

OUTLINES OF THE LIFE OF SHAKESPEARE

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649764662

Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare by J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps

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J. O. HALLIWELL-PHILLIPPS

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OUTLINES.

FOR PRESENTS ONLY.

OUTLINES
OF THE
LIFE OF SHAKESPEARE.

BY

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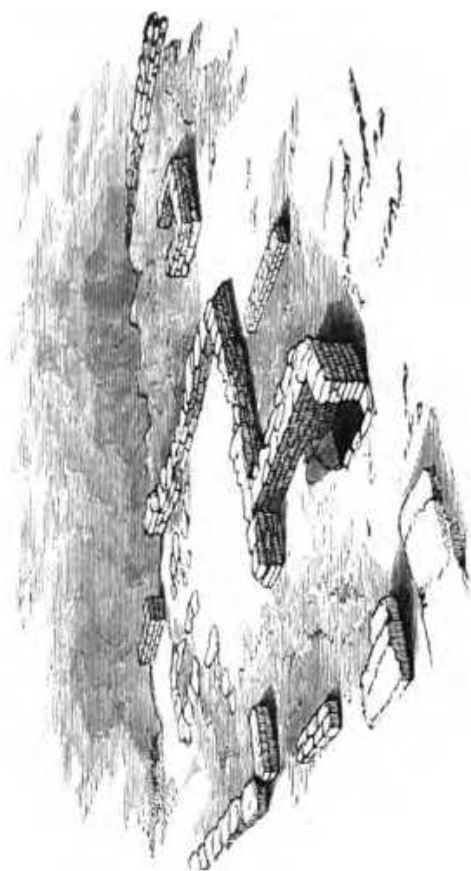
When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought.

—*The Thirtieth Sonnet.*



BRIGHTON:
PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR'S FRIENDS.

1881.



PREFACE.

The remains of New Place, a sketch of which is engraved on the opposite page, are typical of the fragments of the personal history of Shakespeare which have hitherto been discovered. In this respect the great dramatist participates in the fate of most of his literary contemporaries, for if a collection of the known facts relating to all of them were tabularly arranged, it would be found that the number of the ascertained particulars of his life reached at least the average. At the present day, with biography carried to a wasteful and ridiculous excess, and Shakespeare the idol not merely of a nation but of the educated world, it is difficult to realize a period when no interest was taken in the events of the lives of authors, and when the great poet himself, notwithstanding the immense popularity of some of his works, was held in no general reverence. It must be borne

in mind that actors then occupied an inferior position in society, and that even the vocation of a dramatic writer was considered scarcely respectable. The intelligent appreciation of genius by individuals was not sufficient to neutralize in these matters the effect of public opinion and the animosity of the religious world; all circumstances thus uniting to banish general interest in the history of persons connected in any way with the stage. This biographical indifference continued for many years, and long before the season arrived for a real curiosity to be taken in the subject, the records from which alone a satisfactory memoir could have been constructed had disappeared. At the time of Shakespeare's decease, non-political correspondence was rarely preserved, elaborate diaries were not the fashion, and no one, excepting in semi-apocryphal collections of jests, thought it worth while to record many of the sayings and doings, or to delineate at any length the characters of actors and dramatists, so that it is generally by the merest accident that particulars of interest respecting them have been recovered.

In the absence of some very important discovery, the general and intense desire to penetrate the mystery which surrounds the personal

history of Shakespeare cannot be wholly gratified. Something, however, may be accomplished in that direction by a diligent and critical study of the materials now accessible, especially if care be taken to avoid the temptation of endeavouring to decipher his inner life and character through the media of his works. The genius which so rapidly converted the dull pages of a novel or history into an imperishable drama was transmuted into other forces in actual life, as may be gathered even from the scanty records of his biography which still remain. Let these latter be studied in that truest spirit of criticism which deals with facts in preference to conjecture and sentiment, regard being ever watchfully paid to the circumstances by which he was surrounded. A minute examination of those circumstances is essential to the effective study not merely of the personal but of the literary history of the great poet. It will dissipate many an illusion, amongst others the propriety of criticism being grounded upon a reverential belief in the unvarying perfection of Shakespeare's dramatic art. He, indeed, unquestionably obtained a complete mastery over that art at an early period of his literary career, but his control over it was continually liable to be governed by the customs and exigencies of the