespeare than the attackers ever knew or ever could know. His Irish heart, however, sometimes led

¹Especially in *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art*, by Edward Dowden, Harper & Bros., 1881.

his scholar's head into fantasies and imaginings which cannot stand the hard, dry light of modern realistic criticism.

Less dependable than Dowden are Georg Brandes¹ and Frank Harris,² first because their Shakespearean scholarship is inferior to Dowden's, and secondly because of their reckless "journalese." Brandes is as certain that Cleopatra is the poet's image of a lady whom Shakespeare actually knew and trafficked with as if Shakespeare had come back from spirit land and told Brandes the secret.³ It would be comfortable to know anything as confidently as Brandes knew everything when he was alive and writing books. His *William Shakespeare* should be catalogued under the head of fiction. Yet Brandes wrote a book which deserves to live because of its gusto and its perception of Shakespeare the poet from the point of view of a cosmopolitan scholar and lover of great literature. It is as unsafe as the writings of Taine, his "predecessor and master" (to quote Herford⁴) and as interesting reading, which is to say much. But it is not a book for first readers of Shakespeare because they will close the volume thinking they know a great deal more about Shakespeare the man than is knowable.

Frank Harris's *The Man Shakespeare* is as sprightly reading as the book by Brandes, and even less reliable. His deductions of the man from his writings are more detailed than those of Brandes and less plausible because more erotic. Whatever Shakespeare was, the attentive reader of Shakespeare's own words cannot believe that he was the passion-

¹*William Shakespeare: A Critical Study*, by Georg Brandes, Macmillan, 1914.

²*The Man Shakespeare*, by Frank Harris, Mitchell Kennerly, 1909.

³This is of course a widespread assumption shared by many commentators including even so careful a writer as Schücking: See *Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays*, by Levin L. Schücking, Henry Holt, 1922, p. 138.

⁴*A Sketch of Recent Shakespearean Investigation*, by C. H. Herford, Blackie & Son, 1924.

wasted, timid creature portrayed by Harris. Some of the sonnets might have been written by the man Harris imagines, but *Henry the Fifth* and *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar* and *Cymbeline* could not have been written by such a man. If we must make choice between this sex-obsessed epicene and the Goethe-Croce conception of a man "healthy and strong and free" we must accept the latter conception, not merely because it is pleasanter to accept it, but because the conception better accords with the facts of the things Shakespeare wrote.

There is one fact seldom if ever noted by the commentators, the freedom from lubricity of the last plays Shakespeare wrote, *Cymbeline*, *Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

Shakespeare found that his Elizabethan style of drama had grown old-fashioned in the Jacobean age when literature was becoming fashionable (that is the worst thing that can happen to literature—when fashion takes up literature, literature is preparing its *nunc dimittis*). Fine ladies and gentlemen of King James's court began to patronize the drama and young John Fletcher and his young nobleman friend, Francis Beaumont, belonging to the new era, knew how to hit the taste of these sybarites. Nothing too solid or serious, something pretty and fanciful and artificial. The young men were writing for the Globe Theatre Company, Shakespeare's company, and Shakespeare, always impressionable to prevalent styles of writing, must, now that he is no longer young, adapt himself to the new style if he is going to continue writing and he is not quite ready to cease writing altogether (the writing-itch is a lingering disease, well-nigh chronic), so he dresses himself in new garments, lays aside the relentless tragedy of *Lear*, the inescapable tragedy of *Macbeth*, the austere tragedy of *Coriolanus* (written just a year or so before) and takes lessons from the

youngsters¹ in tacking happy endings on to tales of sorrow, letting fancy run riot through not only improbabilities but grotesque impossibilities, and, just because he happened to be Shakespeare he outdid the youngsters on their chosen ground.

But he differed from the youngsters in two particulars. Some of the people (not all) were as substantial and lifelike as those he put into his tragedies. There was still something of what George Saintsbury has called Shakespeare's inability to "scamp" his character creation in his period of tragedy writing, and so some of his leading people in the latter plays are real people in new-fangled tenuous plots. There is a fibre in some of the leading characters in the latter plays which is lacking in Beaumont and Fletcher's fragile creations.

