

THE SHAKESPEARE CONTROVERSY.

BY EDWIN WATTS CHUBB.

IN analyzing General J. Warren Keifer's Shakesperean creed as declared by himself at the beginning of his article, "Did William Shakesper Write Shakespeare?" in the January number of *The Open Court*, one is delightfully confused upon finding that Mr. Keifer really believes what every simple-minded and orthodox believer in Shakespere believes,—I say confused because a full reading of the article leads to the conclusion that Mr. Keifer thinks he thinks differently. What is his creed as plainly published to the world?

1. "I do not believe that any known contemporary of Shakesper wrote them or was, alone, capable of writing them."

2. "And I more than doubt whether Shakesper, unaided, wrote them."

I confess myself to be what Mr. Keifer would call a simple-minded and credulous believer in the old-fashioned notion that Shakesper is Shakespeare, and yet I believe in Mr. Keifer's creed. For instance, I do not think that any contemporary of Shakespere wrote the dramas. I think Shakespere himself wrote them, so we agree on article *one* of the creed; then *second*, I do not think that Shakespere unaided wrote all the plays attributed to him, and I have never found anyone familiar with the Shakesperean drama that did think so. We know that he used old plays, re-writing them; that he laid hands upon everything from historical chronicles to fiction and tradition and made the common the uncommon by the power of his genius.

But the general trend of Mr. Keifer's paper is to show that some "Great Unknown" wrote the dramas commonly called Shakesperean. How much shrewder our doubters are now than they were some years ago. They no longer have the cocksureness of Judge Holmes, one of the High Priests of the Baconian cult, who said in

1884: "A comparison of the writings of contemporary authors in prose and verse proves that no other writer of that age, but Bacon, can come into any competition for the authorship." The doubter has become more wary. As long as Bacon was the great "It," it was easy for modern scholarship to show that Bacon as Shakespere is an absurdity; that it is just as probable that Shakespere wrote the *Novum Organum* as that Bacon wrote *The Merchant of Venice*. When Spedding, the great biographer of Bacon, the man who knew more of Bacon than was known by any other man in the 19th century, was challenged by Judge Holmes as to his opinion, he replied: "I have read your book on the authorship of Shakespere to the end, and . . . I must declare myself not only unconvinced but undisturbed. To ask me to believe that Bacon was the author of these dramas is like asking me to believe that Lord Brougham was the author not only of Dickens' novels, but of Thackeray's also, and of Tennyson's poems besides. I deny that a *prima facie* case is made out for questioning Shakespeare's title. But if there were any reason for supposing that somebody else was the real author, I think I am in a condition to say that whoever it was, it was not Bacon."

The doubters have been so mercilessly and completely driven from their first position that the more wary have repudiated Bacon as the author of the plays. But here the plays and poems are, and a hard-headed world insists that they must have been written. When we ask who is the author, your nimble doubter looks wise and with Delphic solemnity announces "The Great Unknown." In his conclusion Gen. Keifer writes that he does not intend "to give an opinion as to the authorship of the greatest of literary contributions to the world." Of course he does not. I challenge him to name any man other than William Shakespere of Stratford, England. Every repudiator of Shakespere knows that he is under the necessity of naming somebody as the author. Judge Webb, Regius Professor of Law in the University of Dublin, in a book on the Mystery of William Shakespeare, published in 1902, intending to prove that Shakesper is not the author, comes to the same conclusion. "But the only thing that will satisfy the world that he was not the author of the plays is a demonstration that another was."

