

AN ACTOR'S VIEW OF SHAKESPEARE

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I TAKE it as a happy augury for the wider knowledge of our Shakespeare that so much of the recent criticism of his works has tended to take him down—so to speak—from a chilly pedestal, where we had been content to leave him coldly worshipped in a niche remote from our every day coming and going and place him where we can put our arm about his shoulder and love him as a brother. A wonder-moving, miraculous, unattainable brother, if you will, but still a brother! For this love of the *man* is surely the great thing, and if we reach this love through intimacy with and understanding of his work it must be the supreme test. For the sake of his benign humanity, have about you Dowden's *Shakespeare, His Mind and Art*, and by its side have Justice Madden's *Shakespeare and His Fellows*. This latter book has special illumination on the subject of the poet's personality. It is not easy to get at the personality of Shakespeare. Biographical details are meagre, though not more meagre, I suppose, than in the case of the other conspicuous men of his time. A perverse obscurity seems to beset the movements of our dramatist, and he himself had no touch of that latter day art of keeping in the ken of the public, or of ordering his doings with the tail of his eye on posterity.

We must seek, therefore, in other channels for some guide to the man's own self. We often say "Show me a man's friends, and I will tell you what sort of a man he is." Justice Madden has sought out these friends of the poet, and has thus found something of Shakespeare himself. And what a lovable man our Shakespeare emerges! To begin with, he is a great and violent talker. Such floods of loquacity will pour out at the meetings in the Mermaid Tavern that his friends must sometimes restrain him. He is a great lover of fun. Witness his dig at the vaunted classical knowledge of his friend Ben Jonson, when he gives his child a christening present of half a dozen Lateen spoons, with instructions that Ben—his father—is to translate them into English! Witness his triumphant remark to Richard Burbage, upon whom he had stolen a march in the matter of an assignation with a fair

unknown, and upon whose doorstep as he emerges he meets the discomfited Dick Burbage with, "Ha! Ha! William the Conqueror came before Richard." Witness again the verdict of his friends that he and Ben Jonson in their daily walks "made *Humours of all Men*." He is a steady and tolerant friend. He has never a word of resentment at the gibes levelled against him by the jealous authors of his own day,—the irascible Ben Jonson included. There is never other than a kind and charitable judgment of his fellow actors, with whom as an author he must often have had his temper sorely tried. I can even picture Shakespeare appealed to by one of his fellow actors at rehearsal to improve his part, and amiably consenting to do so. How otherwise can you account for that magnificent entrance of Laertes in *Hamlet*, when he rushes on, drawn-sword in hand, to upbraid the King,—an entrance so effectively worked up by the "Shouts off" of a mob of mutinous Danes? Why mutinous? Whence this so sudden and unaccountable mutiny of the Danes? There has been no previous mention in the play of the possibility of the Danes becoming riotous. Their sudden rebellion against Claudius and in favour of Laertes is unprepared for, without consequence, inexplicable except on the assumption that the man who originally played Laertes took our Shakespeare by the sleeve one day at rehearsal and said "Look here, Will, this is a passing rotten entrance you have given me when I return to Denmark! Can't you work it up for a fellow?" And the dear fellow, Shakespeare, has said "By my Fay! 'tis passing rotten, as thou say'st. Let's have some mutinous Danes who shout 'Off', and you can dash in on the King in the midst of a mighty, roaring hullabaloo. How will that satisfy thee?" And the actor who is to play Laertes has said "Splendid!", or "Gadzooks, 'tis very well," as the case may be. The unaccountable but extraordinarily effective incident thus becomes part of his work, and our dear Shakespeare has followed the promptings of his warm, friendly heart, where he could do so without serious injury to the play.

But for a lasting memorial of his kindly soul what can be better than the dedication of his friends and fellow actors John Heminge and Henry Condell, who seven years after Shakespeare's death had collected together his plays, which were being kicked about in the various theatres in London, and published them to the world for all time? Not, it is to be observed, for pecuniary gain, and scarcely it would seem with full understanding of the genius of the dramatist, but in the enthusiasm of *love* for their dead comrade. Here are the words of their dedication:

"To keepe the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive as was our Shakespeare."

Nor did he himself in his will forget his old comrades in art:

"To each of his fellows, John Heminge, Richard Burbage, and Henry Condell he leaves twenty six shillings and eight pence with which to buy memorial rings."

