

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

S. M. I., '43

There is no way in which the truth of the statement that a poet is born, not made, may be more clearly demonstrated than by reference to the literary works of the subject of this essay, for notwithstanding Shakespeare's very ordinary education, his works reveal him as the greatest literary genius the world has ever known.

Although it is impossible to speak with any degree of certainty of the personal history of Shakespeare, the facts concerning his birth and parentage are well authenticated. He was born at Stratford-on-Avon, in the county of Warwick in April, 1564, and was the eldest son of John Shakespeare, a leading burgess of the town, and of Mary Arden, the daughter of a rather wealthy yeoman farmer. It is taken for granted that he received the rudiments of his education at the Stratford Grammar School. At the age of eighteen he married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior. We have no more authentic information about him until we hear of him in London as a prominent actor and playwright of the Lord Chamberlain's Company. Why he left his native home to seek his fortunes in a large city will never be known. Perhaps it was an interior voice which silently but eloquently urged him to seek the proper environment for the development of his extraordinary mental powers. Be that as it may, it is a well-known fact that, when he left London in 1611 to spend the rest of his days at Stratford, he had his reputation as a master poet and dramatist so firmly established that even his own rivals in the literary field were forced to admit his superior powers.

Whence comes it, then, that he, who never invented a plot, who never delved into the realms of philosophy, or who never studied the art of writing, is at once the greatest playwright, the most practical psychologist, and the most outstanding exponent of English literary style the world has ever known? It is necessary only to read his works to find the answer to this question. His lively imagination, his powers of observation, his unprecedented mastery of language, his ability to paint nature in its true colors, and above all his all-embracing sympathy are depicted on every page of the writings that have won for him an immortal

laurel. It may be that a deep abiding sense of his own human shortcomings made him intensely sympathetic towards the weaknesses of others.

Shakespeare's greatest gift is undoubtedly that of character creation. In this he has no rival. It is no exaggeration to say that all the great novelists since his time have learned from him the art of creating characters. His powers of observation were so keen and his interest in human nature so intense that he was able to make his characters absolutely living people, possessing an independent existence of their own. He endowed them with a reality that makes them continue to live on in the imagination long after the curtain falls or the book is closed.

The plays of Shakespeare, over thirty in all, divide themselves into five classes; the Comedies, the Histories, the Classical Plays, the Tragedies, and the Romances. Inferior plays of other dramatists have been falsely attributed to Shakespeare's pen by those jealous of his fame, but Shakespeare put his own stamp on all his works. No other man could write in the same masterly style. In the absence of any information from Shakespeare himself regarding the order in which his plays were written, we are forced to determine from the plays themselves their chronology as well as their authenticity. It is generally conceded that his first play was *Titus Andronicus*. He then turned to light comedy and produced the play, *Love's Labor's Lost*, which showed a decided advance in style and dramatic skill. His literary powers gradually unfolded themselves, and possibly reached their highest peak of development in the five great tragedies.

The benefits that Shakespeare bestowed upon the stage can scarcely be over-estimated. There is no part of the drama he did not improve. There is, however, a coarseness of phrase, but this must be attributed to the age in which he lived. It is true, too, that he had an inclination to play with words when there was no apparent reason for doing so. This tends to weaken the dramatic effect. His faults are few, however, in comparison with his perfections; and, when we say that there is evidence of minor defects in his literary works, we are simply saying that he shares something in common with imperfect humanity. Just as the light of the brilliant sun throws into relief a blemish on a spotless background, so does the effulgence of Shakespeare's genius magnify any imperfections that appear in his writings.

As Shakespeare's dramatic work eclipses that of all his contemporaries, so do his sonnets far surpass the whole mass of other Elizabethan sonnet-literature. They possess the same poetic excellence and are vitalized by the same creative genius as gives life to his dramatic characters and makes them live on in the imagination.

Perhaps this essay could not be more fittingly concluded than with the words of a noted historian who possessed a deep appreciation of literary values: "Some writers are good in some respects, others in other respects, but Shakespeare is the greatest in all respects."

FROM TIME TO TIME

Francis A. Brennan, '43

"Henry Barry, don't you ever tire of that sand pit? The other boys and girls have been playing games all afternoon, and you haven't once joined them. What is the matter? Are you afraid of them?"

The little, curly-headed, round-eyed lad looked into Miss Prittle's face, and a strong voice came from the diminutive body.

"But I like it here, Miss Prittle—look at this tank go. Whee."

His tiny fingers closed on the toy and nimbly wound the motor. The little tank shot over the sand, climbing over the huge obstacles which had been placed in its way, and seeming to be outdoing itself for the boy who knelt and clapped his hands in glee.

"Honest to goodness, Henry Barry, I don't know what is going to become of you. Watch out you don't turn into a machine one of these days," said Miss Prittle with a resigned air as she left the play-room.

This was an incident in the life of Henry Barry, and it took place in Summerton Kindergarten in the year 1925, that year when the world was crazy and topsy-turvy—and no one knew what was coming next.

"Henry Barry, will you please give me your attention?" said Mr. Keble dangerously. "Now sir, what is the atomic weight of antimony?"