But if Shakespere wrote the dramas, why did he not let the world know it? Presumably Shakespere thought the world did know that he was doing business in London and accumulating enough money to make his latter days days of prosperity. Evidently the Baconians think Shakespere should have left a signed statement

attested by a notary public that he and not some other person was really the author of his writings. Like the late governor of a great state who, upon signing an obnoxious bill, sent out the statement, "I was not bribed," so Shakespere should have anticipated criticism by scattering documents about certifying to his character as a *bona fide* author. And Mr. Keifer intimates pretty strongly that just before his last illness he should have hired a stone-cutter to engrave the same fact upon the slab covering his tomb. This concern the Baconians and agnostics have about Shakespere's carelessness about posthumous fame is certainly delightful. It is Falstaffian in its humor and suggests what Saintsbury calls the "subsicious absurdity" of man. For if Shakespere was careless, what shall we call the conduct of the "Great Unknown?" Where is his record?

One begins to doubt General J. Warren Keifer's Shakesperean learning when he unreservedly prints: "William Shakespere was born at Stratford, April 23, 1564." Where did the General get this information? Fifty years ago the school-texts and primers of literature contained that statement, but no accurate modern scholar says Shakespere was born on the 23d of April. All we know is that he was baptized on the 26th. This inaccuracy, slight as it is, casts some doubt upon the General's familiarity with his subject. I also wish Mr. Keifer had given his evidence in support of his declaration that Emerson, Oliver W. Holmes, and Dickens are on the side of the Baconians, or at least among the doubters. It has always been a matter of interest to me that I have never found a well-known man of letters who sided with the Baconians. Nor has ever to my knowledge a prominent professor of literature in England or America been found in their camp. Emerson uses Shakespere as his representative poet in his *Representative Men*; and Charles Dickens was a member of the London Shakespere Society and often attended its meetings. His intimate friend and best biographer—Forster—relates that when a committee was formed to undertake the purchase of the Shakespere house in Stratford—this was before the Town Corporation decided to make the purchase—Dickens entered heartily into the project. More than this, he played the part of Justice Shallow in the *Merry Wives of Windsor* in a company organized to raise funds for the purchase of the house. The company gave nine performances in the principal cities of England and realized 2551£ 8d. after deducting all expenses. Does this make Dickens a doubter? No, the Baconian is not a man of letters nor is he a specialist in literature. The Baconian, and I use the term with sufficient latitude to include the doubter who believes in the Great

and Mystrious Unknown as the author of the dramas, is usually a lawyer, or some one engaged in non-literary work. George Brandes is more forceful in his characterization than I care to be. He writes: "It is well known that in recent days a troop of less than half-educated people have put forth the doctrine that Shakespere lent his name to a body of poetry with which he had really nothing to do. Here it (literary criticism) has fallen into the hands of raw Americans and fanatical women." But even if Emerson and Dickens were Baconians or doubters—which remains to be proved—the weight of their testimony could be met by that of a hundred literary men from the time of Ben Johnson down to Browning.

William Cullen Bryant echoes the sentiment of a thousand fellow craftsmen of ten generations when he writes: "I am sure that, if those who deny to Shakespere the credit of writing his own dramas, had thought of ascribing them to the judicious Hooker or the pious Bishop Andrews instead of Lord Bacon, they might have made a specious show of proof by carefully culling extracts from his writings. Nay, if Jeremy Taylor, whose prose is so full of poetry, had not been born a generation too late, I would engage in the same way to put a plausible face on the theory that the plays of Shakespere, except, perhaps, some passages wickedly interpolated, were composed by the eloquent and devout author of *Holy Living and Holy Dying*."

The assumption throughout Gen. Keifer's paper is that the plays display so much erudition that Shakespere could not have written them. Even if the assumption were true, our friends are placed under the necessity of showing why it was impossible for Shakespere to have acquired this learning. Because there is no record of his attendance at one of the Universities are we to infer that he could not become learned? But some of the profoundest scholars have not been University-bred. Is the assumption, however, true? Is Shakespere a learned writer? No modern Shakesperean scholar pretends that Shakespere was a learned man. The plays abound in evidence to the contrary. When in the *Taming of the Shrew* (1 l. 167) he quotes from Terence he is using a modified form as found in the commonly used Lilly's grammar. No scholarly man would be likely to take his Latin from a school-boy's grammar. Shakespere's plays are not learned in the sense in which *Paradise Lost* and the dramas of Ben Johnson are learned. In his Roman plays his characters are men and women with English customs. Shakespere makes many mistakes in allusion, in history, in geography, in classical reference. Had he been a scholar like Bacon

