

INTRODUCTION.



THE interest excited by our greatest poet extends beyond his writings. Shakspeare's commentators have made the most skilful researches to ascertain the incidents of his life. The late Mr. Malone, in particular, was fortunate enough to correct much error on this subject, and to leave the few particulars we have of his family and himself proved by documents, which will hardly now be disputed. Unfortunately the life of the poet by that gentleman was left unfinished—he conducted him only to the period of his quitting Stratford; and the remaining section, which should have been devoted to his appearance in London, is occupied by the essay on the chronology of his dramas. I am little disposed to blame his editor for not giving that for which he received no materials; but the many conversations which I had the honour and happiness to hold with Mr. Malone upon this subject, (some of which I see he very flatteringly remembered) convince me that, though he left no record, he had accumulated much; and that he could have proceeded to the very end of the poet's existence, and have poured forth at every period, abundance of new fact, or refutation of long established mistake.

The commentators, while they inquired after the actor and the poet, did not altogether neglect his personal resemblance. But very

unfortunately, they conducted the latter inquiry in a way little likely to lead to certainty. They usually worked themselves up to the feeling of partizans rather than that of inquirers, and determined to see no marks of authenticity out of the frame of their favourite portrait. But the few pictures, that have any claim to be considered, being already of great age, and having sustained much injury, it becomes a duty in the poet's worshippers, to settle, if possible, the person of their divinity; and not leave posterity to a wretched indecision, among hundreds of copies and pretended originals, in which the true pictures are debased, and the nation insulted, and his admirers look in vain for any traits of their great and amiable poet.

A reader who rises from the perusal of Shakspeare's writings will be apt, from a fanciful analogy, to invest his person with extraordinary graces; and his portrait is required to reflect all the intelligence in his works. Experience of nature, it is true, commands us to limit such expectations; and indeed art must disappoint them, even if they were just. Shakspeare has himself told us, with his usual point, that "the will is infinite, and the execution confined; that the desire is boundless, and the act a slave to limit."

If we read over the cotemporary allusions to Shakspeare (when the writers were not obviously irritated by his success) we find the most cordial assent to his great and amiable character. He is *admirable in the quality* he professes; he is the wonder of the age for his genius, and THAT was not for an age, "but for all time." As a man of business, he is strictly correct and honourable—as a friend and fellow, as well as a writer, *his mind and hand go together*; he is

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the gentle grace of society, and redeems the profession he adorns, from the galling odium which illiberal prejudice had chained about it. Aubrey, on perhaps good authority, has added something to these pleasing features. He tells us that “ he was a handsome well-shaped man, very good company, and of a very ready, and pleasant, and smooth wit.”

Of such a man, therefore, who would not wish to possess an exact resemblance? Accuracy in such a matter is every thing. Our wish must be, by the aid of picture, to enjoy him in private life; to sit with him in the same room; and, while we have before us the inspirations of his mind, to catch the characteristic look of his meditation, or perhaps the smile with which he brightened his familiar circle. Happily, I think we do possess satisfaction of this nature. It is the object of these pages to shew, that in very few cases of a similar kind have we likeness more strongly authenticated. Both the pencil and the graver have perpetuated the features of our poet. It is our duty to convey to distant times the pleasure we ourselves enjoy—to relieve them, while we have the means, from the spurious portraits; to establish and extend the true; and thus hand down, along with works that are never to die, the express image of him who composed them.

Of all the follies which expensive triflers commit among us, the cruellest is that which is called illustration. The reader knows that I allude to the practice of tearing the portraits from the works of our great authors, to combine them in some fantastic series under a particular reign. The mania is inconceivably violent. Let a man

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once begin to illustrate a chronicle, a Clarendon, or a catalogue, and a fortune only can purchase the bauble. I would, by some rare, because pleasant, Act of Parliament, compel these collectors, to restore such accumulated plunder to the original possessors—

“ So distribution should undo excess,
“ And each book have enough.”

