

**A STUDY OF
SHAKESPEAR'S
HENRY VIII**

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A study of Shakespear's Henry VIII by Cumberland Clark

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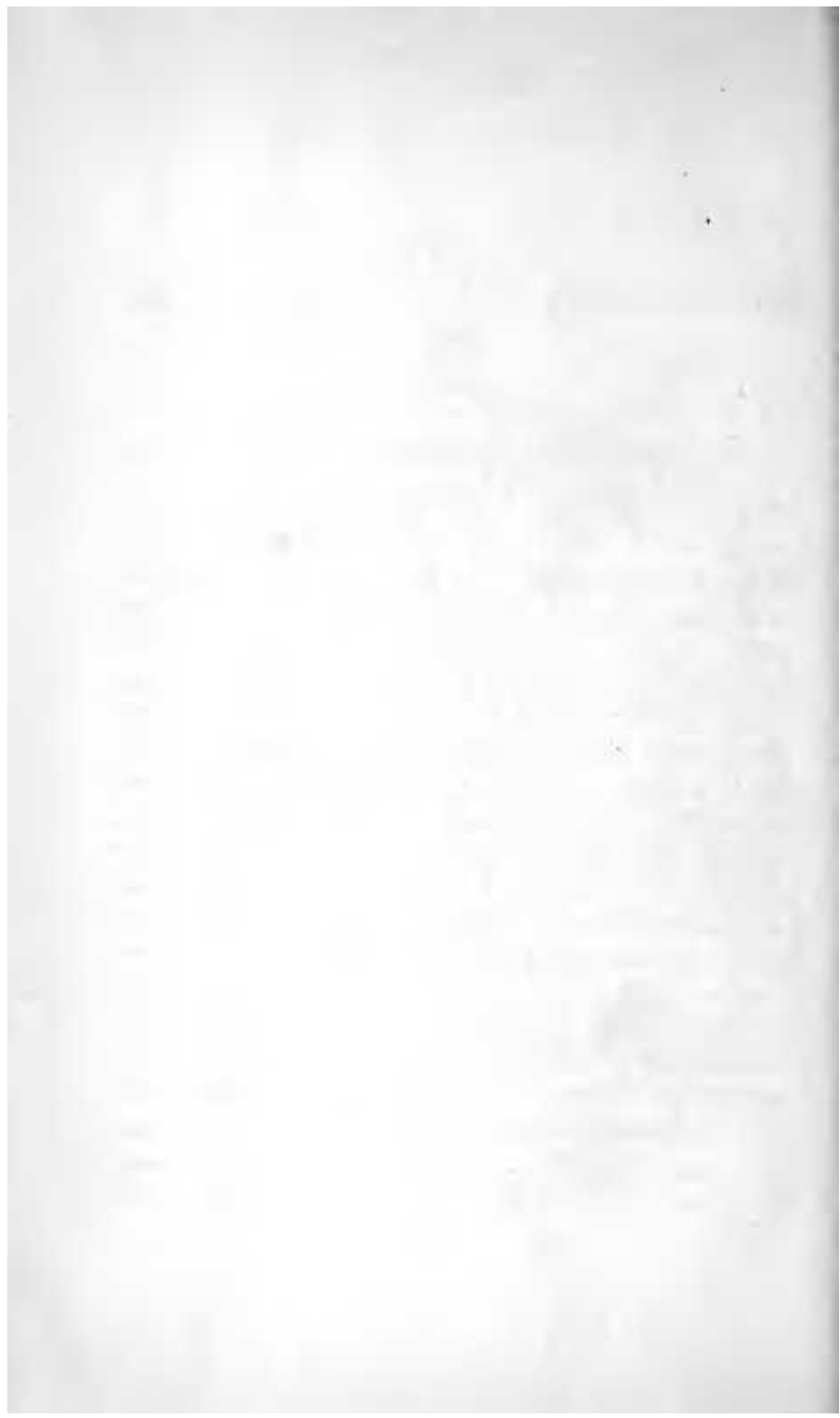
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A STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE'S HENRY VIII

CHAPTER I

SHAKESPEARE THE POET-HISTORIAN OF ENGLAND

OF the thirty-seven dramas commonly regarded as owing some, if not all, of their composition to William Shakespeare, and which (with the exception of *Pericles*) formed the first collected edition of his plays in the Folio of 1623, ten are denominated Histories, or Chronicle plays. These present leading events in that period of our island's history which commenced in the 13th century, and closed about the middle of the 16th. They are entitled, according to the First Folio: *The life and death of King John. The life and death of King Richard the Second. The First Part of Henry the Fourth, with the Life and Death of Henry Surnamed Hot-Spurre. The Second Part of Henry the Fourth, Containing his Death: and the Coronation of King Henry the Fifth. The life of Henry the Fifth. The First Part of Henry the Sixth. The second part of Henry the Sixth, with the death of the Good Duke Humfrey. The Third Part of Henry the Sixth, with the death of the Duke of Yorke. The Tragedy of Richard the Third: with the Landing of Earle Richmond, and the Battell at Bosworth Field. The*

SHAKESPEARE THE POET-

Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth.

The Playwright was between his twenty-eighth and thirty-fifth years when he was engaged upon the nine earlier historical plays, and at the height of his first enthusiasm. These, however, were not written in chronological order, although they are so arranged in editions of his dramatic works.

The three parts of *Henry VI* were completed before they were followed by *Richard III*, *King John*, *Richard II*, and then *Henry IV*, and its sequel, *Henry V*.

Henry VIII, the last one of the series, a description of events the least remote from his own time, was not written until that later period of his life when he had practically retired from the stage. It is, in fact, regarded as his last dramatic work and written in collaboration with a younger author.

From Richard II to Richard III inclusive, every reign is touched upon in a series of eight plays; and with whatever intention, and on whatever model constructed, the whole ten Chronicle plays tell a definite story from which a clear moral may be drawn. We look upon the age of the great armed nobility, with its pretensions and rebellions, which was the soul of England's history under the houses of York and Lancaster.

The progressive narrative begins with the wrong done by the weak King Richard II to his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, reverting upon his own head. In this play, *Richard II*, are sown the seeds of that internecine strife which blazed finally into the Wars of the Roses.

HISTORIAN OF ENGLAND

King Henry V diverts for the time being from the quarrels at home to the brilliant success of English arms in France under the splendid leadership of the patriot king. But all that Henry V gained was lost in the time of his son and successor, Henry VI. Rivalries and contentions among the nobles shook the nation to its heart. There comes a lull when Edward IV seizes the throne; but the Playwright has set out to prove that a wrong upon a wrong does not make a right. Richard of Gloucester, plotting his way to the crown, plunged England into some of the darkest days of history. When things are at their worst, Shakespeare sends a ray of light through that gloomy tragedy, *Richard III*, and ends upon a hopeful note with Henry of Richmond's success at Bosworth Field. The last lines are in the prophetic vein, which the Dramatist often introduces in his historical plays:

Richmond:

'O, now let Richmond and Elizabeth,
The true succeeders of each royal house,
By God's fair ordinance conjoin together!
And let their heirs, God, if thy will be so,
Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace,
With smiling plenty and fair prosperous days!
Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord,
That would reduce these bloody days again,
And make poor England weep in streams of blood!
Let them not live to taste this land's increase,
That would with treason wound this fair land's peace!
Now civil wounds are stopp'd, peace lives again:
That she may long live here, God say amen!'

King Richard III. V. 5. 29-41.