

**SHAKESPEARE'S
PLUTARCH. VOL. 2**

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Shakespeare's Plutarch. Vol. 2 by Plutarch & C. F. Tucker Brooke

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PLUTARCH & C. F. TUCKER BROOKE

**SHAKESPEARE'S
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SHAKESPEARE'S
PLUTARCH: EDITED BY
C. F. TUCKER BROOKE
B.LITT.: VOL. II.: CONTAINING
THE MAIN SOURCES OF
ANTONY & CLEOPATRA
AND OF CORIOLANUS



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INTRODUCTION

A GENERAL DISCUSSION of North's translation of Plutarch and its relation to Shakespeare's play of *Julius Caesar* will be found in the introduction to the first volume.

The scope of North's influence on Shakespeare.

The extent and precise nature of Shakespeare's debt to North is not easily calculated. Besides the four lives here printed, it has been asserted that he drew upon the Life of Theseus for some five lines in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that he used the Life of Alcibiades for *Timon of Athens*, that he got a hint for *Julius Caesar*; namely, Caesar's fear of sleepless men, from the Life of Cato Censor. It has been suggested that he derived from the comparisons or συγκρίσεις attached to the Lives of Coriolanus, Caesar, Brutus, and Antonius a few general ideas as to the character of these personages. Professor Skeat, furthermore, has printed in his book, *Shakespeare's Plutarch*, the spurious life of Augustus Caesar, which found its way into the 1603 and later editions of North.

It is difficult to set limits to Shakespeare's possible erudition. It is highly probable that he had read much more of Plutarch than he ever openly used; and he may have known all the

passages which an unpleasantly microscopic criticism has pointed out; but if so, the matter seems entirely devoid of interest or importance. Only as regards the four lives which are reprinted in this book can there be any true question of debit and credit between North and Shakespeare, and even here the different plays show very different sorts of borrowing.

The relation between *Julius Caesar* and the *Lives* has been already discussed. If the connexion had ended with that play there would be no great reason for crediting North with a much higher sort of influence over Shakespeare than that exerted by Holinshed, Painter, Whetstone, Harsnet, and the many other authors whose matter the poet appropriated without reserve and whose manner, save for a phrase here and there, he seems utterly to have repudiated. But the indebtedness of Shakespeare to North is most striking in the latest of his Roman plays, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. A comparison of the many passages in the lives of Antonius and of Coriolanus here marked by daggers with the corresponding lines in Shakespeare shows that the dramatist was satisfied in no small number of cases to incorporate whole speeches from North with the least change consistent with the production of blank verse. The description of Cleopatra's first visit to Antony, the dying speech of Antony, and the few noble lines that glorify the passing of Cleopatra, the address of Coriolanus to Tullus Aufidius when he throws himself upon the latter's hospitality, and the last all-decisive speech of Volumnia to

her son—these passages, all of which rank among the special treasures of Shakespearian poetry, come straight and essentially unaltered out of North.

Nowhere else in Shakespeare is there an instance of verbal borrowing at the height of dramatic intensity which is comparable to these. Even the speech of Portia to Brutus in *Julius Caesar* offers no parallel, for there we can see plainly the deliberate poetic handling which North's words suffered, fine though they are, before they were allowed a place in the drama. In the passages I have cited there is little evidence of any attempt at improvement; indeed, it may be held in regard to several of them that the palm belongs rather to North's prose than to Shakespeare's poetry. That this should be so is a fact worthy of all wonder and attention, for the like can be said of no other of Shakespeare's rivals or assistants.

Yet it is easy to misinterpret woefully the meaning of the phenomenon. The criticism that blatantly advertises North as the writer who has surpassed Shakespeare in his own art is illogical as well as foolish. It rests on a wrong conception of the nature of Shakespeare's latest work. The probable date of *Antony and Cleopatra* is 1607, and *Coriolanus* is somewhat later. During this his last period, the poet's manner is characterized, it need not be said, by qualities of unapproachable grandeur; it is not, however, marked by minute attention to details. In structure as in versification we find a certain looseness; the carelessness of conscious

mastery overrides trilling rules before which immaturity had bent. After all, North's style, as we see it in these four lives, is pretty much of a piece, and what Shakespeare had been able to improve on in 1601, when he wrote *Julius Caesar*, was assuredly not beyond him in 1607. The truth is that Shakespeare's interest in the last two Roman plays is centred nearly exclusively in character, in Antony and Cleopatra, Volumnia and Coriolanus. He has earned the right to ignore rules of syntax and of scansion. He may at this time appropriate without scruple whatever North has written that will serve his purpose and would cost him pains to write better. It is no more than the assertion of genius's privilege of indifference to non-essentials—the natural corollary of the 'infinite capacity for taking pains,' where the pains are worth the taking.

The borrowing is a deservedly high compliment to North; it is far from being a reproach to Shakespeare. It is as Archbishop Trench has said in his lectures on Plutarch: 'Shakespeare does not abdicate his royal preëminence, but resumes it at any moment that he pleases.' To take the dying speech of Charmion and fit it indistinguishably into a setting worthy of it, to borrow nearly unchanged the words of Coriolanus to Aufidius and then to give them their needed consummation in the answer of Aufidius—this surely is a greater achievement than to have new-written the two scenes.

Plutarch and the structure of the Roman Plays. The indebtedness of Shakespeare to Plutarch's