THE COMPLETE WORKS OF

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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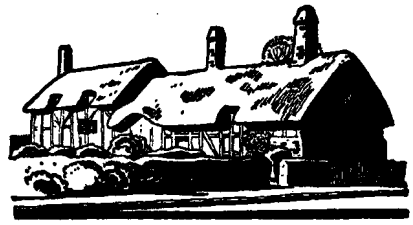
A LETTER TO A READER



THIS IS NOT an Introduction to Shakespeare, but an Introduction to Yourself-as-a Reader-of-Shakespeare. You excited me when you said you hadn't read "it" since high school. That's what you said, *it;* unconsciously revealing that you had come to think of him as an institution, a monument, a mass of dehumanized classic. In former days, when a publisher wanted to mummify an author he stippled the top of the book with a stone-grain pattern. It was said to be *marbled;* the word was well chosen.

And now you say that, as a man of experience, past forty, you think of trying him again. That's grand. We all did so when young, and under regimented tuition. It was all right, as far as it went; but the Shakespeare we met was only a fraction of the full man. And so, of course, were we.

I wish I could imagine, or share, the experience you will have. Be patient! Your attention, accustomed to the low voltages of modern prose, will blow a fuse here and there: by which I mean you'll be bored, at first, by the heavy load of his verbal richness. You'll have to remind yourself that it's really a different language. (We don't even know how he pronounced it; probably with a strong Warwickshire base, overlaid with some tones of cockney. Stratford, for instance, he called *Stretford.* I strongly suspect that his own name sounded like *Shaxper.* If we heard him talking, we'd very likely think he was an Australian.)

Don't take too ponderously everything I say in this letter. I'm trying to get you interested. The most gorgeous thing you'll discover about Shakespeare is that he's so like yourself. Everyone notices that.

Your taste in reading, I gather, has been for narrative that gets going promptly. Did you suppose Shakespeare was slow? Try the beginning of *Antony and Cleopatra* where the whole situation is set in 13 lines; in fact the two principals come on stage after the 10th line. If the groundlings in the pit were still jostling or clearing their throats they'd miss Cleopatra's first speech, and world-wide question that every man has heard, "How much do you love me?" (And Antony's typically evasive masculine reply.)

Incidentally, if you don't laugh when Cleopatra, feeling moody, suggests a game of billiards, then you're not amused by the things that tickle me. And though you'll weary of some of the inter-

mediate scenes, I think you'll find that Cleopatra's death brings the frost on the backbone that only great things cause.

I may be expelled the company of Shakespeare students for writing in this vein; but part of the endless fun of reading him is in exercising and expanding private judgement; cutting our own little paths through the great jungle of his work; discovering (with continuing amazement) how much of him had already become part of us; and realizing that we learn him only bit by bit. Enjoying Shakespeare is a game of as many gradations as tennis or bridge. There is fun to be had even in the crudest amateurism. It increases endlessly as you become a "seeded" player—acquire dexterity and get the pace of his rhetoric.

It's astonishing how few readers are prepared for the more expert strokes of his comedy. I remember once printing a remark that one of the most charming of Shakespeare's improprieties was in a certain scene of *Antony and Cleopatra;* but that I didn't propose to identify the exact line. I received many letters saying that was easy, of course the passage I meant was so-and-so. And in every case they mentioned a crude, coarse, obvious allusion in that scene; not one discerned the really touching and tenderly vulgar line I meant.

So I'm glad you're mature; Shakespeare improves with his readers. You'll find him talking, in perfect simplicity and plainness, of matters that nowadays are too often mentioned with a leer. You, with the bashfulness of a business man, will be a good deal shocked occasionally.

Don't let yourself be grieved by the naïveté of his stage devices: for instance (the first example I think of) the sudden arrival of the English army at just the right moment in Act II of *King John.* The technique of the movies is exactly the same, if you stop to think about it. Nor need you be put off by occasional ghosts, goblins, elves, and apparitions of fantasy. I doubt whether Shakespeare believed in the visible actuality of these any more than you or I; they are purely symbolic; devices to represent imaginations, thoughts, legends, memories. To artists these things do not need to be explained.

