

Baltimore Evening Sun
April 23, 1910

William Shakespeare

Stratford-on-Avon, that sleepy old town, is as crowded and lively just now as a Chesapeake excursion boat on the Fourth of July, for today is the birthday of William Shakespeare, and thousands of tourists have flocked to his birthplace to see the festival performances in the Shakespeare Theatre. This year's festival will last not the usual two weeks, but a full month, and all the English actors, including Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Lewis Waller and Sir John Hare, will have some hand in it.

That April 23 is Shakespeare's birthday is nothing more than a convenient assumption, for no one really knows when he was born. All that the most painstaking research has been able to discover is that he was baptized on April 26, 1564. It was the general custom in those days to have a child baptized three days after birth, and so it is assumed that the greatest of all dramatists first saw the light on April 23.

To be strictly accurate, we should really celebrate his birthday on May 3, for he was born while the old style, or Julian, calendar was still in force, and there is a difference of 10 days between that calendar and the one now in use. The change was made by Pope Gregory XIII in October, 1582, when Shakespeare was 18 years old. To correct the error that the old calendar, with its few minutes loss of time every year had brought about in the course of centuries Gregory decreed that October 5, 1582, should be called October 15. Thus everyone then living grew 10 days older in one day. In Russia, where the Julian calendar has never been ousted by the Gregorian they are still 10 days behind us.

Shakespearean "Scholars"

In late years a radical change has come over the world's view of Shakespeare—a change in the direction of better understanding and sounder judgment. Time was, and not so long ago, when the poet was set upon a pedestal so high and his worshipers adored him so vociferously that the voice of common sense could not be heard. It was accepted as an axiom that every line in his plays was beyond criticism, that his art was perfect in the smallest things as well as in the largest, that he rose above all ordinary human limitations and wrote with the inspiration of divine prophet.

In those days a horde of so-called "Shakespearean scholars," male and female, wrote endless commentaries upon his plays—commentaries as ingenuous and as fatuous as some of the old-time homiletes' expositions of Holy Writ. The rash critic who ventured to point out clumsiness in the dramatist's plots, plagiarism in his rhetoric, inconsistencies in his characters and banality in his philosophy was hooted down as a loathsome ignoramus. That "scholar" was most esteemed who had memorized most

passages from the plays typographical errors and the childish interpolations of early editors included, and who could spout them with the greatest of fection of earnestness and reverence.

Such foolishness had to end, and end it did. A new race of critics sprang up, who sought to understand Shakespeare better by gaining a better knowledge of the time in which he lived. In the light of that knowledge, when at last it had been painfully acquired, many things became clear and the occupation of the ancient cabalists was gone.

The Stage Of His Day

It was learned, for example, that much of Shakespeare's carelessness—his loose writing, his barbarous blunders in names and facts, his occasional dependence upon cheap theatrical devices—was due to the great speed with which he had to work to make a living. It was learned, too, that he had to make frequent and lamentable concessions to the taste and prejudices of his audiences at the Blackfriars and Globe Theater that he had to give his principal personages long and flowery speeches because those pugnacious Elizabethans had a liking for fustian, that he had to regale them with coarse buffoonery because they were hoggish, and offer them plenty of fighting because they were bullies. And it was learned, finally, that Shakespeare did not take himself too seriously; that he placed his main dependence not upon flashes of genius, but upon hard work; that he was, first of all, a busy journeyman dramatist and ready to tackle any job in his line that offered.

After he had thus been rid of his supernatural halo it became possible to study the plays of Shakespeare as the plays of any other man are studied. The result of that study, which has now been in progress for a good while, has been no diminution of his fame, but only a change in its quality. No sane critic maintains today that Shakespeare was divinely inspired or that all he wrote came from within and nothing from without, or that his plays, in themselves, offer credible answers to all the riddles of human existence. But by the same token, no sane critic deules that, if not in kind, then at least in degree, he differs enormously from all other dramatists; that his best plays, in structure and in detail, are the best plays by long odds ever written, and that, in nearly every one of the qualities which enter into the make-up of a great imaginative writer, he exceeded all other men whose writings we know today.

The Magic Of His Words

But in what qualities is his greatness especially to be sought? Chiefly in two. In the first place, he was the most marvelous master of words that ever set pen to paper, and in the second place he was the most prodigal creator of living, upstanding characters that ever peopled a dream world with his fancies.

Shakespeare's skill at putting beautiful thoughts into arresting words was altogether beyond compare. His phrases have entered into the common speech of the race, not so much on account of the truth of their matter, as on account of the astonishing felicity of their manner. He reduced the race philosophy of the English to electric sentences; he got young love and old romance, the music of the spheres and the hope of Heaven into single lines.

No other language save the English has ever known so subtle a master. The German of Goethe, the Spanish of Calderon and Cervantes, the French of Corneille and Hugo and the Greek of Homer must ever delight the connoisseur of verbal magic, but Shakespeare's English stands above them all. In more than one place the thing that he says is scarcely worth hearing, but he always says it with such inimitable art that it lingers in memory forever.

His Wonderful Personages

In his characters, Shakespeare's genius is even more astonishingly displayed. His vast canvas is crowded with figures, and though some of them, true enough, are mere shadows, others stand out with such reality that they seem actually to move and breathe. There is more reality in Dogberry than in most English kings. Hamlet is as real as William the Conqueror; Shylock and Mercutio, Benedict and Petruchio, Malvolio and Romeo. By the strange humor of fate are vastly more real than Shakespeare. So too, Corneille and Schiller, Aeschylus and Aristophanes, Lope de Yega and Ben Jonson have given us plays with credible human beings in them, but which of those creations appeals to our sense of reality as strongly as Portia? Which of them is the old friend that Falstaff is? Which remains to memory as Rosalind does?

Now, since the creation of plausible characters is the principal business of a dramatist, and Shakespeare has done that work better than any other man, it follows that he is the greatest of all dramatists. He is, indeed, a very colossus of the theatre, a genius unapproachable and incomparable. But in many of the minor things of his art lesser men have surpassed him, and we get a surer and saner view of him if we admit it.

He is often careless, for example, where Congreve is always careful: he is sometimes banal. Where Racine is dignified. Scribe knew a great deal more about deft play building than Shakespeare, and Wycherley was a better hand at writing dialogue. George Bernard Shaw, in truth is not altogether absurd when he maintains that much water has gone under the bridges since Shakespeare's time, and that many things are done better today, even in the theatre and even by Shaw himself.

The New Shakespeare

Such admission would have seemed much religious to the old-time Shakespearean "scholars" but we may make them today without hesitation. We have outgrown the ancient fashion of regarding the plays of the poet as impeccable scriptures, which must be accepted without cavil or inquiry. We no longer go into raptures over his so-called philosophy, with its confusing echoes of all creeds and schools and its superficial resignationism. We no longer hail Shakespeare as a master psychologist for psychology is no longer a mere name, but a definite science and we know that an artist is not a scientist. In a word, we have abandoned a lot of cant, a lot of cheap worship a lot of doddering nonsense.

But the more we study the plays of Shakespeare, as stage plays, the more we become convinced that the world will never see his peer as a dramatist, and the more we study that marvelous English of his, as a work of art, the more we incline to the belief

that he must stand first, for many long years, among all the great masters of the written word.