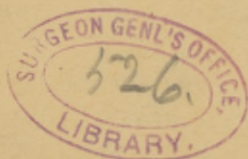


BARRETT (Wilson)

On the Sanity and age
of Hamlet.



Barrett (W.)

MR. WILSON BARRETT

ON

THE SANITY AND AGE

OF

HAMLET



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On the stage, nothing is more hard to kill than tradition. The play-goer often forms his conception of a character upon that of the first actor he sees attempt to play it. When afterwards he takes up the drama to read it, the actor's personality is in his mind's eye, and it is almost an impossibility for him to disconnect that actor and the character.

Who that has read Dickens can picture his characters otherwise than as Phiz drew them? What a shock it would be to have a new illustrator of Dickens, who would give us entirely fresh conceptions of Peggotty, of Captain Cuttle, of the Artful Dodger, of Fagan, Sykes, Pickwick, Weller, and the other characters which Phiz has stamped upon our memories! and yet it has been said that Dickens did not by any means agree with all of Phiz's realizations of his ideals.

Something like this feeling is engendered in the mind of the play-goer when an actor appears who has sufficient originality to strike out for himself an entirely new conception of a favorite part: unconsciously he resents the innovation, and during the performance he sees constantly before him, side by side with the new, the old interpretation and interpreter. It may be that the old is the wrong and the new the right idea of the character. This does not lessen the shock that the new notion gives the auditor. Thus an actor who gives an entirely new rendition of "Hamlet" places himself at once at an enormous disadvantage. Most play-goers have formed a conception of Hamlet, and they are not grateful to the man who wantonly disturbs it. Still, tradition may be false, and when an actor continues to be true to a false tradition he is false to his art. At any sacrifice let truth prevail. To no play has tradition done so much harm as to "Hamlet." Bold as this contention is, I think I shall prove it a just one before I finish this article, if the reader will patiently read the text of the play with me as I go along, uninfluenced by any commentator whatsoever except his own common sense. Before attempting to analyze the character of Hamlet, I will endeavor to point out a few of the gross absurdities which have for generations been perpetrated in the acting version of the play.

Since Betterton's time the actors have invariably finished the third act of "Hamlet" with the lines—

I must be cruel only to be kind;
Thus bad begins, but worse remains behind.

Turn to the published acting versions of the play, and you will find the proof of what I say. What is the result of this arrangement? The fourth act commences with the meeting of the king and the queen. The king learns from her that Hamlet has just slain Polonius; he confides the secret to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; they are sent to find the body

of Polonius, and, before that task is accomplished, Ophelia enters, mad with grief for her father's death, of which she has never heard, and describes in her madness his funeral, which has never taken place. Furthermore, Laertes enters, and demands of the king, "O thou vile king, give me my father," and goes on to talk of his "means of death,—his obscure funeral." Obscure indeed, considering the fact that the body has not been found. Remember, too, that Laertes was in France when his father was murdered, that the news had to travel from Denmark to France, that Laertes had to journey from France to Denmark and stir up the rebellion which he guides and leads,—and all this has been done in the few hours, or rather minutes, which elapse between the slaying of Polonius and the despatch of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find the body. Hamlet has been sent a moment before to England: ere he has had time to cross the court-yard of the castle, a letter is brought to the king from him, in which he says he has been "three days at sea," has been captured by the pirates, and has been by them set naked on the shores of Denmark. What a jumble is here! And yet for generations this maltreatment of this glorious tragedy has been allowed to pass unquestioned. By finishing the act where Shakespeare meant it should be finished,—viz., after Hamlet's departure for England,—we get the interregnum which the dramatist intended. Some six weeks have elapsed, there has been time to bury Polonius, time for Ophelia's grief to affect her brain, time for Laertes to travel from France, and time for Hamlet to be captured by the pirates at sea and be released again. I have pointed out a few of the mistakes which have been tolerated for a hundred and fifty years at least. Space will not allow me to enumerate them all, nor do I so much wish to criticise the stage version of the play as to endeavor to put right the conception of the leading character. Casting tradition to the winds, I took up "Hamlet" to study it as I would a character written but yesterday,—entirely by the light of the author's words, uninfluenced either by commentator or by the conceptions of other actors. Here I trust I was in the right, for nearly every one will admit that it is the first duty of an actor when studying a character to endeavor to discover the meaning of his author, to get at the motive and the psychology of the part, and then to the best of his ability to embody the poet's ideal, and to reproduce, as nearly as his physical qualifications will allow, the outward appearance of that ideal.

