

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00076-5 - Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art

Edward Dowden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Shakspeare—His Mind and Art.



CHAPTER I.

SHAKSPERE AND THE ELIZABETHAN AGE.

IN these chapters an attempt will be made to present a view or aspect of a great poet, and the first word must explain precisely what such a view or aspect is worth, what it professes to be, and what it disclaims. Dr Newman, in his "Grammar of Assent," has distinguished two modes of apprehending propositions. There is what he calls the real apprehension of a proposition, and there is the notional apprehension. In real apprehension there is the perception of some actual, concrete, individual object, either with the eye or some bodily sense, or with the mind's eye—memory, or imagination. But our minds are not so constructed as to be able to receive and retain only an exact image of each of the objects that comes before us one by one, in and for itself. On the contrary, we compare and contrast.

We see at once "that man is like man, yet unlike ; and unlike a horse, a tree, a mountain, or a monument. And in consequence we are ever grouping and discriminating,

A

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00076-5 - Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art

Edward Dowden

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Shakspeare—His Mind and Art.*

measuring and sounding, framing cross classes, and cross divisions, and thereby rising from particulars to generals, that is, from images to notions. . . . ‘Man’ is no longer what he really is, an individual presented to us by our senses, but as we read him in the light of those comparisons and contrasts which we have made him suggest to us. He is attenuated into an aspect, or relegated to his place in a classification. Thus his appellation is made to suggest, not the real being which he is in this or that specimen of himself, but a definition.” Thus individual propositions about the concrete, in the mind of a thinker whose intellect works in the way of notional apprehension, “almost cease to be, and are diluted or starved into abstract notions. The events of history and the characters who figure in it lose their individuality.”

Now it is not such an aspect, such a view of Shakspeare which it is here attempted to present. To come into close and living relation with the individuality of a poet must be the chief end of our study—to receive from his nature the peculiar impulse and impression which he, best of all, can give. We must not attenuate Shakspeare to an aspect, or reduce him to a definition, or deprive him of individuality, or make of him a mere notion. Yet also no experiment will here be made to bring Shakspeare before the reader as he spoke, and walked, as he jested in his tavern, or meditated in his solitude. It is a real apprehension of Shakspeare’s character and genius which is desired, but not such an apprehension as mere observation of the externals of the man, of his life or of his poetry would be likely to produce. I wish rather to attain to some central principles

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00076-5 - Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art

Edward Dowden

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Shakspeare and the Elizabethan Age.* 3

of life in him which animate and control the rest, for such there are existent in every man whose life is life in any true sense of the word, and not a mere affair of chance, of impulse, of moods, and of accidents.

In such a study as this we endeavour to pass through the creation of the artist to the mind of the creator: but it by no means prevents our returning to view the work of art simply as such, apart from the artist, and as such to receive delight from it. Nay, in the end it augments our delight by enabling us to discover a mass of fact which would otherwise be overlooked. To enjoy the beauty of a landscape it is not necessary to understand the nature and arrangement of the rocks which underlie or rise up from the soil. While studying the stratification of those rocks we absolutely lose sight of the beauty of the landscape. Nevertheless, a larger mass of pleasure is in the end possessed by one who adds to his instinctive spontaneous feeling of delight, a knowledge of the geology of the country. In like manner, while the study of anatomy is quite distinct from the pleasure which the sight of a beautiful human body gives, yet, in the end, the sculptor who adds to his instinctive, spontaneous delight in the beauty of moulded form, and moving limb, a knowledge of human anatomy receives a mass of pleasure greater than that of one who is unacquainted with the facts of structure and function. There is an obvious cause of this. The geologist and the anatomist *see more*, and see a new class of phenomena, which produce new delights. The lines of force in a landscape to which an ordinary observer is entirely insensible, come out to the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00076-5 - Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art

Edward Dowden

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Shakspeare—His Mind and Art.*

instructed eye, and give it thrills of strong emotion, like those which we receive from the athletes or the gods of Michael Angelo. The lines of force are drawn in the granite and the sandstone differently, and hence an endless variety of delights corresponding to the infinite variety of the disposition of its rock-forces by Nature. We do not only understand better what is before us; we enjoy it more. We are not attenuating it to an aspect, or inobservant of its individuality; we are, on the contrary, penetrating to the centre of that individuality. It is generally not until the dominant lines of force are clearly perceived that we can group in just proportions the minor details which investigation presents to our notice.