or Jonson he would "not have introduced clocks into the Rome of Julius Cæsar, nor would he have made Hector quote Aristotle, nor Hamlet study at the University of Wittenberg, founded 500 years after Hamlet's time; nor would he have put pistols into the age of Henry IV., nor, cannon into the age of King John; and we are pretty sure he would not have made one of the characters in *King Lear* talk about Turks and Bedlam. Shakespere is one of the wisest and profoundest of men, but he is not learned. And in acknowledging this, I am not saying that Shakespere was illiterate. Ben Jonson acknowledges he knew Latin and Greek. Of course he intimates that Shakespere had not gone very far into either, but to a classical scholar like Johnson, "little Latin and less Greek" would be enough to explain all the classical lore we find in the writings of the dramatist. Nor are we bothered or excited because Shakespere would be incompetent to serve as a professor of penmanship in a business college, and because his name is spelled in different ways. Richelieu, Montaigne, Hugo, H. Greely, and Rufus Choate were all miserable penman. And as to the various ways in which the name is spelled, John Fiske says: "The real ignorance, however, is on the part of those who use such an argument. Apparently they do not know that in Shakespeare's time such laxity in spelling was common in all grades of culture. The name of Elizabeth's Lord Treasurer, Cecil, and his title, Burghley, were both spelled in half a dozen ways. The name of Raleigh occurs in more than forty different forms, and Sir Walter, one of the most accomplished men of his time, wrote it Rauley, Rawleyghe, Raleigh, and in yet other ways."

Another illustration of the falsity of the assumption that Shakespere is too learned to be the author of the dramas is found in the statement that his knowledge of law is too exact and varied to be the knowledge of a layman. But is Shakespere's knowledge of legal phraseology greater than that of some of his contemporary dramatists? The passage in *Hamlet*, so frequently quoted, can be matched again and again with more technical use of legal knowledge in the Elizabethan dramatists. An American judge has well said that if Bacon wrote *Hamlet* then Coke himself must have written some of the dramas accredited to other Elizabethan writers.

But is Shakespere's knowledge of law superhuman? Is it even humanly accurate? He knows no more law than a bright man of business, a buyer of land, part owner of theatrical establishments, interested in legal proceedings against theatres and sometimes at law for the recovery of debts and no stranger to proceedings in chancery, would be expected to know. Judge Allen, of the Supreme

Bench of Massachusetts, has carefully examined every legal term used by Shakespere and he finds many inaccuracies. He finds that the *Merchant of Venice* is full of bad law. "By the will of Portia's father, all of her suitors must submit to the test of the caskets, and if unsuccessful must forever renounce marriage. This testamentary provision in restraint of marriage, with no means of enforcing it, would seem to have been the invention of a story teller rather than of a lawyer." Again: "The condemnation of Shylock to death, without presentation of charges against him, or giving him any chance to be heard, is probably the most summary, informal, and irregular judicial trial for a capital offense known to history or fiction." "Portia's rules of law will not bear examination. Such a condition of a bond probably would not even at that time have been valid, as it involved a homicide. But if valid, it would be in no violation of the condition to cut off less than a pound, and the incidental flowing of blood could not make Shylock's act unlawful, since the cutting could not be done without it. Shylock would not lose the right to accept money by a refusal at the outset of the tender in court." So also we find in *Julius Caesar*:

"On this side Tiber; he hath left them you,
And to your heirs forever, common pleasures,
To walk abroad and recreate yourselves."

"In a devise or dedication of lands to the public," says Judge Allen, "the words 'to your heirs forever' are misplaced, as they would imply individual ownership, instead of a right invested in that indefinite body, the public. As these particular words are not found in any of Shakespeare's authorities he likely inserted them. No good lawyer would thus have phrased it."