The other respect in which he differs from his young friends is his refusal to tickle the prurient fancies of the polite ladies and gentlemen who sniggered over the sly innuendoes and graceful risqué allusions of Beaumont and Fletcher.

The young Shakespeare had been susceptible to literary fashions of the fine gentlemen, whom probably he emulated, who wrote erotic verse, and so the young Shakespeare wrote *Venus and Adonis* and the sonnets (some of which are decidedly of the court of the little god Eros). The earlier comedies are, in passages, of a piece with this erotic non-dramatic poetry, but as Shakespeare grew to early maturity he wrote less that was risqué and more that was frankly obscene.

¹On relationship of Shakespeare's last plays to the drama of Beaumont and Fletcher, see *The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakespeare*, by A. H. Thorndike, Press of O. B. Wood, Worcester, Mass., 1901; also see *A Life of William Shakespeare*, by Joseph Quincy Adams, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925, chap. 22.

The maturer Shakespeare, in the manner of his play-writing contemporaries, often used language which delighted the popular audience (chiefly male) at the public theatres. When Falstaff and Prince Hal fell to slanging each other they used the language with which the masculine audience was familiar in street and tavern, merely used it more copiously than most of those in the audience could, for it requires imagination even to be richly obscene.

William Shakespeare was not squeamish. He was a man in a world of men and he used man's talk when he could make his audience guffaw by using it.

More than that, he could and did use obscenity freely when it fitted the character and the situation, as when Mercutio and the Nurse meet each other in *Romeo and Juliet*, as when Cleopatra's maiden (female if not maiden) attendants talk with Alexas and the soothsayer in an antechamber of the palace, talk about the things with which minds are likely to be occupied in a court dedicated to "love" but not to constancy. But sly and prurient and inquisitively veiled the talk is not. It is as frank as it is indecent—indecent by the standard of much literature of today, which literature is more in the fashion of Beaumont and Fletcher's *double entendre* than in the manner of Shakespeare's robust virility.

But, and this is the point, the last plays were interestingly devoid of improper speech, either in his old resonant manner or in the innuendo of Beaumont and Fletcher. Many Shakespearean plays call for expurgation before they can be used in modern classrooms, especially now that education is co-education. But little expurgation is necessary in the last plays—almost none. When lasciviousness became fashionable Shakespeare dropped it. What the servant in *Winter's*

*Tale*¹ says about the ballads of Autolycus applies to Shakespeare's language, "so without bawdry, which is strange."

He gave the gorgeously costumed courtiers the sort of plots they craved, he eliminated severe talk about politics which the sturdy popular audiences of earlier days had accepted in his English historical plays, he spared the brittle brains of his fashionable auditors the philosophy of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, he respected their tender sensibilities which shrank from tragic endings, he centered his story in love, the one thing in which they were interested, but it should not be morbid love as in so much of Beaumont and Fletcher—it should be the love of Imogen, whom Sidney Lee calls, and perhaps with justification, "the crown and flower of his [Shakespeare's] conception of tender and artless womanhood,"² or the constant love of insulted Hermione, or the idyllic love of Perdita and Miranda. And he gave these society ladies and gentlemen no sly equivocations over which they could wink at each other with sophisticated eyelids.

His poetic genius has not slackened; if his dramatic structure is looser-fibred that is because of the nature of the plays he is writing; only his mirth is less; and one guesses that this is because his robust nature does not favor the sort of mirth prevalent among these shallow auditors who laughed not from their lungs but from the corners of their sensual lips.

Schücking³ calls attention to a corresponding purity of speech in the early *Midsummer Night's Dream*, "written for a wedding in the house of some great personage"; "No

¹Act IV, sc. 4, line 194. The references are to the third edition (1910) of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by William Allan Neilson, Houghton Mifflin Co.

