

SHAKESPEARE and His Contemporary Critics

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Did Shakespeare's own age have any awareness of his power as a playwright or any sense of his identity as a contemporary literary figure? The answer is, of course, "yes," as anyone can know who will bother to read the definitively presented record of his career in E. K. Chambers' two volume *William Shakespeare, A Study of Facts and Problems*. But it is a "yes" that must be qualified by the fact that it is difficult for us to accept as serious the views of him which actually were generated out of the literary innocence of his audience of almost four centuries ago. Our own views of Shakespeare's stature and of what is proper criticism of his work have been shaped, now, by two hundred years of commentary. It is a commentary that begins, for the first time in earnest, with the sharp scrutiny which Samuel Johnson gave the plays in his notes to his edition of 1765. It is a commentary which continues unimpeded into our own time as a fiercely competitive, intensely learned discourse on every aspect of Shakespeare's art.

To honor the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, I would like to retreat to the pre-critical years of the Elizabethans in order to assemble a portrait of him as his own ingenuous contemporaries saw him. Such a portrait, it is hoped, will appeal to a modern reader's historical curiosity concerning the English Renaissance and its naive way of looking at things literary. And in assembling this portrait, one needs to observe immediately that Shakespeare's contemporaries, with the single exception of Ben Jonson, were capable of expressing praise for his work, but only as a sort of primitive, half-articulate liking. Or, to put it in another way, his commentators simply affirmed, almost without interpretation or analysis, that there was much in him that was entertaining or profound. This is, to us, a severely limited kind of criticism, one aptly described by Wayne Shumaker, in his *Elements of Critical Theory*, as "confined to parts of the consciousness able to express themselves only by ambiguous ejaculations."

The first mention of Shakespeare's name in print, his first critical notice, appeared in 1592 when he was twenty-eight. It was a malicious, personal attack by Robert Greene, a young Cambridge University bohemian-intellectual who had tried unsuccessfully to make a living in London as a free-lance writer of plays,

romantic novels, and crime pamphlets. Greene addresses his remarks to other contemporary playwrights to warn them that the only persons to profit from their labors would be London actors, "those puppets . . . that spake from our mouths." Greene then singles out Shakespeare as the special object of his scorn both as an actor ("an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers"), and as a would-be playwright who "supposes he is well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you," and who is "in his own conceit, the only Shakespeare in a country."

There is no doubt that Shakespeare is the man referred to, not only because of the pun on his name but also because Greene quotes a sample of blank verse from Shakespeare's very early play *Henry VI*, Part III, against him. Greene's publisher, Chettle, issued a retraction in the same year 1592, describing Shakespeare as "excellent in the quality he professes" (i.e., as an actor), and notes that "divers of worship" (i.e., men of good reputation and social standing) have acknowledged Shakespeare's "facetious grace in writing."

By the time he was twenty-eight, then, Shakespeare had sufficiently established his local identity as an actor and as a young playwright to be worth attacking — though Greene's remarks are rather remote from what we would call literary criticism. Greene's castigations were repeated in print two years later (1594), in verses on Greene's death. And Shakespeare may have been sufficiently irritated by the adverse publicity to have commented on the whole matter, by way of a pun on Greene's name, in his sonnet 112 addressed to a friend:

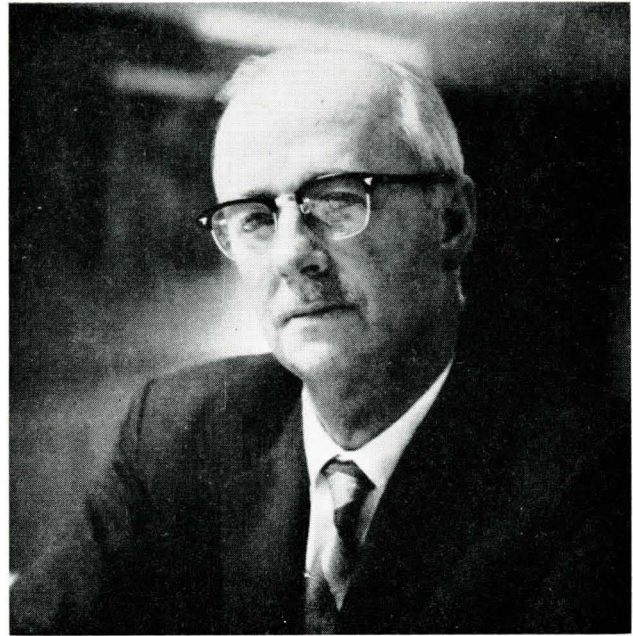
Your love and pity doth the impression fill
Which vulgar scandal stamped upon my brow;
For what care I who calls me well or ill,
So you o're greene my bad, my good allow?

