

A CRIME TO TEACH SHAKESPEARE AS WE DO NOW



© 1907 BY GEBBIE & CO.
The Merchant of Venice - The Casket Scene - Act II, Scene IX.
(This and the other pictures on this page are from the collection of Evert Jansen Wendell.)

A Pupil Who Gets a Mark of 100 and Thereafter Hates Shakespeare Has Failed---Rather, His Teacher Has

Written for THE NEW YORK TIMES
By WALTER PRICHARD EATON,
Author of "The American Stage of Today,"
"At the New Theatre," &c.

SHAKESPEARE died 300 years ago without the slightest consciousness that he had written textbooks for Phillips Academy and the New Rochelle High School. He passed from amid his daffodils and primroses—for in those last quiet years in the country I am sure he had especially the Spring blooms about his dwelling—in the knowledge and belief that he had written plays for the practical theatre. That they commanded a wide interest he was not unaware; probably he was not unaware that they deserved it! He had already seen them put into print. But he had no "message," as Shaw or Brieux has, and these quartos were, so to speak, souvenirs of a pleasant evening in the playhouse, or hints of a pleasant evening for those who were not present. Most assuredly they were not textbooks.

And it would take a bold man to deny the possibility of a connection between the modern decline of Shakespeare on the stage and the fact that his plays were never more generally in use as textbooks! More American children grow up today with a supposed knowledge of Shakespeare than ever before, and fewer ever see him acted—which simply means that fewer have any real knowledge of him.

It is an object of the tercentenary celebration not only to honor Shakespeare, but to focus attention upon all phases of his works, and personally believe that no more useful result could possibly follow than a revaluation of Shakespearean study methods in our secondary schools, so complete in places as to be revolutionary. At present it is safe to say that the average high school makes Shakespeare a bore, and while it may teach enough routine of plot and smattering of philology to jam a child past the college entrance board, it fails utterly to inspire dramatic appreciation, to expand the imagination, to create affection. And the reason invariably is that Shakespeare's works are studied as textbooks, not as living dramatic performances spoken by living players. Conditions are not so bad as they were a few years ago, to be sure. The dramatic renaissance in our colleges is carrying down better equipped teachers into the secondary schools. But there is still a vast deal to be done, and the present is an excellent opportunity for calling attention to it.

Most readers, I fancy, have gone through much the same experience that I went through in my school days—and they were spent in a great and famous school, too! We boys sat on benches with our red-bound Rolfe's editions before us, and in a sleepy, singsong some boy droned out a passage, and then the instructor asked him questions to see if he'd read the notes, and then another boy recited and was questioned on the notes, and then the instructor, if he were feeling particularly energetic that day, gave us a bit of a lecture on the beauty of the poetry or on the character of Rosalind, and we openly yawned, and waited for the bell, and when it sounded rushed with a glad stamping into the open air. By virtue of much repetition, we learned that the quality of mercy is not strained, and we could repeat the plot of "Macbeth" in order to get into Yale. After which, we prayed to be delivered from the Bard! From a considerable observation of secondary schools since that time I gather that this is still the way Shakespeare is "taught" in too many places.

It is a crime, and doubly a crime, now that we so pitifully need the right cultivation of dramatic imagination and poetic appreciation to counteract the stultifying banality of the movies.

I am convinced that the first thing which

should be thrown overboard in a preliminary teaching of Shakespeare to children of high school age is the notes. In their place should be substituted, by diagram, by picture, and most of all, if it is a possible thing, by practical illustration, a clear image in the pupils' minds of the Elizabethan stage, of the actual conditions under which "Hamlet" or "Macbeth" or "The Merchant of Venice" first saw the light. This preliminary seems indispensable to me, for until the play to be studied is sensed in its practical relation to the theatre, until it is felt primarily as a living, acted story, it is ridiculous to expect children, or even untrained adults, to grasp its secondary significances. Moreover, through the dramatic sense lies the easiest and most natural approach to the child's interest; the method is pedagogically sound.

