

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS LOVE

Frank Harris



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*A PLAY IN FOUR ACTS
AND AN EPILOGUE*

BY

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"The Women of Shakespeare," etc.).*



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INTRODUCTION

THE National Shakespeare Memorial Committee, it is announced, is about to produce a new play by Mr. Bernard Shaw entitled "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets." Fourteen years ago, provoked by the nonsense Mr. Shaw was then writing about Shakespeare in *The Saturday Review*, I wrote some articles on Shakespeare in the same paper, in which I showed in especial that Hamlet was a good portrait of Shakespeare, for the master had unconsciously pictured Hamlet over again as Macbeth and Jaques, Angelo, Orsino, Lear, Posthumus, Prospero and other heroes. With admirable quickness Mr. Bernard Shaw proceeded to annex as much of this theory of mine as he thought important ; in preface after preface to his plays, notably in the preface to

“Man and Superman,” he took my discovery and used it as if it were his. For instance, he wrote :—

“He (Shakespeare) must be judged by those characters into which he puts what he knows of himself, his Hamlets and Macbeths and Lears and Prosperos.”

And again :—

“All Shakespeare’s projections of the deepest humanity he knew have the same defect”—and so forth and so on.

In the preface to “Three Plays for Puritans” Mr. Shaw gave me a casual mention, just sufficient to afford him a fig-leaf, so to speak, of covering if the charge of plagiarism were brought against him: “His (Shakespeare’s) genuine critics,” he wrote, “from Ben Jonson to Mr. Frank Harris, have always kept as far on this side idolatry as I.”

Six or seven years ago I wrote a play called

“Shakespeare and his Love,” which was accepted by Mr. Beerbohm Tree. As Mr. Tree did not produce the play at the time agreed upon, I withdrew it. Some time afterwards, on the advice of a friend, I sent it to the Vedrenne-Barker management. They read it; but Mr. Barker, I was told, did not like the part of Shakespeare. I wrote, therefore, asking for the return of the play. Mr. Vedrenne, in reply, told me that he admired the play greatly, and still hoped to induce Mr. Barker to play it. He asked me, therefore, to leave it with him. A little while later I met Mr. Shaw in the street; he told me that he, too, had read my play which I had sent to the Court managers, and added, “you have represented Shakespeare as sadder than he was, I think; but you have shown his genius, which everyone else has omitted to do. . . .”

Last year I published a book entitled *The*

Man Shakespeare, which was in essence an amplification of my articles in *The Saturday Review*. A considerable portion of this book had been in print ten years. The work had a certain success in England and America. This year I have published in *The English Review* a series of articles on *The Women of Shakespeare*, which one of the first of living writers has declared marks an epoch in English criticism.

Now Mr. Shaw has written a play on the subject, which I have been working on for these fifteen years, and from what he has said thereon in *The Observer* it looks as if he had annexed my theory bodily so far as he can understand it, and the characters to boot. After talking about his play and Shakespeare's passion, and using words of mine again and again as if they were his own, he acknowledges his indebtedness to me in this high-minded and generous way :

"The only English writer who has really grasped this part of Shakespeare's story is Frank Harris; but Frank sympathises with Shakespeare. It is like seeing Semele reduced to ashes and sympathising with Jupiter."

This is equivalent to saying that all the other parts of Shakespeare's story have been grasped by someone else, presumably by Mr. Shaw himself, and not by me. It is as if Mr. Cook had said, "the only American who really knows anything about Polar exploration is Captain Peary, though he uses his knowledge quite stupidly." One can imagine that such testimony from such an authority would have been very grateful to Captain Peary.

This precious utterance of Mr. Shaw shows further that in his version of the story he is going to take the side of Mary Fitton against Shakespeare; he will therefore defend or at least explain her various marriages and her

illegitimate children by different fathers, none of whom happened to be married to her.

Mr. Shaw's sole contribution to our knowledge of Shakespeare is the coupling of him with Dickens, which is very much the same thing as if one tried to explain Titian by coupling him with Hogarth. This, in my opinion, is Mr. Shaw's only original observation on the subject, and its perfect originality I should be the last to deny.

I have not yet read or seen Mr. Shaw's play : I only wish here to draw attention to the fact that he has already annexed a good deal of my work and put it forth as his own, giving me only the most casual and grudging mention. From the larger acknowledgment in *The Observer*, I naturally infer that in this new play he has taken from me even more than he could hope to pass off as his own.

All this in the England of to-day is looked

upon as honourable and customary. If Mr. Shaw can annex my work it only shows that he is stronger than I am or abler, and this fact in itself would be generally held to absolve and justify him: *vae victis* is the noble English motto in such cases. But if it turns out in the long struggle that Mr. Shaw is only more successful for the moment than I am, if my books and writings on Shakespeare have come to stay, then I can safely leave the task of judging Mr. Shaw to the future.

