

**THE MERCHANT OF
VENICE. PP. 1-110**

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

**THE MERCHANT OF
VENICE. PP. 1-110**

The Riverside Literature Series

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

BY

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

FROM THE RIVERSIDE EDITION OF
SHAKESPEARE'S WORKS

ANNOTATED FOR SCHOOL USE

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INTRODUCTION.

THE help which the beginner in Shakespeare study needs, the wise teacher will be careful to give judiciously, having in view the formation of mental habits rather than preparation for impending scholastic tests. Examinations have, in our educational system, so far transcended their legitimate function of stimulus and guidance, that they are at last fairly installed as ends in themselves, and we constantly hear of preparing for them and passing them as the business of the school. This extravagant homage to examinations warps the ideals of teachers and vitiates their methods in many studies. In *English* it has begotten the highly annotated text, which contemplates an emergency of hurry and is meant to preclude the necessity of stopping to think.

Not until the examination ceases to be a disturbing element in our planning can we teach with reference to the desires, the capacities, and the needs of the youthful mind. The mature Shakespeare scholar finds his stimulus to activity in the hard knots, the unsolved difficulties, of the poet's text: he must have something that resists to brace himself against. But the beginner, in his humble sphere, is in precisely the same case as the learned scholar. He too must have his tangible problem, a clearly felt obstacle to progress, that requires him to take trouble, to think again and again, to push his search in many directions. So dead and inert a thing is information that was unsought and undesired, — information proffered before the need of it was even surmised, — that earnest search, even though it has failed, is far better. A bright youth furnished with the bare text of a play, and having access to but the scantiest literary helps, will, provided he has an inquisitive mind, read

his Shakespeare to better issues than will the possessor of the fullest notes who has had nothing to do but memorize printed matter placed under his eye in the shape of lessons.

In accordance with these convictions I have prepared the *Merchant of Venice* for the use of young readers, whether in or out of school. I have aimed to set the young people at work, not at the task of committing notes to memory, but in the pleasanter and more fruitful occupation of searching for the materials of which notes are made, as if the young people had the notes to make for themselves. For the value of a note lies not in the possession of it, but in the having made it from one's own resources. Therefore my notes have taken the form of questions and cautions, often coupled with suggestions of the route to be pursued in making the required investigations. One of the best ways to stimulate pupils is to give them something to find out and report upon at a future time. It does no harm even to lead them sometimes into a maze, and let them extricate themselves after considerable wandering in wrong paths. A difficulty solved at the instant of its appearance lacks all the elements of interest. A difficulty conquered after valiant efforts and repeated failures becomes memorable, and whets the appetite for more adventures.

The notes appended to these pages will be found few in comparison with the noteworthy points. There are not many lines of Shakespeare that do not furnish occasion for some sort of comment. Teachers will use their discretion as to the time they shall linger over any given matter. A good rule is to dwell upon passages so long as the pupil's interest does not flag. I have found in my own classes that it is possible to advance rapidly, even through matter abounding in difficulties, by distributing the items of research among the individuals of a class. The most charming kind of recitation is that to which each pupil brings his own preparation, unlike that of any other. To such a recitation all listen with eagerness.

In my annotation, as often as it seemed feasible, I have referred the student, for light on special points, to other passages in the poet's works. The habit of seeking explanations of Shakespearian difficulties in Shakespeare himself is of the very first importance. It has seemed to me also desirable to familiarize the learner in this way with the plays at large, even though it be only to such extent as is implied in turning the leaves and searching for passages and words. These references are to the *Globe* Shakespeare, published by Macmillan & Co. As this book has come to be almost universally recognized by Shakespeare scholars as a standard for purposes of reference, and is exceedingly cheap, it may be named as the first requisite among collateral helps for the study of the poet.

Next in importance is Mrs. Clarke's *Concordance*. With the aid of this book the pupil can make discoveries for himself of all sorts of analogies and illustrations. Of perhaps equal value, and for very similar purposes, is Schmidt's *Shakespeare Lexicon*. Schmidt classifies the meanings of words and refers to act, scene and line, but usually does not quote the context; whereas Mrs. Clarke simply collects all instances of each word, without classification, even mingling parts of speech, and refers merely to act and scene, but quotes enough to give some idea of the use of the word in each instance. Thus both books are important adjuncts to the school-room apparatus for literary study.

The larger English dictionaries, like the *International Webster* and the *Century*, are in themselves adequate helps to the solution of many of the difficulties that confront the beginner in Shakespeare. The habit of constant reference to the dictionary is quite as important in this study as in any other.

At an early period of his occupation with Shakespeare, the young student should become acquainted with the facts of the poet's life. An outline of the history of the times of Elizabeth and James he will doubtless have got already, or

soon will get, from his study of English history. The learner's attention may properly be called to the facts that Shakespeare's opportunity for education and observation was by no means a peculiarly restricted one, and that he was early recognized by his contemporaries as a poet and playwright of surpassing power. About his life there remains great obscurity, for the records of it are, at least in comparison with our desire to know about it, painfully meagre. But this scantiness of information about the poet's life is altogether natural: there is about it no element of the marvelous, — nothing that requires or suggests the invention of startling hypotheses to account for the existence of the works that bear his name.

Lives of Shakespeare are to be found in many of the standard editions of his works, and in all the encyclopædias. The great authority is Halliwell-Phillips, whose *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare*, although not interesting to young persons as reading-matter, may often, even by them, be profitably consulted on special topics. Much the same may be said of F. G. Fleay's *Chronicle History of the Life and Works of William Shakespeare*. Quite within the range of young readers is the little book of Samuel Neil, — *Shakespeare, a Critical Biography*. More easily accessible will be found Mrs. Caroline H. Dall's *What we really know about Shakespeare*. The article on Shakespeare in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, by Professor Baynes, is of moderate length and readable. It presents a concise bibliography of Shakespearian literature, which will sometimes prove convenient for reference. Professor Dowden's *Shakespeare Primer* contains, or hints, the essentials of Shakespearian study. This book is so easily procurable, and is so entirely trustworthy, that it may be recommended to the young student as a desirable possession. The life of the poet by Richard Grant White, prefixed to his edition of the works, is eminently vivacious in style, if not altogether pleasing in tone and spirit.