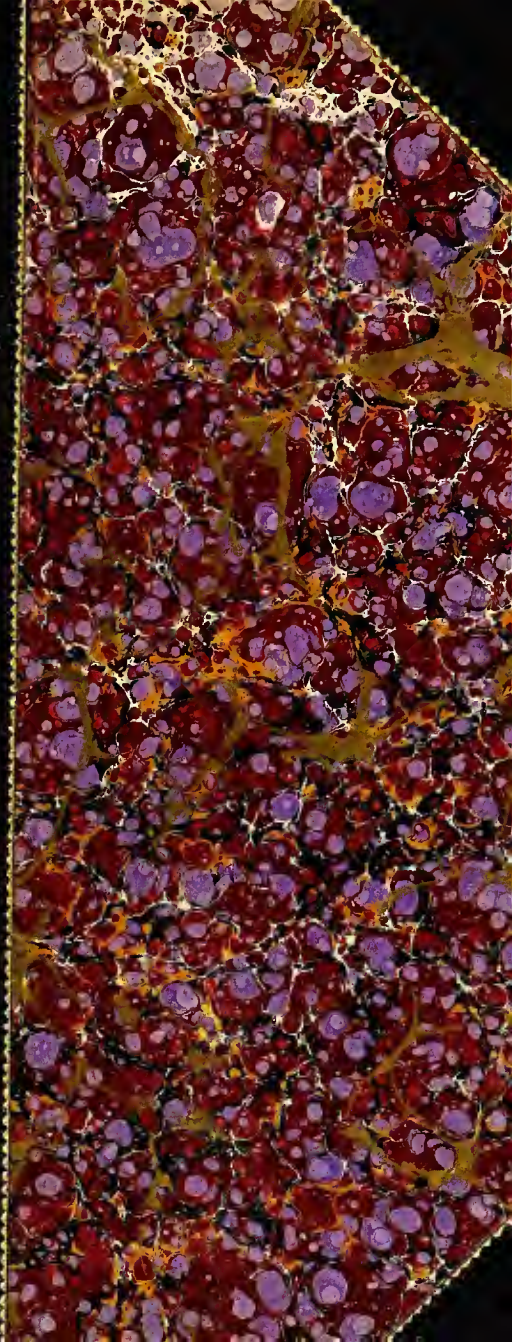
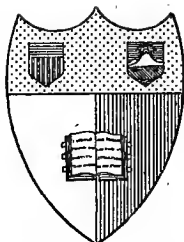


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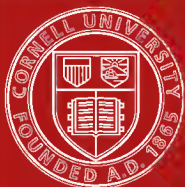
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SHAKSPEARE

A BIOGRAPHY

BY

THOMAS DE QUINCEY

THE ENGLISH OPIUM-EATER.

EDINBURGH

ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK

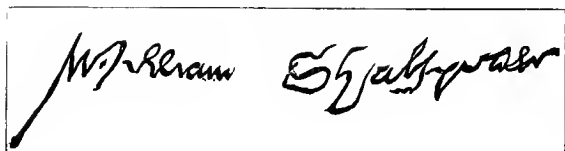
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N O T E.

IN issuing this Biography in a separate form and at the present time, it is perhaps only necessary to mention, in justice to the author, that it was written in the year 1838, and had not the benefit of any revision before his lamented death, which occurred in the year 1859.

EDINBURGH, *April* 1864.

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in cursive script. The signature reads "William Shakespeare". The ink is dark, and the handwriting is fluid and characteristic of the early modern period.

WILLIAM SHAKSPEARE, the protagonist on the great arena of modern poetry, and the glory of the human intellect, was born at Stratford-upon-Avon, in the county of Warwick, in the year 1564, and upon some day not precisely ascertained, in the month of April. It is certain that he was baptized on the 25th ; and from that fact, combined with some shadow of a tradition, Malone has inferred that he was born on the 23d. There is doubtless, on the one hand, no absolute necessity deducible from law or custom, as either operated in those times, which obliges us to adopt such a conclusion ; for children might be baptized, and were baptized, at various distances from their birth : yet, on the other hand, the 23d is as likely to have been the day as any other ; and more likely than any earlier day, upon two arguments. First, because there was probably a tradition floating in the seventeenth century, that Shakspeare died upon his birth-day : now it is beyond a doubt that he died upon the 23d of April. Secondly, because it is a reasonable presumption, that no parents, living in a simple community, tenderly alive to the pieties

