

HOME NEW BOOKS.

Swainburne's Study of Shakespeare.

Since Victor Hugo's monograph the most curious and interesting piece of Shakespearean commentary comes to us from the author of "Erechthius" and "Chastolouf." Of late years, the more acute and authoritative reviewers of Shakespeare's text have adopted a new method framed on a close analysis of the changes in rhythm and rhyme which are alleged to mark successive stages of the poet's growth in technical felicity. Inasmuch as no living master of English verse has shown a more complete mastery of the mechanism and melody as has Mr. Swainburne, we should naturally listen with eagerness and respect to his judgment on the new processes and results of Shakespearean criticism. Other motives, too, besides a sense of the author's peculiar fitness for the task, attract us to the volume entitled "A Study of Shakespeare" by ALONZO CHARLES SWAINBURNE (Worthington) alike by their merits and their defects, the prose writings of Mr. Swainburne are calculated to hold the ear and fix the fancy of the most listless reader. There is in them the same grasp on the reader's attention, the same assurance of adjective and nice delineation of the finer shades of meaning which delight us in his verse, while, on the other hand, the same temperance of thought which disdains some of his minor lyrics here finds vent in frantic denunciations of the King in Hamlet. Mr. Swainburne's parables may be likened to the spasms of a Delphic priestess, amid whose ravings now and then the heedful ear detects a sentence of large import. At the worst, it may be said of this remarkable volume that even those who were wont to look upon Swainburne, just as Victor Hugo's monograph was less an exposition of his subject than a revelation of himself.

Mr. Swainburne wastes no time on the verbal emendations of Steevens and his school, or on the philippic method of the German and other German critics. He sees far more significance in the new method of interpretation founded on the obvious principle that a singer must be tested by his song—that as the technical work of a painter appeals to the eye, so the technical work of a poet appeals to the ear. The inference, however, from Mr. Swainburne's further statement is, that this method is only applicable by one who is himself a first-rate artist. Of course an affirmation which would deny the competence of critics like Winkelmann and Lessing cannot be accepted for a moment; but the delight which we derive from the King in Victor Hugo and himself exclusive authority in the field of Shakespearean comment is characteristic of this whole volume. It is acknowledged by the author that no line of study can be more useful to a student of Shakespeare than the tracing of his intellectual growth by the development through various moods and phases of his metres. We do not need to be told that such an inquiry into the music of verse cannot be fruitfully prosecuted by those whose ears are exceptionally dull or deplorably long—that in the case of a deaf student no proficiency in grammar and arithmetic would be of any avail, and no scheme of broadly would be of the least avail. Properly understood, however, what is called the metrical test is probably the surest key to one side of Shakespeare's secret, and we should have been glad to see such an expert in numbers as Mr. Swainburne undertake its application. But the title inclines to the other side. Instead of more brilliant variations on the common-place thought that the inner and outer qualities of a poet's work are, of their very nature, indivisible, and that the source of melody cannot be seized by the ingenious device of counting syllables and rhyming feet, it is true enough that the intricate and delicate subtleties of movement and association, which contribute so much to the charm of Mr. Swainburne's lyrics, form only the husk or shell of the artist's work, but it is equally self-evident that without a certain amount of technical adjustments and complexities we should often fail to appreciate, or even to apprehend, the gist, word, and difficulty of his achievement. In a word, we did not expect from the author of this volume a bald list of the double or single, masculine or feminine terminations discovered by given amount of mechanical process. We did look, however, for the guidance which can be given by no metronome or color-glass—for the suggestion which might have helped us to discern the cause and the effect of every choice or change of rhythm and to comprehend the reason and result of every shade and tone which composes and completes the graduated scale of harmonies. This is the kind of criticism which Mr. Swainburne assures us is most authentic and most fruitful; but after raising our hopes and formulating his programme he gives us nothing of the kind. From the first to the last of the book before us there is not a line of metrical analysis, of that technical exposition which, in the author's hands, might have had rich results. We are merely treated to a series of dilettante pronouncements on the judgments based on general impressions and on individual taste. Inasmuch, however, as the individual taste of Mr. Swainburne, these occasional utterances will be heard with attention, and not infrequently with profit. The book, as we hinted at the outset, adds really nothing to our knowledge of Shakespeare. It is a volume which may be termed the "Science of Metrical Exegesis," but its disclosure of personal opinions, sympathies, and prejudices will be scanned with the relish provoked by autobiographies by those who recognize in Mr. Swainburne the foremost of living English poets.

