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# Shakespeare

**His World and His Art**



**K R Srinivasa Iyengar**

# SHAKESPEARE

## HIS WORLD AND HIS ART

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K. R. SRINIVASA IYENGAR



STERLING PUBLISHERS PRIVATE LIMITED  
NEW DELHI-110016 JALANDHAR-144003 BANGALORE-560009

**STERLING PUBLISHERS PVT. LTD.**

**L-10 Green Park Extension, New Delhi-110016**

**Sri Maruthi Complex. No. 325, Gandhi Nagar, Bangalore-560009**

**695 Model Town Jullundur-144003**

This book has been subsidised by the Government of India, through the National Book Trust, India, for the benefit of students.

**SHAKESPEARE: HIS WORLD AND HIS ART**

© 1964, 1984 K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar

First Edition 1964

Second Edition: 1984

Code No. (45-237/1982)

Price Rs 25.50

**Printed in India**

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**Published by S.K. Ghai, Managing Director, Sterling Publishers (P) Ltd.,  
L-10 Green Park Extension, New Delhi-110016 and  
Printed at Ram Printograph (India), New Delhi-110020**

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THE CRAYTON PORTRAIT  
(Portrait of the John A. Crayton Library)  
(1850-1860)



THE GRAFTON PORTRAIT

(Courtesy of the John Rylands Library,  
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## PREFACE

This book is conceived as an introduction to Shakespeare for the general reader, the college student, and the isolated teacher who may find a conspectus like this useful for presenting Shakespeare to his classes. I have accordingly tried to give, in the light of recent scholarship and the trends of modern criticism, both an uncomplicated record of existing knowledge about Shakespeare and a critical study of the poems and all the 37 plays. Scholarship is expected to prepare the way for criticism by 'clearing the decks' as it were; yet criticism cannot wait till scholarship completes the preliminaries. The two activities have thus to go on side by side, making mutual adjustments all the time. Shakespeare scholarship today, pursued simultaneously in several directions, is becoming more and more a global co-operative enterprise, with the major concentrations of activity in U.K. and U.S.A. Our century is supposed to have specialised in what is commonly called 'historical criticism', whose aim is to discover the 'Elizabethan Shakespeare': in other words, to try to see Shakespeare as the Elizabethans saw and understood him. But in the evaluation of the phenomenon that is Shakespearian drama, we have to take note of the Elizabethan 'variables' as well as the human 'constants'. Nor should we forget that it is these 'constants' or universals — which are verily the constituents of quintessential human nature — that make Shakespeare important for us 361 years after the death of Queen Elizabeth the First, and important for us even in far-off India in the quatercentenary year of his birth.

While Shakespeare scholarship seems to call for the play of almost every scientific and humanistic discipline, the profession of Shakespeare criticism requires insight, sensibility and judgement of a high order. "I take it", declared J. Isaacs thirty years ago, that

"the true objects of Shakespeare criticism are (a) to give a picture of the author by tracing his treatment of material so far as it is conscious, or eliciting his unconscious processes without imposing an autobiography of the critic upon the victim of his inquiries; (b) to give the pattern of the



man and dissect for admiration the beauties he produces, the complexity and explosive force of the poetry, and the deploying and juxtaposition of the characters”.

An almost impossible task! Therefore, all that I have tried to do in this book is to preserve some sort of balance between biography, exploration of the backgrounds, discussion of the ‘sources’, and critical examination — more or less in their chronological order — of the poems and plays. I make no claim to originality; there are no sensational ‘discoveries’, no definitive ‘solutions’. On the other hand, I have not hesitated — where it seemed legitimate and appropriate — to give parallels drawn from Indian life and literature, or to express what my own heart spoke even if it was in defiance of received authoritative opinion.

