

**NOTES ON ELIZABETHAN POETS.
- NO. I; SUPPOSED CARICATURES
OF THE DROESHOUT PORTRAIT
OF SHAKESPEARE**

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BASIL BROWN

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SUPPOSED CARICATURE OF THE DROESHOUT PORTRAIT OF
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Notes on Elizabethan Poets.—No. 1.

Supposed Caricature of the Droeshout

Portrait of Shakespeare

With Fac-Simile of the Rare Print
Taken from a very scarce Tract
of an Elizabethan Poet

By Basil Brown

Printed for private circulation.

New York
1911.

*“Though I deserve not, I desire
The laurel wreath, the poet’s hire.”*

I.

Thus sang quaint John Taylor, the Water-poet, who was Sailor, Sculler, Traveler, and Reporter, in the golden age of “Eliza and our James;” who for fifty years poured forth a remarkable collection of prose and verse, which is very little known outside the circle of those who delight in Elizabethan literature; and it may be truly said no other English author gives us more exact or curious information respecting the customs, buildings, rivers, inns, and manners of the people of that age than John Taylor. Yet in his voluminous works the magic name of Shakespeare is only once mentioned—namely, in his “*Praise of Hemp-seed*”* where he tells us:

“Spencer and Shakespeare did in Art excell.” Could this have been written to refute what Ben Jonson had told Drummond of Horthornden in 1618 when he said: “Shakespeare wanted Art”?***

**The Praise of Hempseed*, with the voyage of Mr. Roger Bird and the Writer hereof, in a Boat of brown paper from London to Quinborough in Kent. As also a Farewell to the Matchless deceased Mr. Thomas Coryat, concluding with the commendations of the famous River of Thames. Printed at London for H. Gosson, &c., 1620-23.

**Ben Jonson’s *Conversations with William Drummond*, p. 26. Printed by the Shakespeare Society 1842.

Although Taylor only mentions the name of our greatest poet once, he alludes to several of the Shakespearean plays. In 1630 in his "Epistle prefixed to Sir Gregory Nonsense,"* he mentions "The Midsummer Night's Dream," and in his "*Three Weeks, three Daies, and three Houres Observations and Travel from London to Hamburg, 1617,*" where he gives a "true picture of a most unmatched Hangman," he compares him to "our English Sir John Falstaff." Again he is supposed to allude to the "Winter's Tale," in the following lines taken from his "*Travels from Prague in Bohemia (Folio, 1630)*—"The truth is, that I did chiefly write it, because I am of much acquaintance, and cannot pass the streets but I am continually stayed by one or other, to know what news; so that sometimes I am four hours before I go the length of two pairs of butts, where such nonsense or senseless questions are propounded to me, that calls many seeming wise men's wisdom to question, drawing aside the curtains of their understandings, and laying their ignorance wide open. First John Easy takes me, and holds me fast by the fist half an hour; and will needs torture some news out of me from Spinola, whom I was never near by five hundred miles, for he is in the Palatinate Country and I was in Bohemia. I am no sooner eased of him, but Gregory Gander-goose, an alderman of Gotham, catches me by the goll, demanding if Bohemia, be a great town, and whether there be any meat in it, and whether the *last fleet of ships be arrived there.*** His mouth being stopped, a third examines me

**Sir Gregory Nonsense His News* from no place. Written on purpose, with much study, to no end, plentifully stored with want of wit, learning, Judgment, Time and Reason, and may seeme very fitly for the understanding of Nobody. This is the worke of the Authors, without borrowing or stealing from others. Printed at London, by N. O. 1622.

**Italics are mine.

boldly what news from Vienna? where the Emperor's army is, and what the Duke of Bavaria doth? . . . and such a tempest of inquisitions that almost chokes my patience in pieces. To ease myself of all which, I was enforced to set pen to paper and let this poor pamphlet (my herald or *nuntius*) travel and talk, while I take my ease with silence."