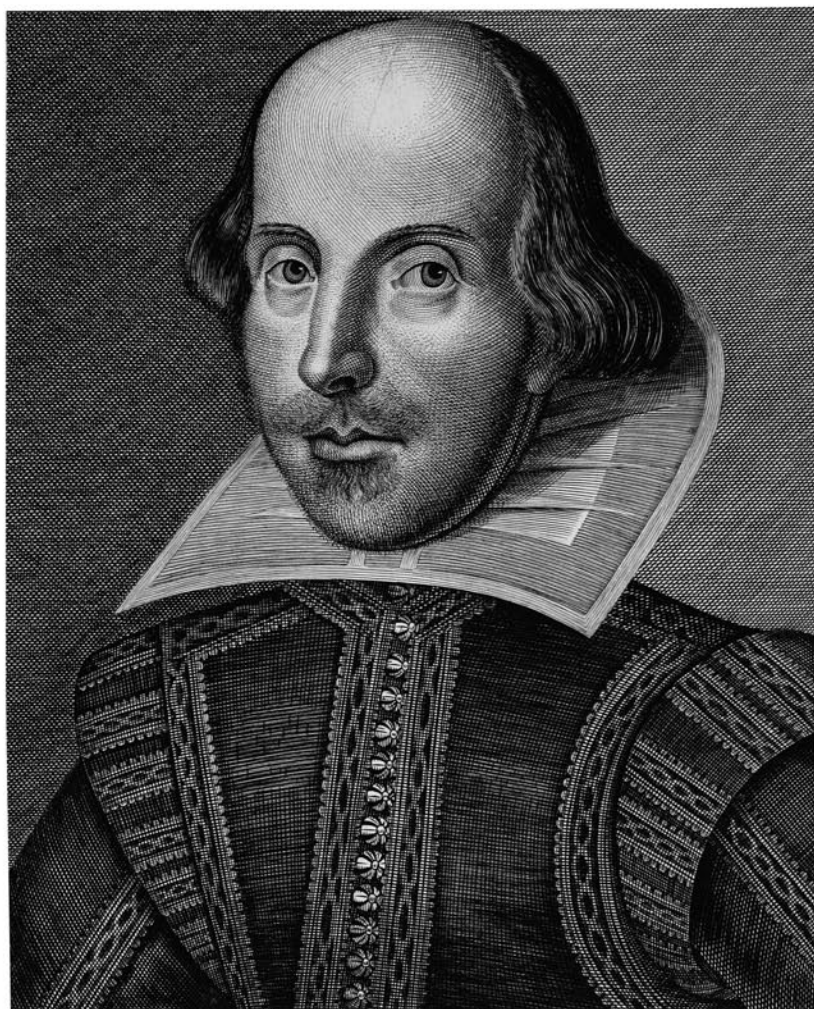
The first authentic collection of the plays of Shakspeare was printed for Messrs. Heminge and Condell, by Jaggard and Blount, in the year 1623, though a copy is in existence dated one year earlier; it is a medium folio, printed with two columns on each page, and exhibits the plays, with the simple and natural classification, under the three heads of Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies: meaning by the middle term, such dramas as had been constructed from the materials of our English chronicles.

The copies of this book, called the first folio, are usually found divested of their original title; and the reason is, *not* that this page was more liable to injury than any other, for it was sufficiently guarded by the leaves preceding it, but that it has been torn out, to afford an illustration to some fanciful assemblage of English portraits. The process then has been, to get the head from the second, third, or fourth impressions of the book, and let this into a spurious title-page printed for such purposes. The original price of the folio 1623 was one pound—the highest price it has ever yet brought at our book-sales is 107 guineas, which the late Mr. Boswell paid for the copy that was Mr. Kemble's. This book, it is true, had been rendered

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extremely beautiful, and had in its various stages cost Mr. Kemble nearly three times that sum. It had been purified from all stains by the usual chemical process; it had then been inlaid into a royal paper, and superbly bound, at first in three volumes, but finally compressed into one. Thus sumptuously equipped, it was deposited in a neat case with a lock and key; and except to the truer order of bibliographical antiquaries, remains the most precious copy of that folio. The class to which I have alluded, prefer it in the condition of Sir Walter Blunt, perfect in its members, but “stained with the variation of each soil” it may have passed over, from the time it was printed, till it reaches the metropolis from some manor-house in the country, and after being thumbed by several generations, at last settles, new bound, in splendid repose upon the shelf of some library of ostentation. By this explanation, I am naturally led first to consider what is called Martin Droeshout’s print of Shakspeare.

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SHAKSPEARE

from the First Folio Edition.

MARTIN DROESHOUT'S PRINT OF SHAKSPEARE.



IN the year 1623, Heminge and Condell, two friends and fellows of our poet, published the first complete edition of his plays. On the title-page of their folio is impressed a head of Shakspeare, to which Martin Droeshout the engraver has put his name. It should be looked at in a clear and good impression, in this genuine book; for as the same plate was used in the succeeding folios, the wear of it during sixty-two years may be supposed to have done injury to the skill, mean as it was, of the engraver; and in also affecting the likeness, time may be said to have done, however extraordinary, a solitary injury to Shakspeare. In other words, Droeshout's original copper-plate is made to furnish out a portrait of the poet in the edition of 1623; in that of 1632, in which it continued very tolerable; and in the two latter folios of 1664 and 1685, when I confess it to have become, what it has frequently been called, "an abominable libel upon humanity."

