

Shakespeare Centenary

The New York Times



Betterton



Henderson

March 26, 1916

(Copyright 1916 by The New York Times Company.)

HOW EACH AGE FINDS NEW FLAWS IN SHAKESPEARE

Each Praises---But Rewrites Him

Written for THE NEW YORK TIMES

By John Palmer,

Dramatic Critic of The Saturday Review, London.

IN the last few years there has been rather a strong reaction from what has been humorously described as "bardolatry." An effort has been made to strip Shakespeare of the majesty and glamour in which the great critics of the nineteenth century enwrapped him, and to put him to the small tests of common sense, probability, and simple logic which rule our more modern ways of thinking and writing. Since Swinburne sang his glorious hymn in pure praise of Shakespeare there has been a growing desire among our literary leaders to show either (1) that Shakespeare was really a twentieth century author in disguise, unfortunately born into a barbarous epoch (2) that, falling to be a twentieth century author, his greatness was thereby limited. This desire is not usually quite so crudely expressed as in the foregoing statement. But it is implicit in most of our modern attempts to judge Shakespeare according to the standards and practice of today.

All such criticism will be very rudely avenged by posterity. Critics who make fun of "bardolatry" will as surely become a laughing stock for their grandchildren as Garrick has, or Dryden. "Bardolatry," far from needing any excuse or apology from those who profess it, is absolutely essential in a critic of Shakespeare. It is the critic's best and most necessary defense against all error. In proportion as critics of the past have suffered from bardolatry they have prospered. In proportion as they have lacked bardolatry they have proportionately become a byword.

The history of Shakespearean criticism shows one thing, at least, as plain as a church—that it has been almost invariably fatal to the gravity of ensuing generations to censure Shakespeare at all. However absurd and wrong Shakespeare may seem to be in the eyes of this or that generation. In this or that particular it is tempting time and Providence to say too much about it. Silence is best, unless we desire posterity to amuse itself at our expense. It may seem to us perfectly reasonable and right to assess Shakespeare strictly by our own contemporary standards, to require him to pass the tests which we normally apply to ourselves and to our own achievements. But we shall be well advised to resist the temptation. Men like Dryden and Dr. Johnson—bigger men than any of our critics today—yielded to precisely this temptation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and their critical reputations have not recovered from it yet. A little bardolatry might have saved them; and it is in their praise that their greatness is revealed. They preferred to leave us also their censures, and here we stand in awe of the whorls of Shakespeare for all time, they most distinctly were, as critics, only for their own particular age.

Bardolatry pays in the long run. Praise what you can and leave the rest to your grandchildren is a good motto for Shakespeare's critics. Your grandchildren will almost certainly look at Shakespeare quite differently from yourselves, and discover the virtues which escaped you. Do not quarrel with Shakespeare's mirror because you cannot find a perfect likeness of your own time. Many generations have looked into that mirror before you, and each of them has found in it something which was never seen before. Remember that Shakespeare has now been famous for over 300 years, and that he has never been famous in quite the same way for very long. It is Shakespeare's privilege to be born again about once in every quarter of a century. Each generation has praised him; but each generation has praised him for a different reason.

Ben Jonson praised him "on this side idolatry as much as any," but he was none the less rebuked by Dryden for a too limited allegiance. Dryden in turn was rebuked by Jonson's eighteenth century namesake, who in due time was taken severely to task by Hazlitt, Coleridge, and a host of others. To each succeeding age the criticism upon Shakespeare of its predecessor has seemed ineffectual, what it was fault with him and inadequate when it praised him. All the generations can agree that Shakespeare was the greatest dramatist who ever lived, but they find it altogether impossible to agree upon an explanation of his greatness. It would seem that lovers of Shakespeare, when they hear the eulogy of other lovers, become possessed with the rage of Hamlet when he heard Laertes praising Ophelia. How dare these other critics praise a godlike genius whom they had not the eyes or ears to understand? What right have these men, who picked holes in the fabric of Shakespeare's plays and measured his achievement by ephemeral standards of their own time, to join the congregation of his worshippers? Such is the feeling which jealously arouses as the eighteenth century reads what the seventeenth century has written concerning Shakespeare, or as we today survey the whole field from Ben Jonson to Bernard Shaw.