of household duty, and in an age still clinging reverentially to the ceremonial ordinances of religion, would much delay the adoption of their child into the great family of Christ. Considering the extreme frailty of an infant's life during its two earliest years, to delay would often be to disinherit the child of its Christian privileges ; privileges not the less eloquent to the feelings from being profoundly mysterious, and, in the English church, forced not only upon the attention, but even upon the eye, of the most thoughtless. According to the discipline of the English church, the unbaptized are buried with "maimed rites," shorn of their obsequies, and sternly denied that "sweet and solemn farewell" by which otherwise the church expresses her final charity with all men ; and not only so, but they are even *locally* separated and sequestered. Ground the most hallowed, and populous with Christian burials of households,

That died in peace with one another,
Father, sister, son, and brother,

opens to receive the vilest malefactor ; by which the church symbolically expresses her maternal willingness to gather back into her fold those even of her flock who have strayed from her by the most memorable aberrations ; and yet, with all this indulgence, she banishes to unhallowed ground the innocent bodies of the unbaptized. To them and to suicides she turns a face of wrath. With this gloomy fact offered to the very external senses, it is difficult to suppose that any parents would risk their own reproaches by putting the fulfilment of so grave a duty on the hazard of a convulsion fit. The case of royal

children is different ; their baptisms, it is true, were often delayed for weeks ; but the household chaplains of the palace were always at hand, night and day, to baptize them in the very agonies of death.* We must presume, therefore, that William Shakspeare was born on some day very little anterior to that of his baptism ; and the more so because the season of the year was lovely and genial, the 23d of April in 1564 corresponding in fact with what we now call the 3d of May, so that, whether the child was to be carried abroad, or the clergyman to be summoned, no hindrance would arise from the weather. One only argument has sometimes struck us for supposing that the 22d might be the day, and not the 23d ; which is, that Shakspeare's sole grand-daughter, Lady Barnard, was married on the 22d of April 1626, ten years exactly from the poet's death ; and the reason for choosing this day *might* have had a reference to her illustrious grandfather's birthday ; which, there is good

* But, as a proof that, even in the case of royal christenings, it was not thought pious to "tempt God," as it were, by delay, Edward VI., the only son of Henry VIII., was born on the 12th day of October in the year 1537. And there was a delay on account of the sponsors, since the birth was not in London. Yet how little that delay was made, may be seen by this fact : The birth took place in the dead of the night, the day was Friday ; and yet, in spite of all delay, the christening was most pompously celebrated on the succeeding Monday. And Prince Arthur, the elder brother of Henry VIII., was christened on the very next Sunday succeeding to his birth, notwithstanding an inevitable delay, occasioned by the distance of Lord Oxford, his godfather, and the excessive rains, which prevented the earl being reached by couriers, or himself reaching Winchester, without extraordinary exertions.

reason for thinking, would be celebrated as a festival in the family for generations. Still this choice *may* have been an accident, or governed merely by reason of convenience. And, on the whole, it is as well perhaps to acquiesce in the old belief, that Shakspeare was born and died on the 23d of April. We cannot do wrong if we drink to his memory on both 22d and 23d.

On a first review of the circumstances, we have reason to feel no little perplexity in finding the materials for a life of this transcendent writer so meagre and so few; and amongst them the larger part of doubtful authority. All the energy of curiosity directed upon this subject, through a period of one hundred and fifty years (for so long it is since Betterton the actor began to make researches) has availed us little or nothing. Neither the local traditions of his provincial birth-place, though sharing with London through half a century the honour of his familiar presence, nor the recollections of that brilliant literary circle with whom he lived in the metropolis, have yielded much more than such an outline of his history as is oftentimes to be gathered from the penurious records of a grave-stone. That he lived, and that he died, and that he was "a little lower than the angels;"—these make up pretty nearly the amount of our undisputed report. It may be doubted indeed whether at this day we are as accurately acquainted with the life of Shakspeare as with that of Chaucer, though divided from each other by an interval of two centuries, and (what should have been more effectual towards oblivion) by the wars of the two roses. And yet the traditional memory of a rural and a sylvan region, such as Warwickshire at

