

# **SIDELIGHTS ON SHAKESPEARE**

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Sidelights on Shakespeare by Edwin Gordon Lawrence

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**EDWIN GORDON LAWRENCE**

**SIDELIGHTS ON  
SHAKESPEARE**



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ON  
SHAKESPEARE

BY  
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THE LAWRENCE SCHOOL OF ORATORY OF NEW  
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"HOW TO MASTER THE SPOKEN WORD"  
"HOW TO IMPROVE THE MEMORY"  
ETC., ETC.

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BOSTON  
THE STRATFORD COMPANY, Publishers  
1918

To

*The Immortal Spirit of William Shakespeare*

A POOR PLAYER WHO STRUTTED AND FRETTED HIS HOUR  
UPON THE STAGE OF LIFE, AND THEN WAS SEEN  
NO MORE, BUT WHO LIVES TODAY AS THE  
DRAMATIST IN A MORE REAL SENSE  
THAN WHEN, IN THE GUISE OF  
MAN, HE WALKED THE EARTH

*This Book is Dedicated*

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## CHAPTER I

### Shakespeare's Knowledge and Portrayal of Human Nature

**A**S WITH a wave of a wand, Shakespeare mysteriously called into being men and women of all lands, all climes, all temperaments, and all ages. He could not have known the originals of all the types that he produced. How then did he accomplish his task? Through an understanding of the nature of man. He knew that the emotions of men are similar the world over and that only in the expression of these emotions do men differ. It is this difference in the mode of expressing the feelings that move the heart and mind of humanity that produces the different types of men and women.

Different persons see the same things in different lights and express their emotions concerning them in different ways. It is this difference in perception and action that indicates the difference in characters. Perceiving this in human nature, Shakespeare drew the characters of Macbeth and Richard III. He represents both men as actuated by ambition, and yet so dissimilar are these characters in speech, action, and mode of procedure while in pursuit of their object as to appear to be impelled by different motives. They are both murderers, both usurpers, both actuated by the same motives, and both work



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according to the same principles but along lines peculiar to the characteristics of each individual.

The peculiar characteristic possessed by Macbeth that colored his ambition was the philosophical trend of his mind, therefore was he continually debating with himself on the wisdom and the consequences of his acts. On the other hand, the ambition of Richard III. was directed by his belief in the superiority of the intellect over all other powers, but his intellect was so saturated with cruelty that it prompted him to perform deeds that brought about his ruin. It was the misdirection of Richard's mental powers, and not his possession of them, that made him a murderer and a villain. These sidelights are necessary to a clear perception of character.

Thus Shakespeare depicts two beings of different temperaments who are representative types of characters governed by the same emotions but differing in the expression of them. This reveals what constitutes the difference in Shakespeare's characters, and partly accounts for his marvelous portrayal of them.

The grasping of this great truth that there is an underlying principle in human nature that governs the emotions and their expressions, enabled Shakespeare to produce two types of the wicked woman—Lady Macbeth and Goneril. One, intellectually immoral; the other, physically depraved.

Lady Macbeth's wickedness was tinged with determination. She would go on in any course, no matter what the penalty, provided she had made

## PORTRAYAL OF HUMAN NATURE

up her mind to do so. Determination was the main characteristic that colored the trait in the type of wicked woman represented by Lady Macbeth. Selfishness entered so largely into the making of Goneril that it produced in her a kind of wickedness different from that typified by Lady Macbeth. In order to gain a share in the kingdom, she lied to her father; to satisfy her passion, she was false to her husband; to possess the man of her choice, she murdered her sister; and when she found that her plans had miscarried, she took her own life. Both of these characters are women, both wicked, but because of the peculiar characteristics possessed by each they are different types of women who show their wickedness in different ways.

So also with two pure women of his creation—Desdemona and Cordelia. He lays hold of the basic trait that is the foundation to the characters of both these women and then develops those characters along different lines. Desdemona was of that type of women who will gladly lie in order to shield a loved one—lie, as it were, in the performance of a duty. Shakespeare understood that such women exist, therefore he made Desdemona a character true to nature when he caused her to lie in an endeavor to prevent the discovery of Othello's crime. On the other hand, there are women who will not tell a lie even though the heavens fall. Shakespeare knew there were such women in the world, consequently when he gave that trait to Cordelia he produced a different woman to Desdemona, but one

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just as natural. Thus Shakespeare depicts the difference between the conception of right and wrong of these two noble women. The same principle actuates both—the desire to do right, and the moral courage to do that right as they understand it, irrespective of the consequences. This same principle is apparent in both and is the governing force in both, the trait in each character showing the standpoint from which each viewed her duty. The main trait in Desdemona's character is obedience to her husband; that of Cordelia's obedience to truth.

The knowledge that it was a difference in viewpoint that produced the different types in human nature enabled Shakespeare to depict murders without being a murderer, to characterize madness without being mad, to draw women to perfection without being a woman, to create representative kings, peasants, philosophers and fools without being, in turn, a king, a peasant, a philosopher, or a fool. Instead of possessing all the traits that go to the making of these diverse types of humanity (the murderer, the madman, the woman), instead of being a complex character such as Nature never created, Shakespeare was merely the dramatist who saw the principles that govern human nature and applied them when creating the children of his brain. Through his ability to see and apply Nature's laws he was able to produce counterfeits that resemble closely the men and women of reality, and it is because he so saw and applied these laws that his productions have