All this simply means that each generation has discovered some new aspect of Shakespeare's genius, and that it has quite rightly resented the blindness to its own particular discovery of those who went before. Dryden was well reprieved by Johnson, who in turn was well reprieved by Coleridge. The mistakes made by critics of every time and race who have written concerning Shakespeare are a fair motive for the indignation, mirth, and wonder of all those who today think it worth while to keep his centenary. They are also, it should be added, a fair motive for caution and humility. Let every critic of Shakespeare



Sir Joshua Reynolds's painting of Garrick hesitating between Comedy and Tragedy. Garrick's first great success was in Richard III. Later he turned to Comedy.

henceforth reflect that Shakespeare's critics in the past, wherever they have praised him, have rarely seemed in the view of after ages to praise him enough, and that whenever they have found fault with him time has usually decided that Shakespeare was right and that they were wrong—in most cases quite in credibly and absurdly wrong. Shakespeare is so great that each generation has been able to find in him something which particularly appealed to it, and to praise as immortal what it found, even though it was indifferent or hostile to the rest.

The genius which has appealed in turn to the luxuriant Elizabethans, the cavaliers, and Puritans of the early seventeenth century, the formal dramatists and poets of the eighteenth century, the romantic revolutionaries of the nineteenth century, and the intellectual realists of today—which has appealed to each of these generations on account of something in his work which was welcomed as appealing especially to itself alone—such genius must clearly be of a somewhat comprehensive character. It will not do lightly to assume that we have even yet thoroughly exhausted it. There may still be something lying in Shakespeare for ages yet unborn—something to which we are as blind today as Johnson was blind, among other things, to the quality of his lyrics, or as Lamb was blind to his skill as a practical playwright. This something may be precisely the thing we choose in our arrogance to despise. There is no reason why we should be any happier in our censures and excisions today than Cibber was, or Garrick. To find fault with Shakespeare is to incur the risk of standing in a famous and extensive pillory, where big men like Dryden and Voltaire are found in the company of little men like Rymer and Tate. I must confess that, whenever I hear an eminent critic finding fault with this thing or that to which Shakespeare has set his hand, I cannot help feeling a little anxious on that critic's account. It is so extremely probable that fifty years hence all the world will be laughing at him.

It is well in this time of celebration to glance retrospectively at one or two of the more striking passages in this comedy of critical errors. The full story would fill many books, but its merest chapter headings—a few references, for example, to Dryden, Garrick, and Dr. Johnson—are worth an occasional reprint. The kernel of the whole comedy of Shakespearean criticism from start to finish lies quite briefly in this: that, whereas almost every critic who has approached the plays of Shakespeare any time this 300 years has been ready to swear that Shakespeare was the greatest genius who ever lived, this same critic has usually been quite sure that Shakespeare's plays, as he wrote them, were not worthy to be heard or read. People have always been ready to agree that Shakespeare plays were immortal, but they have invariably been equally ready to improve them. Shakespeare, said the seventeenth century, was great; but Shakespeare rewritten by Dryden or D'Avenant was somehow greater. Shakespeare, said the eighteenth century, was a wonder of the world; but Shakespeare improved by Garrick was even better. Shakespeare,

our own times have quite recently said, is a transcendent genius, but that is no reason why he should not be susceptible of improvement for stage purposes by Irving or Herbert Tree. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that each succeeding period, after first declaring that Shakespeare's plays were incomparable, proceeded at once coolly to rewrite them. It almost seems as if hitherto Shakespeare's genius has been too intolerably shining for the common sight, and that he has required a succession of mediators to interpret to each succeeding generation such portions of his genius as could be made accessible. The bones of many critical reputations whiten the roads. What better warning could we desire than the great Dryden himself? Dryden was a really great critic. His appreciation of Shakespeare is amazingly generous and true when we take into account the habit and fashion of his period.

