

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09110-7 - The Essential Shakespeare: A Biographical Adventure

J. Dover Wilson

Excerpt

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I

IMAGES OF SHAKESPEARE

Look here upon this picture and on this

Hamlet.

THIS LITTLE BOOK attempts, as many hundreds before it have attempted, to interpret the career of William Shakespeare, poet and dramatist for all time, and principal entertainer of Elizabethan and Jacobean London. And if I am asked what excuse I offer for adding even one more pebble to the enormous cairn of commentary and biography beneath which the real Shakespeare somewhere lies, I can only reply that I heartily dislike some of the current interpretations which pass as orthodox, and have long wished to work out another which might seem more in accord at once with common sense and with what we know of the life and spirit of other poets and creative artists.

My own interpretation is of course influenced by personal prepossessions, as all general notions of Shakespeare must be, but I can at least claim that it is no piece of preconceived sentimentalism. Rather, it has revealed itself bit by bit through a study of the plays, of the period and of the known facts of the life, a study carried on continuously for over thirty years and culminating during the last ten of them in the most intimate relationship which anyone, not an actor and dramatist of genius like Mr Granville Barker, can now have with Shakespeare; I mean the editing of his works from the originals. It is true

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that the edition I am concerned with has so far embraced the Comedies only,¹ but this in some degree puts me at an advantage, since it means at any rate that I start at the right end, the Elizabethan end; most previous biographers, to my thinking, having gone astray by considering Shakespeare too much from the standpoint of his later work, written during the reign of James I.

The sublimity of his subject, and the comparative poverty of contemporary information about it, expose anyone who undertakes to write a life of Shakespeare to many perils, but the greatest of them all is the personal equation. It is indeed impossible that he should altogether escape it; for he must begin by framing some general conception of what he takes to be Shakespeare's spirit and personality, which is as if a blind man who could not climb should try to form a general idea of the Matterhorn or Mont Blanc from every point of view and in all weather conditions. Yet he may observe two precautions which will go some way towards saving him from absolute disaster. In the first place he should make all possible and legitimate use of the lives of other poets and artists to throw light upon the life of Shakespeare, acquainting himself as well with what other poets and artists have thought about their greatest fellow, since such thoughts will be of infinitely more value than anything he could excogitate out of his own feeble imagination. And secondly he should do what in him lies to make clear both to himself and to his readers what personal prepossessions about Shake-

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speare he starts with. Every biographer has them, though few confess them, and most are unconscious of them. I observe that even Sir Edmund Chambers, who appears in his *William Shakespeare: a study of facts and problems* as an arch-sceptic and a sardonic anti-romantic, when composing his earlier book, *Shakespeare: a survey*, followed Sidney's precept "Look in thy heart and write" and found an image there, which is certainly not lacking in romance.

I shall disclose my own image of Shakespeare towards the end of this chapter. At the moment I would insist that this secret image of the heart, of which the biographer may be completely unaware, is too often the root cause of his aberration. What may be called the scientific school of Shakespearian biography furnishes an excellent example. Setting the plays and poems aside as "impersonal" and therefore of no value whatever as evidence, they proceed to build up every available scrap of external information into their structure, without realising that the significance they attach to each scrap depends upon their own implicit conception of the poet, and that the scraps can only be held together by a plentiful supply of mortar in the form of suppressed hypothesis. The best known writer of the school is Sidney Lee, whose magisterial *Life of William Shakespeare* is the standard authority upon the subject. An indispensable reference book of facts, which I shall not hesitate to make use of in the following pages, it offers reading encouraging to the industrious apprentice and flattering to the

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successful business man ; for its theme is the story of the butcher-boy of Stratford who made a fortune in London, and the conclusion it draws is that “his literary attainments and successes were chiefly valued as serving the prosaic end of making a permanent provision for himself and his daughters”; which is like saying that Keats wrote the *Ode to a Nightingale* in order to have something in his stocking against a rainy day with Fanny Brawne. Such writers are dangerous because their show of objectivity and science may conceal their premises from the very elect. The image in Lee’s heart was that of a typical English manufacturer who happened to deal in *Twelfth Nights* and *Lears* instead of brass tacks. Now Lee himself was not in the least like this. Where then did his image come from? An unimaginative man, he was not likely to have invented it. As we shall see in Chapter III, he got it partly from an earlier biographer, Halliwell-Phillipps; but he also paid frequent visits to Stratford, and there he had ample opportunities of gazing at a false image which would suggest all the ideas he required. In a word, the *Life* that Lee gave us was not the life of William Shakespeare the man and the poet, but the life that ‘William Shakespeare’, the bust in Stratford Church, might have lived had he ever existed in flesh and blood.