If I were teaching Shakespeare in a high school—and, I may add, I have taught him to many boys and girls of high school age, lest it be thought I am speaking purely from theory—I should first of all (after my talk on the Elizabethan theatre and my display of pictures and diagrams) have the desk removed from the platform, or shoved far back for a "balcony." I should then group some of the class at the sides as well as in front, and with as much informality and informality as possible lead the

class to play the teacher's platform was Shakespeare's stage and they the London audience. Then, picking boys and girls for the various parts, I should have them come up on this platform to read their rôles, act by act. No doubt the players would be changed frequently if the class were a large one. Everybody must have a chance.

No effort would be made, of course, to "coach" any pupil into acting, further than to keep them in the relative positions called for by the text, though a very definite effort would be made—and herein lies one of the finest opportunities of the Shakespearean teacher, and a neglected one—to coach each pupil to read his lines not only intelligently but rhythmically and with full voice and clean enunciation. Those who by nature threw themselves into acting would, of course, not be discouraged, but those who lacked the capacity or the self-assurance would not be made to feel that they were less useful or failing in their work. The main object to be achieved would be the creation in them all of a sense for the dramatic quality of the story, a realization of the dramatic drive and interest.

It should be possible thus to cover at least one act, possibly two, at each recitation, and I should go through the entire play in this manner before a single word was said about the notes at the back of

the book. I should make that particular play a living, vital tale to every child, as vital as the movies around the corner, before I turned to the notes at all. I should abolish most of the formality and discipline of the conventional classroom, and have a grand good time in the process.

Then, and only then, should I turn back to the text and go through it as classroom work, demanding a knowledge of the notes, elucidating the simpler and most necessary problems of philology, and discussing with (not at) the pupils the characters of Shylock or Hamlet or Rosalind. And even during this work, at every possible opportunity the teacher should make reference to this or that famous performance in the past, show pictures of Booth and Sothern and Marlowe, keep in every possible way the stage side of the play before the pupils' minds. It is only by bringing out the dramatic element that the growing mind can grasp Shakespeare in his true significance and interest.

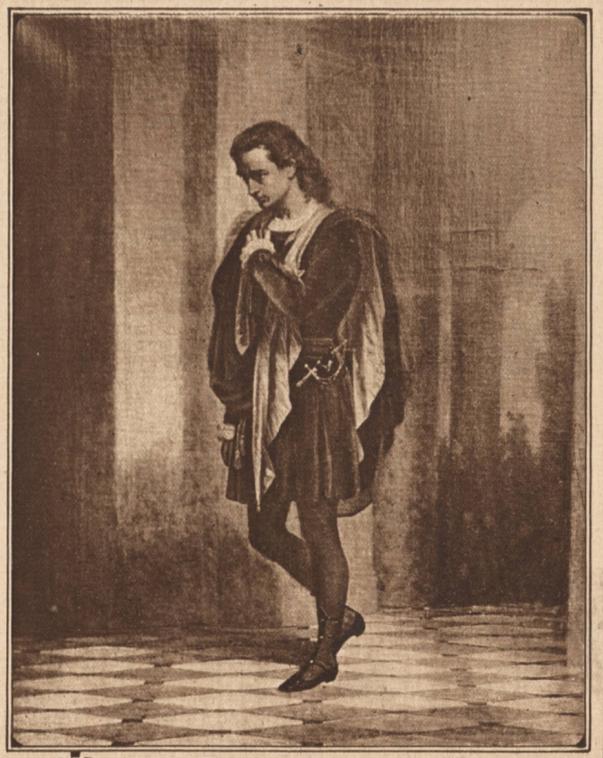
It is only by a practical demonstration of the platform stage that the school child can acquire the capacity for historic projection, the ability, that is, to view with comprehension in one century the works of a previous century, created for totally different conditions. And it is only by keeping Shakespeare a living, spoken thing, not a dry, printed text, that a love can be fostered for verbal beauty on the stage of the present, for the chiming of the spoken word, the strut and sweep of poetic passion.

