CHARACTER OF OUR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT SHAKESPEARE

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ALL writing which is not of the loosest kind about Shakespeare must, almost necessarily, be dominated by one of two distinct estimates of the positive information available on the subject. There is the view that all this information really comes, as a matter of fact, to very little; and there is the vew that, as a matter of fact, it comes to a good deal. The former is the more common, and—though the other has been held by persons whose opinion deserves the utmost respect, and to whom our debt for the labour they have spent on the question is very great—it is probably the sounder. The more impartially, the more patiently and the more respectfully, so far as regards the laws of critical and legal evidence, we examine the results of Halliwell-Phillipps among dead, and of Sidney Lee among living, enquirers, the more convinced do we, in some cases, at least, become that almost the whole matter is "a great Perhaps," except in two points: that one William Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon was, as a man of letters, actually the author of at any rate the great mass of the work which now goes by his name, and that, as a man, he was liked and respected by nearly all who knew him. These things are proved, the first critically, the second legally and historically. To the critical certainties we can add considerably, and to the critical probabilities immensely. But, legally and historically, we are left, at least in the way of certainties, with a series of dates and facts mostly relating to matters of pure business and finance—a skeleton which is itself far from complete, and which, in most points, can only be clothed with the flesh of human and literary interest by the most perilous process of conjecture. We are not quite certain of the identity of Shakespeare's father; we are by no means certain of the identity of his wife; we do not know, save by inference, that Shakespeare and

she ever went through the actual ceremony of marriage; we do not know when he began his dramatic career; we know the actual date of the first production of very few of his pieces, let alone that of their composition. Almost all the commonly received stuff of his life story is shreds and patches of tradition, if not positive dream work. We do not know whether he ever went to school. The early journey to London is first heard of a hundred years after date. The deer stealing reason for it is probably twenty years later. The crystallisation of these and other traditions in Rowe's biography took place a hundred and forty-six years after the poet's supposed birth. To hark back: it is not absolutely certain, though it is in the highest degree probable, that the "Shake-scene" in Greene's outburst is Shakespeare. "Shake-scene" is not so very much more unlikely a term of abuse for an actor than "cushion-" or "tubthumper" for a minister. And Chettle's supposed apology is absolutely, and, it would seem, studiously, anonymous. The one solid ground on which we can take our stand is supplied by Ben Jonson's famous, but mainly undated, references. They form the main external evidence for the two propositions which have been ventured above; to them, as to a magnetic centre, fly and cling all the contemporary, and shortly subsequent, scraps of evidence that are true metal; they supply the foundation piece on which a structure, built out of internal evidence, may be cautiously, but safely, constructed. Next to them, though in a different kind, comes Meres's *Palladis Tamia* passage in 1598. The publication dates of *Venus and Adonis,* of *Lucrece,* of the *Sonnets,* as well as the fact and date of the purchase of New Place, are tolerably fast-driven piles; the death date is another; the publication of the first folio yet another. We are not, therefore, in a mere whirl of drifting atoms, a wash of conflicting tides; but we may be more exposed to such a whirl or wash than men who like solid ground could desire.

FURTHER STUDIES:

- Shakespeare's Family and Education
- Shakespeare's Marriage and Relations with his Wife
- Shakespeare's Company
- Greene's Jealousy of Shakespeare
- Biographical aspects of the *Sonnets*
- Shakespeare

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