²*Life*, p. 422.

³*Character Problems*, p. 18.

coarse word is uttered"; "Every suspicion of a lascivious thought is avoided." But Beaumont and Fletcher introduced lascivious thoughts and pregnant expressions into their plays intended for production at court. The point is not nullified by the case of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. No doubt Shakespeare had tact and suited the language of *Midsummer Night's Dream* to what he supposed to be the taste of his aristocratic audience, but it is clear that in his latter plays he refrained from impurities for some other reason, because the audiences before which his plays were produced were the same that took pleasure in Beaumont and Fletcher's innuendoes.

In short the Shakespearean conception of womanhood and true love remained untarnished in his latter plays, and his language grew pure precisely when the audience had come to expect the speech that is called "suggestive."¹

Surely, there was something sound and clean in this William Shakespeare.

Whatever experiences he may have had in youth, or in young manhood when he left his wife in Stratford to seek his fortunes in London—and it is quite likely that he had experiences which he would have been better off without—whether or not the sonnets tell us anything authentic about those experiences (and an equally good case can be made

¹The flaw in the present argument is that many of the earlier plays were acted "on command" at the court of Elizabeth. Whether these court performances toned down the obscenity, we do not know. But Elizabeth was coarser in speech than James (see Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex*). It was at the court of James that there began those tendencies which culminated in the "politer" age of the Restoration, the refinements of vice in which John Dryden first rejoiced and which he subsequently condemned—"this lubric and adultr'ate age" (*Ode to memory of Mrs. Anne Killigrew*). The main point is unaltered, that Shakespeare's last plays, molded in the new fashion of Beaumont and Fletcher, contain no titillations of polite but prurient imaginations.

for the sonnets as "confessional" or "conventional" with little or no personal experience behind them) there was, it would seem, in this man Shakespeare something healthy and incorruptible.

To the testimony of the last plays, when Shakespeare had plenty of incentive to make them rotten but preferred to make them pure, add the testimony of the vigorous historical plays of earlier days and the stern tragedies which he wrote in between the historical plays and the tragi-comedies, and it becomes impossible to accept the Frank Harris portraiture of the man Shakespeare: a portrait of a Swinburne (to whom Harris explicitly likens Shakespeare) consumed with passion, or an Ernest Dowson (about whom Mr. Harris has written understandingly and sympathetically) wrecked by passion—but not a portrait of William Shakespeare.

Mr. Stoll does well to reject such attempts as those of Brandes and Harris to deduce from Shakespeare's copious dramatic utterances the details of Shakespeare's personal career.

Nevertheless it is impossible to avoid altogether Shakespeare the man when reading carefully and repeatedly the writings of Shakespeare the playwright, the artist, and the thinker.

Even so disciplined a scholar as President Neilson (he who makes a new text of all Shakespeare's writings has undergone about as severe scholastic discipline as is possible), even Neilson cannot refrain from parentheses which indicate that he thinks that some things in the plays represent what Shakespeare himself thought and believed or disbelieved and rejected, as for instance when Neilson writes of *Coriolanus*: "Nowhere does Shakespeare rise more triumphantly above what we may suppose to have been his own

personal prejudices, to show the workings of the permanent laws that govern the relations of men in society."¹

Doctor Neilson in collaboration with Doctor A. H. Thorndike compiled the indispensable manual, *Facts About Shakespeare*, in which, concerning this same tremendous *Coriolanus*, there occurs the sentence, "Whatever else he may have written in these years here is surely the period of tragedy"²—meaning, it is clear from the context, not that Shakespeare wrote his personal experiences into his tragedies, but that in the tragedies there must be some suggestion of the way Shakespeare himself regarded human fatality.

In the whole vexed question whether or not there are authentic tracings of the man in the things he wrote there is one distinct line of demarcation, that between the incidents of Shakespeare's life and the things which he personally thought and believed.