It will readily be granted that, as a work of art, it is by no means skilful, even for that time. They certainly had better artists. Seven years earlier, CHAPMAN'S Homer had been published, with an engraved head of that translator, of the very finest character. It is too

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well known to our collectors, to demand any particular praise in this place. I can only regret, that the portrait of Shakspeare was not equally fortunate. Chapman's engraver would have left nothing to desire, unless indeed the vain wish that Vandyke could have painted ONE destined to a kindred immortality.

We all know that *mere* likeness does not rest upon excellence in art. A great painter in his work has many other points that attract him. He is to compose a picture. He may aim at the expression of the general character, and slight the detail. He may consider too attentively grace of position, and turn out of hand a finished performance, which, when compared with his sitter, is only the "romance of real life." In nearly all families, you find some inferior portrait which is there preferred to the finer picture. The one, they will tell you, is reckoned a capital performance of the great master of the time, but the other is the exact resemblance of their relation. In the one you think of the painter, in the other of the sitter. Vulgar art is fitted to satisfy vulgar taste—it besides exaggerates the points in which resemblance consists. I am not saying that such abortions of art *should* be preferred—I am only shewing that likeness may be found, where nothing else exists for which the picture is desirable.

I feel tempted to select one striking instance of the important truth above explained; and I solicit the indulgence of such as may think it digression, to leave the Dutchman, for Sir Joshua Reynolds. The great painter of our country, full of the spirit of Michael Angelo, conceived and executed a sublime portrait of Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse. He used freely the mighty impersonation of the

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prophet Joel in the Capella Sistina. The subject excited his imagination, and inspiration informs the whole of his composition. But as a *likeness* of Mrs. Siddons, it confessedly fails. Yet I do not believe that this was intended by the artist—mere identity was lost in the magnificence of his design; and perhaps from the late Mr. Harlow's picture of her as Queen Katherine, the most correct notion may be acquired of the features and expression of Siddons. When Reynolds modestly inscribed his name upon the hem of her garment, he bestowed greater longevity than he received.

“ The actor only shrinks from Time's award,

“ Feeble tradition is his memory's guard.”

The picture will, in distant times, astonish those who never heard of the actress; and one general impression of unappropriated grandeur will be all the result of this amazing portrait.

To return at length to Shakspeare and his first engraver. The catalogues tell us that Droeshout engraved, besides the head of our poet, portraits of John Fox, the martyrologist; Richard Elton; John Howson, Bishop of Durham; and Lord Mountjoy Blount. That he was also employed upon Haywood's *Hierarchy of Angels*, and executed a print of Dido stabbing herself, for Stapylton's octavo *Virgil*.

The head of Shakspeare is confessedly inferior to some of these works. It has been therefore supposed that he engraved after a very coarse original, if indeed he did not work from personal recollection, assisted by such hints as might be given by those who desired this embellishment for their book. Some ten years ago I was shewn a

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picture, which appeared to be painted by the very artist who supplied Droeshout with the likeness of Shakspeare. The figure is a half-length. The dress of the person is like that of Shakspeare—the ruff is in form the same. On the left hand, at the top of the canvass, is painted anno 1602, ætat. 25. On the right, in the taste of the Shepheard's Calendar, is this quibbling emblem—*Sperando, ferendo, vivo, vinco*. He wears moreover “a seal-ring, probably of his grandfather's,” the arms on which are plain enough for a herald to interpret. Distance is nothing with such painters. If their subject had a heap of coins before him, you step up to the picture, as you would to the table, and may peruse the evidence of many a king's reign. Who this person was I know not, but I owe him my attentions, for thus shewing me the exact manner in which Shakspeare was painted. Here were therefore no volunteer infidelities, as Mr. Steevens subsequently asserted, on the part of the engraver—we may rest assured that the engraving was scrupulously faithful to an indifferent original; I mean indifferent only as to its style of art; for as to its resemblance, we may be confident it was deemed perfect by those who best knew the man, most regarded and most regretted him. “The stage,” in language no less true than complimentary, “despair'd day but for his volume's light.” To Heminge and Condell, therefore, it was essential to perpetuate his countenance with his works. Though his hasty but immortal compositions had none of his own care, to that of his fellows they were every way entitled: they constituted the precious stock of their company—the great possessors, as they were once angrily called, were the true heirs of his inventions, with a re-