Shakespeare is undoubtedly the most frequently cultivated field — the most thoroughly churned-up ocean — in 20th century literary scholarship and criticism, and it is unlikely that anything altogether new can now turn up, however persistent our endeavours. There are over 4,000 entries in Ebisch and Schucking’s *A Shakespeare Bibliography* (1931), and the bare recital of the conclusions of the aesthetic critics alone runs to some 1,000 tight pages in Augustus Ralli’s two-volume *A History of Shakespeare Criticism* (1932). Since the Second World War, the annual *Shakespeare Survey* (17th issue, 1964) and the *Shakespeare Quarterly* (now in its 15th year), not to mention the happily revived German *Jahrbuch*, are steadily adding to the fearful opulence and proliferating complexity of Shakespeare studies. “It is doubtful”, said M. W. Black some years ago, “whether any one mind, in the working hours of an ordinary lifetime, will ever again be able to assimilate all that is known about Shakespeare”. Other scholars too have expressed themselves in similar terms. While Kenneth Muir complains that “the yearly flood of Shakespeariana submerges all but the strongest swimmers and makes it *increasingly difficult* to see Shakespeare steadily, and see him whole”, J. I. M. Stewart moans that “as the industrious years go by, it becomes *increasingly difficult* not only to add to the criticism of Shakespeare, but even to report adequately upon a single aspect of it” (My italics). Again, Louis B. Wright of the Folger Library has recently acknowledged in near-despair:

“The field of Shakespeare criticism today is so vast and has such a ramification of specialised topics, from aesthetic appreciation to Freudian

analysis, that non-specialist literary scholars, much less other folk, find it difficult to sort out the significant from the trivial

And thus Clifford Leech, in a tone of resignation :

"The burden of Shakespeare criticism has become so grievous that no one today can undertake a general study of the dramatist in the confident belief that he has read, and remembered, everything of value that has already been written concerning his theme. He will be likely, therefore, to come to a point of disregard, trying to see the works by his own light, aided only by those writers who have exercised a special influence upon him".

Which, perhaps, correctly explains my own plight ! It is unlikely we shall ever reach finality about many of the vexed questions relating to Shakespeare, for we know at once too much and too little about him, his world, and his work. The field is full of booby-traps, the ocean full of deceptive currents. What has been garnered and pieced together and postulated about Shakespeare makes such Himalayas of 'facts and problems', argument and exegesis, expostulation and ecstasy, that the appetite of a Saintsbury may quail before the fare, and Atlas himself may feel crushed by the burden. Besides, as Alfred Harbage has pointed out, "everyone who has worked with Elizabethan drama knows how slippery the footing, how difficult to determine simply who wrote what when—with what hazards for honest impulses, what opportunities for dishonest ones". As the mass of publications swells more and more, our certitudes become less and less sharply defined. The circumstance that I was working in remote Waltair, without the facilities of the British Museum or the Bodleian—the Stratford or the Birmingham—the Folger or the Huntington—libraries, although it circumscribed too narrowly and even too arbitrarily the scope of my reading, perhaps also gave me the advantages that Lytton Strachey has claimed for 'ignorance',—for doesn't 'ignorance' simplify and clarify, select and omit, "with a placid perfection unattainable by the highest art?" Even so, the mass of material that I actually had on hand left me repeatedly wondering whether my present attempt wasn't, after all, foredoomed to failure.

My first formal introduction to Shakespeare was in 1922 when, as a schoolboy, I had to read the story of Hamlet in Lamb's *Tales*. Our enterprising teacher, however, read out and explained numer-