that time was, is usually exact as well as tenacious; and, with respect to Shakspeare in particular, we may presume it to have been full and circumstantial through the generation succeeding to his own, not only from the curiosity, and perhaps something of a scandalous interest, which would pursue the motions of one living so large a part of his life at a distance from his wife, but also from the final reverence and honour which would settle upon the memory of a poet so pre-eminently successful; of one who, in a space of five-and-twenty years, after running a bright career in the capital city of his native land, and challenging notice from the throne, had retired with an ample fortune, created by his personal efforts, and by labours purely intellectual.

How are we to account, then, for that deluge, as if from Lethe, which has swept away so entirely the traditional memorials of one so illustrious? Such is the fatality of error which overclouds every question connected with Shakspeare, that two of his principal critics, Steevens, and Malone, have endeavoured to solve the difficulty by cutting it with a falsehood. They deny in effect that he *was* illustrious in the century succeeding to his own, however much he has since become so. We shall first produce their statements in their own words, and we shall then briefly review them.

Steevens delivers *his* opinion in the following terms:—
“How little Shakspeare was once read, may be understood from Tate, who, in his dedication to the altered play of King Lear, speaks of the original as an obscure piece, recommended to his notice by a friend; and the author of the Tatler, having occasion to quote a few lines out of

Macbeth, was content to receive them from Davenant's alteration of that celebrated drama, in which almost every original beauty is either awkwardly disguised or arbitrarily omitted." Another critic, who cites this passage from Steevens, pursues the hypothesis as follows :—" In fifty years after his death, Dryden mentions that he was then become a *little obsolete*. In the beginning of the last century, Lord Shaftesbury complains of his *rude unpolished style, and his antiquated phrase and wit*. It is certain that, for nearly a hundred years after his death, partly owing to the immediate revolution and rebellion, and partly to the licentious taste encouraged in Charles II.'s time, and perhaps partly to the incorrect state of his works, he was ALMOST ENTIRELY NEGLECTED." This critic then goes on to quote with approbation the opinion of Malone,—“ that if he had been read, admired, studied, and imitated, in the same degree as he is now, the enthusiasm of some one or other of his admirers in the last age would have induced him to make some inquiries concerning the history of his theatrical career, and the anecdotes of his private life.” After which this enlightened writer reaffirms and clenches the judgment he has quoted by saying,—“ His admirers, however, *if he had admirers in that age*, possessed no portion of such enthusiasm.”

It may perhaps be an instructive lesson to young readers, if we now show them, by a short sifting of these confident dogmatists, how easy it is for a careless or a half-read man to circulate the most absolute falsehoods under the semblance of truth; falsehoods which impose upon himself as much as they do upon others. We believe that not one word or illustration is uttered in the sentences cited from

these three critics which is not *virtually* in the very teeth of the truth.

To begin with Mr Nahum Tate:—This poor grub of literature, if he did really speak of Lear as “an *obscure* piece, recommended to his notice by a friend,” of which we must be allowed to doubt, was then uttering a conscious falsehood. It happens that Lear was one of the few Shakspearian dramas which had kept the stage unaltered. But it is easy to see a mercenary motive in such an artifice as this. Mr Nahum Tate is not of a class of whom it can be safe to say that they are “well known:” they and their desperate tricks are essentially obscure, and good reason he has to exult in the felicity of such obscurity; for else this same vilest of travesties, Mr Nahum’s Lear, would consecrate his name to everlasting scorn. For himself, he belonged to the age of Dryden rather than of Pope; he “flourished,” if we can use such a phrase of one who was always withering, about the era of the Revolution; and his Lear, we believe, was arranged in the year 1682. But the family to which he belongs is abundantly recorded in the Dunciad; and his own name will be found amongst its catalogues of heroes.

With respect to *the author of the “Tatler,”* a very different explanation is requisite. Steevens means the reader to understand Addison; but it does not follow that the particular paper in question was from his pen. Nothing, however, could be more natural than to quote from the common form of the play as then in possession of the stage. It was *there*, beyond a doubt, that a fine gentleman living upon town, and not professing any deep scholastic knowledge of literature (a light in which we are

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