

**THE WORKS OF
SHAKESPEARE. THE LIFE
OF KING HENRY THE FIFTH**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649634262

The Works of Shakespeare. The Life of King Henry the Fifth by William Shakespeare & Herbert Arthur Evans

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE & HERBERT ARTHUR EVANS

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THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE
GENERAL EDITOR : W. J. CRAIG

THE LIFE OF
KING HENRY THE FIFTH



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**METHUEN AND CO.
36 ESSEX STREET: STRAND
LONDON
1904**



CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	ix
THE LIFE OF KING HENRY THE FIFTH	i
APPENDIX	171

INTRODUCTION

Connexion of *Henry V.* with the preceding Histories, p. ix—Its first appearance on the stage and in print, p. xi—Date, p. xiv—The Quarto text and its relation to the Folio, p. xvii—*Henry V.* and the *Famous Victories*, p. xxv—Shakespeare's conception of Henry's character, p. xxxi—Conduct of the action and function of the Chorus, p. xli—Supposed allusions to contemporary politics, p. xliii—This Edition, p. xlvii.

THE emergence of the historical drama during the last decade of Elizabeth's reign, and the popularity which it achieved during its brief existence, were the natural outcome of the consciousness of national unity and national greatness to which England was then awakening. Haunted for more than a quarter of a century by the constant dread of foreign invasion and domestic treachery, the country could at last breathe freely, and the fervid patriotism which now animated every order in the State found appropriate expression in "a noble and solid curiosity" to learn the story of the nation's past. Of this curiosity the theatres, then as always the reflection of the popular taste, were not slow to take advantage. To the earlier Chronicle Plays succeeded the *Edward II.* of Marlowe, the *Edward I.* of Peele, and the anonymous play of *Edward III.*; the influence of Marlowe on his contemporaries was paramount, and it was under his banner that Shakespeare himself, who

had entered the field with revisions of earlier plays on the wars of York and Lancaster, was content for a while to range himself. *Richard III.*, however, remained his solitary effort in Marlowesque, imitation was soon to give way to originality, and in *Richard II.* and *King John* he proved that he had now felt his strength, and had left his predecessors far behind. Nor was he destined to stop here; in 1597 he took up the thread of the story which he had dropped some three years earlier, and in the three greatest dramas that have ever been founded on the history of England, he set the crown upon his labours, and filled up the gap which had been left between the death of Richard II. and the accession of Henry VI. The popularity of these three plays was at once assured by an innovation, which in itself marks an epoch in the history of the drama. Taking the hint from an earlier play, of which we shall have more to say later, he grafted upon the serious portion of his subject a comedy of "humours," which was alone enough to make the fortune of a dramatic performance of far inferior merit. Such a favourite, indeed, was the leading "humorist" in these plays, that to judge from the numerous allusions to him in documents, literary and non-literary, of the seventeenth century, Falstaff shared with Hamlet the honour of being the best known creation of Shakespeare. As for the theatre-going public, they could never have enough of him, and we may suspect that it was partly with a view of soothing the indignation aroused by his unlooked-for humiliation at the hands of his former patron and ally, that the speaker of the epilogue to the Second Part of *Henry IV.* was allowed to promise his admirers a continuation of the story "with Sir John in it," and

INTRODUCTION

xi

(another hint from the old play) to "make you merry with fair Katharine of France"—as if there *could* possibly be any need for any further attraction!

The way in which this promise was fulfilled was peculiar. Two plays appeared: in one of them the story *was* continued, and fair Katharine was there to make them merry; Sir John, however, was seen no more: in the other the story *was not* continued, but there was Sir John in his full proportions,—at least so said the bills; the more critical spectators probably came away with a shrewd suspicion that they had been imposed upon.

Which of these two plays—*Henry V.* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—preceded the other is a question upon which the critics are still divided; we shall return to it directly. We must first sketch the history of the production of *Henry V.*, as far as it can be collected from the evidence available.

We will assume, for reasons which we are not called upon to examine here, that the Second Part of *Henry IV.* was produced during the course of the winter of 1597 and 1598.¹ But 1598 slipped away,² and it was not till the spring of 1599 that the promised continuation of the story appeared. About May in that year, when the triumphant return from Ireland of the Earl of Essex was beginning to be looked forward to by his admirers, the long-expected play was performed on the boards either of the Curtain or the Globe. Falstaff alas! was absent; the pathetic tale

¹ I leave the demonstration of this point to the editor of the play in question.

² Shakespeare was perhaps engaged on *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Cæsar*; see Mr. Macmillan's introduction to the latter play in this edition.