SHAKSPERE: AN ADDRESS, DELIVERED ON APRIL 23, 1916, IN SANDERS THEATRE AT THE REQUEST OF THE PRESIDENT AND FELLOWS OF HARVARD

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649323043

Shakspere: An Address, Delivered on April 23, 1916, in Sanders Theatre at the request of the president and fellows of Harvard by George Lyman Kittredge

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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GEORGE LYMAN KITTREDGE

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SHAKSPERE

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED ON APRIL 23, 1916
IN SANDERS THEATRE AT THE REQUEST OF
THE PRESIDENT AND FELLOWS OF
HARVARD COLLEGE

BY

GEORGE LYMAN KITTREDGE

CAMBRIDGE
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON: HUMPHREY MILFORD
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1916

SHAKSPERE

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DR. JOHNSON was a wise man and a four-square, though not an intolerant, moralist. Incidentally he has proved himself one of the most sensible and serviceable in that long array of professed Shakspereans that bids fair to stretch out to the crack of doom. In all of these capacities I think the more of him, the older I grow; and such, it seems, is the common experience of literary men. To-day, and on this occasion, he sustains me — nay, he comes to my rescue — with one of the most pregnant and unforced, yet most searching, of his many admirable truisms, to the effect that men need, in general, not so much to be informed as to be reminded.

But for that supporting adage, I know not how I should have mustered courage to approach this hour. For I have neither conceit enough to fancy that I can say anything new; nor stodginess enough to rehearse old saws with the self-conviction of

Sir Oracle; nor sophistry enough to turn commonplaces into paradoxes by standing them on their heads; nor enough of the philosopher or the modern critic in me to parade them as novelties by draping their shrunk shanks in the ample robes of an esoteric jargon.

I am not here to rationalize the miracle of Shakspere, or to define poetry, or to account for its emergence, or the emergence of genius either, in the history of mankind at large, or in any particular period in the annals of a given race, a given nation, or a given language.

> My liege and madam, to expatiate
> What majesty should be, what duty is,
> Why day is day, night night, and time is time —
> Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time.

Frankly, I can solve none of these problems. I am quite as much amazed at the splendid accident of genius in the supreme dramatic poet, as I am aghast at the same splendid accident in the skin-clad savage (name and date unknown) who first invented the fish-hook or the blowgun or the fire-drill, or dis-

covered that a dugout is a handier craft than a solid log. Of Shakspere's life we know a good deal, but nothing that explains him. Nor should we be better off in this regard if we had his pedigree to the twentieth generation, with a record of everything that his forbears did and said and thought and imagined and dreamed. God is great, and from time to time his prophets come into the world. "The wind bloweth where it listeth—and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth. So is everyone that is born of the spirit."

Still, I can analyze Shakspere roughly, though I cannot account for him. He had the ability to put himself in your place, and then — to speak. Sympathetic knowledge of human nature we call it, and the gift of expression. Rarely, very rarely, do they hunt in couples. William Shakspere of Stratford and London, actor, poet, good fellow, dramatist, theatrical proprietor, and Englishman of the most thorough and indubitable breed — like Geoffrey Chaucer,