By following some such method of teaching as this I think nearly as many plays can be got through with in a year as by the old methods, and, I am very sure, if only half as many are covered twice as much will actually be accomplished. I have certainly demonstrated to my own satisfaction, by a considerable series of experiments, not only that the average mixed class of small-town high school children can be made to enjoy Shakespeare by this method, but that they will thereafter voluntarily and delightedly come through snow and slush of an evening to read, in the same way, the plays of Sheridan, Goldsmith, Lady Gregory, even G. B. Shaw.

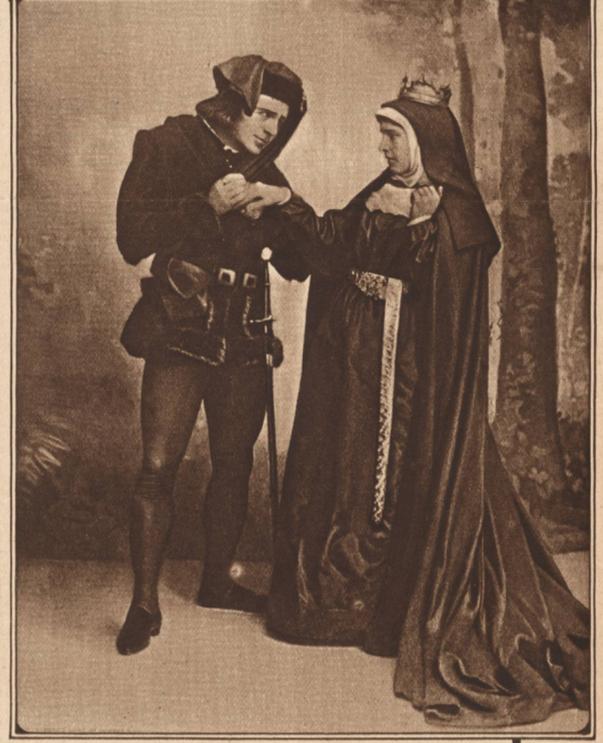
I have had a dozen boys and girls howling joyously over "You Never Can Tell" in my library, and I have the next week had them all around the piano singing "Patience" and "The Mikado." They didn't ask to "rag" the music, either! After all, that is a better gauge of education than a high percentage in the college entrance tests. We do not study to pass examinations, but to expand our capacities for useful living and rational enjoyment. Any pupil who gets a mark of 100 per cent. in Shakespeare, but thereafter hates the plays, has not "passed" brilliantly; he has dimly failed—or, rather, his teacher has.

Coincident with some such method as this for teaching Shakespeare in many cases might very well be an actual performance of one of his plays (in whole or in part) by the pupils. It is impossible to say how many amateur productions are made by public and private secondary schools in America during a year, but the total is undoubtedly up in the thousands. In a great many instances, the pupils are allowed to pick their own play without any helpful suggestions, and, naturally wanting something "snappy" or amusing, they pick some cheap farce and waste their time over the most dreiful rubbish. Quite aside from the fact that any self-respecting Principal ought to be ashamed to let his school be represented by anything short of the best standards, the school is losing thereby an excellent chance to combine its educational functions with the spontaneous impulses of the children. If they have been properly taught, the pupils themselves will know that Shakespeare wrote quite as jovial farces as anybody else, and that one of his plays offers them the fullest opportunities for "showing off" the capacities of everybody in the class. And to the teacher it means the culmination of her efforts to vitalize the text.

It is safe to say that a school performance of Shakespeare should be made either on a platform stage, as nearly



Edwin Booth as Hamlet
(From here to the unpublished painting by Pope in the Wendell Collection)



Richard Mansfield as Gloucester and Beatrice
Cameron as Lady Anne - Richard III
Act I, Scene II.

Elizabethan as the resources permit, or else out of doors. If the former method is chosen, both pupils and public should be impressed with the fact that the school is trying to do something historical, to show Shakespeare in an approximation of his original dress. It is perfectly proper for a school production to have a touch of the educational about it, especially as in that way the terrible obstacle of scenery is overcome!

The platform stage is easily made, requires no curtain, has the charm of novelty, and centres the attention on the spoken word. It can be appropriately dressed at the rear, also, with cloth hangings, rugs, tapestries, to relieve its bareness and give it color. The New Theatre's production of "A Winter's Tale" proved that.