For heaven's sake, unless it be Pearsall Smith's chapter *On Not Reading Shakespeare,** don't read anything *about* him, anything biographical or critical.—Well, perhaps Walter Bagehot's *Shakespeare the Man,* written in 1853 and still one of the wisest commentaries not only on W.S. but on authors in general—and written, mark you, by a business man. That you will find in volume I of Bagehot's *Literary Studies,* in the Everyman Series. And whatever you read, including Shakespeare himself, please remember you have the privilege of dissenting from it. For instance, Bagehot's very odd opinion of the Sonnets: that they are ideal reading "for a young man in the spring of the year among green fields and in gentle air." But there are a great many things in the Sonnets that a very young man is unlikely to relish. They require the forty winters that the author mentions; the winters that "feelingly persuade me what I am." I can give an instance of this. It chanced that when I was forty I made a list of the 20 of Shakespeare's Sonnets that then spoke most sharply to my condition. Subsequently, rummaging some old notebooks, I found that I had done exactly the same thing when I was 21, and had forgotten. Only 9 of my favorites at 21 were still in my list chosen at 40.

I'm tempted to say a word more about the Sonnets. Many men, including some of the highest intelligence, have made their study a lifetime hobby. Bagehot's youth, strolling the springtime

*This is the humorous first chapter of Pearsall Smith's brilliant, crotchety, sensitive and superlative little book *On Reading Shakespeare;* unquestionably for the modern reader the most amiable guidebook into the jungle.

fields, was probably perplexed to find those philoprogenitive appeals addressed to one of his own sex. (A man's interest in some other man's begetting children is usually rather detached.) But the wise reader never hesitates to resex the Sonnets to his own purpose. What particular frolicsome conceit Shakespeare had in mind in the first 17 sonnets—perhaps even an ingenious plea to his friend to get married and leave Shakespeare's girl alone—cannot now be guessed, and is immaterial to us. The important thing is not the much scrutinized Dedication, nor the identity of Mr. W. H., but how far do the sonnets themselves prick into the reality of your own heart.

"His sugared sonnets among his private friends" one of Shakespeare's contemporaries called them. And by "sugared" I think an Elizabethan would mean not only sweet but spun into fantastic and dilettante confectionery shapes. The publishers of this present edition once refused Shakespeare's Sonnets for publication, when they were guilefully submitted in modern typescript and under a strange name. Let them not be embarrassed: Shakespeare himself never published them. Thomas Thorpe, a sort of pirating literary agent, got hold of a MS copy and had them printed at the Sign of the White Horse (it should have been Dark Horse) and they were put on sale (for fivepence) at The Parrot. Professional scholars have squawked and scuffled round them like parrots ever since. And it was Don Marquis's imagined Mermaid Tavern parrot (in his book *Archy and Mehitabel*) who uttered one of the shrewdest pieces of Shakespearean criticism. Shakespeare, says the Parrot, was a disappointed man and wept in his beer because his life had largely been spent writing or rewriting stock melodramas for the managers. (Drivel such as *Titus Andronicus*, for instance, which you'd better not try to read.) What Shakespeare really wanted, the Parrot says, was "to write sonnet serials like a gentleman should."

No one should be allowed to write about Shakespeare unless he has himself tried (however humbly) to write poetry and produce plays, and has seen something of the kind of tavern and backstage and lodging-house life that Shakespeare led. Professors, academicians, tamed in years of cautious comfortable living, have been bred to put out of their minds the savage, laughing and despairing world of a mind like Shakespeare's. The scholars have saved the text for us, but the great commentators—the Johnsons, Coleridges, Hazlitts, De Quinceys, to keep safely in the past—have mostly been those who led disorderly and Grub Street lives like his, and understood him by divination. I once tried to discuss Shakespeare before a college community, and a refined old lady was overheard to say afterward that it was "an insult." But bless her heart, I was not trying to talk in the mood a cultured suburban community would understand, but in the mood Shakespeare himself would recognize. It is impossible ever to talk honestly about Shakespeare to well-bred people without appalling them. Canny indeed were the old educators who saw to it, until about the time of McGuffey's Readers, that Shakespeare was excluded from school textbooks. Lindley Murray, the famous grammarian whose influence was potent about a century ago, said—and truly—that Shakespeare caused "fatal wounds to youth's innocence, delicacy, and religion."*

But we were speaking of the Sonnets. Many learned students, uncertain whether the emotions described were platonic or plutonic, fled to the timid theory that Elizabethan sonnet-sequences were a conventionalized artifice; that they dealt with stereotyped themes; in other words that Shakespeare's sonnets don't mean what they say. Perhaps they did begin as formality, but they

