

CHARACTER OF "HAMLET."

On Friday night the character of "Hamlet" was selected. The Professor introduced the subject by the observation that many of the more obvious qualities were revealed by contrast with the dramatis personae, especially the King, Queen, Horatio, and Fortinbras. There were conflicting opinions concerning Hamlet's character. Carl Rohrbach found the explanation in the lines after his death—"Bear Hamlet like a soldier (not as a soldier) to the stage; for had he been placed there, had Fate called him to the stage instead of the throne he would have proved most royally." To Rohrbach therefore Hamlet was an actor who would have done well on the stage; in action he was a failure. To people of that way of thinking he was "a sort of German half-professor, all tongue and no hand, for ever cackling and hatching nothing, like a dog wagging his tail at the sound of his own barking." The best answer was that the world would not permanently interest itself in such a character. Carl Werder took the opposite view, and as that critic held second place among interpreters of Hamlet's character they must take him seriously. Werder would have them remember the extraordinary difficulty of the task. "Hamlet's aim is not the crown, nor is it his first duty to kill, but his task is justly to punish the murderer of his father, unassailable as that murder is in the eyes of the world, and to satisfy the Danes of the righteousness of this procedure." The tragic fault was to be found in rashness rather than excess of meditation. There was nothing in the play to lead them to believe that Hamlet in killing Polonius wanted anything but personal revenge. Goethe had said:—"Here is an oak tree, planted in a costly vase, which should have received into its bosom only lovely flowers; the roots spread out, the vase is shivered to pieces." Goethe might have said that Hamlet was a Prince of noble nature, who by reason of his grace and culture could have been an ornament to the society in which he lived and moved. But a terrible task was imposed upon him, and the effort to perform it shattered his nerves and ultimately destroyed him. Hamlet was a "splendid failure," and his failure was inaction. But Hamlet was not incapable of action. He was stirred by impulse, and was clever at scheming and counter-scheming. He had not the action of the statesman—the man who conceived a policy and carried it through to a finish. Hamlet failed in the highest form of action, which was based upon the union of intelligence and will. The point was more definitely put in the great soliloquy:—

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

It was important to note that conscience meant speculation, "casting about in one's mind, and when he ought to proceed to action he goes on thinking." Touching the emotional nature of Hamlet, the speaker said he had a profound moral sense. He idealized his father's virtues, brooded over his mother's over-hasty marriage, and the sense of duty remained to the end. Hamlet, too, had aesthetic feeling, although the shocks at Court might have temporarily paralysed it. His tenderness, however, had been exaggerated. His language was that of a disappointed idealist. Hamlet might have loved Ophelia in early years, but the Hamlet of the play did not. He had no more than an aesthetic appreciation for her beauty. His feelings were not under control; he was passions slave, and his words lacked the force of genuine love. Hamlet practically confessed the weakness of his emotion to Horatio:—

And blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart
As I do thee.

Hamlet's character had to be judged in its completeness. He suffered from melancholia—was a mass of nerves. He had not the Greek virtue of temperance. There was want of self-control, of sustained energy; there was something wrong at the heart of the man's nature. Hamlet was in many respects noble, but he lacked force in the core of his being. Strong faith was missing, and the fault was discovered when it was too late:—

Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown;
Our thoughts are ours; their ends none of our own.

TEACHING OF "HAMLET."

On Saturday night the teaching and character of "Hamlet" were combined in a beautifully lucid address. It was a model of intellectual reasoning and fine penetrative study. Professor Henderson began by saying that in the drama every character must speak for himself or herself. Nothing should be uttered by any of them except that which served to elucidate. The author must not obtrude himself, the personae must stand on their own feet. How then could they speak of the teaching of "Hamlet?" The answer was that the lyrical poet taught directly, the dramatic poet indirectly. When they spoke of the teaching of "Hamlet," they did not refer to what was said by this character or that, but to the scheme of thought on which the play was founded. In every Shakspearean drama there was as Goethe had said, one ruling idea, and in "Hamlet" it was, if their interpretation be correct, the necessity in human nature for preserving a balance between inward contemplation and impression to outward things. Hamlet, by "thinking too precisely on the event," brought direful consequences, not only to himself, but to those associated with him. It was to that tragic quality that Shakspeare specially directed attention. The intimate connection between balance or equipoise and health or sanity has been carefully elucidated by some of the greatest thinkers of the eighteenth century. It was the idea underlying Goldsmith's poem, "The Traveller," which was really a criticism on the state of society in European countries. He tried to show there how one virtue or quality being developed at the expense of others led inevitably to degeneration. So in his political philosophy, Burke was dominated by the same fundamental consideration. Introspection, especially in the form of melancholy brooding, was dangerous. Indulged to excess it was bound to induce a state of inward strain. The healing power which John Stewart Mill and Matthew Arnold and a thousand others found in Wordsworth was not for Hamlet. He had lost all interest in Nature. There was no appeal from the outward world sufficiently strong to take him outside himself. The result was that he became the creature of meditation, and lost the natural power of action. He knew he was no statesman, and he told them so with a cry of despair.