In an age which believed that every syllable in a poet's vocabulary should be "polite"; that plays should be written according to the unities of time and place; that plots should be single; that the best diction for drama was the rhymed couplet, which Dryden himself extolled; that tragedy and comedy should be strictly isolated one from another—at this time we find Dryden roundly declaring that Shakespeare "had a larger soul of poetry than any of our nation"; that the compassion and mirth of tragic-comedy did not necessarily destroy one another; and that plots and underplots were not necessarily barbarous, but often an advantage. Nevertheless, even so enlightened a critic as Dryden, when it came to the point, found it necessary to "improve" upon his hero; and he has accordingly handed himself over to the ridicule of posterity. Let all those who are editing Shakespeare for the stage today

ponder carefully Dryden's preface to his version of the "Troilus":

"I undertook to remove that heap of rubbish under which many excellent thoughts lay wholly buried. Accordingly I new-modeled the plot, threw out many unnecessary persons, improved those characters which were begun and left unfinished; as Hector, Troilus, Pandarus, and Theristes, and added that of Andromache. After this I made with no small trouble an order and connection of all the scenes, removing them from the places where they were artificially set and . . . I have so ordered them that there is a coherence of them with one another and a dependence on the main design. I need not say that I have refined his language which before was obsolete." We today are able to smile at the sanguine program here set forth, but there is no reason to believe that our present acting editions of Shakespeare will be any less amusing to our successors. Dryden's performance is essentially the same as that of almost every critic of Shakespeare from Ben Jonson to Bernard Shaw. It consists in asserting first of all that Shakespeare is the greatest poet who ever lived, and in going on to wish that he had written his plays rather differently.

If Dryden is a warning to our critics, Garrick is a warning, even more alarming, to our actor managers. Garrick began in the traditional way by asserting that it was his aim as a producer of Shakespeare "to lose no drop of that immortal man." He went on, also in the traditional way, to edit him. He produced "A Midsummer Night's Dream"—with additions by himself, songs out of Waller and Dryden, and without any reference to Bottom the Weaver. He cut out such lines as

And there the snake throws her enamelled skin,
Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in,
and substituted verses by himself:
Joy alone shall employ us,
No griefs shall annoy us,
No sighs the sad heart shall betray;
Let the vaulted roof ring,
Let the full chorus sing,
Blest Theseus and Hippolyta.

He produced the "Tempest" in the version which Dryden and D'Avenant had worked upon—a version in which Miranda, who has never seen a man, is balanced with Hippolyta, a man who has never seen a woman. He produced "Romeo and Juliet"—with all the rhymes cut out and a doggerel scene of his own added to prolong his opportunities as a tragic actor in Romeo's tomb. He produced "A Winter's Tale," but suppressed the first three acts entirely. He produced "Hamlet"—without the gravediggers, and with the addition of a Queen who goes mad with remorse. Garrick's whole career is a reduction to absurdity of the assumption that Shakespeare, though an immortal poet, ought to have written his plays in a different way.

It will be objected that Garrick's mistakes need not alarm his more modern successors, because Garrick was soaked in French models and in eighteenth century classicism. He revered the unities as laws of nature and had quite lost touch with the fundamental humor and sense of English literature. But one would like to ask how exactly Garrick's reverence

And Is Laughed at by the Next

for the unities differs from the reverence of our own more modern managers for the picture-frame stage and its realistic furnishings—a reverence which makes it quite impossible for Shakespeare's skill in construction to tell upon his audience, and which incidentally requires that his plays shall be cut and rearranged to fit conventions quite unlike those of his own time and theatre. Are these our modern managers, in their reverence for the mere modern carpentry of their art, perilously near the position of Garrick? One would also like to point out that the conventions to which Garrick was a thrall have not been by any means the sole cause of audacious folly in his editors. The spirit of the age was also to blame; and the spirit of the age is always with us—today as well as yesterday. The spirit and mental attitude of the generations has differed from period to period, with the result that one generation has worshipped what another has discarded.