*See Henry W. Simon: *The Reading of Shakespeare in American Schools and Colleges.*

soon turned into a bonfire. They are the most definite and passionate onslaught on Time ever undertaken by the perishable human spirit. (I once took the trouble to count, and found the word *Time* occurring 78 times in the series.) Dear old Professor George Herbert Palmer loved to tell how in youth he and another Harvard student agreed to repeat to each other one of the Sonnets every morning at breakfast; in that way he learned 80 of them by heart, and believed it the most valuable experience of his college course. I myself remember at Oxford a parallel episode. On my staircase lived an ambitious young German who was struggling to improve his English. He used to invite some of us to breakfast with him and corrigate his accent. Someone had advised him to memorize the Sonnets and he often asked us to hear him recite them. His fantastic palatals and gutturals were no less comic than the Welsh pronunciation Shakespeare ridiculed in Fluellen.* Indeed his recitations of some of the Sonnets almost spoiled them for me permanently: I can still hear him—

Luff iss not luff
Vich alterss ven it alterration findts

I can imagine Shakespeare's curses when the Sonnets were published. Certainly he would hardly have let them escape into print in the form we have them: some technically imperfect; the later numbers sinking into abominations of carnal vulgarity or an actual madness of mockery; and ending with what seems a realtor's testimonial for the town of Bath.

But if you don't worry about what Shakespeare may have meant, but what the Sonnets mean to *you*, you can agree with Professor Palmer: "no other body of poetry in the language is so precious for internal possession."

II

THERE indeed I think we touch upon a good woodsman's trick for camping in the Forest of Arden. To know exactly what Shakespeare had in mind, to collate his allusions with the history, economics, or metaphysics of his time, is a matter for the expert. But to unprofessional readers, more important is to read with intent to find how it applies to ourselves, to fit his universality to our own particular. Take for instance that extraordinary scene in *Henry V* (Act IV, Scene 1) where King Harry on campaign in France, unknown and disguised in a borrowed cloak, meets Soldiers Three. They are an Englishman, a Scotchman, an Irishman. What an excitement when we suddenly realize what Shakespeare is doing: giving a deliberate cross-section of the B.E.F. of his time. There we find the soldier speaking his blunt mind just as he did in the trenches of the Somme; and arguing the still unanswered question whether the government has a right to call on plain men for such bloody argument. And—as an added verisimilitude—how pleased one is to notice that Bates the cockney and Mike the Irishman are the soldiers who do the talking. Sandy, the Scot, says nothing. It is Mike who gets into quarrel with the incognito king and challenges him to fisticuffs. This magnificent scene could not possibly have meant to readers before 1914 what it

*See the play *Henry V*. You will want to look up Fluellen. Also it was partly from him that descended the modern and continual use of the adjective *lousy*. Very likely you will also discover for yourself the scenes in this play where Shakespeare chaffs the most amusing of human frailties: the difficulties both French and English have with each other's languages.

means to us now when we remember how men of English, Scottish and Irish speech fought again on French fields. So we think of it now (interpreting, as men must, in terms of our own perspective) as the *All Quiet on the Western Front* of its time. One is tempted to say that Shakespeare transfused into the very blood stream of human character, with the result that whatever happens in history serves to consolidate and enrich him.

How much pleasure I had, for instance, during the Prohibition and Racketeering era, in reading *Measure for Measure*—even to the astonishing coincidence of the Duke's lines:—

> We have strict statutes and most biting laws
> Which for this fourteen years we have let sleep. . . .

(The calculation 1919 to 1933, the duration of our Prohibition amendment, = 14 years, was an immediate ecstasy.)

> so our decrees
> Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead,
> And liberty plucks justice by the nose;
> The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
> Goes all decorum.

And again, what could be more thrillingly permanent than this:—

> We must not make a scarecrow of the law
> Setting it up to fear [*viz.* frighten] the birds of prey,
> And let it keep one shape, till custom make it
> Their perch and not their terror.

It is not possible for any commentator in England—a relatively law-obeying country—to feel that as tinglingly as does an American. So mark you, Shakespeare gets better and better as time passes; the huge army of the world's desire* is enlisted on his side.

Measure for Measure is as good a play as any to illustrate how invigorating is the drink when you mix the whiskey of Shakespeare with the plain soda of your own mind. First let me say this: don't let yourself be annoyed by the incredible and preposterous plots (which were not, we are assured, Shakespeare's own). Based on twins, disguises, lies or hoaxes, lightning strokes of love or jealousy, they are the crudest beanpoles on which morning glories ever grew. But a queer thought occurs: if the plays were as subtle and shrewd in plot as they are glorious in text, would they not be unbearable? They would not then be art but life itself; which none could endure more than once. And I wonder if the sheer naïveté of the plot did not serve to put the author on his mettle? The rough scantling trellis of his theme is overshaded and beautified by the tenting grapevine of his wit. Did you ever watch the tendrils of the grape making fast with sailorly judgement to the nearest mooring?