style, in which the typical plays of his second period are written, would be, were imitation practicable, the most absolute pattern that could be set for any man. This is not to say, however, that the author of "Erechthius" and "Chastolouf" has adopted a new method framed on a close analysis of the changes in rhythm and rhyme which are alleged to mark successive stages of the poet's growth in technical felicity. Inasmuch as no living master of English verse has shown a more complete mastery of the mechanism and melody as has Mr. Swainburne, we should naturally listen with eagerness and respect to his judgment on the new processes and results of Shakespearean criticism. Other motives, too, besides a sense of the author's peculiar fitness for the task, attract us to the volume entitled "A Study of Shakespeare" by ALONZO CHARLES SWAINBURNE (Worthington) alike by their merits and their defects, the prose writings of Mr. Swainburne are calculated to hold the ear and fix the fancy of the most listless reader. There is in them the same grasp on the reader's attention, the same assurance of adjective and nice delineation of the finer shades of meaning which delight us in his verse, while, on the other hand, the same temperance of thought which disdains some of his minor lyrics here finds vent in frantic denunciations of the King in Hamlet. Mr. Swainburne's parables may be likened to the spasms of a Delphic priestess, amid whose ravings now and then the heedful ear detects a sentence of large import. At the worst, it may be said of this remarkable volume that even those who were wont to look upon Swainburne, just as Victor Hugo's monograph was less an exposition of his subject than a revelation of himself.

Mr. Swainburne discusses at some length what he terms an indomitable and irradicable fallacy of Shakespearean criticism, viz. the tendency to find a keynote of Hamlet's character in the quality of his speech. He thinks the compulsory expedition to England, and Hamlet's exhibition of hot-headed, personal intemperance in the ensuing sea fight, serve no purpose whatever in the play but that of demonstrating the instant and almost unobtrusive manner in which Hamlet's character is in time of practical need. To Mr. Swainburne it is plain that the signal characteristic of Hamlet's nature was of no meagre importation, or any form of moral infamy, but rather the strong conflict of conflicting forces. It is true enough that during four acts Hamlet does not utter a word which is not a direct and unqualified action against his uncle; but this Mr. Swainburne would ascribe to the fact that Hamlet had "somehow" more of mind than another man to make up, and might properly want somewhat more time to do it. This, of course, is a very different view from Goethe's, who explained Hamlet's hesitation by an innate inadequacy to his task and an unchangeable weakness of the will; and also from Victor Hugo's, who referred to an irresolvable propensity to nebulous intellectual refinement. Mr. Swainburne likewise seems of his strongest conviction that Hamlet's presentation quality is given on the stage to the bluff, soldierly, trustworthy figure of honest Iago. It is pitiful, he says, to see that most largely disguised, and therefore most mortally effective of evil doers, moulded by sly actors after a member of the aristocracy, and to see that the most impossible actors to understand that Iago is not a would-be detective, an aspirant for the honors of a Volpone—that he is no less than Lepidus, or than Anthony's horse "A tried and valiant soldier." On the whole, however, Mr. Swainburne is probably right. The two deepest and subtlest of all Shakespeare's intellectual studies in good and evil should be the most painfully misused and misunderstood alike by his commentators and his followers of the stage. It is certainly undeniable that no third figure of Shakespearean criticism has ever been on the stage as consistently misconceived and misrepresented as Hamlet and Iago.