For Johnson tore to shreds, once for all, the classical rules, not only in the famous "Preface," but in a paper, which should be more famous than it is, to the "Rambler": "It ought to be the just endeavour of a writer to distinguish nature from custom, or that which is established because it is right from that which is right only because it is established." Nevertheless, Johnson, the parent of all the moderns, is, equally with Garrick, a warning and example to all those who at any time or for any cause shall improve, or wish to improve, the plays of Shakespeare. When Johnson writes of Shakespeare, "In his tragic scenes there is always something wanting," he exhibits a blindness as great as that of the critics he dispossessed. Or, again, when he says of Ariel's songs that they "must be allowed of no supernatural dignity or elegance," we simply know that Dr. Johnson, with all his wisdom and sweep of imagination, was here obtuse to an appeal of which the least lover of literature today is entirely sensible. At this point, if we are reasonably modest, we shall begin to wonder whether some of our more modern strictures may not be due to a similar callosity of the literary nerves analogous to that which afflicted the great doctor in regard to the songs of Ariel.

Dryden, Garrick, and Dr. Johnson are a warning to all critics, in that their offenses have been exposed by the mere passage of time—offenses which cry aloud that the works of Shakespeare are not to be lightly brought before the bar of any merely contemporary standards.

Coleridge teaches the critics of Shakespeare the same necessary lesson in another way. Coleridge is Shakespeare's greatest critic. There is only one possible exception to this statement to be made in favor of Maurice Morgann, a critic who, a generation in advance of the Romantics, in a jocular essay upon Falstaff, reached a point in the general criticism of Shakespeare which will perhaps be reached by the main body of English and American critics some time within the next fifty years. But Morgann is almost entirely unknown, even by name, to readers of Shakespeare today, and the exact nature of his achievement would require a small treatise to set it forth in its exact historical setting and significance. Meantime Coleridge, who half a century after Morgann had written, got within speaking distance of that amazing amateur of criticism, may well stand by general acclamation for the captain and leader of us all. What is the lesson we learn from Coleridge? What is his chief recommendation, his most urgent advice, the secret of his own amazing success? Briefly, it is the counsel of pure humility.

"The Englishman," says Coleridge, "who, without reverence, a proud and affectionate reverence, can utter the name of William Shakespeare, stands disqualified for the office of critic. He wants one at least of the very senses the language of which he is to employ, and will discourse, at best, but as a blind man, while the whole harmonious creation of light and shade with all its subtle interchange of deepening and dissolving colors rises in silence to the silent fiat of the uprising Apollo. However inferior in ability I may be to some who have followed me, I own I am proud that I was the first to have publicly demonstrated to the full extent of the position that the supposed irregularity and extravagancies of Shakespeare were the mere dreams of a pedantry that arraigned the eagle because it had not the dimensions of the swan."

Here is our warning; and we shall do well, after a glance back into the errors of the predecessors of Coleridge and a side-glance at some of the more impudent utterances of our modern "intellectuals," occasionally to go through the list of what Coleridge has written, to watch the play of his reverent but piercing intelligence, and to take his lesson deeply home to ourselves.

The practical application of all this is not far to seek. There is a good deal in Shakespeare which does not square with the rational "psychology" of our modern novelists and dramatists. Let them avoid it. If they cannot humble themselves enough to accept Coleridge's simile of the eagle and the swan, they can at least be silent. That is our first practical application. A second application may be addressed to all those modern producers of Shakespeare who prefer to "arrange and edit," in other words, to mutilate and destroy, the plays of Shakespeare because they have never troubled to study the technique of his theatre, or, having studied it, still believe that their allegiance to the fashionable stage formations of the moment are of more account than a fidelity to Shakespeare's spirit and text. Copyright, 1916, by The New York Times Company



M^r GARRICK in Four of his Principal Tragic Characters.