

Advertiser October 12<sup>th</sup> 1884.  
~~Register October 11<sup>th</sup> 1884.~~

"HAMLET."

— — —

The following is the lecture delivered on Thursday evening before the Shakespeare Society by the Rev. W. R. Fletcher, M.A.:—

When I was asked by Professor Boulger to give the Shakespeare Society a paper on "Hamlet," I hesitated for some time before acceding to his request. The reason for this hesitation was not any lack of interest in the proceedings of our society, but it arose simply from the fear that on such a subject I could say nothing that had not already been better said by some one or other of the numerous writers who have been attracted to this theme. Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is without doubt the profoundest and the most difficult and therefore the most fascinating drama in all literature, and it is not to be wondered at that so many critics should have attempted to explain it, and to get at the heart of it. Every conceivable view as to the artistic merit of the drama, as to the character of its hero, as to the development of the plot, and as to the general meaning of the play, has found an advocate. Some say it is a grand work of art, profound and sublime, and others tell us it is a series of blunders, and the work of a clumsy but clever writer. Some will tell us that Hamlet was only feigning madness, others that he was really mad, and others again that he was a little mad and tried to make himself out to be worse than he was. Hamlet's philosophy has been described as confirmed pessimism, as deliberate optimism, and as something which is neither the one nor the other. One critic pictures him as a brave martial hero, and another as a coward who is afraid to do any deed of blood. In the eyes of one his conscience is his imperious divine monitor, but in the eyes of another he has no conscience at all, and what seems like a conscience is only timidity. He is blamed for doing too little and for doing too much, for doing the right thing at the wrong time and the wrong thing at the right time. Hamlet has been held up as a moral hero, and an illustration of how

The good man in the direful grasp of ill  
His consciousness of right retaineth still,

and as a pitiful example of a weak man yielding to circumstances and becoming deteriorated by them, veritably "a weak and peasant slave." The same curious uncertainty seems to attach to all the main characters of the play except the king, who finds no friends anywhere. That Ophelia is a lovely creation of the poet's genius is one opinion, that Ophelia is such an empty weak sort of a girl that it was impossible for such a man as Hamlet to have more than a passing fancy for her, is another opinion; that Laertes is the ideal man of the drama, the man of action, prompt, decisive, and reliable, a notable contrast to poor Hamlet with his mad dreamings, is set against the opinion that he is an empty-pated braggadocio, a worthy son of the tedious old fool, his father, who shows his inherited meanness by his becoming a partner in the king's treachery. Even Polonius has his admirers as well as his detractors. Horatio is the only character against whom no one has a word to say, and Oscar share with the king in having no one to stand up for him.

Under the circumstances it is impossible for any student of Hamlet to pretend to be original. The ground is already too well occupied for him to build his own house of fancy. He must rent one that some one else has put up. Consciously or unconsciously he must put on other men's thoughts as his mental armour. In this paper I do not pretend to set forth anything very original. I, like all of you, have been a reader of Hamlet and of men's thoughts on Hamlet, and like you have thought my own thoughts in the midst of my reading, and a few of those thoughts I will venture to give you this evening. If your thoughts are better than mine I am quite ready to admit the fact and adopt them.

Just as among instruments there is a sharpness proper to a scythe, to a lancet, and to a saw, so in human minds acuteness may take various forms, and this acuteness may cut in different fashions. If some of our critics may

be likened to scythes or lancets Voltaire may be best represented by a sharp saw well set. Let me quote you his words. He occupies the extreme left of the army of critics, as Gervinus occupies the extreme right, but Voltaire has but a scanty following, while the right wing is composed of numerous battalions." Says Voltaire, p. 381:—

"Far be it from me to justify everything in that tragedy; it is a vulgar and barbarous drama, which would not be tolerated by the vilest populace of France or Italy. Hamlet becomes crazy in the second act and his mistress becomes crazy in the third; the prince slays the father of his mistress under the pretence of killing a rat, and the heroine throws herself into the river; a grave is dug on the stage, and the gravediggers talk quodlibets worthy of themselves, while holding skulls in their hands; Hamlet responds to their nasty vulgarities in silliness no less disgusting. In the meanwhile another of the actors conquers Poland. Hamlet, his mother, and his stepfather carouse on the stage; songs are sung at table; there is quarrelling, fighting, killing. One would imagine the piece to be the work of a drunken savage. But amidst all these vulgar irregularities, which to this day make the English drama so absurd and so barbarous, there are to be found in "Hamlet" by a bizarrerie still greater, some sublime passages worthy of the greatest genius. It seems as though nature had mingled in the brain of Shakespeare the greatest conceivable strength and grandeur with whatsoever witless vulgarity can devise that is lowest and most detestable."—From Voltaire's "Theatre Complet," vol. ii., 201: Geneva, 1768

Voltaire speaks as the representative of the French mind in the eighteenth century. Time has, however, had its revenges, even in France. Victor Hugo, the typical modern Frenchman, has gone to the other extreme. He idolizes Hamlet. He finds a meaning in every line and in every incident. He makes it fit in with his own wild imagination. "Nothing," said he, "more overwhelming has ever been dreamed."

The common opinion touching the character of Hamlet is that he was a brave, educated, gentlemanly prince, a man with a melancholy and thoughtful cast of mind, which had been intensified by a liberal education; a man who, had he been born in the middle ranks of society, and a few centuries later, would have shone in the peaceful regions of scholarship, but whose misfortune was that he was born a prince in a wild and semi-barbarous court, and in the midst of political circumstances which showed the times to be sadly "out of joint." Upon this man there was laid by supernatural interposition a burden of dubious duty which was too heavy for him to bear. He is cursed with a habit of too much thinking, which begets in him a tendency to procrastination. He no sooner sees the way to action open to him than he begins to speculate on his motives and reasons for carrying out his purpose, and while brooding over the event he lets the opportunity slip. This weighty responsibility has the effect of partially unhinging his mind and driving him to simulate a madness to which he was almost driven in reality. He plans, and then fails to translate into deeds what had inflamed his mind. He sacrifices everything to this fatal irresolution, and finally falls a victim to a foul plot, not, however, before he has accomplished his task, which he does, after all, by a sudden impulse. If this view of Hamlet's character be correct Shakespeare with consummate genius has sketched for us a picture of a man whose misfortune it was to be unable to fight the battle of life, not from lack of ability or courage, but from being unable to make up his mind to do at once what he felt he ought to do and must do sooner or later. This common opinion is well expressed by Goethe in his *Wilhelm Meister* in those well-known words—

The time is out of joint: O, cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right."

In these words I imagine will be found the key to Hamlet's whole procedure. To me it is clear that Shakespeare meant, in the present case, to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. In this view the whole piece