

## CHAPTER I

### GENESIS OF JONSON'S APHORISM, "SMALL LATINE, AND LESSE GREEKE"

A BRILLIANT APHORISM is a dangerous thing. It is always a lie and never the truth. It cannot be the truth, for that is too large to be expressed in an aphorism. At best, the aphorism can serve only as a topic sentence to be lengthily and cautiously modified into that commonplace inconsistency which approximates truth. Only in that modifying context can the aphorism approach truth. And that context itself is relative to the audience addressed. It approaches truth only for them. As the connotations of the context change for succeeding audiences, to that extent will our aphorism, even in its context, approach a lie.

So it has been with that aphorism of Jonson upon Shakspeare's learning. Every schoolboy knows that Shakspeare had little Latin and less Greek, that being the preferred version of Jonson's "small *Latine*, and *lesse Greeke*." Our tradition has not felt the necessity of preserving accurately even the wording of Jonson's aphorism. Still less has it troubled about the context, and least of all has it troubled to put the context into its proper setting. The result is a total lie. For in effect we deny to Shakspeare any Latin or Greek, dismissing the matter as of no importance.

If we are to understand how Shakspeare developed, we must know something of the formal education to which he was exposed, and whether he later found any use for it. The present work addresses itself to a preliminary examination of that problem, in the hope that if once the problem is fairly stated, then the combined efforts of preceding and succeeding scholars on the matter will eventually lead us closer to truth.

We address ourselves first to the tradition. Our tradition has developed from Benjamin Jonson's statement in the First Folio. There is nothing surprising about this, since this is the official statement, and since there were no other editions of Shakspeare's works except the folios before the eighteenth century. One had to turn to the folios for Shakspeare, and there at the very gateway he would find Jonson's statement as the official one. It thus behooves us to examine carefully this statement, part of which every schoolboy misquotes so