"that spirits of another sort may remember that to their own innocent, infantine perceptions, the first obscure, electric revelation of what Blake calls the 'Eternal Female,' was given through a blind, wondering thrill of childish rapture by a lightning on the baby dawn of their senses and their soul from the sunrise of Shakespeare's Cleopatra." He goes on to show how the father of Rosalind, of Cordelia, of the possessive of decomposition to Europe, is by the natives deemed of great importance, and that this is of a most agreeable odor to be inferred from the extended area over which its use prevails. The chemistry of the betel nut, however, is quite obscure. It is very astringent, and abounds in a peculiar species of tannin, which is extracted in India by boiling the nut in water, and is brought to England under the name of catechu. In the moist, relaxing climates of the East, this strongly astringent substance acts beneficially on the system, and it should properly be ascribed the good effects experienced by a French traveler who preserved his health, during a long and difficult voyage, by the continual use of betel with his companions, who did not use it, died mostly of dysentery. But the perfectly understood action of astringents does not account for the astringency caused by the betel nut in those who chew it for the purpose of curing the gums, or for the astringency in all. These properties seem to imply the presence in the nut of some narcotic ingredient which is as yet unknown. From the fact of no such principle having thus far been detected, some writers would attribute the intoxicating influence of the betel nut altogether to the tannin, and we know that other varieties of pepper, when used alone, possess narcotic properties. In the absence, however, of narcotic constituents, whose joint action it is difficult to ascribe the narcotic effects of betel chewing to the joint influence of the constituents of both nut and leaf, and of the chemical action of the quicklime used along with them, and of the saliva upon both. We may note here that throughout southern India and throughout the East, the betel nut is used, and the tea leaf of China is used, a little bit of land usually grows the leaves of the nut, or betel pepper, for his own consumption; and the plant may often be seen clinging round the stems of the shapely betel palms which overshadow their dwellings. It is computed that the consumption of the betel nut in India is about five hundred million pounds weight every year. Only tobacco, among the narcotics in common use, is consumed in larger quantity than this. In India, indeed, where, on an average, not more than twelve cents a head is the price of the betel nut, the plant forms the second great necessary of common life.

Another variety of pepperwort, known as the arec, or long pepper, is extensively used among the South Sea Islanders both as a medicine and as an intoxicating draught. The plant has a woody, aromatic stalk, which, when reduced to powder, and mixed with water, forms an intoxicating beverage. It unquestionably possesses a narcotic influence, which is probably exerted also by the leaves when chewed, as they often are, along with the betel nut instead of the betel pepper. The half-woody species of pepperwort which have been mentioned are not the same as the aromatic oil allied to turpentine, and two active bases or alkaloids. All the three constituents mentioned exercise a beneficial action in cases of intermittent fever, and to this property we are familiar with the betel nut and the arec, which are probably safe in referring a portion at least of the narcotic effects of the betel nut to the arec, while in betel chewing the astringent property of the nut would check the tendency to internal relaxation, the fever-chasing principles of the pepper leaf preserve the health and the steaming vapors which the hot sun draws from the swamps and jungles and irrigated rice fields.

We are familiar with the beverage made from the cocoa bean; but so far as we know, the leaves of a very different shrub or plant, the Peruvian coca, have never been imported into this country as an article of commerce, although some of the most valuable observations, such as those of Prof. Von Tschudi and Schubert, have affirmed that the coca leaf might be usefully introduced in Europe. The coca plant, which still grows wild on the eastern slope of the Andes, in Bolivia, and Peru, at an elevation of from eight to ten thousand feet, has the black thorn in its small white flowers and thick green leaves. It has been cultivated, however, for a great many centuries, and when the Spanish conquerors overcame the Incas of Cuzco, they found extensive plantations of the herb. It is the dried, powdered leaves of the coca plant, which form the basis of the Peruvian commerce, and which in Lima constituted the usual money or medium of exchange in Peru. The taste of these leaves is not unpleasant; it is slightly bitter and aromatic, and recalls that of green tea of inferior quality. The leaves are dried, and then the aromatic oil is sprinkled with quinine and agave is chewed with the leaves. In the short interval of indulgence in this narcotic, which is invariably conceded to the Indian laborer three times a day, a few leaves are rolled into a ball or quid, and a little powdered lime or alkaline substance is added to the quid. The quid is then rolled up in a small piece of animal skin, and is dipped into his lip flask. The coca leaf acts differently according to the mode of use. When infused and drunk like tea, it produces a gentle excitement, followed by wakefulness, and if taken strong, retards the approach of sleep, and induces a nervous, but healthful, sleep in climbing hills. It is seldom employed in this way, however, but is commonly chewed, as we have said, in the form of a quid, which is turned over and over in the mouth, as is done with tobacco. Taken in this form, it produces a more powerful and prolonged effect, but also differs in character, because the continued influence of the saliva, and of the time or action of the quid, and the time of extraction from the leaf certain constituents which water alone does not dissolve. In the eastern part of the Andes, the coca is used somewhat differently. The betel nut is dried, and a little powdered lime or alkaline substance is added to the quid. The quid is then rolled up in a small piece of animal skin, and is dipped into his lip flask. The coca leaf acts differently according to the mode of use. When infused and drunk like tea, it produces a gentle excitement, followed by wakefulness, and if taken strong, retards the approach of sleep, and induces a nervous, but healthful, sleep in climbing hills. 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