Measure for Measure is the story of a municipal clean-up, an attempt to enforce the laws. "Of government the properties to unfold," says the Duke, and the play is partly a satiric on political science. You remember the witty comment that the most Prohibition did was to move the corner saloon to the middle of the block. So how felicitously contemporary is the remark of Pompey, Mrs. Overdone's bartender, in Act I, Scene 2. Mrs. Overdone is the proprietor of a "house of

*Startling line that goes off like a rocket at the beginning of a jejune play, *Love's Labour's Lost*. I say jejune, for so I dimly remember it; but it's a long while since I've read it. It may be a better play by now, since I'm a better reader. Please consider carefully this relativity of Shakespeare to your own experience and capacities.

resort" and is disturbed to hear that her business has fallen under a ban. Have no fear, says the encouraging Pompey, "though you change your place you need not change your trade." But not only in humors of low life is this play perennial: it also rises to universals in serious mood. The next time you see someone fainted on the street and crowded round by well-meaning spectators, look up Act II, Scene 4, line 25; the next time you tread on an insect, III, 1, 79. You know then, this man has had your very own thoughts. It is the subtlest corroboration: he was built (as that oaken word means) of the same tough wood as you. I have said before, we recognize so much of Shakespeare in ourselves, there must have been a good deal of us in him.

There's at least one passage in *Measure for Measure* ("To die, and go we know not where," Act III, Scene 1) which almost everyone, hearing it out of context, will think is from *Hamlet.* This is the most serious criticism one can offer of Shakespeare *as dramatist:* his passages of fine frenzy could too often be put in almost anywhere.

To be honest, observed Anatole France, the critic should say "I am going to talk about myself à propos of Shakespeare." So let me add that *Measure for Measure* is particularly dear to me because I found in it two things I supposed I had invented myself. One was the notion that stewed prunes are funny (see Act II, Scene 1) and the other the phrase *Neither Maid, Wife, Nor Widow* which I tacked on as a subtitle to an old melodrama when we played it in Hoboken. This I truly think was worth thousands to the box-office. But see *M. for M.*, Act V, Scene 1, 177.*

Whether you have read him once or a hundred times, you'll always notice something you hadn't seen before. Somewhere in Keats's Letters—probably, after Shakespeare, the next finest reading our language has—he asks his friend Reynolds to let him know whenever some passage in Shakespeare "comes rather new to you." Only the other day in *Troilus and Cressida* I observed a touch I had never spotted before. It can't be just an accident? Ulysses is making his famous speech (Act IV, Scene 5) about Cressida the wanton:—

> Fie, fie upon her!
> There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip,
> Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out
> At every joint and motive of her body.

And so on; concluding with his description of the Trojan heroine as one of the "daughters of the game." He's interrupted by a trumpet call within, and all the Greek warriors cry out "The Trojans' trumpet!" Surely, surely, this was meant to be also heard by the audience as "The Trojan strumpet!" and a sure-fire laugh.

He keeps pace with the clock. Every new dogma or doctrine can justify itself in him. As I write this, there comes to my table a new book: *Shakespeare, a Marxist Interpretation,* translated from the Russian of A. A. Smirnov. An able little study, I can see at a glance, but devoid of humor. It proves, I gather, that "Shakespeare was the ideologist of the bourgeoisie . . . but the bourgeoisie have never been able to understand him."—Which is, in logic, both eating your cake and having it. Jaggard, Shakespeare's printer, went blind; and most of his thesis-possessed annotators grow curiously cock-eyed.

*To forestall argument, my first notion of this title was over 20 years ago, reading a volume of Bertha M. Clay on a park bench. On the back of the paper-bound book was a list of charwomen's classics, including one called *Maid, Wife or Widow* "by Mrs. Alexander." To negative the phrase was obviously funny.—Shakespeare's version was *Neither Maid, Widow, Nor Wife,* less felicitous both in sequence and rhythm.

