

AN IMAGE OF SHAKESPEARE

Plays which had been admired in his Youth had been con-
signed to forgetfulness : Lyly's Comedies were buried with
Gorboduc ; Greene, Peele and Nashe were names ; Kyd was
only remembered because the Pit still enjoyed an altered
form of *Jeronimo*, and even Marlowe was rejected as bar-
barous. Though Ben Jonson wrote of "Marlowe's mighty
line" in the Verses prefixed to the Folio of 1623 he expressed
his real opinion when he wrote of himself in *Discoveries*,
"Though his language differ from the Vulgar somewhat,
it shall not fly from all Humanity, with the Tamer-lanes
and the Tamer-chams of the late age, who had nothing in
them but the Scenical strutting and furious vociferation
to warrant them to the ignorant gaper."

It may be that Shakespeare would have said of his Plays
with *Theseus*, "the best of this kind are but shadows ; and
the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them," or with
Mercutio,

I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,
Which is as thin of substance as the air.

If he did not try to keep them remembered we might think
that (like *Prospero*) he repented his witchcraft and that
instead of attaching importance to the fame of the Stage he
only asked for Oblivion (as *Marston* did when he was dying),
and that the Verses on his grave were a prayer to be let alone
in its silence,

Safe from the Wolf's black jaw and the dull Ass's hoof.
If so that prayer was partly vain,

The Wild Ass

Stamps o'er his head, but cannot break his sleep.

Heminge and *Condell*, however, wrote in their Address
to the Reader : "It had been, we confess, a thing worthy
to have been wished that the Author himself had lived to
have set forth and over-seen his own Writings : but, since
it hath been ordered otherwise, and he by death departed
from that right, we pray you do not envy his friends the office

THE FIRST FOLIO

of their care and pain to have collected and published them." This may mean that he had intended to publish the Plays in the Folio or to leave them prepared. His bequest of money for rings to Heminge and Condell and to Burbage (who died in 1619) may be a sign that he had entrusted the publication to them when he saw that it was out of his power. In that case he resembled Gil Vicente in this, as in other things, for Vicente (of whom Andres de Resende wrote,

Gillo, auctor et actor,

Gillo, jocis levibus doctus perstringere mores)

retired to his quiet home in the fields in 1536 and there devoted himself to preparing his Works for publication but died before his task was completed.

In the year of Shakespeare's death, 1616, Ben Jonson's First Folio was published. Ben Jonson only printed the Plays which satisfied him, and he omitted *Bartholomew Fair*, which had been acted in 1614, and rejected the early Tragical Work which had won him a place in Francis Meres' list of Tragedians. And even Ben Jonson when he dedicated *Every Man Out of His Humour* to "the Noblest Nurseries of Humanities and Liberty in the Kingdom, the Inns of Court" wrote, "Now that the Printer, by a doubled charge, thinks it worthy a longer life than commonly the air of such things doth promise, I am careful to put it a servant to their pleasures, who are the inheritors of the first favour borne it. Yet I command it lie not in the way of your more noble and useful studies." He may have known that Shakespeare had planned a Folio edition.

Heminge and Condell may have printed their Folio for their Company's profit. We do not know whether Shakespeare had sold his share in the Company, for the fact that his Will makes no mention of it is not conclusive since Burbage and Condell, for instance, did not bequeath the shares which they possessed when they died. But even if he had sold his share he might have expected some payment for revising the Plays.

It seems to me that the many signs of revision in the Folio indicate that he was preparing the Plays for it; but this is uncertain because we do not know how often they

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were revised. And I think that the later signs of revision suggest an attempt to cure faults which would not have impeded the applause of the Pit.

Heminge and Condell wrote in their Address to the Reader: "His mind and hand went together, and what he thought he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers." This may mean that he took the trouble to make a clean copy of the Plays which he furnished. Or it may mean that he wrote the different forms of them fluently without harking back to alter what he had written: he may have preferred to test them by their effect on the Stage (instead of pausing to search for faults), and to change them afterwards if he thought it worth while. This, I think, was his method, and it would help to account for many of the faults of his Plays and for a few of their virtues.

This method would have kept him in touch with the eager life of his days, and that effect would have been also produced if he copied men of his time in his Characters, as was stated, for instance, by Sir Charles Scroop when he wrote before 1686,

When Shakespeare, Jonson, Fletcher ruled the Stage,
They took so bold a freedom with the Age,
That there was scarce a knave or fool in town
Of any wit, but had his fashion shown.

Such a liberty taken with knaves and fools would have helped his Plays to mirror the times. But it would also have degraded the Plays with an ignoble vivacity. The vitality given to base people in them, even in the Tragedies, is one of the things which set him apart from his only competitors in Tragical Plays, Æschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. And this separation is radical.