So far as practicable, the costumes should be made by the children themselves, and at the least possible cost. It should be a matter of pride to make a pretty dress out of cheesecloth for 65 cents, rather than to present a sumptuous appearance in velvet and gold. Every possible phase of the school curriculum—drawing, music, sewing, manual training—should be applied to the preparation of the stage, the costumes, the play, not only to reduce expenses, but far more to connect the school work with reality, to correlate it, to give every pupil a useful part to play.

The same holds true, of course, for the out-of-door performance, which in many sections of the country is the more desirable. Not only is the out-of-door performance, under good conditions, apt to be more illusive, especially if given at night, but it has a peculiar beauty of its own, and it permits the utilization of more players and the arrangement of pretty dances.

But how is this co-operation between school and stage to come about? The reader asks. Especially how is it to come about in the small towns where there are no theatres?

Very often, of course, for the small towns, the thing is impossible, making the more need for such amateur productions as that in West Virginia, described above. But in the larger towns, and in the smaller places adjacent to them, a little co-operation between theatre managers and school authorities could in a surprisingly large number of cases bring about an opportunity for the high school pupils to see Shakespeare professionally performed. Not only are there several companies touring the country who are equipped to give Shakespeare out of doors, but anything like a concerted demand for Winter performances would keep these companies as permanent organizations during the year. Moreover, even today, though the average stock company has sunk to a rather low level of accomplishment, the right encouragement from the school and municipal authorities would find most of the Directors ready to respond with occasional matinees.

Certainly, nothing could be better for the theatre than the creation of a sentiment in the community that it is not only a luxury, a means of idle amusement, but also a factor in the educational life of the town, an adjunct of the schools. Let your rising generation of school children come in regard to the playhouse in their town as a fascinating part of their school study, and you have made vastly easier for the next generation the task which faces us—the task of freeing the American theatre from the bondage of Broadway, of revitalizing it and localizing it in each separate community. One of the ways to accomplish this end, and one of the surest ways, is to make the theatre contributory to our prized national institution, the public schools. The advantage will be mutual.

felt the inspiration of the new dramatic renaissance. The boys cut young firs on the mountain and made a stage in a corner of the school yard, screening out unsightly objects beyond and creating masked wings and entrances. The girls made all the costumes. Their natural love of dancing was utilized to the full. Everybody contributed something, even the grade children.

And on a June day all the population of the little town gathered to watch the play, seeing and hearing something different from anything the movies provide. The sixteenth century touched hands with the twentieth across the years in this mountain village, and the thrill of eternal loveliness awoke. What a splendid thing for a school to do! That is the real way to teach Shakespeare.

Alas! In the cultured New England village where I live, when the high school pupils want to raise some money they no longer even get up a farce or give a performance of "The District School." They merely sell tickets for a movie show and divide profits with the manager.

While the superior educational advantages of doing a thing yourself instead of having it done for you can never be overestimated, at the same time we should never lose sight of the stimulus of professional example and the standard such example sets. In the study of Shakespeare there is as yet almost no official recognition of the aid the professional theatre could, and should, give to the public schools. Some form of co-operation between the two should be brought about, and doubtless will be as time goes on and our theatre is better adapted to such service.

There is probably hardly a reader of this article who does not treasure among his most precious memories certain trips to the playhouse when he was of school age. In my own case, I know, the performances of Dickens's dramatizations by the old Boston Museum Stock Company had more to do with my development of a love for reading and appreciation of character portrayal than anything else. The other day a man told me of a boys' club he organized some years ago, outside of Boston. Miss Maude Adams sent him twenty seats to "Peter Pan," and he took the whole club. Ten years later, talking with those same boys, it was that trip to Boston to see "Peter Pan" which every one of them most vividly remembered and talked about. Moreover, many of them had been to see Miss Adams's revival of the play, and one and all were still her ardent champions. Just so those of us who saw Julia Marlowe's Juliet when we were schoolboys have never forgotten it, but treasure in our hearts a fragrant memory, like a precious standard of loveliness and poetry.