III

For your great purpose of enjoyment you need very little apparatus of knowledge about W.S., but chiefly a readiness to observe your own mind. An adequate glossary of Elizabethan English is helpful, and perhaps also some inkling of the supposed chronology of the plays (the order in which they were written) on which scholars have spent an infinity of argument. But it is your own innocent speculations that I desiderate and solicit. What will you make of *The Tempest*, I'm wondering? Will you see in it, as I do, the most exquisite fable of the human mind cast away on the lonely island of its egotism? Prospero (to me) typifies Thought; Ariel, the magic of Art; Miranda, the soft appeal of loving kindness; Caliban, the various greeds and lusts; and the rest of the shipload is old helterskelter Demos, the public. It matters little to me that the author may have had no conscious intention of any such allegory; that, so baldly suggested, is my own translation. It matters little to me, for instance, that Melville professed amazement when the first readers of *Moby Dick* (two very intelligent people called Mr. and Mrs. Nathaniel Hawthorne) saw in the chase of the White Whale a parable of the soul's heat for certainty. The best of any artist is what he does subconsciously—as true of the writer as of the gymnast's equilibria.

Shakespeare, like all great creators, offers us the chance to collaborate with him. When for instance you see in the line "Your swords are now too massy for your strengths" not merely Ariel magicking the roughnecks, but a comment on our mechanized and militarized civilization, then you have collaborated with Shakespeare; you have brought him home to your present business and bosom; you have put your own exponent above his figure, and raised it to higher power.

Capitalism, or the Profit System as they sometimes call it, is by no means exhausted. You will find it perfectly exemplified in the arts of reading. Two people will read Shakespeare, and how much more profit one will get than another. That is the internal revenue that no tax-collector can plunder.

Or *Hamlet:* how I aspire to hear your sober comments on that play. From the crisp foreboding dialogue of the opening—the thrilling words in the dark: *Who's there?*—down to the "peal of ordnance is shot off", what terrible and ticklish doings! Will you see it (as I do) not only tragedy but also the most humorous satire on parents and the junior generation? Will you note the comic irony of putting the line *Brevity is the soul of wit* in the mouth of gabby old Polonius? Will it occur to you that the dramatic dexterity consists not merely in a play within a play, but in fact two plays within a play: for the whole action is laid inside the confidential reciprocity of Hamlet and the audience. Here some knowledge of the physical structure of the Elizabethan stage (projecting far into the pit, so that Hamlet can be alone with the audience) would be useful. The Elizabethan stage was built just as a man's mind is built, with a forward apron apt for soliloquy.

How many peals of ordnance have been shot off about *Hamlet* by the professors and hierophants. Yet it is not hard to understand if you still have in you anything of the young prince. Youth dies, stabbed by the poisoned sword of living. And all idealists are liegemen to the Dane.

I do not wish to seem to praise ignorance. The full reach and suggestion of that play cannot even be approached without the most absorbing research: not only in the text but in your own living. It is packed with an infinity of small chuckling jests; of which one of my favorites is the

groundlings' laugh when, because the family think Hamlet is mad, they wish to send him to England. You, as a solid business man, will enjoy the King and Queen's doubtfulness about Hamlet going back to the university for graduate study. Hamlet, remember, was a Wittenberg student, and Wittenberg (not in Springfield, Ohio, but in Germany) was Martin Luther's college. In other words, they thought Hamlet in danger of becoming (as Wolsey called Anne Boleyn in *Henry VIII*) "a spleeny Lutheran." Some of the commentators have had good frolic in considering that whereas Hamlet was a Protestant, the Ghost was Catholic. How much of the play carries "the tune of the time", and how much is for always, few can profitably conjecture. Of the original printing (the 1603 quarto) only two copies are known to survive. One lacks the last page of text, the other has no title-page. These losses are symbolic. In one's own mind the play either has no beginning or will never end.

Everyone who writes about Shakespeare goes a little mad—a pleasant goofiness, a lunacy only of one point of the compass, as Hamlet said of himself. (As he said so very likely he jerked his thumb in the direction of the King and Queen offstage, to suggest that his antics were put on for their benefit. It would be perfectly characteristic of the spirit in which the play has been studied to conduct an archaeology to determine whether the actors playing King and Queen were actually N.N.W. of Hamlet as he said the lines.) My own kind of mania is to see what gorgeous tricks of alliteration Shakespeare's excitement procured. Read these lines aloud to yourself:—

> The King doth Wake TonighT and TakeS hiS RouSe,
> KeepS WaSSail, and the SWaggering up-SpRing ReelS;
> AnD, as he DRainS hiS DRaughts of Rhenish Down,
> The Kettle-DRum and TRumpet thus BRay out
> The TRiumph of his pledge.