ous parallel passages from the play itself. In my undergraduate days I had to read as 'prescribed texts' *Julius Caesar*, *Othello* and *The Tempest*, while all Shakespeare came within the purview of the masterate course. Becoming a teacher in Ceylon in 1928, I taught Cambridge School Certificate students *Julius Caesar*, *Henry V*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*. Back in India, for over thirty years (and with hardly any break) I have been reading Shakespeare with my under-graduate or post-graduate students at Belgaum, Bagalkot and Waltair. I must have covered at least twenty-five of the plays in some detail, besides of course lecturing generally on Shakespeare's life and art. Again, one of my earliest review-assignments was H. Somerville's *Madness in Shakespearian Tragedy* (1928), and one of the most recent, A. L. Rowse's *William Shakespeare: A Biography* (1963). Between these two dates, I must have reviewed scores of books on Shakespeare, some at considerable length. In March 1955, I gave a course of three lectures on 'Crime and Punishment in Shakespeare' at the Annamalai University, and followed them with two more, with special reference to the great tragedies, at the Balangir College. The proximity of the quatercentenary year gave me the stimulus to make a new effort, although I knew how full of hazard the undertaking was. I soon gave up my original idea of a restricted monograph on the problem of 'Crime and Punishment in Shakespeare' in favour of a fuller study, and during the summer and autumn months of 1963 I managed to shake myself reasonably free from most other commitments and to get the typescript of the present study ready for the press. I now see that it has been clearly a task beyond my powers, yet it is also true that the writing of the book has helped me to see things I hadn't seen before. Reading the plays and the poems and re-reading them and living with them was certainly a most exhilarating experience; but when presently I turned to the many exercises in explication and interpretation, the shower of light by its very excess had sometimes an almost blinding effect upon me. While the *New Shakespeare* and the *New Arden* have been naturally among the most often consulted, the great critics and the great editors of all our yesterdays have seldom failed me when I was in serious difficulties. The *apparatus criticus*, considering the nature of the subject, has been kept within modest proportions; and although I have tried to

indicate every debt, it is not unlikely that I have here and there unconsciously echoed others' views or failed to make the necessary acknowledgement. As most of the authorities are cited in the footnotes, I have not duplicated the information in a regular Bibliography.

In this the quatercentenary year it is worth remembering that Shakespeare — in the original, in translation, or in adaptation — is still the universal favourite almost everywhere. His plays are read and seen with appreciation in both India and Pakistan. Boris Pasternak devoted some of the best years of his life to rendering Shakespeare into Russian. It is said that, on the eve of its fall in 1945, Shakespeare was performed in Berlin, and presumably *he* doesn't suffer because of the Berlin Wall. And although there are our latter-day innovators in the theatre — Ibsen and Bernard Shaw, O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, Brecht and Eugene Ionesco, Pinter and Samuel Beckett — Shakespeare still manages to win hands down against all competitors old and new. Besides, even in the field of Shakespeare criticism, the notes of violent dissidence are being heard no more. "The spectacle afforded by modern criticism", said Terence Spencer in his British Academy Lecture (1959), "is the shadow-boxing of rival bardolaters. Shakespeare is a dead issue. The resistance to his magnificent tyranny is over; and with it has gone something of the vigour and excitement and courage of Shakespeare criticism". A comet provokes furious discussion, but the Sun is more or less taken for granted. We are sustained by the Sun, we live in its light of life and truth, we daily offer our *sandhya* prayers, but we also take it all very much for granted. As the Shakespearian light streams upon us, we are awakened to the realisation that the natural human bond is the main insurance against the stratagems of mere egotistical man; the human microcosm, held together by the ties of civility and love and friendship and fellowship (and those obscure motions of the heart and soul that inspire hope and beat back despair), is the essence of the world of Shakespearian drama; and Shakespeare the creator of this world is also himself of a piece with it — an immanent as well as a transcendent Power and Personality. As J. W. Mackail puts it, "the study of Shakespeare returns finally, so far as it can be completed by a single student in a single lifetime, to that assimilation of Shakespeare, that interpenetration with his world, on

which . . . all study of him should be built. The world of Shakespeare may become our world."

I must here record my gratitude to the many batches of students who have patiently 'suffered' my Shakespeare classes. The quotations from Shakespeare are throughout from Peter Alexander's edition; and, besides, his forthright sanity — as revealed in his books and Introductions — has helped me to steer clear of some of the popular whimsies of twentieth century Shakespeare criticism. I was privileged to meet him on my first visit to U.K. in 1951, and the gift of his friendship has been a great inspiration to me all these years. The staff of the Andhra University Library and of the British Council Library at Madras have always readily given me such assistance as was within their means. My daughter, Prema Nandakumar, helped me in various ways while the writing was in progress and, later, by sharing the burden of proof-reading. My son, S. Ambirajan, sent me from U.K. books and journals that I urgently wanted. Messrs. Jupiter Press Private Ltd. have made a good job of printing this book with so many quotations, footnotes, and oddities of spelling. I am also grateful to the Regional Representative of the British Council, Madras, for securing the drawing of the Swan Theatre, and to Mr. Ronald Hall, Librarian of the John Rylands Library, Manchester, for permission to reproduce the 'Grafton Portrait' as frontispiece to the book. Even as the 'Swan' gives us a plausible enough image of the 'Globe', we would very much like to see in the 'Grafton Portrait' (taking our cue from John Dover Wilson and the late John Semple Smart) the very image of the 'Young Shakespeare' — Shakespeare, aged 24, in 1588, the year of the Armada. The coincidence is, indeed, too good and too striking *not* to be true!