Following Greene's attack in 1592, one finds little until 1598 except a scattering of references to Shakespeare in print. In 1598, a Francis Meres published the first attempt at an evaluation of Shakespeare as a currently living writer of plays and of poetry. Meres was a young clergyman living in London in the last years of Queen Elizabeth's reign, with some connection with Sir Thomas Egerton and conceivably with the poet

John Donne. Meres equated Shakespeare's art as a poet with that of Ovid, though Shakespeare had perhaps invited the comparison by choosing two lines from Ovid's *Amores* as an epigraph for his own *Venus and Adonis* (1593). Meres attempted to describe Shakespeare's poetic style by labeling it "mellifluous and honey-tongued," words repeated in print by such other contemporaries as Richard Barnfield, John Weever, and Thomas Heywood as especially appropriate ones. Meres described Shakespeare as "the most excellent" playwright "among the English" and compared his work with that of Plautus and Seneca. Meres lists twelve of Shakespeare's plays by title (as of 1598), a number of which remained unpublished until after Shakespeare's death. Meres makes the first reference to Shakespeare's sonnets, the sequence of which was not to be published for another eleven years. He describes the sonnets as "sugared," (i.e., "spicy"). He concludes what he has to say about Shakespeare by listing him among those of his contemporaries "the most passionate among us to bewail and bemoan the perplexities of love."

There is a further scattering of about a dozen references to Shakespeare in things published between Meres' comments and Camden's eulogy in 1605. These include a mention of *Romeo and Juliet* by the playwright John Marston and a rebuttal of the complaint in Shakespeare's as yet unpublished sonnet 111 by the poet John Davies of Hereford. But the two most significant references to Shakespeare during these years are from manuscript sources. They both date from around 1600, about mid-point in Shakespeare's career as a dramatist. The first is by Gabriel Harvey, the tutor of Edmund Spenser at Cambridge University, a man with a learned, somewhat arrogant scholarly mind. In a long note which Harvey jotted down about 1600 in the margin of his copy of Chaucer (the 1598 edition), he makes a comment on what people were reading at the turn of the century. He lists Shakespeare as among "our flourishing metricians." He observes, further, that "the younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* [then in its 5th edition], but his *Lucrece* [then in its 3rd edition] and his tragedy of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* [not to be published until 1603] have it in them to please the wiser sort." These half-critical remarks of Harvey's remained unknown until the eighteenth century. But they do suggest the extent to which Shakespeare had become a figure in his own age, ten years after he had started writing, and about seven years after his first published work, the poem *Venus and Adonis*.

The second of the significant references to Shakespeare between the years 1598-1605 is to be found in a series of parodies, in a manuscript of three student plays, the "Parnassus" plays, produced at Cambridge



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between 1598-1600. In the first of the plays, the character of the Gull quotes from *Venus and Adonis*, misquotes part of Mercutio's description of Romeo, and observes "I'll worship sweet Mr. Shakespeare, and to honor him will lay his *Venus and Adonis* under my pillow, as we read of one . . . slept with Homer under his bed's head." In the third of these plays, *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* are mentioned somewhat in scorn. Kemp and Burbage, two prominent actors of the Lord Chamberlain's company (that to which Shakespeare also belonged), are impersonated by students. Kemp is made to praise Shakespeare's plays above those written by "university men," and above those of Ben Jonson as well. The character Burbage then tries to solicit actors for his company from among the university audience. He picks out one student and asks him to try the role of Richard III. The student then recites the opening lines of Shakespeare's play. As with Harvey's marginal note, these Cambridge parodies are not literary evaluation of a high order, but an acknowledgment that Shakespeare had achieved a discussable identity as a writer of his time.

