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SHAKESPEARE AS POET AND DRAMATIST.

PROFESSOR HENDERSON ON SHAKESPEARE.

Professor Henderson's introductory lecture on "Hamlet" in the Town Hall last night was extremely interesting. The professor has a remarkably effective manner and a powerful voice, with the result that he imparts to everything he says a certain impressiveness which it would not otherwise possess. If he were to recite "Jack and Jill" he would no doubt profoundly move his hearers. But his lectures are not merely examples of impressive speech; they are also examples of deep and wide learning and powerful reasoning. Professor Henderson frequently touches the heart, but his primary appeal is to the head. If his lecture on "Hamlet" had any fault at all, it was the fault that characterises nearly all Shakespearean criticism; it was too exclusively and excessively eulogistic. No doubt Shakespeare is worthy of the highest praise; but is he also above criticism? And can a lecture on Shakespeare be what it ought to be if it gives the impression that the master was absolutely faultless? No doubt, "Hamlet" is a marvellous display of dramatic genius. But, after all, is it not full of faults? Is not the ghost scene itself a defect? What dramatist to-day would permit a ghost to strut upon the stage? Would Shakespeare himself have done so, if he lived now instead of three hundred years ago? Shakespeare, great as he was, was but the product of his age. The theatre-goers of his day—mostly uneducated, rude men—demanded

ghosts and witches, and murder, and blood and thunder generally, and Shakespeare supplied the demand in a most bountiful manner. They demanded impossibly good men and impossibly bad men, and they got them. In other words, the wonderful works of this most wonderful man are full of blemishes, and the fact ought to be candidly confessed. Shakespeare is so great a man that he can afford to have men speak the truth about him.

With all that Professor Henderson had to say on Shakespeare's marvellous gift of language we cordially agree. As an artist in words he stands absolutely supreme. But this proves his greatness as a poet rather than his greatness as a dramatist. One of his most serious defects as a dramatist is that he makes nearly all his characters talk like poets. One has only to compare the simple, natural, every-day speech of the characters in Ibsen's problem plays with the long-winded rhetorical blank verse speeches of the characters in Shakespeare's to perceive how immensely superior, from the standpoint of dramatic realism, the former is to the latter. "Romeo and Juliet" is not a drama; it is a poem. It is the first duty of the dramatist to be natural; to make men and women act and talk naturally—to unfold, to use Shakespeare's own words "A plain unvarnished tale." But Shakespeare seldom does that; he is too much of a poet; too much given to give to airy nothing "a local habitation and a name." He does not hold "the mirror up to nature." On the contrary, he changes all things by the mighty magic of his imagination, and creates a new heaven and a new earth. He was a great poet, and people have mistaken him for a great dramatist simply because he wrote his poems in the form of plays.

THE DEIFICATION OF SHAKESPEARE.

Professor Henderson certainly succeeded last night in completely proving that Shakespeare knew how, by the right use of words, to create a particular atmosphere. This is, unquestionably, one of Shakespeare's most remarkable qualities. He uses words as a scene painter uses pigments—to paint pictures, to create in the mind certain definite psychological effects. And he undoubtedly succeeds. "It is now the witching time of night" undoubtedly tends, so far as mere words can, to produce in the soul a creepy sensation. And in the absence of the wonderful scenic effects possible in the modern theatre, Shakespeare was compelled to resort very largely to this literary device. But, after all, this kind of thing can be overdone. And then it becomes ridiculous. Tennyson's "murmur of innumerable bees" is very fine, but is almost too obvious. That we have, as Professor Henderson pointed out last night, an emotional connection is undoubted, and that the poet ought to take full advantage of it to produce his effects, may be granted. But after all, we must remember that language has its limitations. A good actor will give a better and more accurate idea of a bit of scenery, or a skillful description even, than the best man pen. And one

Shakespeare's dramas—a defect largely attributable to the fact that stage scenery and effects had not been invented in his day—was that he tried to make words do more than they are capable of accomplishing. The simple truth is, that Shakespeare cannot be fully understood and appreciated unless he is studied in relation to his age and environment. And one of the necessary conditions of a true understanding of him is the frank recognition of the fact that his environment compelled him to resort to devices which are no longer justifiable. Let us admire this genius by all means; it is supreme. But let us also recognise the defects which marred its perfect manifestation. After all, the drama, like everything else, is subject to the law of evolution, and if Shakespeare were alive to-day he would not write as he wrote 300 years ago, when the English drama was in its infancy. In saying this, we are not in the slightest degree impugning his greatness. He still remains the most wonderful poet the world has ever seen. Shakespeare, indeed, was perhaps the world's greatest man. But he was not a god. For, as Heine has well said, even the greatest of men make the meanest of gods.

PROFESSOR HENDERSON'S LECTURES

The Town Hall was crowded last night when Professor Henderson delivered the first of a series of lectures on "Hamlet." He said that they were to consider some aspects of the Shakespearean drama, as seen in "Hamlet." Literary men once looked on Homer as the greatest figure, but now they were inclined to give the first place to William Shakespeare. "Hamlet" was not necessarily the finest of Shakespeare's plays, but it was the most famous, and the most interesting of them all. Furness wrote: "No one of mortal mould, save Him

... "Whose blessed feet were nailed For our advantage to the bitter cross" ever commanded such absorbing interest as this Hamlet, the mere creation of a poet's brain." Coleridge said that the character must have some connection with the fundamental laws of our nature. Most French writers thought that Hamlet was Shakespeare himself—this was a testimony to the human interest of the character. The German writer, Freiligrath held that "Germany was Hamlet"—Hazlitt that "we were Hamlet." He (the lecturer) would say—"If you desire to know yourself, study the character of Hamlet." The struggle between will and fate belonged to the history of all. To-night they were to consider not the character, or the tragedy, but the language of "Hamlet."—Shakespeare's power over words, and his use of words. In this play he had given us the verb "to illumine," and the noun "control," and in his phrase "to out-herod Herod," he had given us a hint for making compound words. Many familiar phrases came from this play—"For this relief much thanks," "more in sorrow than in anger," "wild and whirling words," "the time is out of joint," "to be or not to be," "to thine