It is a wild goose chase to seek autobiography in Shakespeare's writings, but there is surely in these writings some autopsychography (to employ Mr. Gamaliel Bradford's word).

From the sonnets we can learn nothing indisputable about the occurrences of Shakespeare's life because they tell either too little or too much.

We can learn nothing from Shakespeare's writings about his relationship with his wife. A dramatic warning put in the mouth of a fictitious character, Prospero³—against pre-nuptial sexual intimacy is surely inadequate as corroborative evidence of a meager external biographical and biological indication that William's and Anne's first child was born

¹*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by William Allan Neilson, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906, p. 1097.

²*The Facts About Shakespeare* by William Allan Neilson and Ashley Horace Thorndike, Macmillan, 1913, p. 82.

³*The Tempest*, Act IV, sc. 1, lines 14-23.

too soon after their marriage to have been begotten and conceived in wedlock.

That he was unhappy with Anne is as unprovable from his writings as that he was happy with her. From external records it is apparent that he was able to endure long periods of absence from her with fortitude. But from the same external evidence it seems clear that when his busy career in London was ended he settled down with her sensibly in Stratford and ended his days in domestic quietude—whether in domestic bliss, who can say?

There must be no yielding here to temptation to discuss the interlineation in Shakespeare's will by which he bequeathed "unto my wife my second best bed with the furniture" (the only mention of his wife in his will), for many long discussions have "proven" by this famous line many things varying from studied insult to exceptional conjugal tenderness.

Careful biographers, like Sidney Lee¹ and J. Q. Adams² mention without comment the tradition handed down by John Dowdall on the strength of what he said the parish clerk told him when he visited Stratford in 1693 (seventy-seven years after Shakespeare's death and seventy years after the death of Mrs. Shakespeare) that the widow "did earnestly desire to be laid in the same tomb with him," but that the request was declined because the sextons shrank from the curse pronounced in Shakespeare's epitaph upon anyone who "moves my bones."³

If the legend is true it indicates in Mrs. Shakespeare a pathetic devotion to her dead spouse. But legends are treacherous, and all we really know is that Mrs. Shake-

¹*Life*, p. 487.

²*Life*, p. 476.

³Dowdall said the parish clerk told him that the epitaph was written by Shakespeare "himself before his death."

speare's body was entombed in the chancel next to her husband's grave, with a better inscription on the tomb than the master poet wrote for himself, an inscription presumably composed by the educated son-in-law, Doctor Hall, in behalf of his wife, his sister-in-law, her husband and himself, an inscription which gives as Sidney Lee says, "poignant expression to filial grief."¹

If one is bent on evidence that Shakespeare's marriage was not unhappy he may find it best in the incomparable creations of winsome and noble women made by the poet during a period of twenty years of dramatic writing. Whatever the truth about the marriage, certainly Shakespeare was never "sour on women." And that's that.

In many of the plays there are expressions of paternal tenderness which only a great poet and, one fancies, only a fond father could have written, but if Shakespeare ever wrote anything expressive of his personal grief over the death of his only son it has been lost. From the public he veiled his sorrows in the uproarious mirth of *Taming of the Shrew* and Sir John Falstaff, creations coincident with and just after the death of his little boy. It is a safe guess that this implies not callousness on the part of the father, to whom contemporaries applied the adjective, "gentle," but rather the repeated story of actors and all public entertainers, the story (with modification) of Pagliacci, the necessity, as they say in modern stage parlance, that "The curtain must go up," no matter if the actor's heart is breaking. These lines are written a few days after the publication of a news dispatch concerning a young acrobat who wondered why his father, senior member of the "team," did not join him on the stage, somersaulted toward the wings, heard from the ashen faced "props" that his father had just died of heart failure,

¹*Life*, p. 504.

gyrated back to stage center, completed his act alone, took his curtain call bowing and smiling and then retiring behind the scenes sobbed his young grief out on the still bosom of his father.