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

There were some natures which seemed to find satisfaction and content in the love of contemplation for its own sake. They were content to find out the truth and feel but little impulse to realize it in act. There were others who spent little time in thought and were prone to act on the spur of the moment. They were not well balanced natures. Their leaning side was indiscretion and rashness. With them action might easily outpace reason. Between the two extremes were the true men of action—those who made up their minds after due deliberation and proceeded to put it into effect. Hamlet would act if they did not give him time to think; if they did, then thinking, speculation, and introspection

carried him away. Hamlet needed force in the core of his breeding. That force was within him by nature. He made it weaker by introspection. Instead of strengthening it by exercise, by practice, he neglected it and passed off into morbid speculation. Man had become a quintessence of dust, and the world a "foul and pestilential congregation of vapors." If that force had been strong enough Hamlet would have been able to control his thought or to have kept it if you won't do it. There was no second order of the motion. The clerk said within bounds. He could not, and hence the tragedy. This was the point, Hamlet was an idealist, but he was not a strenuous idealist. He could see the difference between beauty and ugliness, but he had too much of that spirit which impelled a man to transform one into the other. There was a difference between the idealism of the merely contemplative nature and the strenuous idealism of the man who was ever striving to lift himself above himself, and transform evil into good. The difference was only bridged by that force which Hamlet lacked. Hamlet's nature was noble and refined, and in many respects great, but he failed of the highest. In his "Happy Warrior" Wordsworth speaks of that quality which was human nature's highest dower, the quality by which we bore a disaster of its evil and receive the good; by which we turn darkness into light, and evil into good. It was transformation and transmutation. And this was the lesson which Great Nature taught them if they would only take the trouble to observe. They could see it when the rainbows flashed from the broken and whirling spray dashed up from the rocks. They could see it when the little plant pushes its way through the dark and sometimes loathsome soil till it became a flower of loveliest hues. Nay, the more loathsome and repulsive the soil the brighter and more gorgeous, sometimes, the flower that bloomed. And they saw it, too, in history. The Puritans were persecuted for their religious convictions; out of that suffering came one of the most precious possessions of the British people—liberty of conscience. Some of them were driven into exile because they would not deny their convictions; they settled in America, and out of that wandering arose a mighty nation—the United States. The fate of Ophelia, a beautiful, artless, and innocent girl, who suffered so nobly, of Cordelia and Desdemona, made the conclusion obvious that tragedies might arise involving the direst consequences to those who had erred but little, and in the process of their development innocent beings might suffer horrible torments. King Claudius, a villain and a murderer, got a crown and the woman he loved. What they had to recognise was that in many, and perhaps most, of the world's tragedies, and of Shakspearean tragedies, "the weight of the tragic fault does not necessarily depend upon the magnitude of the moral transgression." Such was the fate of men and women in Shakspeare's little world. Was that little world a reflex of the bigger world of actual experience? Yes, and few who had studied the lives of Christ and Socrates would care to deny it. It was the interesting question whether there was something radically wrong with the moral system on which the world was based. Let them consider what would happen if the alternative system prevailed. Supposing that instead of innocent suffering in the world as they knew it, there was a system by which every good action would get an immediate reward. How would they like to live in such a world as that? How would they like to feel, for instance that when a friend did them a kindness he did so knowing he would profit by it? How would they like to feel that when their mother lavished kindness upon them their love was supplemented by the conviction that she would surely profit by it? No. Under such a system life would be reduced to the level of a busi-