As an illustration of how easily Shakespere's reputed learning can be explained we have the passage of Henry V. in which we hear:

Canterbury.

There is no bar
To make against your highness' claim to France
But this, which they produce from Pharamond,—
'In terram Salicam mulieres ne succedant;'
'No woman shall succeed in Salique land;'
Which Salique land the French unjustly gloze
To be the realm of France, and Pharamond
The founder of this law and female bar.
Yet their own authors faithfully affirm
That the land Salique is in Germany,
Between the floods of Sala and of Elbe;

Where Charles the Great, having subdued the Saxons,
 There left behind and settled certain French ;
 Who, holding in disdain the German women
 For some dishonest manners of their life,
 Establish'd then this law ; to wit, no female
 Should be inheritrix in Salique land ;
 Which Salique, as I said, 'twixt Elbe and Sala,
 Is at this day in Germany call'd Meisen.
 Then doth it well appear the Salique law
 Was not devised for the realm of France :
 Nor did the French possess the Salique land
 Until four hundred one and twenty years
 After defunction of King Pharamond,
 Idly suppos'd the founder of this law,
 Who died within the year of our redemption
 Four hundred twenty-six ; and Charles the Great
 Subdued the Saxons, and did seat the French
 Beyond the river Sala, in the year
 Eight hundred five. Besides, their writers say,
 King Pepin, which deposed Childeric,
 Did, as heir general, being descended
 Of Blithild, which was daughter of King Clothair,
 Make claim and title to the crown of France.
 Hugh Capet also, who usurp'd the crown
 Of Charles the duke of Lorraine, sole heir male
 Of the true line and stock of Charles the Great,—
 To fine his title with some shows of truth,
 Though, in pure truth, it was corrupt and naught,
 Convey'd himself as heir to the Lady Lingare,
 Daughter to Charlemain, who was the son
 To Lewis the emperor, and Lewis the son
 Of Charles the Great. Also King Lewis the Tenth,
 Who was sole heir to the usurper Capet,
 Could not keep quiet in his conscience,
 Wearing the crown of France, till satisfied
 That fair Queen Isabel, his grandmother,
 Was lineal of Lady Ermengare,
 Daughter to Charles, the foresaid duke of Lorraine :
 By the which marriage the line of Charles the Great
 Was reunited to the crown of France.
 So that, as clear as is the summer's sun,
 King Pepin's title and Hugh Capet's claim,
 King Lewis his satisfaction, all appear
 To hold in right and title of the female.
 So do the kings of France unto this day ;
 Howbeit they would hold up this Salique law
 To bar your highness claiming from the female,
 And rather choose to hide them in a net
 Than amply to imbare their crooked titles
 Usurp'd from you and your progenitors."

Here we have what the doubters would call another evidence of learning impossible to the Stratford player. This presupposes intimate acquaintance with French, with Latin, with the law of succession, with obscure history, and no one but a scholar could write like that. But in this case we need presuppose nothing of the kind. Turn to *Holinshed's Chronicles*, the second edition of which was published in 1586-87, and read and compare :

“The verie words of that supposed law are these, In terram Salicam mulieres ne succedant, that is to saie, into the Salike land let not women succeed. Which the French glossers expound to be the realme of France, and that this law was made by King Pharamond; whereas yet their owne authors affirme that the land Salike is in Germanie betweene the rivers of Elbe and Sala; and that when Charles the Great had overcome the Saxons, he placed there certaine Frenchmen, which having in disdeine the dishonest maners of the Germane women, made a law, that the females should not succeed to any inheritance within that land, which at this day is called Meisen, so that if this be true, this law was not made for the realme of France, nor the Frenchmen possessed the land Salike, till four hundred and one and twentie years after the death of Pharamond, the supposed maker of this Salike law, for this Pharamond deceased in the yeare 426, and Charles the Great subdued the Saxons, and placed the Frenchmen in those parts beyond the river of Sala, in the yeare 805.

“Moreover it appeareth by their owne writers that King Pepine, which deposed Childerike, claimed the crowne of France, as heire generall, for that he was descended of Blithild, daughter to King Clothaire the first: Hugh Capet also, who usurped the crowne upon Charles Duke of Loraine, the sole male heire male of the line and stocke of Charles the Great, to make his title seeme true, and appeare good, though in deed it was starke naught, conveyed himself as heire to the ladie Lingard, daughter to King Charlemaine sonne to Lewes the emperour, that was son to Charles the Great. King Lewes the tenth, otherwise called saint Lewes, being verie heire to the said usurper Hugh Capet, could never be satisfied in his conscience how he might justlie keepe and possesse the crowne of France, till he was persuaded and fullie instructed that queene Isabell his grandmother was lineallie descended of the ladie Ermengard daughter and heire to the above Charles duke of Loraine, by the which marriage, the blood and line of Charles the great was again restored to the crowne and scepter of France, so that more cleare than the sunne it openlie appeareth that the title

of king Pepin, the claime of Hugh Capet, the possession of Lewes, yea, and the French kings to this daie, are derived and conveied from the heire female, though they woude under the cover of such a fained law, barre the kings and princes of this realme of England of their right and lawfull inheritance."

I have quoted these parallel passages at length as they show how easily much of Shakespere's reputed learning can be explained. Shakespere, wide-awake, energetic, living in London and coming in daily contact with its throbbing life, had means of gaining information that was as valuable to him as a university training. Because we can not always tell where he got his information is no proof that he could not get it.

"I am inclined to envy those who have faith and cannot doubt. I almost regret I have investigated the subject far enough to become a doubter." So writes Mr. Keifer as he nears the conclusion of his paper. This is certainly almost pathetic in its *naïveté*. In much knowledge there is always much grief. The penalty of learning is that we lose our illusions. Then again it may be that a little learning in Shakespere is a dangerous thing. Perhaps if Ben Jonson, and Milton, and Goethe, and Coleridge, and Carlyle, and Schlegel, and Furness, and Lowell, and John Fiske, and a hundred others, scientists, philosophers, critics, and actors, had only investigated this matter as deeply as Mrs. Gallup and General Keifer, they too could envy those simple-minded who are so credulous, and blissful in their harmless illusion.

The truth, however, is that the credulous are not the believers in the accepted belief; the Baconians and they that put their trust in the mythical "Great Unknown" are the gullible. Their argument is always based upon a "suppose." What do they ask us to do? It is this:

To cast aside as worthless all the weight of tradition extending in unbroken line back three hundred years; to believe that all Shakespere's contemporaries were grossly deceived; that the writer of the greatest literary productions in the English language, perhaps in all languages, could live and write and grow in power and yet not leave the slightest evidence of his existence, not even a grave.

What is the evidence presented to cause a reversal of our present opinion? Surely here we should expect some positive evidence of a most convincing character. But what is our astonishment to learn that we are to disbelieve in Shakespere because his daughters were not well-educated, because he does not mention his plays in his

will, because the verse serving as inscription on the slab covering his grave does not testify to his authorship, and, usually the most astounding of all, because it is rumored he was concerned in a poaching lark in his youth and lived in a town whose streets were apt to accumulate Elizabethan filth! Surely the children of darkness ask the children of light to exercise a faith that is childlike indeed. If there are thirty-nine reasons against believing in Shakespere and forty equally good for believing, the reasonable man will be obliged to believe where the forty good reasons are found. But in this case the Doubters have been unable to produce one sound argument based on fact. When the Doubters can agree as to who the "Great Unknown" is, and persuade us that Ben Jonson was either a fool or a knave," says Henry Irving, "or that the whole world of players and playwrights at that time was in a conspiracy to palm off on the ages the most astounding cheat in history, they will be worthy of serious attention."