In modern plays, as a rule, the actor has the advantage of personal communication with the author, and from him he can learn what the text of the play may leave uncertain. Failing this personal instruction, he resorts to the drama itself; and no drama should leave in doubt for a moment the intention of the author on certain fundamental conditions.

Shakespeare was too practical a dramatist not to take the utmost care in, so to speak, labelling his characters, that the actors in his plays might not have the least excuse for making a mistake as to his intentions.

As a rule, so anxious is he to instruct the player that he repeats to an almost tiresome extent his descriptions of his characters. In nearly all cases these labellings and instructions are accepted by actors and commentators alike; but there is one instance to the contrary, and that is, oddly enough, the one of all others most clearly and carefully worked out by the poet. There is no character throughout the whole range of his plays which Shakespeare has taken so much pains to describe as Hamlet. His personal appearance, his age, his mental qualifications, all are insisted upon with a lucidity and an accuracy which Shakespeare no doubt fondly thought would render misapprehension impossible. But, alas! no other character has been so deliberately misunderstood, or so distorted. No two commentators seem able to agree upon Hamlet; they build up the most astonishing theories, volumes of speculations are written upon this or that fact of this or that critic. In the meantime there is Shakespeare's own authority for what he intended Hamlet to be (writ so large that he who runs may read), ignored, neglected, and despised with the most astonishing persistence. "This is white," says Shakespeare, "white," and again "white." "Ah!" says the commentator, "what does he mean by that? He has told us three times that it is white; therefore he must mean that it is black, or at least whity-brown; he would never insist so strongly upon its being white unless he meant us to understand that it was some other color." "Hamlet is not mad," says Shakespeare, again and again. "Hamlet is mad, or at least half mad," says the critic. "Hamlet is young, young, young; please do not think I mean anything else but a youth," says Shakespeare. "Hamlet is thirty-five,—a middle-aged man," say his commentators. Let me endeavor to point out what Shakespeare has to say on the subjects of Hamlet's sanity and his age. First, as to his sanity. There can be no doubt as to Ophelia's madness. Is it likely that Shakespeare would be guilty of the serious dramatic error of making both the hero and the heroine of his play insane? Is Hamlet ever mad in soliloquy? Is he ever mad when with his one trusted friend, Horatio? Is there the slightest allusion in the first act to Hamlet's madness until he has announced to his two friends that he "hereafter may think meet to put an antic disposition on"? Hamlet, after he has seen the ghost, has rapidly made up his mind to avenge the death of his father. He knows his uncle is a murderer. He knows his own life would not be worth a pin's purchase if by any accident the king should learn that he is cognizant of his crime. He will feign madness, to cloak his designs and lull the suspicions of the king. He knows, however, that Horatio and Marcellus are aware that he is perfectly sane, and he makes them swear not only that they will never "make known that which they have seen," but, further,

Never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd so'er I bear myself,
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on,
That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
With arms encumbered thus, or this head-shake,
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,
As, Well, well, we know, or, We could, an if he would,
Or, If we list to speak; or, There be, an if they might,
Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
That you know aught of me; this not to do,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you,
Swear.