Robert Greene in his "Pandosta" places Bohemia near the sea, and Shakespeare in the "Winter's Tale" followed Greene.

Recently an Italian writer has demonstrated that in ancient times one could go all the way from the Sea to Bohemia in a boat, so that we are glad to believe Shakespeare did not blunder after all. It seems to me John Taylor was the forerunner of our newspaper reporter. To read some of his queer titles reminds one of the headlines in a metropolitan daily—although the modern newspaper can scarcely outdo his descriptive titles. A few specimens are given here for the reader's amusement:

"Of Alterations—

Alterations strange

Of various Signes

Heere are compos'd

A few Poetick Lines.

Heere you may finde, when

You this Book have read,

The Crowne's transform'd

Into the Poet's Head.

Read well; be Merry and Wise."

Written by John Taylor, Poeta Aquatica. Printed at London, 1651.

Epigrammes written on purpose to be read with a Proviso, that they may be Vnderstood by the Reader, Being Ninety in Number. Beside two new made Satyres that attend them. By John Taylor at the Signe of the Poet's Head in Phoenix Alley, neare the middle of Long Aker, or Convent Garden. Printed in the Yeare 1651.

Nonsense upon sence, or Sence upon Nonsense, chuse you whether, either, or neither, &c. Written upon white paper, in a browne study, Beginning at the End and Written by John Taylor, at the Signe of the Poore Poet's Head in Phoenix Alley, neare the Middle of Long Aker in Convent Garden.

Mad Verse, Sad Verse, Glad Verse, and Bad Verse, Cut out, and Slenderly sticht together, by John Taylor. Who bids the Reader either to like or dislike them, to commend them, or Command them.

John Taylor knew and was known to many of the greatest men of his age. He tells us:

*"Seven times at Sea I served Elizabeth,
"And 2 kings forty-five years, until death
"Of both my Royal Masters quite bereft me."*

When only sixteen years old, he was at the taking of Cadiz under the brilliant but most unfortunate Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, Elizabeth's last Favorite, and one of her last victims. Although there is little worthy the name of poetry in Taylor's works, Ben Johnson told William Drummond that James I. said: "Sir Philip Sidney was no poet, neither did he see ever any verses in England (compared) to the Scullers."

And yet Shakespeare had only then been dead two years! After such praise from the lips of this Scotch Solomon, John Taylor cannot be blamed by posterity for

calling himself the "King's Water-Poet," or for wearing the badge of the Royal Arms. That Taylor knew Shakespeare of Stratford personally, I have little doubt. He knew most of the dramatists and poets of his time. In his "Penniless Pilgrimage" taken to Scotland in 1618 he tells us of his meeting with Ben Jonson as follows: "Now the day before I came from Edinburgh, I went to Leith, where I found my long approved, and assured good friend, Master Benjamin Jonson; at one Master Stuart's house; I thank him for his great kindness toward me: for at my taking leave of him, he gave me a piece of gold of two and twenty shillings, to drink his health in England. And withal willed me to remember his kind commendations to all his friends. So with a friendly farewell, I left him as well as I hope never to see him in a worse estate: for he is amongst noblemen and gentlemen that know his true worth and their own honours where with much respective love he is worthily entertained." Taylor makes us laugh even when he is most serious. Is it not reasonable to infer from this that Taylor could not have known his "long approved and assured good friend," Ben Jonson, without having known Shakespeare also, whom Jonson "loved this side idolatry"? I only relate plain matters of fact and leave every reader to make his own conclusions. I believe the Poet Shakespeare was the friend and patron of Jonson, and in my monograph on Ben Jonson I have thrown new light upon their friendship. John Taylor knew Thomas Dekker, Thomas Nash, and George Wither, intimately. Dekker was one of those poor dramatists who now and then received a pittance from the manager, Henslowe. He was often in prison—sometimes for debt, and sometimes for too openly expressing his opinion of those in authority. He wrote the following lines: