

SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS:

A CHAPTER OF STAGE HISTORY

THE title of this paper, I trust, fairly indicates the subject proposed. It does not treat of Shakespeare personally; nor of his plays, described simply with reference to himself. There is no attempt to show how the plays became what they are; I simply take them as they stand, and try to show what has been done with them since they came from the mind of the poet. I want to tell something of the conditions under which they have been presented during a long series of years; for although Shakespeare is so much more to us than a mere writer of stage plays, I dare assert that now, as in his own day, the theatre is his proper and most natural home. He may be studied and dearly prized in all places; but to know Shakespeare in his fulness, without the agency of the stage, is, to my mind, as

impossible as to taste the magical charm of snowy peaks and glaciers only from poring over books of science at home.

Our concern, then, is less with the great Original than with those men through whom, for better or worse, he has been made known; the dramatists who have handled his plays, and the actors who have been the living embodiments of his creations. It is a wide field of research, and a lecture can only point out a few of its features. The temptation to pile up great names, and say a little about everything, must be resisted. And, so, looking to the real drift of the matter, and trying to find for this paper the most exact description, I have ventured to call it 'A Chapter of Stage History.'

It would seem best to begin with an account of the Elizabethan theatres, in order to explain how Shakespeare's plays were first acted, and that we might call to mind under what outer conditions he wrote as he did. But this of itself is ample subject for a lecture, and, awaiting further instalments from Mr. Halliwell of his 'Illustrations of

the Life of Shakespeare,' the task would be somewhat hazardous. The company of players to which the poet belonged travelled about, performing in noblemen's mansions, inn-yards, and civic halls; in our own Townhall, Mr. Kelly has told us.* But they were chiefly engaged at two theatres in London, the Blackfriars, and a large circular or polygonal playhouse, the Globe, on the Bankside. The buildings were simple in form; in the larger theatres only the stage, the 'tiring rooms, and galleries were roofed over, the central space, or yard, being open to the sky. There must have been plenty of shouting and bluster on the stage, and rough manners among the audience. There was no scenery; the walls were draped with tapestry or curtains, and other curtains placed between the front of the stage and the back, called traverses, increased or lessened the visible area, according as they were drawn together or thrown apart. There was then

* 'Notices illustrative of the Drama and other Amusements at Leicester,' by William Kelly.