AND NOT PROPERLY PRESENTED, EVEN TODAY

The Star System, the Entr'acte Convention, the Attempt to Treat Poetry as Prose, All Stand in the Way

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THE situation with regard to Shakespeare on the modern stage is not easy to state or explain. The facts are confusing and often contradictory; opinions are many and divergent. Indeed, whenever any question connected with the poet-dramatist arises the enormous pressure of tradition and of convention makes it difficult to see the object in view as it is, while if there be clear seeing, it takes courage to tell the truth.

First of all we must discriminate between the English-speaking lands and others. It is notorious, for example, that Germany, that terra non grata at present, is far more appreciative of the great English poet than his own country. In a leading Berlin theatre last year an entire season was given over to nightly performances of the Shakespeare repertory, and with success not only artistic but financial. Such a thing is unknown on the stage which is native to the dramatist.

It is this rather humiliating contrast which led that arch-satirist, Bernard Shaw, to suggest the other day that the Shakespeare tercentenary celebration had better been left to the Germans. "After the waste of several years," says he, "in the attempt to interest our native culture in the foundation of a national theatre as a memorial to Shakespeare, with no result better worth mentioning than the purchase of a site by a cultivated German gentleman, and the entire refusal by our enormously rich representatives of British culture to contribute a single brick to the proposed edifice, we had better not make ourselves ridiculous by affecting an admiration for Shakespeare and his art that we do not feel." A hard saying, but containing, let it be confessed, something more than a kernel of truth.

Again, in a recent number of The Dramatic Mirror is to be found an editorial concerning the coming Shakespeare celebration the tone of which is distinctly elegiac. The writer looks fondly back upon a time when "there was a Shakespeare cult in America," mourns the passing of sundry great actors, among them Forrest, Cushman, Booth, Davenport, McCullough, and Mary Anderson, and is of the opinion that "art and commercialism do not go hand in hand," so that even capable survivors like Tyrone Powers, William H. Thompson, and a few others "are silenced by the conditions that surround the theatre." We are all familiar with the caustic views of Mr. William Winter when he is rendered vocal upon this theme.

And yet, on the other hand, Mr. Sothern, as his Vale before retiring from a profession he has long adorned, declared with emphasis in an interview that the people would respond to Shakespeare if great actors can be found to interpret him and if the city fathers in our municipalities will awake to the fact that at present the public is not afforded opportunity to see classic plays which, in this distinguished actor's opinion, they would welcome. "Our classic drama is classic," he said, "because it is entertaining." And again: "I can't imagine any better entertainment than Shakespeare."

This, it will be observed, puts the blame upon our mishandling of the amusement problem, and relieves the Stratford genius from the customary burden of proof: it contrasts vividly with the Broadway manager's frequent statement that Shakespeare spells ruin and is caviare to the general. And it is unquestionable truth that a player like Mr. Mantell, confessedly not of the highest rank as a Shakespeare interpreter, has for years given the Shakespeare dramas throughout the land with profit to his manager. The present writer well remembers when Frederick Warde came to a large Western city and offered a week of Shakespeare's plays in a house usually given over to popular melodrama; and with no change in the scale of charges crowded the house at every performance, so that extra seats were placed in the aisles and the city law broken to accommodate those who for 25 or 50 cents wished to hear "The Merchant" or "Hamlet" or "Richard III." Nor can a really distinguished exponent of the bard like Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson complain of want of patronage when he comes across the water to let us see the best living Hamlet who uses English speech. In short, and without other modern instances, he who would claim that the people *do* want Shakespeare, if they can get him under the right conditions, can make out a very pretty case. That to produce Shakespeare is a synonym of disaster is by no means proved—in spite of the popular impression to the contrary.

The question, therefore, sharpens down to this: How should the poet be presented for the best results of financial response and wide public acceptance, as well as best to please the honorable minority offended by any distortion or inexpertness in the attempt to do justice to the master dramatist under modern limitations and conventions?

We may move toward a reply by remarking that, so far as the general public is concerned, he should be produced prevailingly in those examples of his art which are really good acting plays; such dramas as "The Merchant of Venice," "Hamlet," "Othello," "Lear," "Midsummer Night's Dream," "As You Like It," and "Julius Caesar"; not a complete list, but illustrative: all of them pieces tried and true from the practical stage viewpoint. But in contrast, some of the plays are not good plays for acting purposes and their interest, so far as they possess any, is for the student, the specialist of Elizabethan forms, or for one whose aim is to trace the organic development of the playwright. The fact that such dramas contain glorious poetry, or that they include some of their creator's cherished characters, is aside from the consideration of their strict value.

Broadly speaking, people in a theatre, whether it be Shakespeare or another, want a play also: a skillfully growing story that culminates in climax and that contains suspense, situations, and character clash. Sometimes Shakespeare gives us all these things; but sometimes he does not. To call "Antony and Cleopatra" or "The Merry Wives of Windsor" good plays in this sense is confused thinking, or not to think at all. What you mean is, if you mean anything, that other non-dramatic virtues are in them; but this can be true, and the drama quite fail of play value. It is exactly as if, because "The Spoon River Anthology" is at times poetical or full of psychological vitality, the mistake is made of calling it a poem. Loose-knit, sprawling chronicle history and spectacle, like the two famous dramas mentioned, emphatically lack the strict denotements of real drama, if drama today be a distinct genre among the forms of literature. And the sooner we have the honesty and common sense to acknowledge it and cease from blaming the general public for being bored when it is asked to witness such things for the sake of brightening now and then at the entrance of Falstaff or thrilling to the music of Antony's love words, the better for the genuine appreciation of Shakespeare and dramatic literature as a whole.

When "Antony and Cleopatra" was produced at The New Theatre in New York to inaugurate that well-intentioned but ill-fated playhouse, the acoustics of which were found to be so poor that a famous actor, who is also a wit, was heard to remark between the acts: "What a charming theatre to have a bad play in; you can't hear it." And there was a two-edged truth in the epigram.

Next, and obviously, the really fine acting plays of Shakespeare must be adequately played. This is not to be taken to mean that some noteworthy star should be so great an attraction as to blind the public to the fact that "the play's the thing." In truth, this overemphasis upon individuality in presenting the dramatist has checked genuine Shakespeare culture in America, even as it has checked dramatic art, by and large. And I say this not for a moment overlooking the natural delight in witnessing a superb piece of characterization at the hands of a Booth, a Salvini, a Jefferson, a Mansfield, or a Forbes-Robertson. But the tendency has been to give a lopsided rendering of the play as a whole because of this deification of personality. They order this matter better abroad, where in several lands, at the best theatres, ensemble effects are striven for rather than the exploitation of a name. With us the actors who surround a star are sometimes excellent, more often mediocre, or worse; practically never all that they should be. The false conductment of our whole theatre system is responsible for this, and the result is our audiences are not yet trained to accept gladly a good, all-round performance where no one member of the cast is of disproportionate attainment. The reception awarded the English company known as The Benson Players a few years ago is eloquent attestation to the statement.

Then, too, there is some difficulty in finding actors today in this country who are trained in the tradition of heroic and romantic work who can speak the lines of poetry trippingly on the tongue. It is often said that the younger generation of players is even incapable of feeling and hence of imparting the qualities of imagination and music which inhere in Shakespeare's blank verse. I deem this too pessimistic an attitude and prefer to believe that there are still numerous actors with sympathy in plenty for such work, who would gladly prepare for it, if the demand justified such preparation. The player must live, incidentally, and so is forced to train himself especially in the current realistic manner of portraying human life in the theatre, to the comparative neglect of the resonant heroics of the elder drama.

Closely connected with the matter of adequate acting is the production itself; the stage setting and adaptation of the archaic Elizabethan form to modern requirements. Ideally a Shakespeare play should be presented intact as a continuous performance. But because of our modern convention of the entr'acte this would extend the playing time beyond the desired limits. Hence, all sorts of garbled versions, or at the best a judicious cutting of the original text. By no means is every such editing of the play to be condemned under the present necessity. The late Edwin Booth cut something like a thousand lines out of his stage version of "Hamlet"; yet he was a reverential student of the dramatist he interpreted so wondrous well.

But it is true that, largely through the vicious star system, Shakespeare is frequently so changed, not to say mangled, as to obscure his meaning. To illustrate: Two players, among the most distinguished of our time, end "Romeo and Juliet" with the deaths of the star-crossed lovers at the mouth of the tomb. Yet to do this is surely to lose a certain intention of the dramatist; for the wistful, elegiac sadness of the scene is graduated to another and welcome key by the succeeding scene wherein we are comforted by the consoling thought that it is only over the dead bodies of the lovers that the estranged houses can be reconciled. In other words, a poignant, particular sorrow is so related to outside life as to give tragedy a significance beyond itself, and so to mitigate it; it becomes more than sorrow for sorrow's sake. This is Shakespeare's way of artistic reconcilement, a sort of poetic justice. Surely, it is wrong to blur his meaning by the omission.

And this play stands for other examples of the same abuse. Either, then, the editing hand must be trusted with the full implications of the poet, or else, and better, the play must be given in its integrity, and the presentation so arranged as to eliminate the waits between the acts. And this last can be accomplished when we are ready to realize that all concerned would be benefited by seeing a drama played without the stupid intervals of supposed "rest"; and when we cease from the idea that scenery is of first importance and the play secondary. For it is this overrating of scenery which has led to the modern habit of waits necessitated by the shifting of elaborate sets.