So to those who knew him he was always "Sweetest Shakespeare," or "Gentle Shakespeare," or "Our Friend and Fellow;" and even the jealous, turbulent Ben Jonson at last confesses "I loved him more than any man, this side of idolatry." Who can read his works without feeling that kindly,—and I use "kindly" in its Elizabethan sense—that kindly soul behind them? It is an element present in so many of his great personages in their dealings with lowly people. Says the Lord in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, when he is instructing his servants in the hoax that is to be practised on the drunken tinker—Christopher Sly—

But do it *kindly*, gentle sirs

and again,

Take him up *gently* and to bed with him.

I think we may safely say that when one meets in any disputed work of the dramatist with that kindly and gentle note in dealing with those of humble station it is Shakespeare's own gentle hand which is at work.

How can love for this man fail to steal into our souls? Is he not a great and priceless possession?—he who smiles at us through his works and through the testimony of his friends, who takes us to his mighty but benign heart,—that heart which holds all the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove, who has tickled the ribs of the civilized world with his wholesome English laughter, who has struck chords of music out of the English language which are comparable only to the music of the spheres, who has set before us without a note of harshness, but with the inevitability of doom, the tragedy of ourselves?

Would that I could see my own countrymen appreciate him better; they would be the happier and the greater people. The English have great qualities, but no man loves England well enough who does not wish her to be greater, and she will never be worth the consideration of posterity if she has not shown appreciation of great art and great literature. Your Empire will vanish, your

kings will be as if they had never been; only great art endures; and the greatness of the people is measured by their understanding and support of this. A few of us who feel these things, and are humiliated at the neglect by the English people of their fellow-countryman, Shakespeare,—the first literary genius of the world,—have been for years urging the necessity for the establishment of a Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre. I went through the country pleading this cause. I collected from my audiences—touched as they were to a momentary enthusiasm—about one thousand pounds, and formed honorary committees in all the principal towns pledged to see the idea carried out. What was the result? A sale of work in Harrogate (to Harrogate's honour be it recorded), and a subscription of ten guineas from the Lord Chief Justice of Ireland! Surely even in this period of relaxation after the war we should not lose our hold upon the mainstays of our intellectual and artistic life. One meatless day throughout the kingdom is the price of a Shakespeare National Theatre endowed for all time. Is that price too much for Englishmen to pay only once in their lives to honour the name of their immortal fellow-countryman?

Let me now say a very little, from an actor's standpoint, about just one of his plays. When, some years ago, I made up my mind to attempt the perilous task of appearing in the character of Hamlet, my great master—Sir Henry Irving—under whose banner I had served a long and invaluable apprenticeship, very generously offered to have a chat with me on the subject. Such an offer was a piece of princely condescension to a comparative youngster like myself, and entirely characteristic of our dear Sir Henry. How often have I recalled that memorable interview! I waited upon him at the appointed hour with much of the old nervous deference which I never lost during the many years I passed in his company; reflecting upon the long and glorious triumph he had won in the same character at the old Lyceum of hallowed memory, where he appeared as Hamlet for two hundred and fifty consecutive performances—a record for that play which has never been approached. With this remembrance in mind it came to me as something of a shock that his first comment upon the ambition of any actor who essays the part of Hamlet was that he would be "a miserable fellow for the rest of his life." It was a startling confession from one who was held by the most intellectual of his contemporaries to have been indisputably the greatest Hamlet of our day. The confession puzzled me at the time, and only to those of daring originality of thought—as he was—and with great idealism of character can the full meaning and force of his words strike home.

The way of the great Hamlets is inevitably strewn with suffering, because the new light they have to shed upon the character has outraged many traditions and conflicted with much immature thought upon this subject, and because each in following the ideal he has set before himself is ever rising to greater heights whence the prospect of that great epitome of human nature called "Hamlet" stretches out illimitable and perhaps unattainable.