From Shakespeare's point of view, perhaps the most impressive comment on his work would have been that made by William Camden in his book *Remains, Concerning Britain* (1605). In the few pages which he devoted to the history of English letters, Camden gave one paragraph to his contemporaries. He included Shakespeare as one of ten writers that he considered as "most pregnant wits of these our times, whom succeeding ages may justly admire." Camden's judgment was excellent and we still read eight of his ten writers. To

have listed Shakespeare, along with Sidney, Spenser, Jonson, and others, as a "pregnant wit," after he had written not only all the romantic comedies but *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Lear* as well, may strike a twentieth century reader as something short of profound insight. To Shakespeare, however, to have been mentioned by Camden at all was to have been recognized by one of the most learned men of the time, one of the first Anglo-Saxon scholars, Head of Westminster School, author of the definitive study of his own age, *Annals of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*.

Between Camden's eulogy in 1605 and Shakespeare's death in 1616 at the age of fifty-two, Shakespeare's name, or titles of his works, turn up for casual mention about sixteen times. From his death to the last reference to him in 1643 by a man who had no doubt seen his plays and Shakespeare acting in them, Sir Richard Baker, we pick up another fifteen or more comments. These include one by the poet Michael Drayton who was also, curiously, a patient of Dr. Hall of Stratford, Shakespeare's son-in-law. Out of all this steady reference we still get almost nothing concretely critical with the single exception of the observations on Shakespeare's style by Ben Jonson, to be found in Jonson's thumbnail sketch of Shakespeare. Jonson's personal connections with Shakespeare are many. His name had been linked with Shakespeare's as early as the "Parnassus" plays. Shakespeare's company had produced six of Jonson's plays between 1598 and 1611, and Jonson himself lists Shakespeare as having acted in two of the six. Jonson also wrote the most famous of the commemorative poems on Shakespeare, published in the First Folio edition of the plays in 1623, giving us the famous line: "He was not of an age, but for all time." The sketch of Shakespeare was found among Jonson's papers, and published shortly after his death in 1637.

In this sketch we get, for the first time, the kind of analytical observation on an aspect of Shakespeare's style that we today would recognize as criticism. Jonson asserts that "many times" in his writings Shakespeare "fell into those things [which] could not escape laughter." The line he cites as an example of the sort of thing he finds "ridiculous" is from *Julius Caesar*: "Caesar never did wrong but with just cause" and one notes that in the only published version of this play (in the First Folio), the line has been edited to read, more tamely I think, "Know, Caesar doth not wrong, nor without cause /Will he be satisfied."

In chiding Shakespeare for a lack of logic in this kind of line, Jonson isolates, with precision and for the first time, one of the most characteristic idiosyncrasies of Shakespeare's verbal manner: his fairly constant use of self-contradictory, paradoxical assertion. I have gathered a few further examples of what to Jonson

would have been "ridiculous" lines, to show them appearing in Shakespeare's early work as well as in his late work. In his *Comedy of Errors*, for instance, Aegeon illustrates this stylized paradoxical assertion in his comment:

A heavier task could not have been imposed
Than I to speak my griefs unspeakable (I. i. 32).

Juliet uses this same stylistic device when she says:

Come, civil night . . .
And learn me how to lose a winning match
Played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods
(III. ii. 10).

Enobarbus uses it again in his description of Cleopatra:

Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies (II. ii. 241).

The nice touches of verbal irony characteristic of Shakespeare's style having been derided by Jonson, he concludes his sketch magnanimously. He observes that Shakespeare "redeemed his vices [as a writer] with his virtues. There was ever more in him to be praised than to be pardoned."

We close the record of Elizabethan views of Shakespeare's art with Sir Richard Baker's estimate. Baker (1568-1645) had been the friend of the Elizabethan scholar Sir Henry Wotton. He had also known the young John Donne whom he had described as "a great frequenter of plays." Baker wrote a thoughtful defense of the Elizabethan stage against its puritan attackers, *Theatrum Redivivum, or The Theatre Vindicated*. To while away the tedium of age and a lack of personal success, he also wrote *A Chronicle of the Kings of England* (1643). At the end of his discussion of the reign of Elizabeth he added a list of the men he considered to have been the most prominent of their time. He included among them both Shakespeare and Jonson: "For writers of plays, and such as had been players themselves, William Shakespeare and Benjamin Jonson have specially left their names recommended to posterity."

This is the summary of the way in which Shakespeare's age recorded its awareness of the fact that the greatest writer in the English language was of its time. The Elizabethans are seen to have been rather inarticulate as literary critics. We may take comfort, however, in the fact that had they been more articulate they still would most probably not have known the true stature of the Lord Chamberlain Company's actor-playwright, William Shakespeare. A man's full measure can scarcely be taken until one sees how far other men in later ages fall away from his earlier accomplished greatness.