

### Book Reviews

*Shakespeare and Medicine*. R. R. SIMPSON. Edinburgh and London: E. & S. Livingstone Ltd., 1959; pp. viii+267. 25s.

Since Bucknill wrote his still useful book on Shakespeare's medical knowledge a century ago 'Shakespeare' has become almost a national industry with its own directors, managers and expert research teams and even its own research institute. Its surveys and reports have made us familiar with the range and depth of its activities and its products usually bear the stamp of the highest professional skill. Unfortunately, this 'high-powered' treatment has not yet been accorded to the theme of *Medicine in Shakespeare*—a result probably of the present and, it is to be hoped, temporary dichotomy in our culture—and until it is, there is still time for the amateur Shakespearean to have his say. When the amateur is also a trained medical man the result might well be noticed even by the professionals.

Mr. Simpson's book is based on lectures given at various times to a number of medical societies. He is obviously one who not only professes to love Shakespeare but also reads him assiduously and one may take it for granted that his lectures were received everywhere with acclamation. Cold print, however, always loses something of the warmth and enthusiasm of the spoken word—unless one can write like Shakespeare—and such a book must be judged on its value as a contribution either to Shakespeare studies or to the history of medicine in Shakespeare's time. Its author has collected 712 medical references in the plays, a number which would certainly be enlarged if all the esoteric allusions were spotted, but which is still an impressive total. These are classified and discussed under various headings (Shakespeare's clinical descriptions; Shakespeare on wounds; etc.) in a way which will be useful and enlightening to all who are considering this topic for the first time. The scholar will recall that there are a dozen or more books and scores of articles, some of them learned papers, on or directly relevant to this theme and will be disappointed to find that there is little that is new or original in the present one. He will also raise his eyebrows at Mr. Simpson's comment on a recently disputed and celebrated reading in the account of Falstaff's death: 'if Shakespeare did not write [these words] he ought to have'. There is also one misinterpretation which should be corrected. In discussing Shakespeare's references to venereal diseases it is stated that 'Winchester geese' was the name given to the prostitutes in the Bankside stews which lay within the diocese of the Bishop of Winchester. All contemporary evidence supports the definition of this term as a syphilitic ulcer in the genital region. Randle Cotgrave's French-English dictionary of 1611 has '*clapoir*: a botch in the Groyne or yard; winchester goose'. Only in 1778 was the term erroneously used as a synonym for prostitute.

This having been said, it must not overshadow the immense attraction inherent in any book which contains as much of Shakespeare as does this one. So much has been said and written around and about his work that it is difficult to avoid triteness in any comment, but he remains the author *par excellence* for the medical man, especially for the practitioner. If Mr. Simpson's book, by its special approach, persuades doctors to sweeten their labours with the wisdom and inspiration and sheer enjoyment offered in the plays then it will have done good service. Its publication by one of our leading medical publishers, with a well-earned reputation for high standards of production, is a fitting contribution towards this end.

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