One who stands in the Sistine Chapel at Rome, and looks up to its ceiling, must in due time become aware of his own spirit as if it were some over-burdened caryatid, sustaining the weight of the thought of Michael Angelo. The first effort—and it is no trivial effort—must be to raise oneself to the height of the great argument. Merely to conceive prophet, or sibyl, primitive man or the awful demiurge, as placed before one's eyes, is an exercise which demands concentration of self, and abandonment of the world,—an exercise which strains and exhausts the imagination. To ascend from this to a comprehension of the total product,—to feel the stupendous life which animates not alone each single figure, rapt or brooding, but which circles through them all, which plays from each to the other, and forms the one vital soul that lies behind this manifold creation—to achieve this is something rarer and more difficult. But

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00076-5 - Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art

Edward Dowden

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Shakspeare and the Elizabethan Age.* 5

there is a yet higher ascension possible. These vast creations, and much beside these, St Peter's at Rome, the David at Florence, the Slaves of the Louvre, the Last Judgment, the Moses, the Tombs of the Medici, the Poems for Vittoria Colonna,—all these are less than Michael Angelo. These were the projections of a single mind. There is something higher and more wonderful than St Peter's, or the Last Judgment—namely, the *mind* which flung these creations into the world. And yet, it is when we make the effort which demands our most concentrated and most sustained energy,—it is when we strive to come into presence of the living mind of the creator, that the sense of struggle and effort is relieved. We are no longer surrounded by a mere world of thoughts and imaginations which, in an almost selfish way, we labour to appropriate and possess. We are in company with a man ; and a sense of real human sympathy and fellowship rises within us. Virtue goes out of him. We are conscious of his strength communicating itself to us. We may not overmaster him, and pluck out the heart of his mystery ; yet it is good to remain in his companionship. There is something in this invigorating struggle with a nature greater than one's own which unavoidably puts on in one's imagination, the shape of the Hebrew story of Peniel. We wrestle with an unknown man until the breaking of the day. We say, "Tell me, I pray thee, thy name?" and he will not tell it. But though we cannot compel him to reveal his secret, we wrestle with him still. We say, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." And the blessing is obtained.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00076-5 - Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art

Edward Dowden

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Shakspeare—His Mind and Art.*

If to lay hold of Michael Angelo and to strive with him be the most strenuous feat achievable by the critical imagination in the world of plastic art, to deal with Shakspeare requires more endurance, a firmer nerve, and a finer cunning. The great ideal artist, a Milton, a Michael Angelo, a Dante, betrays himself in spite of the haughtiest reserve. But Shakspeare, if an idealist, was also above all else a realist in art, and lurks almost impregably behind his work. "The secrets of nature have not more gift in taciturnity."* And yet some few of the secrets of nature can be wrested from her. But Shakspeare possessed that most baffling of self-defences—*humour*. Just when we have laid hold of him, he eludes us, and we hear only distant ironical laughter. What is to be done? How shall a dramatist—a dramatist possessed of humour—be cheated of his privacy? How shall his reserve be overmastered? How shall we interrogate him? Is there any magic word which will compel him to put off disguise, and declare himself in his true shape?

If we could watch his writings closely, and observe their growth, the laws of that growth would be referable to the nature of the man, and to the nature of his environment. And we might even be able to refer to one and the other of these two factors producing a common resultant, that which is specially due to each. Fortunately the succession of Shakspeare's writings (although it is probable that neither external nor internal evidence will ever suffice to make the chronology certain and precise), is

* *Troilus and Cressida*, Act iv., Scene 2.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00076-5 - Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art

Edward Dowden

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Shakspeare and the Elizabethan Age.* 7

sufficiently ascertained to enable us to study the main features of the growth of Shakspeare as an artist and as a man. We do not now place "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "The Tempest" side by side as Shakspeare's plays of fairyland. We know that a long interval of time lies between the two, and that if they resemble one another in superficial or accidental circumstances, they must differ to the whole extent of the difference between the youthful Shakspeare, and the mature, experienced, fully-developed man. Much is due to the industry of Malone; much to the ingenuity and industry of recent Shakspeare scholars who, in the changes which took place in the poet's manner of writing verse have found an index, trustworthy in the main, to the true chronology of the plays.*

It will be well first to stand away from Shakspeare, and to view him as one element in a world larger than himself. In order that an organism—plant or animal—should exist at all, there must be a certain correspondence between the organism and its environment.

* Mr Spedding, in his article, "Who wrote Henry VIII?" (*Gentleman's Magazine*, August, 1850) first applied quantitative criticism of verse peculiarities to the study of Shakspeare's writings. Mr Charles Bathurst, in "Remarks on the Differences of Shakespeare's Versification in different Periods of his Life" (London, 1857), called attention to the change "from broken to interrupted verse" which took place as Shakspeare advanced in his dramatic career; and observed also the increase in the use of double-endings in his later plays. Professor Craik, in his "English of Shakespeare," and Professor J. K. Ingram, in a lecture upon Shakspeare published in "Afternoon Lectures" (Bell and Daldy, 1863), again called attention to these peculiarities of versification as affording evidence for the ascertainment of the chronology of the plays. Finally, about the same time in England and in Germany, two investigators—Rev. F. G. Fleay and Professor Hertzberg—began to apply "quantitative criticism" of the characteristics of verse to the determination of the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00076-5 - Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art