Like the provident business man he was, Shakespeare drew his will carefully to safeguard his daughters and their heirs, but he omitted adjectives of endearment when naming his daughters. Some testators employ affectionate terms in these semi-public documents. Apparently that was not William Shakespeare's way.

And so we might catalogue the things domestic about which we should like Shakespeare's own words and find—nothing.

Stoll says: "Only once, for a moment, does Shakespeare grow personal (for he remarks upon the little eyases, rivals to his company, in *Hamlet*, have to do with a Company affair), when, remembering his poaching days, perhaps, he gives Justice Shallow a 'dozen white luses on his old coat,' in allusion (with the boyish prank of a pun on his enemy's name intended) to the coat of arms of Sir Thomas Lucy, who had prosecuted him. The old legend may, then, be true, we are delighted to discover."¹

Even here Stoll writes with "subintents and saving clauses"—"perhaps" and the legend "may be true." The story of the poaching and the punishment is at best doubtful and though Sidney Lee, little given to credulity, accepts the story as a fact and accepts the reference to Justice Shallow² as a lampoon on Sir Thomas Lucy, on the other hand J. Q. Adams rejects the story, founded on a late tradition, first uttered by Archdeacon Davies who had been vicar of Sapperton, and incorporated by Rowe in the first sketch of

¹*Shakespeare Studies*, pp. 13-14.

²*Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act I, sc. 1.

Shakespeare's life of sufficient proportions to be called a biography, and Professor Adams reasons well. It is a checkmate, this endeavor to prove or disprove autobiographical matter in the description of Justice Shallow's coat-of-arms.

Sir Dunbar Plunket Barton, one of the most recent writers who refers to the Lucy-Shallow business inclines to Sidney Lee's view of identification. The lines may well indicate an allusion to Lucy but they prove nothing about Shakespeare's personal contacts with or animus against Lucy. Shakespeare found repeated sources of merriment in the blundering stupidity of minor minions of the law (compare Dull in *Love's Labor's Lost* and Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*) and it is possible that he had Sir Thomas Lucy in mind when he created the absurdities of Justice Shallow, but a creative writer's reminiscences may color a character, or caricature, without being a portrait of the flesh-and-blood original—and certainly may be without personal animosity.

In seeking unquestionable allusions in Shakespeare's writing to things personal to himself we are practically reduced to the reference in *Hamlet* to the popularity of the children actors. Though this is, as Doctor Stoll says, "a company affair," yet Shakespeare is penning lines here which reflect his own resentment against the prestige of the child players, whose vogue was hurting business at the Globe Theatre—his own business, and, after all, a provident business man's calamitous business experience is a personal experience.

Beyond that it is impossible to say for certain that any of Shakespeare's lines refer to personal experiences. We may guess much. We can prove little.

Books on Shakespeare, like those by Walter Raleigh¹

¹*Shakespeare*, by Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh, English Men of Letters series, Macmillan, 1913.

and John Masefield¹ are interesting reading, often plausible, seldom if ever wildly hypothetical like the books written by Brandes and Harris. But they are not proof. Raleigh wrote with the acumen of a trained man of letters, Masefield with the perceptions of a poet—both illuminating the art and humanity of Shakespeare, but neither establishing anything absolute about the man in his writings. Practically the same thing may be said about F. S. Boas,² an illuminating critic but not a biographical interpreter.

One of the sanest recent books on Shakespeare has been referred to a few lines back, the book by Sir Dunbar Plunket Barton.³ The author, former solicitor-general of Ireland, a Justice of the High Court of Ireland, Member of Parliament, and an expert in English jurisprudence, knows his law and his Shakespeare equally well and he seems to the layman to dispose once and for all of the assumption that Shakespeare had any systematic legal training or was more conversant with the law than many of his contemporaries: "The easy use which Shakespeare made of legal topics has caused some of his commentators to jump to the conclusion that, at some stage of his career, he had been a lawyer or a lawyer's clerk. This theory is not supported by any extrinsic evidence or by any tradition; and there does not appear to be any necessity for resorting to it. Most of Shakespeare's legalisms were drawn either from the history of the Plantagenet and Tudor periods, from the procedure of Courts of Justice, from the jargon of the Law of Real Property,

¹*Shakespeare*, by John Masefield, Home University Library, Williams and Norgate.

