Holmes, Oliver Wendell, American author and physician, b. Cambridge, Mass., grad. Harvard (B.A., 1829; M.D., 1836); father of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. He began his medical career as a general practitioner but shifted into the academic field, becoming professor of anatomy and physiology at Dartmouth (1838–40), dean of the Harvard medical school (1847–53), and Parkman professor of anatomy and physiology at Harvard (1847–82). A stimulating and popular speaker, he published two important medical lectures, one in opposition to the practice of homeopathy and the other on the nature of fevers. His first important poem, “Old Ironsides” (1830), was a protest against the scrapping of the fighting ship Constitution. A collection of his witty occasional poems was published in 1836. In 1857 he began to contribute to the Atlantic Monthly (which he named) the famous series of “Breakfast-table” sketches, which were collected in The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table (1858) and several subsequent volumes. These urbane pieces present imaginary conversations at a Boston boardinghouse, reflecting Holmes’s opinions, charm, and wit. The first volume includes several poems, of which the most famous are the ironic “Deacon's Masterpiece” and “The Chambered Nautilus.” Among his other notable works are three novels presenting a scientific approach to psychological traits, most notably Elsie Venner (1861); and biographies of his friends John Lothrop Motley (1879) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1855).
