

**SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS: A
CHAPTER OF STAGE
HISTORY. AN ESSAY ON
THE SHAKESPERIAN DRAMA**

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Shakespeare's plays: a chapter of stage history. An essay on the Shakesperian drama by A. H. Paget

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AN ESSAY ON THE SHAKESPERIAN DRAMA.

By A. H. PAGET.

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PREFACE.

THE following pages were originally prepared as a paper to be read before the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, early in the present year; and, at the time of its delivery, I had no intention of their appearing in print. Since then, however, suggestions kindly made by Mr. J. O. Halliwell, Mr. C. Roach Smith, and other gentlemen qualified to advise, have led me to venture upon publication; and I now lay my essay, in a slightly enlarged form, before such of the general public as take interest in tracing the connection of Shakespeare's works with the English stage.

A. H. P.

April, 1875.

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SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS :

A CHAPTER OF STAGE HISTORY.

THE title of this paper, I trust, fairly indicates the subject proposed. It does not treat of Shakespeare personally ; nor of his plays, described simply with reference to himself. There is no attempt to show how the plays became what they are ; I simply take them as they stand, and try to show what has been done with them since they came from the mind of the poet. I want to tell something of the conditions under which they have been presented during a long series of years ; for although Shakespeare is so much more to us than a mere writer of stage plays, I dare assert that now, as in his own day, the theatre is his proper and most natural home. He may be studied and dearly prized in all places ; but to know Shakespeare in his fulness, without the agency of the stage, is, to my mind, as impossible as to taste the magical charm of snowy peaks and glaciers only from poring over books of science at home.

Our concern, then, is less with the great Original than with those men through whom, for better or

worse, he has been made known; the dramatists who have handled his plays, and the actors who have been the living embodiments of his creations. It is a wide field of research, and a lecture can only point out a few of its features. The temptation to pile up great names, and say a little about everything, must be resisted. And, so, looking to the real drift of the matter, and trying to find for this paper the most exact description, I have ventured to call it 'A Chapter of Stage History.'

It would seem best to begin with an account of the Elizabethan theatres, in order to explain how Shakespeare's plays were first acted, and that we might call to mind under what outer conditions he wrote as he did. But this of itself is ample subject for a lecture, and, awaiting further instalments from Mr. Halliwell of his 'Illustrations of the Life of Shakespeare,' the task would be somewhat hazardous. The company of players to which the poet belonged travelled about, performing in noblemen's mansions, inn-yards, and civic halls; in our own Townhall, Mr. Kelly has told us.* But they were chiefly engaged at two theatres in London, the Blackfriars, and a large circular or polygonal playhouse, the Globe, on the Bankside. The buildings were simple in form; in the larger theatres only the stage, the 'tiring rooms, and galleries were roofed over, the central space, or yard, being open to the sky. There must have been plenty of shouting and

* 'Notices illustrative of the Drama and other Amusements at Leicester,' by William Kelly.

opening of this play. The poet calls upon his hearers to take their part in the illusion ; for without their lively sympathy he can do nothing for them.

" O for a muse of fire, that would ascend
 The brightest heaven of invention !
 A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
 And monarchs to behold the swelling scene !
 Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
 Assume the port of Mars ; and, at his heels,
 Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword, and fire
 Crouch for employment. But, pardon, gentles all,
 The flat, unraised spirit that hath dared
 On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
 So great an object : can this cockpit hold
 The vasty fields of France ? or may we cram
 Within this wooden O the very casques
 That did affright the air at Agincourt ?
 O, pardon ! since a crooked figure may
 Attest, in little place, a million ;
 And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
 On your imaginary forces work.
 Suppose, within the girdle of these walls
 Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
 Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
 The perilous, narrow ocean parts asunder.
 Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts,
 Into a thousand parts divide one man,
 And make imaginary puissance.
 Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
 Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth :
 For 'tis your thoughts that new must deck our kings,
 Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
 Turning the accomplishment of many years
 Into an hour-glass ; for the which supply,
 Admit me, Chorus to this history ;
 Who, prologue-like, your humble patience pray,
 Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play."

On what, then, did Shakespeare rely, for the

working out of his conceptions? On good acting, and that only. The age that produced great dramatists produced great actors also; the two were cast in the same mould, and, in several cases, the same individual was at once actor and dramatist. The mighty lines of the poet called forth the actor's genius; and the poet himself, hearing his words sent back to him with the added force of impassioned utterance, wrote in confidence that his thoughts would be understood and realized. This held good with every portion of a play; for we read that leading actors did not then disdain to undertake small parts besides their chief character. And thus servants and messengers were presented by men of the highest stamp; a thing not often seen on the modern stage.

It is a common regret that it is so hard to judge of actors of a former age. We wish to know how actors whom we are used to see, would compare with the great men of past days. We can read descriptions of their playing, collect scraps of anecdote that prove their genius, study their portraits; but we come away, after all, very little satisfied, and with a mighty hunger for more exact information. The further back we go, the greater this uncertainty becomes: in the infancy of an art the standards of comparison are indefinite, and the data for exact analysis are wanting.

This applies in a high degree to our knowledge of the original acting of Shakespeare's plays. We have, indeed, the names of the chief performers of

the day ; but we cannot do with them, as we might with the painters of former times, set side by side works by Raphael and Rembrandt, or of Holbein and Gainsborough, and nicely weigh the manner of each master. We cannot thus set the art of Burbage by that of Betterton, nor feel on sure ground in balancing the merits of Garrick's tragedy and Kean's.

But there is no doubt whatever that the greatest actor of Shakespeare's day was Richard Burbage. He played Shylock, Richard III., Prince Henry, Romeo, Henry V., Brutus, Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, Pericles, and Coriolanus. Probably, in every case too, Burbage was the original performer of these parts ; and it is amazing to think of the good fortune of an actor to whom it fell, to be the creator on the stage of such a wondrous round of characters.

Burbage lived long before the days of professional critics ; and except from mention of his name in legal documents relating to various theatres, and from a few poems, we know but little about him. The list of his characters is taken from a manuscript epitaph in the British Museum, which, though not a brilliant poem, has a few expressions that convey real ideas.

" Tyrant Macbeth, with unwaht, bloody hand,
We vainly now may *hope to understand.*"

Without Burbage, the written character would be an insoluble riddle.