The Stratford bust is the only portrait of the poet which can claim any sort of authority, seeing that the Droeshout frontispiece to the First Folio is nothing but a clumsy engraving derived from it, and that all other portraits are themselves derived

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from either the bust or the engraving. Moreover the monument was erected at Stratford shortly after Shakespeare's death, before 1623 at any rate, and it is generally supposed that the features were modelled directly from a mask taken from Shakespeare's face, alive or dead. Yet, despite everything, I make bold to say that this bust is one of the greatest of all obstacles to the true understanding of Shakespeare. Here are a few descriptive notes of it from a learned essay by Mr M. H. Spielmann, which is objective but by no means hostile in spirit: "its wooden appearance and vapid expression", "its coarsely-shaped, half-moon eyebrows, more like George Robey's than anybody else's", its staring eyes set "too close together" and like the nose "too small for the face". The essay also draws attention to the extraordinary upper lip, the hanging lower lip, and the general air of stupid and self-complacent prosperity. All this might suit well enough with an affluent and retired butcher, but does gross wrong to the dead poet. "Some men there are love not a gaping pig", and for half the unlearned world this Shakespeare simply will not do. The Stratford bust, and Lee's *Life* inspired by gazing too much upon it, are together, I am convinced, mainly responsible for the campaign against "the man of Stratford" and the attempts to dethrone him in favour of Lord Bacon, the Earl of Derby, the Earl of Oxford, the Earl of Rutland, or whatever coroneted pretender may be in vogue at the present moment.

Yet the bust is easily explained. It is the old story, only too familiar to friends and relatives of most

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men wealthy or famous enough to fall a prey to the second-rate portrait-painter. The job was given to an Anglo-Flemish mason of London, one Garratt Janssen, who knew what belonged to a monument and executed the task in a workman-like and (as monuments go) highly creditable fashion. The proportions are admirable, and the architectural design, with its pillars and canopy, its mantled shield, and its twin cherubs, is even beautiful. But one thing was clearly quite beyond the workman's scope—the human face, the face that happened to be Shakespeare's! And if Mistress Shakespeare and the poet's daughters disliked the portrait, what could they do? In cases of this kind, the family of the victim is helpless. There was the monument, complete and no doubt paid for, paid for perhaps by friends as well as relatives. And what a fine monument it was—all but the face! As to that, widow and daughters could only grin, like the travesty that confronted them, and bear it.

But we need not; and it is time an end was put to the scandal of three centuries. For Janssen's self-satisfied pork-butcher and the Folio engraving taken from it, which Sir John Squire has called "the pudding-faced effigy of Droeshout", stand between us and the true Shakespeare, and are so obviously false images of the greatest poet of all time that the world turns from them in disgust and thinks it is turning from Shakespeare himself. A banner of the crusade against Janssen and Droeshout is hoisted in the frontispiece to this book. It is a reproduction of a beautiful portrait, now hanging in the Rylands

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Library at Manchester, of a young man of Shakespeare's time. As the inscription at the top shows, he was Shakespeare's exact contemporary, and a comparison with the Droeshout engraving reveals the further coincidence that the relative distances from the chin to the lower lip, from the lower lip to the tip of the nose, from the tip of the nose to the lower eyelid, from the lower eyelid to the eyebrow, and from the eyebrow to the top of the forehead, are identical in both portraits, a fact which is not to be despised seeing that honest Droeshout and Janssen would take a pride in getting their faces right "by the squier". The similarity too of the great foreheads is particularly striking. Beyond these coincidences there is nothing whatever to connect the unknown youth of the wonderful eyes and the oval Shelley-like face with the poet who was also twenty-four years old in 1588.