The Greek Tragical Stage was an altar of Sacrifice: his Stage was a Mummer's booth for ignorant crowds. The Greek Tragical dramatist knew that his Players would wear masks and recite in huge Amphitheatres and so was compelled to enforce his story by grouping them,—he saw like a sculptor, and his Characters shared the dignity and the final repose of Statues. In the same way Michael Angelo made his faces

SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES

immortal by studying the look of the dead. The Greek Tragical Characters spoke as if there was nobody listening; they were aloof in a higher World of their own: Shakespeare's Players talked in the Pit, they were breathing the rank breath of the Crowd and they were jostled by the men who had paid to have their stools on the Stage; they spoke either to their hearers or for them. A Greek Tragedy had the calm of a whirlpool, for it dealt with a climax, the end of a tale already known to the hearers: Shakespeare was unfolding a tale, and he did this with a deliberate falsity, making his Characters tell their secret thoughts and explain all their emotions. Besides, the Greek language has a carven precision and a quietness which may be in part due to the fact that in reading it we remember how long ago it was written; the Greeks may have found the Works of Egypt as quiet and all that lost Literature a *Book of the Dead*: in Shakespeare's time England was young and his language was only reaching maturity.

It was his aim to write a Book of the Living. Still, he did not draw his times as they were, but as he saw them in the Kingdom of Dreams, and this alteration made his work universal. Calderon is too Spanish to appeal to the World and Molière is too French; but there are no limits to the Kingdom of Dreams. And this is why his Tragical Characters are all unsubstantial: they soar above everyday Life as flame rises from coal or as his Poetry sprang from his prosaic Blank Verses.

It may be that his juvenile Tragedies and his Chronicle Pageant and all his Comedies except the last form of *The Tempest* were written to please himself and his patrons, without any effort, and that he would have reckoned them ephemeral things. These were his "native woodnotes wild" and they are full of the happy repetitions of birds. He is seen in these Comedies like one of his Jesters, commenting on the ways of the World with snatches of song. It was his lot to earn his bread as a Jester, spending his wit to win the laughter of fools, and he did this as naturally and lightly as Touchstone. This set him apart from Ben Jonson, who when he wrote Comedies resembled the Elephant imagined by Milton in the garden of Eden,

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The unwieldy Elephant
To make them mirth used all his might, and wreathed
His lithe proboscis.

Heminge and Condell's boast of the easiness with which he wrote Plays is supported by his visible fluency. The fact that he wrote so few seems to show that he did not give much time to this pleasure. Even if we add *Pericles* to the Folio list he only left thirty-four Plays, many of them written as trifles and some, for instance, nearly all the Chronicle Pageant, openly founded on Plays written by others, and if he began writing about 1588 these are the fruit of twenty-eight years. In those days Lope de Vega Carpio, who was born in 1562 and died in 1635, wrote according to Montalban four hundred Autos and eighteen hundred Plays (not counting Entermeses), of which about four hundred Plays and forty Autos survive. Shakespeare seems to have been equally fluent, so the smallness of his output may show that while he was in London he only wrote Plays when they happened to be required by his Company. This may explain why he seems to have written many of them with the carelessness of natural talk.

He used all his might in his last Tragedies, or in portions of them, and he lived in them not as a Jester but as a man who endured the worst of their agonies; so they must have been more to him and he may have wished to give them a chance of being remembered and may have revised them for a Folio edition. But it is improbable that he would have presumed to differ from all the learned men of his day by attaching much importance to them or that he could have guessed that for three hundred years there would be nobody to share his renown. And it is impossible that he could have imagined Samuel Coleridge's hysterical shout, "Merciful, wonder-making Heaven! What a man was this Shakespeare!" Perhaps he would have preferred Samuel Johnson's English sobriety.

He must have known how much he was indebted to others though he may not have thought that anyone would trouble to ask from what medley of dead branches he made his Everlasting Bonfire. Because he knew this he would have been

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less prone to imagine that he would be singled out as a Miracle. The fate of Marlowe's Plays may have taught him not only that noble work could be slighted in a different time but also that it could be botched and degraded by ignoble additions, and if he wished his Plays to be printed it may have been because he preferred that they should survive as they had been written by him if they should chance to be remembered at all.

My impression is that he began as a fragile and effeminate youth, with auburn hair and grey eyes and a bright colour and an excited and over-confident way, superfluously friendly to all and obviously pleased with himself and eager to ape the behaviour of Queen Elizabeth's Court, and that as the years went on he grew quiet and was subdued to the faded elegance of the Ely House Portrait, and that he ended wan and emaciated and quieter still, exhausted by his passionate dreams and in the silence of a man who remembers that he has spoken too much. I think that he was one of the men who live in this World as if they did not belong to it, friendly but not caring much for those they meet and indifferently liked in return, who seem to have something intangible and remote in their nature and to retain youthfulness as if they were exiles from some Country beyond the ravage of Time.

