

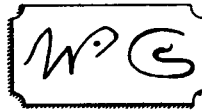
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EDITORIAL PREFACE

The present volume, issued in the fourth centenary year of Shakespeare's birth, does not, and could not, aim at presenting a general comprehensive survey of Elizabethan life and thought. Many aspects of the age have deliberately been omitted—some because they have been fully explored elsewhere, others because they impinge less directly on the dramatist's career. Thus, for example, there are no chapters on such important but already well-documented subjects as Elizabethan costume and pictorial art. Rather, in the planning of this book an effort has been made to select themes which have been neglected, or which have received comparatively little attention, or which, although surveyed in the past, appeared to demand reappraisal.

Naturally, throughout the book Shakespeare's genius presides, but no effort has been made to focus all attention on his writings, since it has been thought more important to reserve as much space as possible for the treatment of the environment amid which these writings took shape. With this end in view the several contributory chapters have been arranged in three main sections.

The first of these deals with the physical environment. Shakespeare was born and died in a small market town, from which he moved, during his middle years, to work in the metropolis, and it is eminently proper that a start should be made with a survey of life in town and countryside. We do not know what practical experience he had of seafaring, but no Elizabethans who passed even a small part of their time in London or reasonably close to the coasts could escape the impact of the ocean which engirdled their island, giving it safety, sustenance and strength: after city and country, therefore, the sea takes pride of place. The sea brought Englishmen of that age into contact with realms beyond their islands; many of the Folio plays have foreign settings; Othello is a Moor, and Shylock a Jew, of Venice; in *The Tempest* the newly discovered wonders of another continent find their imaginative mirroring; there is, accordingly, virtue in trying to assess in what light these insular, sea-roving subjects of Elizabeth looked upon men of other races. Like his fellows and rivals, Ben Jonson and George Chapman, Shakespeare did not attend a university, but all three certainly went to grammar school, and, if he did not seek to attain to such advanced self-made scholarship as they later sought to acquire, he shared with them the fundamental benefits which Elizabethan grammar schools so richly offered; and hence the world of sixteenth-century education becomes of prime significance for us. No Elizabethan, rich or poor, could escape daily contact with the law, so that familiarity with legal processes was widely spread over the entire population; unless we make fullest allowance for this we may be tempted to credit Shakespeare with a legal training for the existence of which there is no real justification—like most of his companions he no doubt imbibed from boyhood an awareness of the law's ways and delays. In one respect, however, he was unlike the majority of his theatrical fellows: no prison gates seem ever to have clanged behind him; yet, paradoxically, the ever-imminent threat of incarceration which confronted so many men in his time, combined with his own avoidance of such danger, makes an account of London's Clinks and Counters seem obligatory.

In the opening chapters of the second section the main themes are the prevailing thought of the period—its fundamental, and generally accepted, philosophy—and the aberrant views of nonconformist groups and individuals: the idea of the Establishment in church and society and the

EDITORIAL PREFACE

ideas of religious dissidents and of angry young men. While the advance of science lagged far behind that which dominates our own lives, the Elizabethan age was tentatively, gropingly, stretching out its hands to the present, and while its medical knowledge and practice may appear hopelessly primitive, some things were being learned which were destined to prove a fundamental basis for the doctors of the future—and once more, if every man was his own lawyer, every man was his own doctor and every sailor at least his own astronomer. Science and medicine, then, demand our scrutiny. In those days physicians often indulged in methods savouring of wizardry, and we need to give full weight to the almost universal belief in an enveloping universe of strangeness, of evil and of good inhabited by denizens extending from material witches to wraith-like creatures beyond the reach of human touch. Nor can we neglect that associated and elusive belief in the power of symbols which prevailingly coloured so much of the age's thought and which almost insensibly guided the lives of its men and women.

In the third section attention is given to certain selected aspects of the artistic and recreational life of the period—the theatres, naturally; the active printing presses which disseminated everything from expensive folios, handsomely bound, to cheap paperbacks; and, alongside these, that realm of song and balladry which made street and tavern, private house and country fair, ring with melody, lyric beauty and jiggling rhyme. When all has been said, the true glory of the Elizabethan age must be found to rest in its strange power over words—words winged with splendour, barbed with wit, and so fashioned that, although issuing from an environment far removed from ours, they have retained all their compulsive force. Appropriately, therefore, the final chapter seeks to suggest the source from which Shakespeare and his poet-companions drew their command over language. An attempt, too, has been made to present this picture visually as well as by the printed word. All the illustrations have been selected with this end in view, and one set of plates in particular has been devised, largely with the aid of the late F. P. Wilson, to give at least a glimpse of something not dealt with in the text—the sports and games which were a solace and delight on summer days and winter's long candle-lit evenings.

A.N.