To few, therefore, it is given to understand why the interpreter of Hamlet must be "a miserable fellow for the rest of his life." Yet my grand old master settled down in his chair to discuss the character with his pupil, and proved at once the irresistible and painful allurements of the subject. Before putting aside my recollection of that interview, however, I must mention a touch of his own characteristic sardonic humour which Irving gave to it. Some little time before—in his own theatre—a highly popular actor, who had made some reputation in a certain melodrama into which he had introduced some original ghostly effects of lighting, had upon the success of those same effects made up his mind to play Hamlet, and imparted the project to Sir Henry. The suggestion was received by the great man with sympathy, not unmixed with grave concern. "Humph," said he, "and how old a man are you Mr. _____?" The aspiring Hamlet confessed he was just about fifty. "What?" said Sir Henry; "You want to play Hamlet at *your* time of life? How do you know you won't do yourself a grave injury?" Nothing can describe the look of sincere concern for the actor's dangerous purpose, mingled with a perfectly satanic enjoyment of his own biting humour, with which my old master used to repeat the story. The actor in question took the hint, and laid aside his cherished idea, deciding I presume to preserve his health and employ his lighting effects in some less perilous stuff. "No man can stand the strain of Hamlet," Sir Henry explained to me, "unless he begins to play it before the age of thirty-five."

No other part in all the range of drama, I should say, makes so severe and protracted a demand upon the nervous energies. Indeed I remember that after my first performance of that part I arose next morning as one who has come through a long illness. Nor is it only a question of the exhausting of energy. There is an exhaustion of spirit so great that during the long run of *Hamlet* at the old Lyceum, it was told to me by one who was his nearest and dearest friend in those days that Sir Henry Irving deliberately eschewed all social distractions, and allowed nothing to ruffle the calm, serene poise of his soul. How undying is the memory of that spiritual performance in those who can recall it! "If ever I

prayed in my life," he once confided to an old friend, "it was the night before I played Hamlet." Such was the spirit in which the great man approached his beautiful and unforgettable work. We used to wonder, we who were youngsters in his company, why he never appeared in it towards the end of his career. Mr. Harry Loveday told me that Irving felt himself "burnt out." He felt that he could give nothing more—perhaps even less, as in the course of nature his vitality ebbed,—to his beloved creation, and was content to leave the remembrance of it to those who had eyes to see and afterwards the understanding to recall its beauty.

Upon the play of *Hamlet* itself, a subject to which so many of the finest intellects have devoted their gifts, I venture most diffidently. But there are some aspects of it which will bear a closer scrutiny than—so far as I am aware—they have yet received. The first of these is the opening scene, and more especially the words of Bernardo. Coming to relieve Francisco, who is on duty as sentinel, he speaks the first words of the play, "Who's there?" Bernardo seems for the moment to usurp the proper function of the guard on duty by challenging the sentinel. It is obvious from this that he does not recognize Francisco, and I submit that he has, in the dim twilight of the early morning and in the highly wrought state of his own imagination, taken Francisco for the Ghost himself. The succeeding lines of Bernardo all bear out the suggestion that he has arrived upon the scene very apprehensive of another visit from the Ghost. For, twice before, about the same hour, "with martial stalk had he gone by the watch." This perturbation of Bernardo's is so marked, that when Marcellus and Horatio join him he welcomes them with such conspicuous relief that Marcellus asks, "What, has this thing appeared again to-night?" It is obvious, too, that Bernardo is in almost childish dread of being left alone to face the ghostly visitant. He is anxious enough to be rid of *Francisco*;—"Get thee to bed, Francisco," he says. The latter must know nothing of the strange vision which is haunting the battlements, and news of which he and Marcellus have imparted to Horatio in "dreaded secrecy." To make sure that the Ghost has not again appeared, Bernardo asks him "Have you had quiet guard?" but upon being assured that not a mouse has been stirring he bids good-night, with the parting request that if Francisco meets Horatio and Marcellus he will bid them "make haste." Now this attitude of Bernardo's is a small matter at first sight, but such delicate yet highly significant notes are of the utmost value from the point of stage-craft. The mere fact that Bernardo appears to be in a condition of highly nervous tension over something of which the

audience are quite ignorant piques and arouses their curiosity at once. Such slight but striking touches show Shakespeare's mastery of his craft in a manner which is not exceeded in the opening of any other of his plays which I call to mind.

I often reflect that if those who uphold the Baconian theory had possessed any knowledge of this subtle but potent thing called *stage-craft*, they would not have so wasted their time and their ingenuity. Stage-craft is a difficult thing to impart, and can as a rule be acquired only through intimate association with the theatre. We actors who rejoice in it, who feel its instant power over an audience, and often groan under its absence in indifferent plays, know it too well to trouble ourselves over the fantastic idea that the craft which constructed Shakespeare's plays could ever have been acquired by the philosopher Bacon.

I now approach another, and a much more debatable question. Was either Hamlet or Ophelia aware that the King and Polonius were eavesdropping during their interview with each other? I hold strongly that neither of them knew this. Recall for a moment the situation. The King and the Court are much concerned about Hamlet's apparent madness. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been set on to ascertain whether the madness is genuine or assumed, and in either case, to discover, if possible, its mysterious cause. They have failed. Polonius still adheres to this theory that the madness is real and that it is occasioned by love for his daughter Ophelia. The King is sceptical, but consents to put his Councillor's theory to the proof, and agrees to be present at an interview which Polonius has contrived between Hamlet and Ophelia,—the two spectators being hidden behind the tapestry. To this end he and Polonius have sent for Hamlet. Observe the exact words: "Good Gertrude," the King says to the Queen, "Leave us too, for we have closely sent for Hamlet hither." I have occasion later to recall the fact that Hamlet *had been sent for*. In obedience to the summons Hamlet comes, and on his way falls to ruminating upon life and eternity in the famous lines beginning "To be or not to be." Ophelia meanwhile has been bidden by her father to walk about reading her prayer-book, "that show of such an exercise" might "colour" her loneliness. We need not doubt that Ophelia had been glad to avail herself of the opportunity of an interview with Hamlet. It was long since she had seen him, for she had in obedience to her father's command "denied his access" to her. The part she was to play at the interview seems to have been left in her own hands. No indication is given to her either by the King or by Polonius as to how she is to behave, beyond the reading of the prayer-book

to account for her loneliness. She was only bidden to walk about that Hamlet might come upon her "as 'twere by accident," and the King, hidden behind the tapestry, was to judge from what he heard whether it was "his love for her or no" that was the cause of his madness. I repeat, *without* Ophelia's knowledge. If it is objected that Ophelia was present when the King told his Queen that he intended to play the eavesdropper with her father, and that therefore she must have known they were listening, I reply that upon an Elizabethan stage it was quite possible to speak to a character without the words being overheard by a third person. But there is a stronger proof for my view. In every edition of the play there is a line which in the *acting* version is usually cut out, because Ophelia usually leaves the stage at the end of her soliloquy beginning "Oh what a noble mind is here o'erthrown." The cutting out of this line not only destroys all the pathos of Ophelia's position—that of being made a tool—but destroys the proof that Ophelia did not know her father and the king to be listening. The words I refer to were spoken by Polonius:

How now Ophelia?
You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said;
We heard it all.

Ophelia after the interview was to report to her father what had taken place between herself and Hamlet. If she had been told, or if she had known, that the King and Polonius were listening, obviously there would have been no need to make a report, and therefore no excuse for Polonius' lines.

Even if these words did not exist, I should still maintain that Ophelia did not know she was to be overheard. There is nothing in her words either during or after the interview which suggests the knowledge that she is spied upon, or which is inconsistent with the attitude of the sweet and pathetic girl, glad of the chance of meeting her old lover once more, hoping perhaps that in offering to return the few pledges of their former tender relationship she may bring Hamlet to a fresh avowal of his love. What must be her distress when she realizes from her father's words

You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said;
We heard it all

that she had been used as a decoy? No, no. Ophelia never knew till then. If she had known, the keen eye of Hamlet would have instantly detected her guilt, and what a torrent of words he would have poured upon her! We can but imagine

this from the contempt with which he overwhelms Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when he is satisfied that they are permitting themselves to be spies. Could Hamlet after such a revelation of duplicity have ever said

I lov'd Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum.

