

UNAPPRECIATED SHAKESPEARE.

The theory that I am about to propound is so audacious that, at the request of the Publisher of this work, I begin by stating that he has no sympathy whatever with it. He is a family man, and his life is a valuable life, and he is quite right to be cautious. For myself, I have the courage of my opinions. I have no doubt but that the Publisher has the courage of *his* opinions, but he has not the courage of *my* opinions, and, indeed, it would be unreasonable to expect it of him.

My theory is that the people of England have no real appreciation of the merits of their most distinguished poet. I do not refer to a thoughtful few, of whom I am one, and the reader is another, but to the mass of English-speaking men and women, educated and otherwise. I am prepared for the storm of indignant rejoinder with which this expression of opinion will be met. I am prepared to hear that the people of these islands hail Shakespeare as the greatest poet, the most profound thinker, and the most accomplished dramatist the world has ever produced. That the only theatre in which his plays are adequately presented is crowded with enthusiastic audiences. That they have mosaiced a hundred of his pithy apophthegms into our daily conversation. That a popular speaker, however uppopular and insignificant, has only to wind up his speech with half-a-dozen lines of Shakespeare (and to make it clearly understood that they *are* Shakespeare's) and he will sit down amid thunders of applause. That to mention any other author in the same page with Shakespeare is to insult that other author, however distinguished he may be in the abstract by reminding society of his relative insignificance. All this is quite true. My argument is, not that Shakespeare does not deserve all that is said and done in his honour, but that he deserves so much more.

He deserves to be read, but who reads him? I read him, and *you* read him, and probably Mr. Irving reads him, but how many more read him? A few, no doubt, but how many? I do not mean "how many dip into him?" I mean how many read him right through as they read Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, and Carlyle – or as they used to read Byron and Walter Scott, and Cooper and Marryat? Not to have read every novel of Thackeray is to be at a serious social disadvantage. No man with any pretence to a cultivated mind will publicly admit that he is not acquainted with every important poem of Tennyson. But how many Englishmen can lay their hands upon their hearts and say that they have read *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* from beginning to end? or *All's Well that Ends Well*? or *Richard the Second*? or "The First, Second, and Third Parts" of *Henry the Sixth*? or *Julius Cæsar*? or *Coriolanus*? or *Troilus and Cressida*? or *Cymbeline*? or *Love's Labour Lost*? or *Timon of Athens*? A few, no doubt, but how many? I do not mean that these books are never "looked into," but how many have read them as they have read "The Newcomes," or "David Copperfield," or "Adam Bede," or "Ivanhoe," or "Childe Harold," or the "Idylls of the King?" A few, no doubt, but how many? How many of those who bubble over about Shakespeare could give a brief abstract of the plots of the plays above mentioned – or quote half-a-dozen line from any of them? A few, no doubt but how many?

Of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Henry V.*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, most people know something, for most people *have seen those plays acted*. But how many know anything about those plays of Shakespeare which are never acted? The gentleman who is reading these lines knows all

about them, but how many of his friends are as well informed as he? Let him invite the first acquaintance he meets (who has no professional connection with the stage) to favour him with a sketch of the plot of *Cymbeline*, and note the result. The chances are ten to one that that acquaintance, if he ventures on an answer at all, will describe *Cymbeline* as a Queen of Britain. Of *Troilus and Cressida* he will be equally ignorant.

The truth is that Shakespeare is not light reading. But an absolute ignorance of the works of Shakespeare is most properly held to be disgraceful, and so when it comes to pass that a play of Shakespeare is adequately presented people rush to see it in order to familiarize themselves in the readiest and easiest and most agreeable way, with works with which it is considered – and most rightly – that all Englishmen should be familiar.

But of those who go to a theatre at which a Shakespearian play is presented, how many are aware that the play is not Shakespeare's, but a trimmed and docked and interpolated and mutilated and generally desecrated version of his play? How many are aware that the tragedy of *Hamlet*, as Shakespeare wrote it, contains about four thousand five hundred lines, of which only about two thousand two hundred are usually delivered on the stage? I shall be told that that is quite enough, and perhaps it is, but how is this sentiment to be reconciled with the enthusiastic veneration in which all people profess to hold the works of Shakespeare? What author can be fairly judged by a play of which one half is deliberately suppressed? Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* contains about three thousand two hundred lines, the "Acting Edition" of this comedy contains only about a thousand! Then, again, how many are aware that in very many cases – I believe I may say in all cases – the actual order of the scenes is changed, merely to provide time and stage-room for elaborate scenic display? If such an outrage were attempted on a play by, say, Mr. Tom Taylor, would it not be regarded as an insult to his memory? When *Henry VIII.* is presented, it is customary to omit the last two acts – not because they were not written by Shakespeare, but because the star-part, Wolsey, finishes in the last act but two! But who cares? So with the *Merchant of Venice*. The last act is rarely presented because Shylock is not in it; though, in justice to Mr. Irving, I should state that upon the occasion of his recent revival of this play it was allowed to proceed to its legitimate conclusion.

The *Taming of the Shrew*, a five-act play, is usually reduced to three acts, sometimes to two, occasionally to one! The *Comedy of Errors*, a five-act play, loses nearly three thousand lines in representation!

But who cares? Who resents these atrocious liberties? I do and the reader does, but who else? A few, perhaps, but how many? Who calls out from the pit to the "star" who deliberately cuts out the last two acts of *Henry VIII.* because he has no part in it – "You insufferably vain and sacrilegious imposter, how dare you lay your mutilating hand upon the immortal work of a genius whom we revere as we revere our religion? Restore the fourth and fifth acts of this great play! Perform them at once, or up go your benches!" I am in the habit of publicly addressing the star-tragedian in these words, and so is the reader; but who else does so? No one else – probably because it is not generally known that two acts have been suppressed. As for the "star," in all probability he has never read those acts. Why should he? There is no Wolsey in them.

In truth – and it is a lamentable truth – the popular knowledge of Shakespeare is almost entirely derived from performances of mutilated versions of his plays. Of those plays in their entirety, and of the plays that are seldom or never performed, the mass of Englishmen know little or nothing.

I will point the moral of this paper with a quotation from the "Players' Preface to the Folio Edition of Shakespeare's plays."

"It is not our province who only gather his workes and give them to you, to praise him. It is yours that reade him. And there we hope, to your divers capacities, you will finde enough both to draw and hold you ; for his wit can no more lie hid than it could be lost.

Reade him, therefore, and againe, and againe, and if then you do not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him."