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

J. Dover Wilson

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THE GRAFTON PORTRAIT

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THE ESSENTIAL
SHAKESPEARE

A BIOGRAPHICAL ADVENTURE

BY

J. DOVER WILSON

*Our stability is but balance, and wisdom lies
In masterful administration of the unforeseen.*

BRIDGES

*Shakespeare led a life of Allegory: his works
are the comments on it.* KEATS

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PREFACE

I HAVE to thank the Council of the British Academy for its kind permission to reprint one or two brief passages from a lecture I delivered before that body in 1929, entitled *The Elizabethan Shakespeare*.

In a book of this scope and size it would be absurd to attempt a record of my indebtedness to previous writers: let it suffice to say that my creditors are more than I can number and the liability beyond my discharge. But two names I must mention. I had hoped to break a lance with an old friend of Cambridge days, Lytton Strachey, in the last chapter, which was first written as a reply to his brilliant essay, *Shakespeare's Final Period*. But just as I was going to press, he laid his pen aside to join "the loveliest and the best", and I have removed all traces of disagreement except one nameless reference.

I could wish to associate the last chapter too with the name of Sir Edmund Chambers. Though of course the book as a whole owes more than I can estimate to his *William Shakespeare: a study of facts and problems*, I admit to my shame that it was not until it was all but complete, and my theory of *The Tempest* and of what he calls Shakespeare's "conversion" had been worked out, that I read his early prefaces, recently reprinted as *Shakespeare: a survey*. It was interesting to discover that in respect to the last phase we were on somewhat the same tack, and though I differ with him sharply on

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P R E F A C E

certain important details, as he no doubt will with me, I derive much encouragement from our measure of agreement.

I hope my title will not be misunderstood. "Here, in a nutshell, is the kind of man I believe Shakespeare to have been", is what it is intended to convey. I might perhaps have called it "A credible Shakespeare".

J. D. W.

February, 1932

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WHAT IS A POET?

He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.

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