So all important to the understanding of the character of Hamlet does Shakespeare consider this that he brings the ghost back twice to make Horatio and Marcellus swear that they will never reveal, by act or deed, the fact that Hamlet is not mad. And if this is not evidence enough, we have Hamlet making his mother promise that the king will not for

A pair of reechy kisses
Make you to ravel all this matter out,
That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft.

And

Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass, but my madness speaks.

Again,—

Bring me to the test,
And I the matter will re-word; which madness
Would gambol from.

Even the king, after watching Hamlet with Polonius, says:

Nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little,
Was not like madness.

"He shall with speed to England." He is not insane; therefore he is dangerous. Could any author have taken more pains than this to instruct the actor how a character is to be played? And yet, in the face of all this, against the author's express instructions, commentators will distort and misinterpret Shakespeare's language and build up theories of their own, to the destruction of his meaning, and the ruin of the tragedy. Hamlet's inaction, retrospection, and indecision are often insisted upon as another sign of mental weakness. Surely far too much stress has been put upon this one side of his many-sided character. As a fact, Hamlet at times acts with the most remarkable quickness and decision. Let us take his first scene as an example. No sooner has Horatio told him of the appearance of the ghost than Hamlet sets to work and cross-examines him with all the alertness of a practical lawyer. The when, where, and how are brought out in the clearest manner, and immediately Hamlet says, "I will watch to-night;" and he does watch that night. "I will speak to it;" and he does speak. Not much lack of decision here. When the players arrive, does he not at once conceive the idea of the play,—to catch the conscience of the king? Immediately on the success of this ruse, going straight from the play to his mother's closet, he comes across the king, and draws his sword upon him, and would then and there kill him; but that would not be revenge, to send the murderer, purged of his sins, to heaven. No, he cries,—

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent,
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;
At gaming, swearing; or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, whereto it goes.

But a few moments later, in his mother's closet, he believes, on hearing the cry of Polonius, that he has caught the king about "some act that has no relish of salvation in't," and, without a pause, his sword is out, and Polonius is slain. Where is the lack of action here?

Again, when he suspects Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on the voyage to England, he abstracts the commission from their cabin, copies it, inserts in it their names in place of his own, and adds, "That England should the bearers put to sudden death, not shriving time allow." Is not this decision?

When the pirate gave the vessel chase and grappled with it, Hamlet says, "I boarded them; on the instant they got clear of our ship; so I alone became their prisoner." Therefore he was the only one who had boarded the pirate,—the first in action, the first to decide.

It is too often supposed that Hamlet delays his revenge over a period of some years. This is another absurd mistake; as a matter of fact, the whole action of the play does not extend over four months. At the opening of the play, Hamlet's father has been dead barely two months,—"nay, not so much,—not two." In the play-scene in the third act, Ophelia says, "'Tis twice two months, my lord;" so that from the beginning of the first act to the close of the third we must allow about ten weeks. Allowing six weeks for the time between Hamlet's murder of Polonius and the death of Ophelia, we have only the four months; for Ophelia dies at the end of the fourth act, and is buried at the commencement of the fifth. Immediately after the burial the bout of foils takes place, and Hamlet kills the king. Hamlet does hesitate, he does pause and ponder, at times, but at others the swiftness of his action is most marvelous; and surely both sides of his character should be considered.

Another most important point is the age of Hamlet. Following some interpolated lines in the grave-digger's scene, many commentators fix it at thirty, to the utter destruction of Shakespeare's conception of Hamlet and the whole meaning of the play. The lines are, "I have been sexton here, man and boy, for thirty years." My reply to this is that these are not

