

**A GLANCE
TOWARD
SHAKESPEARE**

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A Glance Toward Shakespeare by John Jay Chapman

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A GLANCE TOWARD SHAKESPEARE

I

INTRODUCTION

THE use of great men is to bind the world together. Everybody knows of them, thinks and writes about them, till they become portions of the common mind. An aftercomer cannot tell his own story, or even see life clearly, without reference to those who have controlled the world's thought in the past. And thus the names of great men become a part of the elemental power of language itself. Shakespeare's works touch our life and mind at all points, and he is himself behind most of our critical perceptions. He illumines our atmosphere, and the prismatic lights and shadows that he casts through each generation are moving and transitory things. I have, therefore, not ventured to call the papers by a title more ambitious than a glance toward the light.

It was near the end of the eighteenth century that men began to realize the greatness of Shakespeare, and literary persons were then visited with a new, vague, and strange experience — the discovery that the power of Shakespeare was beyond the reach of criticism. The labors of scholarship over the poet have spread the news, till it has become a commonplace. One finds in the classics, whether of Greek or

INTRODUCTION

Roman times, much reverence for critical theory. At Athens and at Rome all parties had a religious belief in the power of criticism. This breaking of shackles, this plunging of the mind into a mystery that shines the more because it defies analysis, is Shakespeare's gift to the world.

His fame as a poet has all but eclipsed his fame as a dramatist; because poetry is a circulating medium which floats into our houses, whereas a drama implies a journey to the playhouse. It will be seen that I began these studies by a paper on the plays as poetry, for it is as poetry that Shakespeare first approaches most of us. Nevertheless, the drama, and the bones of dramatic construction, the management of plot, the arts of speech and rhetoric, are always at play in him. They are the wings of his vehicle. And thus the actual stage becomes the true place to study him. The footlights are our best guide to him; and if he should be lost to the living stage, a great part of his meaning would vanish. It is for this reason that the reader will find in these Notes various discussions of the plays as mere shows, as popular amusements, and much scattered talk about acting, enunciation, and even about children's performances.