²Boas' classic is *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*, Scribner's, 1905; he has more recently published a useful handbook in which, by the way, he adopts the conventional spelling of the poet's name: *An Introduction to the Reading of Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, 1927.

³*Links Between Shakespeare and the Law* by Sir Dunbar Plunket Barton, with a Foreword by The Hon. James M. Beck, former solicitor-general of the United States, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929.

or from certain notorious aspects of the Criminal and Constitutional Law of this time. These were subjects which had many avenues of approach to his mind. In the Elizabethan age, writes Mr. Hubert Hall, of the Public Record Office, in an oft-quoted passage, 'every man was up to a certain point his own lawyer,' and 'was well versed in all the technical forms and procedure.' The public took a keener interest in legal proceedings than they do in our time. There were fewer places of recreation, and people with idle time on their hands were more disposed to haunt the Courts for the purpose of whiling it away."¹

In the Southern States forty years ago there was an exact analogy to the situation which the author describes in Elizabethan England, comparatively few sources of amusement and therefore a keen interest in legal proceedings among people who crowded the court rooms.

On page 9 Sir Dunbar refers to the well-known fact that both William Shakespeare and his father, John, were frequently engaged in litigation—John "in more than fifty lawsuits in the course of forty years." It would have been strange if a man of Shakespeare's keen intelligence had not picked up a deal of legal lore in such circumstances, but Sir Dunbar in pages 10–12 shows that Jonson used legal phraseology with more technical accuracy than Shakespeare and that references to the law by Peele and Nashe were "more pungent and precise than any of the kind in Shakespeare," and yet as Sir Dunbar says, "nobody suggests that Peele and Nashe were lawyers." And finally Sir Dunbar shows in detail Shakespeare's association with the Inns of Court. In short, Shakespeare was not a lawyer at any time but had abundant opportunity of becoming acquainted with legal forms and phraseology.

¹ *op. cit.*, pp. 7–8.

In the foreword to the book the Hon. James M. Beck refers to Lord Chief Justice Campbell who in 1859 published his famous book *Shakespeare's Legal Requirements*. The testimony of so eminent a jurist led many of us of the laity to suppose that Shakespeare's knowledge of the law was phenomenal even though our common sense told us that we could not accept Lord Chief Justice Campbell's conclusion that Shakespeare had ever been a practicing lawyer. Mr. Beck says: "The Lord Chief Justice, with an unusual disregard of the value of testimony, delivered the sententious judgment that only a lawyer could possibly have written the plays."

Here it may be said that there has been much confusion between "learning" and "information" in writing about Shakespeare. He was neither ignorant nor learned. Most recent commentators accept the statement of William Beeston who lived in the Restoration Age and who reported on the authority of his father, one of Shakespeare's fellow-actors, that before going to London Shakespeare taught school for a time. Certainly his early plays are redolent of Latin, and he wrote French (in *Henry the Fifth*) with fluency if not with idiomatic precision. He was keenly interested in English and Roman history, particularly as he got it from Holinshed and Plutarch. He seems to have been a reading man in the intervals of his busy activities—especially interested in books of travel. He had not Ben Jonson's scope and precision of learning and therefore Ben talked about Shakespeare's "small Latin and less Greek." In estimating the statement we must consider the source. A Harvard professor of classics might and probably would say the same thing about the classical attainments of a teacher in a preparatory school even though the teacher could read Caesar's *Commentaries* and Xenophon's *Anabasis*.

Shakespeare had a quick, inquisitive and acquisitive mind, was interested in many things, apparently in everything, took what he needed, disregarded what he did not need. One might say that he had the habit of mind of a superior, a very superior journalist. It is certain that he was not a lawyer. It is almost certain that he was at one time a school teacher. It is certain that he was not erudite. It is certain that he had a large store of information and the perceptions and intuitions of a man of genius.