Shakespeare's words at all, but were introduced for the convenience of the actor, either Taylor or Burbage, both of whom were incapable of looking the youthful prince. A man who has been sexton, man and boy, for thirty years, supposing him to have been twelve years of age when he began to dig graves, would be forty-two. Why, then, for generations has the actor been allowed to make up as the grave-digger looking at least sixty or seventy years of age, without remonstrance? If the text is right, the actor must be wrong. I have never yet seen a picture or drawing of the grave-yard scene in which the grave-digger is not represented as a very old man; and quite right, too; the sexton should be a very old man; and he is always presented to the imagination as such. The lines fixing his age at forty-two have crept into the text without thought on the part of the interpolator, and the actor while altering the text retained the conception of the character. The other line, "Yorick's skull has been buried in the earth three-and-twenty years," has been inserted for the same purpose; the original line reads "a dozen years." The other lines are no more Shakespeare's than the passage introduced for the same purpose, reading, "Our son is fat and scant of breath." The statement that Hamlet is thirty years of age no more accords with the rest of the play than does the line "fat and scant of breath" accord with Ophelia's description of Hamlet, "The glass of fashion and the mould of form." Other lines quoted in support of the theory of Hamlet's being over thirty are those spoken by the player king:

Full thirty times hath Phoebus' cart gone round
Neptune's salt wash and Tellus' orb'd ground,
And thirty dozen moons with borrowed sheen
About the world have times twelve thirties been,
Since love our hearts and Hymen did our hands
Unite commutual in most sacred bands.

These are understood to imply that Hamlet's father and mother have been married thirty years, and are also accepted as a statement of Hamlet's age. If his father and mother were married only thirty years, and he is over thirty years of age, why does not Shakespeare allude to his illegitimacy at some portion of the play? Yet another argument is that Hamlet says to his mother, when reproaching her for her sin,—

Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones.

And we are asked to believe that the word "matron" signifies a woman fifty or sixty years of age, and therefore Hamlet must be thirty. Is not every mother a matron, whether she be sixty or sixteen? The whole play turns upon the incestuous intercourse of the queen and her husband's brother. This had been going on during the lifetime of the dead king, if we may trust the words of the ghost, who says,—

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,
Won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen.

Let us imagine a woman fifty or sixty years of age inspiring such a passion in the mind of a man like Claudius. Does it not strike one immediately as being truly revolting? Can we imagine Shakespeare building so glorious a tragedy as "Hamlet" on such a theme? With a handsome, sensual, attractive woman of forty it is reasonable, but surely not with a woman of fifty or sixty. Over the actual statements of Hamlet's age made by Shakespeare himself there should be surely no controversy. He is constantly referring to him as "young." He refers to Romeo as the "young Romeo," and again to Orlando as the "young Orlando." Will anybody assert that Romeo or Orlando is over thirty years of age? Will any one avouch that Shakespeare's power of imagery was so poor and scanty that only the one word "young" could be found by him to describe a boy of nineteen, like Romeo, and a man of thirty? In the first scene, Horatio alludes to Hamlet as the "young Hamlet." Horatio is himself a young man. In the second scene the king says, "For your intent in going back to school in Wittenberg." It is immaterial to me whether he meant school or college. So far as we can gather, the schooling would commence at twelve or fourteen, and at the age of thirty a prince like Hamlet would be commanding armies in the field. Again, if Hamlet had attained his majority, why is he not on the throne? Granting that the throne of Denmark went by election, Hamlet is the beloved son of a beloved father, "loved by the

distracted multitude," popular, and with absolutely no bar to his claim to the throne. In the third scene, Laertes, in warning his sister against Hamlet, says:

For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor,
Hold it a fashion, and a toy in blood;
A violet in the youth of primy nature;
Forward, not permanent; sweet, not lasting.

Can we for a moment believe that Shakespeare would use the word forward—i. e., precocious—concerning the love of a man over thirty years of age? Laertes is himself a young man of not more than twenty-one or twenty-two. Would he be likely to speak of the love of a man of thirty as being in the youth of primy nature? Further, he goes on to speak two or three lines which seem to have escaped the notice of nearly every commentator or critic who has yet endeavored to fix the age of Hamlet at thirty, viz:

For nature crescent does not grow alone
In thews and bulk; but, as this temple waxes,
The inward service of the mind and soul
Grows wide withal.