If his ghost haunted this World I would look for it in the Woodland of Arden: there, I think, it would wander in the dusk of the twilight, weary and frail with desolate eyes and a blank face and hair turning grey, soberly dressed, cloaked from the cold and exposing the rich hilt of a sword with some ostentation and keeping a dignity acquired on the Stage, if the dead leaves were falling; but if the branches were green, it would come swift and rejoicing, a youth poorly clad, rich in hope, with a shining face like a girl's, singing under the trees in the early hours of the morning.

This impression seems to me to agree with the image of him shown in his Plays. If we can take *Timon of Athens* to be the last of them all because it is the least finished of them, it may be that the pen dropped from his hand when he had written,

Come not to me again: but say to Athens
Timon hath made his everlasting mansion,

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and the comment on those words of farewell,

These well express in thee thy latter spirits :
Though thou abhorr'dst in us our human griefs,
Scorn'dst our brain's flow and those our droplets which
From niggard nature fall, yet rich conceit
Taught thee to make vast Neptune weep for aye
On thy low grave, on faults forgiven.

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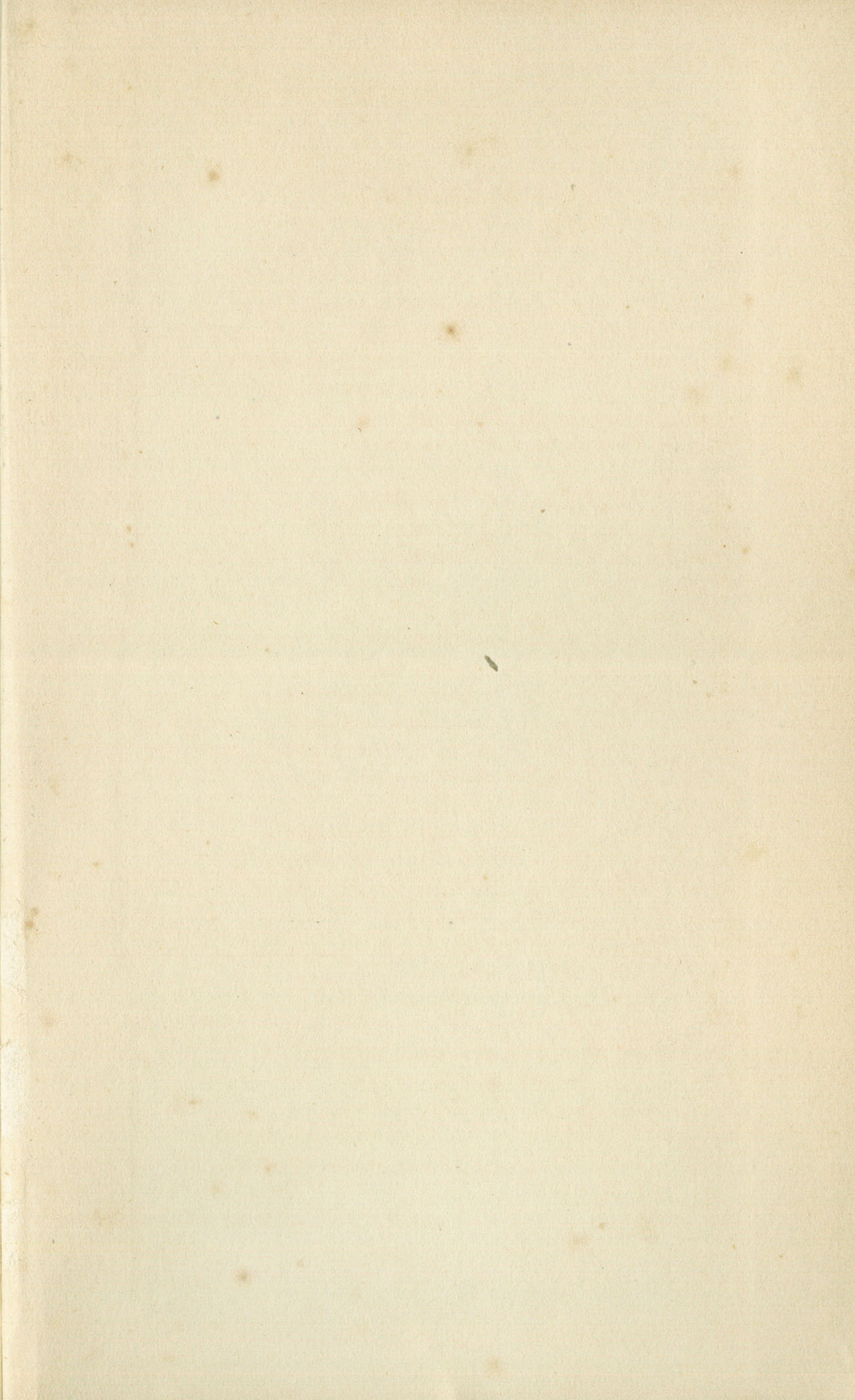
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 (Pompeii juvenile tapes)
 Cymbeline
 Winter's Tale
 Pericles
 Tempest
 (just under)
 Merry Wives