Nor, I feel sure, did Hamlet himself know that his interview with Ophelia was spied upon. There is nothing in the scene to suggest that he did, except possibly his question—which is fully justified on other grounds—"Where is your father?" What more natural than that, recalling suddenly his having been sent for by the King and Polonius, he should ask this? It is as if he had said "The King and he sent for me hither. Where is your father?" What more natural than that Ophelia should suppose Polonius to be at home, whither she expected to go presently and make her report? What, lastly, more natural than that Hamlet should be annoyed when he arrives at finding neither of the gentlemen there to receive him, and feeling he had been made a fool of, should reply "Let the doors be shut upon him; that he may play the fool nowhere but in his own house." To take the query "Where is your father?" as a test of Ophelia's truthfulness is too ignoble an interpretation. I can only suppose that this reading has originated with some actor who, without pondering the matter very deeply, found it an effective theatrical action—such an action as catches the eye and pleases the mind of the groundlings. Hamlet, in an agony of mind which I dare not here attempt to describe, has just torn from his soul the love he had always conceived for his "Fair Ophelia." Suddenly in parting from her he catches sight of the King and Polonius behind the arras. "Ha! Ha!", he thinks, "I am being watched." He wonders "Is she in this? I'll test her." So he asks "Where is your father?" She replies "At home, my lord." "So here is another spy" Hamlet reflects, and then, after hurling a contemptuous taunt at the concealed Polonius, he launches at Ophelia a tirade of words spoken with the utmost scorn. Now this is, theatrically speaking, effective; it is easy; the groundlings will be satisfied. The scorn in Hamlet's voice will please their ears, and capture a fine round of applause at his exit. So the "reading," as it is called, becomes a tradition, and is accepted, too, by so many students of Shakespeare that the actor, who cannot easily disregard the obvious *coup de theatre* or the value of the easily earned applause, may be forgiven if he adopts it. But this was not what Shakes-

peare intended. It is quite unaccountable, too, that Hamlet should content himself with *shouting at* the King and Polonius. It would have been very unlike him. The only other occasion on which he discovered a listener behind the arras he promptly ran his sword through him. There is one line, indeed, which I should imagine Hamlet would rather have cut out his tongue than let the King hear: "Those that are married already, *all but one* shall live." By uttering this threat in the King's hearing Hamlet would be himself destroying his own elaborate precautions against arousing the King's suspicion. If his words, then, are not directed against the two listeners behind the tapestry, against whom are they directed? Ophelia? What? And in the hearing of the King and Polonius, this one a knave and that one a fool? Perish that construction. Hamlet was a gentleman. I cannot conceive that so gracious and princely a being could work off his scorn upon the lady that he loved for the benefit of the eavesdroppers for whom he entertained the most profound hatred and contempt

How, then, are we to solve the riddle? Well, the King is an astute person, and what does he say after hearing the interview?

Love! his affections do not that way tend;
Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,
Was not like madness. There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood.

There is the explanation of it all. The King puts his finger on the spot at once. There's *something* in his soul. The scene and the mystery became clear as daylight. Shakespeare throws more illumination upon Hamlet's soul here than anywhere in the play. In the cruel disillusionment he has endured at the spectacle of his mother's conduct, her lightness, her faithlessness, her disloyalty, his vision is distorted. Generalizing, like the poet he is, he heaps together the whole of womankind and unpacks his sorely wounded soul before Ophelia, loving her still in spite of his scorn for woman, hating himself for doing so, and raving at himself for being only another of the monsters into which a woman can turn a wise man. Love is to him, in the light of his mother's treachery, nothing more than evil passion. "I did love you once," he says to Ophelia, but with the same earthly taint that inoculates "all our old stock." Look at my Uncle! That is the stuff of which we are made. It is you women who make such monsters of us, you, Ophelia, among the rest. So, before I become a monster like the others, "get thee to a nunnery." Thus, in the unbalanced state of his soul he loathes human nature, not excluding his own, and heaps all the fury of

his indignation against *woman* upon the head of poor Ophelia. Distraught, torn this way and that, with the unnatural vision which life presents to him at that moment, Hamlet appears in this scene. Never tell me that he would have so unburdened himself to Ophelia if he had supposed himself overheard. "There's something in his soul." The King's words are the key.

Now, this subject is a vast one, and I have touched only a single aspect of it, though one which I conceive to be perhaps the most important. Beyond and above the separate aspects which form a harmonious whole—harmonious, though Hamlet is so often considered inconsistent—there is the mystery which no human insight can pierce. It is this which makes Hamlet something of an epitome of the immortal. The enigma and the pathos of life, the riddle of man's activity or inactivity, the usefulness and the uselessness of human effort, are crystallized in this play. and we—the rough hewers upon its image—may well be content if we can go to our rest at last and say with Hamlet

There's a divinity which shapes our ends
Rough hew them how we may.