K. R. SRINIVASA IYENGAR

Andhra University, Waltair

23 April 1964

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## CHAPTER I

### 'THE MAN FROM STRATFORD'

#### APPROACHES TO SHAKESPEARE

When a subject is as 'large' as Shakespeare, adventuring into its domain is like the attempt to explore the riches of an ocean. It seems so easy, so tempting, at first. You may begin at any point of the hither shore and press forward, bravely, enthusiastically. But soon you are out of your depth, you are caught and tossed by the waves, you are nearly lost. A great Shakespearian scholar who recently passed away told me in 1951: "I'm turning to other subjects. Shakespeare has a way of exhausting and swallowing up his critics. I'm retracing my steps in time". To be piloted across the ocean that is Shakespeare by an adept like Dowden or Bradley, Dover Wilson or Peter Alexander, Alfred Harbage or Hardin Craig, is no doubt both exciting and comforting, for each great Shakespearian critic is a master mariner who valiantly effects a passage to the furthest shores of understanding and enjoyment, making his way through the mists and storms and the many hidden rocks or largely hidden icebergs that are apt to confuse or overwhelm the unlucky or the unwary; and he is willing to carry us too in his magic bark, if we are prepared to entrust ourselves to his care. On the other hand, the boats vary in tonnage and seaworthiness, they follow diverse routes, and reach different points on the other side; and although a passage has been made somehow, the ocean itself stubbornly defies comprehension. A tiny pond has a neat brevity of its own, and soon yields up its mysteries; but an ocean's total contents defy measurement, its depths elude any sounding by the plummet. It is an

endless mystery, an endless challenge to adventurous humanity. And not to the adventurous alone, for even the timid can venture waist-deep into the ocean and wistfully gaze at the immense expanse, the overhanging clouds, the orange streaks of revelation where the heavens seem to meet the earth. The human mind, in its endeavour to seize Infinity, is only too ready to affirm: "This handful is the All" — like the blind men who equated the ear, the leg, the tail or the proboscis alone with the Elephant. Men must needs rest content with a part if the whole is beyond their reach; and partial knowledge, so long as it is seen to be such, is not without its use to the questing human spirit. Thus no Shakespearian, however ill-equipped or inexperienced, however timid or faltering in his approaches, need be quite shut out of the assembly of the Faithful. All honest Shakespearians are advancing the good cause, though not to an equal degree.

If Shakespeare studies strike us increasingly as the ocean, or all the oceans, the quintessential Shakespeare is a very Everest who lures us all only to baffle us all. Even when happily endowed climbers like Hunt and Tensing touch Everest, they must almost immediately withdraw, and the experience of the 'conquest' is no more than a memory, a dream, — an emotion recollected and re-lived in the tranquillity of after-hours or after-years. What is the secret of that power of utterance that with a few words ("Pray you undo this button") causes a pang or in a couple of lines —

She sat like Patience on a monument,  
Smiling at grief —

creates a human being, to become a part of us for ever? What sort of person, what sort of dramatist, was this 'Man from Stratford'? Was he the apostle of collective order or of uncompromising individuality? Was he more successful as a plotter of dramatic actions or as a creator of memorable characters, as a weaver of golden fancies or merely as a magnificent craftsman in verse? Was he a moralist, or an artist, or a moralist doubled with an artist? Was the symbolist more than the dramatist, the myth-maker more than the man of the theatre? Perhaps Shakespeare really exceeded all our prim critical categories, at once including and transcending them to our complete discomfiture! When Shakespeare speaks to us at his characteristic best, as in the