

HOW TO STUDY SHAKESPEARE

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How to Study Shakespeare by Various

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HOW TO STUDY SHAKESPEARE

How to Study Shakespeare

With Articles *on* General Literature *and*
Directions *for* Forming *and*
Conducting Study
Circles

By

- | | |
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AND OTHERS



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HOW TO STUDY SHAKESPEARE

How to Study Shakespeare

By HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

"You might read all the books in the British Museum, if you could live long enough, and remain an entirely illiterate, uneducated person. But if you read ten pages of a good book, letter by letter—that is to say, with real accuracy—you are forevermore, in some measure, an educated person."—RUSKIN.

IT is one thing to read and another thing to study; and yet reading is the chief means and the best method of study when one is trying to understand a writer or a piece of literature. The lover of Shakespeare begins by reading the plays for pure pleasure and ends by reading them for greater pleasure. In the meantime, he may, so to speak, have taken them to pieces, examined their construction, looked at the words in which they are written with a microscope, traced their historical connections, gone back to their sources. In doing this work of analysis—for it is necessary to take a thing to pieces in order to find out how it is put together—he may become so much interested in the detail of the work that he loses sight of Shakespeare altogether and becomes a student of language, grammar, the structure of style, the evolution of the drama. This is what sometimes happens to the scholar; in studying what may be called the mechanics of a work of art he loses sight of the art itself. To such a student the plays of Shakespeare become a quarry out of which great masses of knowledge may be taken. This is the study of Shakespeare's language, methods, con-

struction; but it is not the study of Shakespeare; and it is with the study of Shakespeare that this paper concerns itself.

The best approach to a great book is by the way of simple enjoyment. If I am to see the Sistine Madonna for the first time I wish, above all things, to give myself up to the pure delight of looking at the most beautiful picture ever painted by man; I wish to surrender myself to the great painter and let his thought, expressed on the canvas, sink clear and deep into my spirit. I wish to keep myself out of sight; to postpone analysis, minute study of detail, the critical attitude. First and foremost I want to hear what Raphael has to say, and I can best do that by keeping silent myself. After I have heard him I can argue with him, criticise him, condemn him if I choose; but I must first hear him to the end and without interruption.

In like manner, if I wish to know Shakespeare, I must give him a full, free opportunity of telling me what he thinks of life, how he understands it, what it means as its workings are revealed in the careers of men and women; and if I am to get any impression of his way of telling his story I must surrender myself to him and let him do what he can with me. These are the first things I must do; and, if I care more for the substance of things than for their peculiarities of structure, more for the truth they have to impart than for the order of words in which they impart that truth, more for the living spirit than for the skeleton in which it is lodged, these are the things to which I shall come back when I have taken the plays to pieces and examined their mechanism with a microscope. The end of art is to deepen the sense of life and to give delight and exhilaration; any kind of study which secures these results is good; all kinds which miss them are bad.

To begin with, then, the student of Shakespeare is to remember that he is dealing with a great human spirit and not with a mass of literary material; that he is never to lose the feeling of reverence which such a spirit inspires; that *he is handling human documents* and not the stuff of which *grammars and rhetorics* are made. To keep the mind open,

the heart tender, the imagination responsive: these are the prime qualities in our friendships for one another, and they are the prime qualities in our friendships with the great writers.

This vital study, for the man who wishes to know Shakespeare and does not expect to gain an expert's knowledge of Shakespeare's works, is a very simple matter. All fundamental ways of dealing with the great realities are simple; it is the tricks of manner, the skill with small details, which are abstruse and obscure. To know Shakespeare one needs, first of all, a good edition of his works; this means a well-printed and well-bound set of his plays and poems, of a size that is easy and comfortable to the hand. There are several editions of small size, but printed from large, clear type, which have the advantage of fitting into a pocket without discomfort. If one has little, or even a great deal of time at command it is a matter of prime importance to keep Shakespeare within reach; to be able to put ten or twenty minutes into reading "Hamlet" or "The Tempest" on a train, in a cable car, or while one is waiting at a station. Many men have educated themselves by using the odds and ends of time which most people waste because they have never learned what Mr. Gladstone called "thrift of time."

