

**STUDIES OF A
BIOGRAPHER. IN FOUR
VOLUMES. VOLUME IV**

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Studies of a biographer. In four volumes. Volume IV by Leslie Stephen

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LESLIE STEPHEN

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Volume IV.

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STUDIES OF A BIOGRAPHER

Shakespeare as a Man

I AM reluctant to break the rule—or what ought to be the rule—that no one should write about Shakespeare without a special license. Heaven-born critics or thorough antiquaries alone should add to the pile under which his “honoured bones” are but too effectually hidden. I make no pretence of having discovered a new philosophical meaning in *Hamlet*, or of having any light to throw upon the initials “W. H.” I confess, too, that, though I have read Shakespeare with much pleasure, I cannot say as much for most of his commentators. I have not studied them eagerly. I spent, however, some hours of a recent vacation in reading a few Shakespeare books, including Mr. Lee's already standard *Life* and Professor Brandes' interesting *Critical Study*. The contrast between the two raised an old question. Mr. Lee, like many critics of the highest authority, maintains that we can know nothing of the man. He shows that we know more than the average reader

supposes of the external history of the Stratford townsman. But then he maintains the self-denying proposition that such knowledge teaches us nothing about the author of *Hamlet*. Professor Brandes, on the contrary, tries to show how a certain spiritual history indicated by the works may be more or less distinctly correlated with certain passages in the personal history. The process, of course, involves a good deal of conjecture. It rests upon the assumption that the works, when properly interpreted, reveal character; for the facts taken by themselves are a manifestly insufficient ground for more than a few negative inferences. If, with Mr. Lee, we regard the first step as impossible, the whole theory must collapse. Upon his showing, we learn little from the works except that Shakespeare, whatever he may have been as a man, had a marvellous power of wearing different masks. There is no reason to suppose that his mirth or melancholy, his patriotism or his misanthropy, reveal his own sentiments. He could inspire his puppets with the eloquence which would bring down the house and direct money to the till of the Globe. He could drop his mask and become a commonplace man of business when he applied for a coat of arms or requested his debtors to settle their little accounts.

This raises the previous question of the possi-