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DISCUSSIONS OF THE DRAMA

IV

Letters of an Old Playgoer

BY

MATTHEW ARNOLD

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

BRANDER MATTHEWS



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HAMLET ONCE MORE

At the very moment when Mr. Wilson Barrett is bringing out 'Hamlet' at the Princess's, there comes into my hands "Shakspeare and Montaigne, an Endeavor to explain the Tendency of 'Hamlet' from Allusions in Contemporary Works," by Mr. Jacob Feis, an author not known to me. Mr. Feis seeks to establish that Shakspeare in 'Hamlet' identifies Montaigne's philosophy with madness, branding it as a pernicious one, as contrary to the intellectual conquests his own English nation has made when breaking with the Romanist dogma. "Shakspeare," says Mr. Feis, "wishes to warn his contemporaries that the attempt of reconciling two opposite circles of ideas—namely, on the one hand the doctrine that we are to be guided by the laws of nature, and on the other the yielding ourselves up to superstitious dogmas which de-

clare human nature to be sinful, must inevitably produce deeds of madness.”

Mr. Feis's name has a German look, and the first instinct of the “genuine British narrowness” will be to say that here is another German critic who has discovered a mare's nest. “Hamlet dies wounded and poisoned, as if Shakspeare had intended expressing his abhorrence of so vacillating a character, who places the treacherous excesses of passion above the power of that human reason in whose free service alone Greeks and Romans did their most exalted deeds of virtue.”

Shakspeare is “the great humanist,” in sympathy with the clear unwarpt reason of “a living Horace or Horatio,” an Horatio intrepid as the author of *non vultus instantis tyranni*. This is fantastic. Far from abhorring Hamlet, Shakspeare was probably in considerable sympathy with him: nor is he likely to have thought either, that salvation for mankind was to be had from the ‘Odes’ of Horace.

Mr. Feis is too entire, too absolute. Nevertheless his book is of real interest and value. He has proved the preoccupation of Shakspeare's mind when he made ‘Hamlet’

with Montaigne's 'Essays.' John Sterling had inferred it, but Mr. Feis has established it. He shows how passage after passage in the second quarto of 'Hamlet,' published in 1604, has been altered and expanded in correspondence with things in the first English translation of Montaigne's 'Essays,' Florio's, published in 1603.

The 'Essays' had already passed through many editions in French, and were known to Shakespeare in that language. Their publication in English was an event in the brilliant and intellectual London world, then keenly interested in the playhouses; and Shakespeare, in revising his 'Hamlet' in 1604, gives proof of the actual occupation of his patrons with the English Montaigne, and confirms, too, the fact of his own occupation with the 'Essays' previously.

For me the interest of his discovery does not lie in its showing that Shakespeare thought Montaigne a dangerous author, and meant to give in 'Hamlet' a shocking example of what Montaigne's teaching led to. It lies in its explaining how it comes about that 'Hamlet,' in spite of the prodigious mental and poetic power shown in it, is really so tan-

talizing and ineffective a play. To the common public 'Hamlet' is a famous piece by a famous poet, with crime, a ghost, battle, and carnage; and that is sufficient. To the youthful enthusiast 'Hamlet' is a piece handling the mystery of the universe, and having throughout cadences, phrases, and words full of divinest Shaksperian magic; and that, too, is sufficient. To the pedant, finally, 'Hamlet' is an occasion for airing his psychology; and what does pedant require more? But to the spectator who loves true and powerful drama, and can judge whether he gets it or not, 'Hamlet' is a piece which opens, indeed, simply and admirably, and then: "The rest is puzzle"!

The reason is, apparently, that Shakspeare conceived this play with his mind running on Montaigne, and placed its action and its hero in Montaigne's atmosphere and world. What is that world? It is the world of man viewed as a being *ondoyant et divers*, balancing and indeterminate, the plaything of cross-motives and shifting impulses, swayed by a thousand subtle influences, physiological and pathological. Certainly the action and hero of the original Hamlet story are not

such as to compel the poet to place them in this world and no other, but they admit of being placed there, Shakspeare resolved to place them there, and they lent themselves to his resolve. The resolve once taken to place the action in this world of problem, the problem became brightened by all the force of Shakspeare's faculties, of Shakspeare's subtlety. 'Hamlet' thus comes at last to be not a drama followed with perfect comprehension and profoundest emotion, which is the ideal for tragedy, but a problem soliciting interpretation and solution.

It will never, therefore, be a piece to be seen with pure satisfaction by those who will not deceive themselves. But such is its power and such is its fame that it will always continue to be acted, and we shall all of us continue to go and see it. Mr. Wilson Barrett has put it effectively and finely on the stage. In general the critics have markt his merits with perfect justice. He is successful with his King and Queen. The King in 'Hamlet' is too often a blatant horror, and his Queen is to match. Mr. Willard and Miss Leighton are a King and Queen whom one sees and hears with pleasure. Ophelia, too—

what suffering have Ophelias caused us! And nothing can make this part advantageous to an actress or enjoyable for the spectator. I confess, therefore, that I trembled at each of Miss Eastlake's entrances; but the impression finally left, by the madness scene more especially, was one of approval and respect. Mr. Wilson Barrett himself, as Hamlet, is fresh, natural, young, prepossessing, animated, coherent; the piece moves. All Hamlets whom I have seen dissatisfy us in something. Macready wanted person, Charles Kean mind, Fechter English; Mr. Wilson Barrett wants elocution. No ingenuity will ever enable us to follow the drama of 'Hamlet' as we follow the first part of 'Faust,' but we may be made to feel the noble poetry.

Perhaps John Kemble, in spite of his limitations, was the best Hamlet after all. But John Kemble is beyond reach of the memory of even

AN OLD PLAYGOER.

October 23, 1884.