Of course, the picture has been claimed as a genuine Shakespeare portrait. The temptation so to claim it is almost irresistible; and for my part since I first had it brought to my notice in 1914, the temptation has grown stronger every time I have looked at it. It was encouraging also to learn from his posthumous book published in 1928 that Dr John Smart of Glasgow, the sanest of modern Shakespearian biographers, "found in it his own idea of the youthful Shakespeare and wished it genuine". Yet there is no real evidence, and I do not ask the reader to believe in it or even to wish to believe in it. All I suggest is that he may find it useful in trying to frame his own image of

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Shakespeare. It will at any rate help him to forget the Stratford bust. Let him take it, if he will, as a painted cloth or arras, drawn in front of that monstrosity, and symbolising the Essential Poet. A portrait of Keats or Shelley would have served the purpose; but since fortune has preserved it for us, this picture of an unknown Elizabethan poet serves better. "I think", wrote Keats humbly, "I shall be among the English poets after my death", and Matthew Arnold cried out upon this "He is; he is with Shakespeare". We are apt to forget at times, in our preoccupation with Shakespeare the Stratford Institution, Shakespeare the National Bard, or even Shakespeare the world-worshipped dramatic interpreter of mankind, that Shakespeare himself is also "among the English poets", is with Keats and with Shelley. If my frontispiece reminds even one reader of this, it will not be altogether impertinent.

It may remind readers of another thing, which is still more often forgotten: Shakespeare was once young. Indeed, he was never old; for he gave up writing at forty-eight and was only fifty-two when he died. Yet for most people he is a kind of Grand Old Man of literature. This is due, partly to the Stratford bust, but chiefly I think to the general trend of Shakespearian criticism since Coleridge, which has concentrated upon the tragedies and later plays like *The Tempest*, and has left the comedies and histories in comparative neglect. Thus we have come to look at Shakespeare through the wrong end of the biographical telescope, to think of him as pre-eminently a tragic poet, facing the

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vastity of the universe, wrestling with the problems of evil and disaster—as a man, in short, of brooding temper, of lofty thought, of grave demeanour, and, after passing through the cleansing fires, of cheerful serenity of mind. This Olympian vision might do perhaps for Goethe, who seemed Athene-like to spring into the world in full panoply of philosophic calm, but Shakespeare I am convinced never at any time of his life even remotely resembled it.

The tragic Shakespeare, as we shall see, was a suffering Shakespeare; and the serenity of *The Tempest* was rather the serenity of recovery after sickness, or of peace after a hurricane, than anything aloof or pontifical. Shakespeare was more akin to Dostoevsky than to Goethe; or perhaps it is better to think of him as a kind of larger and happier Keats who lived on to tread the *via dolorosa* that Dostoevsky alone of the moderns has trodden after him. For the Keats and the Dostoevsky within him, were only part-tenants of an all-human spirit, which expressed itself during most of the first half of his dramatic career in comedy without a parallel in the world's literature for gaiety of heart. Thus when Dr A. C. Bradley, after insisting that "Keats was of Shakespeare's tribe", goes on to suggest that "in quality—and I speak of nothing else—the mind of Shakespeare at three-and-twenty may not have been very different", we gratefully subscribe as regards the creator of Romeo, Juliet, King Richard the Second, *Lucrece* and Oberon's fairy-land, while insisting in our turn that the mind

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which produced Mercutio, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and Bottom possessed qualities of steel-like brilliance and temper, of self-assurance and poise, of a blithe and delighted acceptance of Life in all its manifestations, which we look for in vain in Keats.

By leaving the comic muse out of the picture, the Victorian image of Shakespeare as the sedate Olympian does him much dishonour, for it means robbing him of a good third of his laurels and ignoring the miracle of his spiritual development. The Comedies came first; the Shakespeare of *King Lear* and *The Tempest* grew out of the Shakespeare who gave us Berowne and the Bastard, Juliet's Nurse and Mistress Quickly, the clowns Lance and Lancelot, Sir Toby Belch and Sir John Falstaff, to name only a few of the greatest rout of unseemly, and often indecent, disreputables that ever teemed from a dramatist's brain. And though the Jacobean Shakespeare became more serious than the Elizabethan, he was never, right up to the end, a whit more "respectable". As for the comedies themselves, with all the verve and gusto of their gay indecorum, who that reads them can doubt that they have been cast up on the shores of time by the most impetuous tide of warm-blooded humanity that ever beat through the heart of man? They are immortal, because of their amazing vitality; and their vitality is an indisputable testimony to the enormous satisfaction that went to their making. Shakespeare wrote to please. "The poet", and it is Wordsworth who speaks, "writes under one restriction only, namely the necessity of giving immediate pleasure."