In any case I can console myself. It amused me years ago to see Mr. Shaw using scraps of my garments to cover his nakedness; he now struts about wearing my livery unashamed. I am delighted that so little of it makes him a complete suit. My wardrobe is still growing in spite of his predatory instincts, and he is welcome to as much of it as I have cast off and he can cut to fit.

But is this the best that Mr. Shaw can do with his astonishing quickness and his admirable gift of lucid, vigorous speech? Will he, who is not poor, always be under our tables for the crumbs? Why should he not share the feast, or, better still, make a feast of his own? Why does he not take himself in hand, and crush the virtue out of himself and distil it into some noble draught? The quintessence of Shaw would be worth having.

I can afford on this matter to be wholly frank and ingenuous, and admit that I am gratified by the ability of my first disciples. Any writer might be proud of having convinced men of original minds like Mr. Arnold Bennett, Mr. Richard Middleton, and Mr. Bernard Shaw of the truth of a theory so contrary to tradition as mine is and so contemptuous of authority: Shakespeare himself would have been proud of such admirers. And if Mr. Bernard Shaw has

done his best to share in the honour of the discovery, one must attribute his excess of zeal to the intensity of his admiration, and to the fact that he was perhaps even a little quicker than the others to appreciate the new view, or perhaps a little vainer even than most able men. In any case, Mr. Shaw's method of dealing with a new master must be contrasted with that of the professor who also annexed as much as he could of my early articles, and coolly asserted that he had had my ideas ten years before, leaving it to be inferred that he had concealed them carefully.

After all, the chief thing is, here is my play, and Mr. Shaw's will shortly make its appearance, and in time a true deliverance and judgment on the respective merits of them will be forthcoming.

A few words about this play of mine may be allowed me. It suffers from an extraordinary, and

perhaps extravagant, piety : I did not set out to write a great play on the subject. I wanted to give a dramatic picture of Shakespeare and his time ; but above all a true picture. It seemed to me that no one had the right to treat the life-story, the soul-tragedy of a Shakespeare as the mere stuff of a play. Within the limits of the truth, however, I did my best. The play, therefore, as a play is full of faults : it is as loosely put together as one of Shakespeare's own history plays, and the worst fault of it is not poverty of plot and weakness of construction ; it is also academic and literary in tone. Much of this is due to my love of the master. I have hardly put a word in Shakespeare's mouth which I could not justify out of his plays or sonnets. My excessive love of the man has been a hindrance to me as a playwright.

I daresay—in fact, I am sure—that it would be possible to write a great play on the subject,

and tell even more of the truth than I have here told; but that could only be done if one knew that the play would be played and had leisure and encouragement to do one's best. The evil of our present civilisation, from the artist's point of view, is that he is compelled by the conditions to give of his second best, and be thankful if even this is lucky enough to earn him a living wage.

My book on Shakespeare was many years in type before it found a publisher; my Shakespeare play was printed six years ago and has not yet been acted.

FRANK HARRIS.

London, 15th November, 1910.

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

ROBERT CECIL, LORD BURGHLEY

THE EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON

LORD WILLIAM HERBERT (afterwards Earl of
Pembroke).

KINGSTON LACY, EARL OF LINCOLN, an Euphuist

SIR JOHN STANLEY

SIR WALTER RALEIGH

MASTER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

„ FRANCIS BACON

„ BEN JONSON

„ FLETCHER

„ RICHARD BURBAGE

„ MARSTON

„ CHETTLE, the prototype of Falstaff.

„ DEKKER

„ WILLIE HUGHES

„ SELDEN

DR. HALL, Shakespeare's son-in-law

MASTER FRY, the Host of the "Mitre "

QUEEN ELIZABETH

LADY RUTLAND, Sidney's sister

LADY JANE WROTH

LADY CYNTHIA DARREL

LADY JOAN NEVIL

MISTRESS MARY FITTON, Shakespeare's Love

„ VIOLET VERNON

„ QUINEY } Shakespeare's daughters

„ HALL, }

COURTIERS AND SERVANTS

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS LOVE

ACT I

SCENES I - VII *The Stage of the Globe Theatre.*
,, VIII-X *The Antechamber at Court*

ACT II

SCENES I - II *In the "Mermaid"*
,, III-VI *In the Gardens of St. James's
Palace by moonlight*

ACT III

SCENES I - IV *In the "Mitre" Tavern*
,, V - VI *A Room in Lord William
Herbert's Lodgings*

ACT IV

SCENES I - IV *In the "Mitre" Tavern*
,, V - VI *The Throne Room at Court*

THE EPILOGUE

SCENES I - II *A Bedchamber in SHAKESPEARE'S House at Stratford*

Time

*Acts I, II, III and IV take
place in the summer of 1598
The Epilogue in April, 1616*