Edward Dowden

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Shakspeare—His Mind and Art.*

If it be found to thrive and flourish, we infer that such correspondence is considerable. Now we know something of the Elizabethan period, and we know that Shakspeare was a man who prospered in that period. In that special environment Shakspeare thrived: he put forth his blossoms and bore fruit. And in the smaller matter of material success he flourished also. In an Elizabethan atmosphere he reached his full stature, and became not only great and wise, but famous, rich, and happy. Can we discover any significance in these facts? We are told that Shakspeare "was not of an age, but for all time." That assertion misleads us; and indeed in the same poem to the memory of his friend from which these words are taken, Ben Jonson apostrophises his great rival as "Soul of the Age." Shakspeare was for all time by virtue of certain powers and perceptions, but he also belonged especially to an age, his own age, the age of Spenser, Raleigh, Jonson, Bacon, Burleigh, Hooker,—a Protestant age, a monarchical age, an age eminently positive and practical. A man does not attain to the universal by abandoning the particular, nor

dates of plays. The test on which Hertzberg chiefly relies is the feminine (double) ending; he gives the percentage of such endings in seventeen plays, and believes that the percentage indicates their chronological order. See the preface to *Cymbeline* in the German Shakespeare Society's edition of Tieck's and Schlegel's translation. Mr Fleay's results, independently ascertained, were published subsequently to Hertzberg's. See *Trans. New Sh. Soc.*, and *Macmillan's Magazine*, Sept. 1874. In 1873 Mr Furnivall, in founding the New Shakespeare Society,—before he was aware that Mr Fleay's work was in progress,—insisted on the importance of metrical tests for determining the chronology, and gave the proportion of stopt to unstopt lines in three early and three late plays. The latest contribution to the subject is Professor Ingram's valuable paper read before the New Sh. Soc. on the "Weak-ending" Test.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00076-5 - Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art

Edward Dowden

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Shakspeare and the Elizabethan Age.* 9

to the everlasting by an endeavour to overleap the limitations of time and place. The abiding reality exists not somewhere apart in the air, but under certain temporary and local forms of thought, feeling, and endeavour. We come most deeply into communion with the permanent facts and forces of human nature and human life, by accepting first of all this fact,—that a definite point of observation and sympathy, not a vague nowhere, has been assigned to each of us.

What is the ethical significance of that literary movement to which Shakspeare belonged, and of which he was a part—the Elizabethan drama? The question seems at first improper. There is perhaps no body of literature which has less of an express tendency for the intellect than the drama of the age of Elizabeth. It is the outcome of a rich and manifold life; it is full of a sense of enjoyment, and overflowing with energy; but it is for the most part absolutely devoid of a conscious purpose. The chief play-wright of the movement declared that the end of playing, “both at the first and now, was and is to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature.” A mirror has no tendency. The questions we ask about it are, “Does this mirror reflect clearly and faithfully?” and “In what direction is it turned?” Capacity for perceiving, for enjoying, and for reproducing facts, and facts of as great variety as possible,—this was the qualification of a dramatist in the days of Elizabeth. The facts were those of human passion, and human activity. He needed not, as each of our poets at the present time needs, to have a doctrine, or a revelation, or an interpretation. The mere fact was enough

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00076-5 - Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art

Edward Dowden

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Shakspeare—His Mind and Art.*

without any theory about the fact; and this fact men saw more in its totality, more in the round, because they approached it in the spirit of frank enjoyment. It was not for them attenuated into an aspect, or relegated to a class.

In the Renaissance and Reformation period life had grown a real thing,—this life on earth for three score years and ten. The terror and sadness of the Middle Ages, the abandonment of earthly joy, the wistfulness and pathos of spiritual desire, and on the other hand, the scepticism, irony, and sensuality under the ban were things which, as dominant forms of human life, had passed away. The highest mediæval spirits were those which had felt with most intensity that we are strangers and pilgrims here on earth, that we have no abiding place among human loves and human sorrows, that life is of little worth except with reference to infinite, invisible antecedents and issues in other worlds. With all his tender affinities to the brotherhood of elemental powers, and of animals, Saint Francis felt allied to these as brethren only because they had ceased to be rivals for his heart with the supreme lover, Jesus. The deepest religious voice of the Middle Ages couples in a single breath the words *de imitatione Christi* and *de contemptu omnium vanitatum mundi*. It is the ascetic quester, Galahad, with vision undimmed by any mist of earthly passion, who beholds the mystical Grail. Angelico paints paradise, and, because the earth can afford no equal beauty, then paradise again; below the glory of seraphim and cherubim appear the homely faces of priest and monk, transported into the pellucid