

Ballad: An Unfortunate Likeness

In "An Unfortunate Likeness" from **The Bab Ballads**, the narrator, an artist who has dedicated his career to painting William Shakespeare in various stages of his life, encounters an individual with a striking resemblance to the Bard himself. Excitedly, the artist believes this man would serve as the perfect model for his Shakespeare-themed artworks, acknowledging the challenges he has faced in capturing Shakespeare's iconic visage.

Despite his numerous attempts to depict Shakespeare in various roles—from a playful infant to a tradesman and even a botanist—the artist admits to falling short of accurately replicating the "glimmer of his wondrous eye." One day, as he prepares to frame a new piece, he spots a passerby whose appearance vividly reminds him of Shakespeare. Overcome with impulsivity, the artist invites the stranger to sit for a portrait, to which the man reluctantly agrees.

As the artist works, he marvels at the man's noble features, imagining the incredible fortune of bearing such a notable resemblance to Shakespeare, humorously envisioning the man enjoying mundane aspects of life (like blowing one's nose) with the grace of Shakespeare's "cast-off countenance." However, the story takes a turn when the sitter, referred to as the "Shakesperian boy," reveals the curse behind his celebrated likeness.

The man describes how his Shakespearean appearance has been a source of misery rather than joy. In theaters, churches, and social gatherings, he is constantly compared to Shakespeare, overshadowing his individual identity. His endeavors to engage in ordinary conversations at parties or express himself are met with reminders of his likeness to Shakespeare, urging him to uphold a level of eloquence befitting the Bard—an expectation he invariably finds burdensome.

In a twist of irony, while the artist envies the man for his physical connection to Shakespeare, the sitter laments the perpetual expectations and comparisons that accompany his appearance. Ultimately, the artist recognizes the folly in his envy, as the man's resemblance to Shakespeare becomes a source of unwelcome scrutiny rather than admiration. The ballad humorously explores themes of identity, the burden of expectations, and the ironic misfortunes that can accompany outward appearances.

