

instead. Mr. Wright most wisely declined to listen to any such allurements. "Sign-post criticism," as he called it, he distinctly refused to supply. He knew well enough what the invitation meant, in too many cases. It meant that certain young critics of Shakespeare wanted to be able to descant authoritatively on Shakespeare's beauties and defects, his strength and weakness, and to exchange æsthetic speculations with their friends at a society, without taking any preliminary trouble even to understand the words of the author they were talking about. And this ambition the editor had no intention of gratifying. His purpose was to make it certain that the critic of the future had mastered this preliminary knowledge, without which to pretend to an opinion at all on Shakespeare's or any other author's merits or demerits is mere vanity and impertinence. And therefore you will not misunderstand me in what I have already said of a grave danger incident to the study before us, that the *notes* to any author should receive more attention than the *text*; and in judging that there was something wrong somewhere when, as I remember once to have seen, a young girl of fourteen or fifteen despairfully roamed up and down a drawing-room with one of Mr. Aldis Wright's little orange-tawny volumes in her hand, exclaiming wearily, "Oh! how I *hate* Shakespeare!"

We are used to this melancholy state of things in the instance of an ancient language. That an average schoolboy, having to read (let us say) Tacitus for the sake of the Latin tongue, should come to hate Tacitus, has long come to be accepted as a natural event. For we know that an extinct tongue must be studied in those writers whom care or chance has preserved from perishing through the world's stormy ages; and as a

rule these are the writers of real mark. In these the Latin and Greek idiom must be studied. It is one of the penalties of the "survival of the fittest." For similar reasons, the notable writers of our own early history have naturally survived; and if we would have our young men and women study to the best advantage an important dialect of the time of Edward the Third, we cannot well avoid having recourse to Geoffrey Chaucer, even if the humour of the Lady Abbess and the pathos of Griselda should perish in the process. The "Canterbury Tales" must be for a while approached as in a strange tongue. But it need be but for a very brief space. No fairly intelligent boy or girl, of decent preliminary training, should need more than a few hours' instruction to enable them to master all the excellences, and taste all the delights of the father of English poetry. Nothing but the will and the taste is wanting. How are the desire and the taste to be fostered? This is the one real problem. Any one who wants to read and enjoy Chaucer can learn to do so with a very few hours' attention and study. The inflected system of the language Chaucer wrote—the allusions and obscurities in Shakespeare—these are not the real obstacles to the student, and the real despair of the teacher. The real difficulty is, that when the editor and commentator have done their part, the love for the writer himself has not thereby been produced. If the young student at the end of it all does not go the length of crying, with the young lady just named, "How I hate Shakespeare!" at least he does not exclaim, "How I love him!"; and unless the teaching of the great writers of England ends in producing some genuine love and admiration for their works—in one word, some real enjoyment of them—the end of English literature as a