Doctor A. C. Bradley in his lecture-essay *Shakespeare the Man*¹ is less happy and successful than in his previous lectures on *Shakespearean Tragedy*,² because as a human being he would like to say something human about the man but as a scholar he is thwarted by the dubiety of the evidence. The lecture was originally delivered after the articles by Frank Harris had appeared in the *Saturday Review* but before they had been collected in book form,³ and, while Bradley "cannot share . . . a good many of Mr. Harris's views," he gives the impression that he would like to be as confident as Mr. Harris that Shakespeare is in his writings. But the habits of a scholar forbid, and one closes the book with no clear idea as to how Shakespeare the man appeared to Doctor Bradley. It is a hesitating essay, like a boy putting his foot into cold water, drawing a deep breath to get resolution for a plunge, and then shrinking back. Doctor Bradley is oppressed with the "dangers and infirmities which the expert in any subject knows too well," and envies writers like Walter Bagehot, Goldwin Smith and Leslie Stephen, who, with no pretensions as "experts" in Shakespearean

¹In *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, by A. C. Bradley, Macmillan, 1909.

²Published by Macmillan, 1904.

³See Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, p. 315, note. The lecture was delivered in 1904.

bibliography wrote about the man Shakespeare with a confidence of "broad and deep impressions which vivid reading leaves," untroubled and unchecked by "minutiae" and microscopic examination of wearisome "rival hypotheses."

Walter Bagehot, Goldwin Smith, and Leslie Stephen were men of robust rather than subtle minds. They loved great literature as great literature should be loved. They read their Shakespeare with high intelligence, their stout common sense told them that it was a man and not an amanuensis who wrote the plays and poems, and they closed the volume with fairly definite impressions of what manner of man he was. They wrote with broad understanding rather than with the close scrutiny which is so likely to beget skepticism.

Scrutiny and hypotheses and speculations inevitably blur a picture. Their pictures are not blurred. For instance Bagehot quotes from *Venus and Adonis* the stanzas about the hare hunt and remarks: "It is absurd, by the way, to say we know nothing about the man who wrote that; we know he had been after a hare"¹—a breezy, confident, characteristic Bagehot saying, refreshing as autumn air, and altogether plausible. But mincing scrutiny suggests doubts as to whether even this is indisputable.

Shakespeare described many other things with equal gusto and apparent experimental knowledge of the facts. But he could not have experienced everything about which he wrote. It is not supposable that he knew from experience what Lady Macbeth experienced when she dauntlessly entered King Duncan's death chamber, smeared the drunken grooms with the blood of the old king, came from the chamber, flaunting her crimson fingers in the face of her

¹*Shakespeare; in Works*, by Walter Bagehot, Hartford, Conn., edit., vol. I, p. 259.

trembling, murderous husband and said, defiantly, to arouse her husband to stiffer manhood:

My hands are of your color, but I shame
To wear a heart so white.

But unwittingly in the concentration of action she received a shock in the death chamber from which she never recovered, a shock not to be revealed until the months had passed and she had had time to brood, and, in forced inaction she lived over what she had seen in that dreadful room, a sight never to be blotted out, which comes back upon her in her somnambulism, when volition is weakened, resolution broken down, by suppression and illness, and she betrays herself in the wail, "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him."

Shakespeare imagined that as he imagined many other acute things which he had not personally experienced.

So niggling criticism may suggest it is possible that even the hare hunt represents an observation rather than an experience. One remembers Shelley sent by his mother to shoot game, bribing the game keeper to do the killing from which he shrank, a pained observer rather than a participant. A hardier than Shelley, Robert Burns ("of all poets most the man," said D. G. Rossetti) shrank with pain from the sight of a wounded hare and then roused himself to indignation against the hunter who had inflicted the wound.

