

SHAKESPEARE AND CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare has been equally respected in all the ages and throughout the world because of his literary genius and universality of thought and dramatic devices of presenting human experiences in different shades of human life and social classes. Different schools of thought like The Romantic School had set the example of English Drama in opposition to the artificial rules of French tragedy. Shakespeare depicts pure and simple form, he treats good and evil as impartially as Nature herself. Shakespeare is here also remembered as an actor and the manager of a theatre.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Hamlet, Germany, The Romantic School, Middle Ages, Mysticism, Greeks.

Introduction

There is no country where Shakespeare-worship has been more fervently professed than in Germany. All schools of philosophy and literature pay equal homage to the mighty dramatist; all have selected his personality as the representative of the highest poetry: and they differ only in the point of view at which they place themselves for the purpose of better exalting the genius of the poet. Thus the different forms of admiration for Shakespeare beyond the Rhine give us a kind of abstract of the vicissitudes of criticism in what is the classic land of theory.

The Romantic School was the first to write the name of Shakespeare on its banners. Lessing had already set the example of the English drama in opposition to the artificial rules of the French tragedy. But the Romantics went further. They put Shakespeare forward as the representative of the Middle Ages, to which they had taken a fancy. They sought and found in him all the elements of art as they understood it. They acquitted him of all the defects with which he was reproached—slips in history and geography as well as mere faults of taste. Their sun must have no spots; their Bible must remain infallible. Shakespeare had been regarded as an unconscious poet. They claimed for him the full and clear conviction of his own genius and his own work. In short, the author of 'Hamlet' was proclaimed the universal poet, the giant of the ages, the supreme exponent of his age, of humanity, of the world.

Philosophical speculation succeeded Romantic mysticism: yet without affecting the new cult, to which it was satisfied with giving a different meaning. Hegel in his 'Aesthetic' followed the development of the idea through the different phases of art—the symbolic art of Asia, the classical art of the Greeks, and finally the romantic art of the Moderns. This latter, in obedience to the ternary arrangement of the system, passed from painting to music, then from music to poetry, and went through the three successive phases of epic, lyric, and drama. Thus drama represented the highest and completest form of art, and Shakespeare, it will be understood, came in at this final term of the demonstration as a personification of the dramatic class. The English poet thus had still to play pretty much the same part, and continued to hide himself from vulgar eyes in uncontested and inaccessible supremacy.

Time brought with it a fresh reaction: the apparent rigour of the Hegelian dialectic had succeeded the fantasies of Romanticism; but a day came when this dialectic seemed hollow. The Germans were suddenly seized with a great disgust for formulas. They turned eagerly towards active life: they stimulated themselves to become men of action. Public and private virtues recovered in their eyes the place too long usurped by contemplation. Thenceforward nothing was fine unless it was moral. Lucky

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Shakespeare to find the means of preserving his royalty even in this third evolution! An eminent critic, Herr Gervinus, hastened to prove (in four volumes) that Shakespeare was the greatest of moralists, the most eloquent defender of the ways of Providence, the surest guide of mankind in the paths of virtue. Not a play of his but, under the commentator's pen, ended by showing some intention of high teaching.

A poet and simple, he treats good and evil as impartially as Nature herself.

Up to this point, and through all these revolutions of taste and thought, enthusiasm had remained unaffected; the unconscious poet and the learned poet, the unrestrained fantasist and the exalted sage, had been admired by turns; but the genius had been unceasingly declared unique and incomparable. Each vied with other in extravagance of praise; there were no reserves. It would have seemed indecent to pick out faults or even to set degrees between beauties. Men were ready to, say with Victor Hugo, 'The oak has an eccentric fashion of growing—knotty boughs, sombre foliage, rough and coarse bark—but he is the oak.

Shakespeare-worship is an example of this. Undoubtedly the religion had become a superstition, and the very fanaticism of the believers was sure to end in arousing the objections of sceptics. At the very least independent spirits were sure to claim the right of free examination : and this is what has, actually happened. Some two years ago there appeared in Germany a little book which dares to discuss Shakespeare, to distinguish the strong from the weak points in him, to bring him back under the common law of criticism. It is clear that a new era announces itself in the history of the poet's destiny.

We make, a false estimate of the rank which Shakespeare enjoyed in the esteem of his contemporaries—of the reputation in which his works were held by court and public; and we thus surround his image with a halo by which we proceed to let ourselves be dazzled. He would have the truth to be that the theatre was in very evil odour during those Puritanic times; that it was attended only by the populace on the one hand, and by a few young men of fashion on the other; that the vocation of an actor was universally despised; that Shakespeare does not seem to have enjoyed any extraordinary vogue during his own life : that, in short, the unequalled glory with which his name is now for ever surrounded dates no further back than some hundred years ago.

The verses in which Ben Jonson equals Shakespeare to the greatest tragedians of antiquity suffice to show what the contemporaries of the poet thought of him. The epitaph in which Milton not merely expresses his admiration for the dead poet, but calls him Dear son of memory, great heir of fame, proves that the succeeding generation were no more insensible than we are to the beauties of Shakespeare.

It is certain that we appreciate the work of a writer much better when we strip him of the halo with which fate has surrounded him and restore him to the company of the circumstances in which he lived. And it is good, in order to understand - ., Shakespeare, to remember that he was an actor and the manager of a theatre. His plays were not merely pieces of literature, but also, and first of all, things forced upon him by his business. He did not write for posterity, but for a special public which he had to please. This is all true; but it is not less true at the same time that it is possible to abuse such considerations, and Herr Rurnelin gives an example of it when he hints that Shakespeare portrayed his friend the Earl of Southampton under the features of young Harry the Fifth. When he guesses that the plays taken from Roman history were meant to serve as a warning to the same Southampton — 'Coriolanus' exhibiting to him the dangers of aristocratic insolence, 'Antony and Cleopatra' those of amorous intrigue, 'Julius Caesar' those of ambition— when, in short, criticism plunges thus headlong into conjecture, we can only remember that things like these are pure hypotheses, as incapable of proof as of disproof. It is the same with this whole class of historical considerations. "We may grant that Shakespeare, working according to the needs of the theatre, did not always subject his work to very severe discipline. He wrote scene after scene, developing first one situation, then another, and ending by losing sight of the unity of the whole work. It is certain that there are two distinct dramas in 'King Lear/ and that most of the pieces drawn from English history are mere chronicles thrown into dialogue. But Herr Rumelin goes much further. "We know in what a questionable shape the part of Hamlet presents itself, in how many ways commentators have sought to explain-this mysterious mixture of irresolution and enterprise, of hidden designs and capricious sallies. For Herr Rumelin there is no mystery at all. The character of Hamlet is simply incoherent; and it is incoherent because the poet worked in bits and scraps, because he did not know how to bind the scenes together, to run the shades into one. In a word, we are to see no problem here, but the actual imperfection of the work. Perhaps so; but it will be granted that this is to cut the knot rather than to untie it.

Herr Rumelin explains the great features of Shakespeare's genius in the same way as the defects of his dramas, by the circumstances of his life. We must, he holds, always come back to the one point: the poet was a manager. Everything follows from this. Shakespeare's profession has its inconveniences- as well as its advantages. If it assists the knowledge of mankind, it is not favourable to experience of the world. Hence, Shakespeare is distinguished for the creation -of a multitude of characters, all living and individual; his theatre is a gallery of portraits which, once seen, can never be forgotten. No writer has ever shown such a faculty of creation.

References

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