If these words have any meaning at all, they mean that Hamlet has not done growing, either physically or mentally. Is this possible in a man thirty years of age? Surely not. Polonius, immediately after this, takes occasion to warn Ophelia against Hamlet because he is young. He says:

For Lord Hamlet,
Believes so much in him, that he is young.

In the second scene of the second act, speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the king says,—

I entreat you both,
That being of so young days brought up with him,
And sith so neighbored to his youth.

Hamlet himself, speaking to these two young men, appeals to them by "the consonancy of their youth." The king further alludes to Hamlet as this "mad young man," and again speaks of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as his "two school-fellows." In fact, there is hardly a scene in the play in which some allusion to Hamlet's youth is not made. And yet, in the face of all this, we are to believe that Hamlet is over thirty!

In the *Tatler* newspaper, dated Tuesday, September 20, to Thursday, September 22, 1709, appears a criticism of the Hamlet of Mr. Betterton, who was unquestionably a very successful exponent of the character. Almost the first detailed criticism of any one in this character relates to Betterton. It is generally conceded that Betterton was taught how to play the part by Sir William Davenant, who received his conception of the character directly from Shakespeare himself. There is no question of Davenant's intimacy with Shakespeare, and, if my evidence be trustworthy, he transmitted his conception of the piece, gained from his intimacy with the author, to Betterton. This is the Betterton-cum-Davenant-cum-Shakespeare idea of Hamlet.

"I was going on in the reading of my letter, when I was interrupted by Mr. Greenbat, who had been this evening at the play of Hamlet. 'Mr. Bickerstaff,' said he, 'had you been to-night at the play-house you had seen the force of action in perfection. Your admired Mr. Betterton behaved himself so well that, though now about seventy-six, he acted Youth, and, by the prevalent power of proper manner, gesture, and voice, appeared through the whole drama a youth of great expectations, vivacity, and enterprise. The soliloquy when he began the celebrated sentence of "To be, or not to be," the expostulation when he explains with his mother in her closet, the whole ardor after seeing his father's ghost, and his generous distress for the death of Ophelia, are each of them circumstances which dwell strongly upon the minds of the audience, and would certainly affect their behavior on the parallel occasion of their own lives. Pray, Mr. Bickerstaff, let us have virtue thus represented on the stage with its proper ornaments, or let the ornaments be added to her in places more sacred. As for my part,' said he, 'I carried my cousin Jerry, this little boy, with me, and shall always love the child for his partiality for all that concerns the fortune of Hamlet. This is entering youth into the affections and passions of manhood beforehand, and, as it were, antedating the effects we hope from a long and liberal education.'" Thus says Bickerstaff, otherwise Dean Swift.

In the original legend of Hamlet, by Saxo Grammaticus,

we are informed that "Feggi killed Orvendio and married his wife, and that Hamlet was then twenty years of age, and that Hamlet, to lull the suspicion of his uncle, feigned madness the better to carry out his plans of vengeance."

By the ancient Northman a madman was considered to be sacred, and to injure one would be a sacrilege. Hamlet, in his address to his people, says: "I hid my knowledge under an assumed cloak of madness," and "this before I had come to man's estate."

Thus in the original legend and in Shakespeare's play we are again and again told that Hamlet was not mad, and that he was quite young.

It is obvious that the tragedy gains in attractiveness if

Hamlet is played as a young man. By representing the king and queen as beings in the very prime of life they interest the audience instead of boring it, and thus the balance of the play is preserved. The eye of the spectator is pleased by the appearance of the most important characters, the sensibilities are no longer shocked, the student finds matter for fresh thought in the new aspect in which the play is presented to him, and, above all, he sees Hamlet as Shakespeare saw him first in the crude legend of Saxo Grammaticus, but strengthened, enlarged, glorified, and immortalized by the grandeur of his genius.

WILSON BARRETT.