Did Shakespeare hunt hares as Bagehot declares with refreshing confidence, or did he, like Shelley and Burns, merely look on, lamenting what he saw?

The description of the hare in the vivid stanzas suggests more of pity for the pursued creature than the hunter's zest in the pursuit: "the purblind hare," "the poor wretch," "poor wat," "the dew-bedabbled wretch," "his weary legs," the whole flashing description concluding with the lines:

Will-o'-the-Wisp

25

For misery is trodden on by many,
And, being low, never relieved by any.

As in John Masefield's poem about the fox chase, the phrases suggest that the poet's sympathies were with the hunted dumb beast rather than with the exultant, noisy hunters.

A "modern note," say the historical critics, a sentiment more consonant with late eighteenth century "feeling for nature" and nineteenth century societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals, than with sixteenth century "robustiousness." But the sentiment seems to be in Shakespeare's phrases, and who will confidently delimit the modernity of William Shakespeare?

In *As You Like It* "the melancholy Jaques grieves" at the sight of the wounded deer, and even the banished Duke who must live on the food of the forest or starve says of the deer:

And yet it irks me, the poor dappled fools,
* * * * *
Should in their own confines with forked heads
Have their round haunches gored.

Dramatic speeches, yes; words put into the mouths of fictitious creations of the poet's fancy, and not to be applied with confidence to Shakespeare's personal sentiments on the killing of wild game. But neither can it be confidently asserted that they were not his personal sentiments.

Thus it is that the "broad and deep impressions" of the "vivid" reader are blurred by the "infirmities which the expert knows too well," thus it is that by "thinking too precisely" on the writings of Shakespeare, line by line and phrase by phrase, the student finds his deductions "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," thus it is that in a field where great readers, like Bagehot, and Leslie Stephen and

Goldwin Smith tread confidently, the closer student of Shakespeare minces and falters and loses his way, and is not sure that Shakespeare's lines are indisputable proof of even so subordinate a fact as that the poet participated in a hare hunt.

A few months ago a shrewd, old Texas cattleman said to the present writer: "That fellow Shakespeare knew more about horses than a cowboy, than a *Texas* cowboy"—the climax and ultimate of horse-knowledge. One thinks that unbiased testimony like that must be true.

But when he undertakes to deduce a personal record from the writings, the microscopic critic falls into a morass of doubt.

Doctor Bradley does not escape the peril. Bagehot and Leslie Stephen and Goldwin Smith arrive somewhere in their conclusions as to what sort of man the writer of the plays and poems must have been, but Doctor Bradley arrives nowhere.

The only confident note in the essay is near the beginning, a broad (and true) assertion that "the great majority of Shakespeare's readers . . . do form from the plays some idea of the man," and that the man they image is more like Scott and Fielding than like Shelley or Wordsworth or Milton. As far as that clear assertion goes it is a true generalization, though even "the great majority of readers" must feel that Shakespeare had a trick of getting deeper under the skin of his creatures than did Scott or Fielding, in short that he was, with apologies to Professor Stoll for a word which he would taboo from Shakespearean commentary, rather more of a "psychologist" than either Scott or Fielding. After this bold classification of Shakespeare in a general catalogue of writers about whom we have much more personal and authentic knowledge than we have of Shake-

speare, Doctor Bradley begins to waver, as evidence rises in conflict with other evidence, and in the end we not only have not a specification of what Shakespeare was personally, we have not even a clear statement of what he was not.

This is the almost inevitable lot of anyone who has lived many years with the Shakespearean writings. However clear may be his own mental image of Shakespeare, he hesitates confidently to commit it to paper.

The chapter ends as it began. It would be pleasant to "pluck out the heart of the mystery," to say, "here within the lines is the veritable record of a man's earthly career," to say with Polonius

I will find
Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed
Within the centre;

but Polonius lived to learn that he did not really know Hamlet. It is better to stop before we begin, to confess that we cannot confidently reshape Shakespeare's personal career out of the lines he wrote, to admit that Will was Will-o'-the-Wisp.