Can you believe that play on consonants was mere chance? See KW changing to WS, then to SR and DR and TR. Or, analyzed more closely still, the sequence is KWS, KSW, SDR, DRT, BRT. All, mark you, harsh percussive thudding sounds, with short vowels for the drum and a long *a* for the brass. That is the sort of fun an author has with himself, taking for granted that few will ever notice it. Sometimes he doesn't notice it himself: it may happen unawares.

You asked me, how much do you need to know of the man himself? A fantastic irony is observable in the few recorded facts. The earliest information we have about the family was when Shakespeare's father was fined for keeping a rubbish heap in the public street. Most of his biographers caught the habit.

We know that he was a country boy, that he apparently left home under a cloud, went up to London, was soon successful enough to rouse the jealousy of playwrights who thought themselves better educated; but that those who actually knew him found him lovable. We know there were lean years: his wife had to borrow money, and he himself was slow in paying taxes. Was it because he went bald early that he lodged at the house of a wigmaker? This wigmaker was a Frenchman, and perhaps from him Shakespeare picked up a smattering of that language. "Daily he gathered the humors of men" John Aubrey noted of him: one of the most significant hearsay comments. He became prosperous, as men may if they are shrewd enough to observe their fellows. He bought a handsome house in Stratford and planted a mulberry tree in the garden. Even in the 18th century there was already so much curiosity about him that the parson who then occupied that house was pestered by visitors. The story is that he tore it down to end the nuisance.

The first doubts as to Shakespeare's authorship, if I read the books correctly, were raised by a United States consul in the rum-drinking port of Santa Cruz. Like the consuls in O. Henry's *Cabbages and Kings* his official duties left much vacation for his mind. His idea was taken up by an eccentric lady whose name oddly enough was Delia Bacon; she inveigled Hawthorne into writing a preface for her book and the fun began. Incidentally, Miss Bacon died *non compos.*

A few days ago I happened to be in the pleasant Falstaff Room of the Biltmore Hotel in Providence, R.I. I asked the waiter if there were a copy of Shakespeare around as I wanted to look up some details in the Boar's Head Tavern scene, illustrated on a mural over the bar. There was no book available, but the cheerful waiter, eager to please, said, "I can tell you where the picture comes from, it's from the third act of Shakespeare."—And later, seeing my interest, and anxious to please, he added (this is exact quotation) "Some people think Bacon wrote it, so they don't know which to read."

IV

THE STORY of Shakespeare and humanity's subsequent dealings with him has no easy consolations for the sharpened mind. It needs not so much a study of documents (though that too is precious) as an intuition of the inward quality of genius; and it is most likely to dismay the house of Grundy. The world tried to dispose of Shakespeare comfortably by turning him over to teachers and troupers, both of whom are people adorably juvenile in their notions. There is a gorgeous hypocrisy in the universal lip-service to Shakespeare: we are safe in praising him because we know that few mature minds really read him. The legend was that his grave was dug 17 feet deep; and the commentators have tried to bury him deeper still.

But the casual reader need not be too humble about Shakespeare. Everyone is a Shakespearean scholar unconsciously. You yourself have probably quoted him today, for his words are the termites of the mind; they infest and honeycomb our thinking. If you said, and I'll wager you did, that the wish was father to the thought, more sinned against than sinning, as sound as a bell, care killed a cat, comparisons are odorous, more in sorrow than in anger, method in his madness,—yes, even if you spoke (I paraphrase) of the heir of a female dog, or said something was lousy, or told someone to laugh that off, or to sell himself to someone else, it was not you speaking but Shakespeare.

"My project was to please," he said—in one of the rare moments when we seem to imagine him speaking in his own person. And he added, though with mannerly qualification, "my ending is despair." He begged us then to set him free from taskwork. He was released long ago; became a marble bust with its right hand resting on a cushion. What hand had ever so earned it?

They say that April 23 was the date of both his birth and death. For the artist (I have said this before) every day should be both birth and death; every day is a complete circle. "His dates", as men say, were 1564–1616. It seems like yesterday; and every day is his birthday in someone's word and thought. Long ago he became far more important to us than the sum total of everything he wrote: he became the symbol of trouble and triumph in the human mind. Be prepared then to

go a little mad if you read him sensitively. The surest way to know how great he was is to try to put his own kind of thinking into his own kind of words. Once I imagined him saying:—

It is the varsal ego in men's bosoms
That gives them stomach, in their loneliness,
To chew and savour this our bright pretence
And take it to themselves.—Haply the author
Like the matron pelican of adage
Feeds his unsuspective auditors
From the red artery of his proper breast.

July 1936

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