The recent tendency to return to a more seemly simplicity and to the assumption that the spectator's imagination will help to stage a play, if only it be trusted, is a promising one, with this in mind. The work of Ben Greet and the Coburns in aiding audiences to grasp this fact by their return to something of the Elizabethan manner, whether historically accurate or not, is welcome for this reason; and the more careful revivals of a man in England like William Poel, who has been heard as a lecturer in the United States, are of much value to disseminate the doctrine. The stylized productions of Mr. Granville Barker on both sides the water are again of significance in so far as they strive to release modern producers from a slavish obeyance to supposed latter-day demands of staging and envisaging Shakespeare. For let it be remembered as of fundamental importance that this poet-playwright is poetical and romantic and heroic, or he is nothing.

All attempts to subject him to the stern realistic requirements of our day, to make blank verse sound as much as possible like prose, and to refuse to the characters that atmosphere of poetic illusion in which they move and breathe and have their imaginative being are false and foredoomed to fail. We must never tire of reiterating that Shakespeare's folk wear the buskin and not the modish shoes of commerce and utility. And the audiences, forsooth, must do their part as well; entering with the actors and producers into a conspiracy of poetry, not forgetting that larger law of the stage enunciated by Sarcey that in the theatre all is illusion. The audience must agree to fall for two hours or thereabout into a mood which is sympathetic when a young Venetian gentleman, being hard up and loving a girl down country, tries to borrow money from an older friend to enable him to compete in clothes and gifts with other suitors for her hand; and tells us about it in such measures of golden verse that he actually seems a romantic figure. Bassanio in "The Merchant of Venice," when he pleads for a loan from Antonio, is only romantic because the play is in the key of romantic poetry; and he partakes of the glorification of the poet's touch.

It is my firm conviction that school and college will in the future aid more and more in the preparation for this honest rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Our educational institutions, somewhat tardily, have waked up to the realization that education has obligations in the direction of the theatre, with Shakespeare central in it; that a play is not a thing alone to be dissected (and killed) in the classroom, but a vital, vibrating work of art, at home in the playhouse and nowhere else. Certainly, earnest and sympathetic attempts to play the master playwright, with due regard to his meaning and with unobtrusive insistence upon the main business of poetry, are increasingly common throughout educational circles. An organization like the Drama League of America is exercising considerable influence in a like direction; the work of Mrs. Emma Sheridan Frye in New York in preparing versions of the plays so that they may be read by children as part of the schoolroom or home activity is but one of various worthy efforts of the kind.

To make one more point: It is not fair to accuse the general public of lethargy toward Shakespeare until we have tested the matter by offering him at a modest, democratic price. The only aspect of the theatre business which is democratic in this aspect is the moving-picture industry. The difficulties of bringing about this consummation devoutly to be wished for are many. It may be, nevertheless, that with more and more attention to an even excellence of performance and less dominance of the highly paid star, together with comparatively inexpensive scenery which yet is adequate for an atmospheric reproduction of the mood properly evoked by the play, (and this is scenery's prime affair,) and with such improved theatre architecture that a dollar charge throughout a house where the seats are all good will aggregate as much as the total intake of a house where the scale runs from $2 to 25 cents, it may be, I say, that when these reforms have come we shall find it entirely feasible to furnish the public with a democratic art at a democratic price. In fact, the opinion may be ventured that when those who conduct our playhouses have it as aim, ambition, and ideal to serve the people's interest in the broadest sense, (and discover in the process that they are also serving their own,) this problem of bringing the best theatre wares to the widest market at a price within the reach not of the few but the many will have been triumphantly solved.

To sum it all up, the best plays of Shakespeare (frankly conceding that there is a "best" and "worst" with him, as with all writers) so produced in the particulars of stage setting, interpretation, integrity of text, and division of scenes as to show the drama in their true light, and offered at a price enabling the student, the appreciator of poetry, and the lover of drama with a slim purse to attend such performances, may reasonably hope for remunerative patronage in the United States.

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"The work of Ben Greet and the Coburns – by their return to something of the Elizabethan manner"– Dr. Burton. ~ ~ The Greet players in As You Like It. Robert Loraine as Orlando, Edith Wynne Matthison as Rosalind, Charles Rann Kennedy as Oliver, Emily Taylor as Celia. Photo by Byron Co.

Ben Greet as Jaques.
I met a fool i'th' forest, A motley fool; a miserable world! Photo by Byron Co.

An early open-air performance in America (at Castle Point, in 1890). Agnes Booth as Audrey, Frederick Bond as Touchstone. Photo by Byron Co.

The earliest open-air production of As You Like It given in England, 1884. Lady Archibald Campbell as Orlando; Eleanor Calhoun (now Princess Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich) as Rosalind.
From the Princess's book, "Pleasures and Palaces," Century Co.