Having become the possessor of a good edition of the works, read them through as you would read a novel, giving yourself up to the interest of the story. People forget that many of the plays were suggested to Shakespeare by the stories of his time and of earlier times, and that every one of them is a condensed novel. If Shakespeare were not placed so high on the shelves as a great classic it is probable that more people would read him for simple entertainment; for he is one of the most interesting writers in the world. Many of the plays carry the reader along without any effort on his part; just as "The Mill on the Floss," "Vanity Fair," "The Tale of Two Cities," and "The Scarlet Letter" carry him along. Many men have gained their most vivid impressions of English history from the historical plays, and at least one English statesman has not hesitated

to confess that Shakespeare taught him nearly all the English history he knew.

Read the plays, therefore, and re-read them continually; for after one is familiar with the story one begins to be interested in the people, anxious to understand them and to know why they think, speak, and act as they do. Great books, like the men who make them, are many-sided and cannot be seen at the first glance; one must approach them from different points of view, as one must approach a mountain if one is to have an adequate idea of its size and shape. One must read the plays many times before one hears all they have to say and sees clearly what Shakespeare is trying to do; and as one reads he reads with increasing insight and with more deliberation. He gets first a view of the whole scene which Shakespeare spreads before him, and then he begins to recognize the number and variety of the objects which are grouped together and combined in a whole.

This familiarity is the beginning of intimacy, and so naturally and inevitably leads on to the best and truest knowledge that very little suggestion need be made to the man who has begun to read the plays frequently and regularly because he enjoys them. Have the plays at hand in a convenient form, carry one with you if you are to have any leisure moments, cut down the time you give to newspapers, put aside the miscellaneous books you have been in the habit of reading or are tempted to read, and study your Shakespeare as often and regularly as you can; if you do this Shakespeare will meet you more than half way and reveal himself to you in ways you will not suspect at the start.

You will not need, at the beginning, any elaborate apparatus of books of reference. There are many admirable books about Shakespeare which you may wish to read and to own later, but at the start you will not need them. The best editions of Shakespeare supply all the information essential to the beginner. They contain introductions which tell you when each play was written, where the materials were found, how each play is related to the other plays, and convey other information which helps you to understand each

play and put it in its proper place; and they also contain notes which explain historical and other references and allusions, the uses of words, obscure passages, and disputed points. Add to a good edition of the plays Mr. Sidney Lee's biography, a concordance of the plays, Professor Dowden's "Shakespeare's Mind and Art," and read the essays on Shakespeare by Coleridge, Lowell, Bagehot, and other standard writers, whose works you will find in the libraries, and you have all the machinery of study you need. Read, in addition, the history of Shakespeare's age in English history as it is told in Green's "History of the English People."

The time will probably come when you will desire a closer intimacy with the dramatist who has so broadened your knowledge of human nature. It will be stimulating, too, with one or more friends who are of your mind, to begin a more systematic study, which need not demand too much time. There are a number of excellent manuals which present suggestions for careful and thorough study of the plays.

The following "Suggestions for Study" are taken from the programme of a literary society in New York City, and may serve as one example of the kind of guidance needed by students in the earlier stages of Shakespearean study. This society devoted a number of evenings to the play of "Macbeth," and to the special consideration of "The Nature of Poetry."

THE TRAGEDY OF MACBETH

Suggestions for Study: Read the whole play carefully, then read it a second time. Consider the plot and principal characters. Has it a distinct moral purpose? Has it a historical basis? Sources of plot, and incidents. Reasons why it is a great drama. What is a drama? a tragedy? a comedy? Does "Macbeth" contain genuine and lofty poetry? Which is the strongest passage in the play and why? Name some of the character qualities of Lady Mac-