THE WORSHIP OF SHAKSPERE.

A FEW years ago an enthusiastic admirer of Shakspere, a fine critic of the plays, an admirable writer, in a lecture on "Antony and Cleopatra," remarking on the death of one of the dramatic characters of Shakspere, who was described as "turning his face to the wall," said, sinking his voice to a reverential whisper: "How did the poet know that? Plutarch does not mention the circumstance; none of the old biographies contains it; Shakspere knew it by divination." The speaker evidently regarded Shakspere as a prodigy of discernment, a prophet and seer, who could look into the deepest recesses of human character and motive; a profound philosopher; a psychologist, to whose all-seeing eye the secret of every heart was disclosed; an intuitive soul; one who could foresee all the contingencies of emotion, and trace to their predetermined results the issues of feeling; a king of spiritual phenomena, whom the highest vision only was adequate fully to understand, and whom none who saw with conventional judgment could understand in any measure; one, therefore, whom the earlier critics misapprehended, and later mastery, with finer discernment, first appreciated; a miraculous, universal, creative man, prodigious, manifold, a paragon of humanity, if indeed he might be called human in any accepted sense of the word. That he was no saint simply proves how far he stood above every kind of technical excellence, surveying like a god all forms of accredited virtue, and from the serene heights of intelligence looking down on the distinctions of the ordinary moral sense. This is the tone of the commanding criticism of our day. Shakspere's brain is presumed to have teemed with thoughts of life and death, of providence and destiny. The book of human existence is supposed to have lain open before him, and our attitude must be simply that of adoring humility. The deepest minds can only partly comprehend his almost divine wisdom; the profoundest spirits can but drop their plummets into this bottomless abyss.

Whoever would get the opposite theory of Shakspere should read M. Taine's chapter in the "History of English Literature." The acute Frenchman gives the poet no credit for superior elevation of mind, but rather ranks him with inordinately passionate natures, below humanity oftener than above it, of infinite variety, but of limited insight, grotesque, excessive, fantastical, heated to inflammation by overwrought fancy, and therefore distorted. "Shakspere spreads metaphors profusely over all he writes." "Metaphor is not his whim, but the form of his thought." "The metaphors are all exaggerated." "His master faculty is an impassioned imagination freed from the fetters of reason and morality." "He does not dream of ennobling but of copying human life." "He accepts nature as a whole, and finds it beautiful." "If Shakspere had framed a psychology, he would have said with Esquirol: 'Man is a nervous machine governed by a mood, essentially unreasoning, a mixture of animal and poet, having no rapture but mind, and led at random by the most determinate and complex circumstances to pain, crime, madness, and death.'" "He had a sympathetic genius." "The most creative that ever engaged in the exact copy of the details of actual existence." "A spirit wide enough to embrace at the same time the two extremes of things." "Equally master of the sublime and the groveling." "All-powerful, excessive." The "Venus and Adonis" M. Taine appears to regard as being Shakspere's most characteristic performance outside of the plays. M. Taine, it may be observed, fits Shakspere into a line of development, as a naturalist might a plant, and has no faith in any theory of idealism that demands abnormal growths of mind. He therefore is indisposed to allow faculties in his subject which do not properly belong to his circumstances. In other words, the poet is a creature of his age, and may not in any important particular transcend it. A poet cannot, strictly speaking, be universal either in his accomplishments or his aims. He is tethered to his generation, and cannot surpass his contemporaries in the substantial qualities of thought.

In curious accord with this estimate of M. Taine, though from a radically different point of view, was the theory proposed by Jones Very nearly fifty years ago. Very was a spiritualist of an extreme type, a believer in the soul's immediate intercourse with God, a Christian who was convinced of the reality of a supersensuous experience through communion with Christ, a friend of Emerson in the early flush of the transcendental period. He wrote an essay on Shakspere which was printed in a little volume published in 1839, under Emerson's auspices, now out of print and rarely found. The papers are not contained in the recent edition of Very's pieces, which embraces poetical works only. The essay on Shakspere is remarkable for clearness as well as for maturity of conception. The tone is thoughtful; the spirit is pure and sweet. There is not a sentence, not a word, that could give offense to any adoring disciple of the English bard. The effort is simply to get at the soul of the poet. "Shakspere," says the critic, "only elicits our wonder." At the same time the claim to extraordinary insight into spiritual realities is denied. Shakspere was a child of nature, spontaneous and impulsive as a child. He acted on instinct, had no egotism, was full of life. The key to his works is the desire for action. "For him everything lives and moves." He is unconscious, impersonal, "not so much a man as a natural phenomenon." Natural existence was his permanent domain; here he was supreme, unlimited in range, inexhaustible in detail. His fancy was exuberant, and disported itself among phenomena with the playful energy of creative power. His mind was unceasing in its activity; every kind of intellectual production was absorbing to him; every sort of intellectual display interested him. He was not endowed with definite will or purpose so much as with overflowing, resistless force. He had no moral enthusiasm, no moral emotion. Alike to him were high things and low, good things and evil. He was neither religious nor irreligious, neither Christian nor unchristian. He was of no sect in belief, of no school in philosophy. He was not Catholic; he was not Protestant. He was neither realist nor idealist. He was a marvelous creature, but not a divine creator; generate, but not regenerate; instinctive, but not inspired; gifted with spontaneity, but not serene as under law. Such is the notion conveyed by Very. On another occasion, reported by Mr. Andrews in his introductory memoir to the "Poems by Jones Very," while fullest acknowledgment is made of Shakspere's genius, a distinction is drawn between genius and "wisdom." The question, it is suggested, is not one of power, but one concerning the source of power, whether celestial or terrestrial. It is aside from the matter in hand to speak of beauty, for there are kinds of beauty. The verses are sweet until a sweeter is discovered. In the essay Very quotes Wordsworth's line in the "Ode to Duty," in which the poet speaks of those

"Who do God's will and know it not,"

as describing a class to which Shakspere does not belong, as suggesting a species of moral instinct whereof he knew nothing, and with which he could not be in sympathy.

From this passionate feeling of life results the abhorrence of death as the cessation of joyous energy that is so conspicuous a feature in the plays. "The thought of death touched him to the very center." The most forcible expression of this aversion is contained in *Claudio's* appeal to his sister in "Measure for Measure":

"Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendant world; or to be, worse than worst,
Of those that lawless and incertain thoughts
Imagine, howling! — 'tis too horrible.
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death."

This horror of dissolution as the possible end is, it is surmised, the leading thought in the tragedy of "Hamlet," the tormenting agony of the prince, the secret cause of the hero's procrastination.

"To be or not to be, that is the question."

The whole of the famous soliloquy throbs with this one apprehension. "What dreams may come!" "This is the respect that makes calamity of so long life." If death were nothing but a sleep! If one might his *quietus* make with a bare bodkin! His murdered father has reappeared from the grave and talked with him, yet he can speak of "that bourn from which no traveler returns." "The native hue of his resolution is sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought." He cannot determine, because he cannot make up his mind respecting the future. He has no faith; he is a skeptic. His reluctance to kill his uncle at his prayers may be ascribed to the same uncertainty with regard to the future, may be, in fact, a mere suspicion that "something after death" may be worse than life. This doubt paralyzes his arm, makes him pause before consigning the king to a happier fate than a remorseful life on earth. Death is hideous, but the bare fancy that what may succeed death will possibly be more hideous still checks his hand. He cannot strike, for he cannot decide. His hatred is held in abeyance by his misgiving. A hesitating intellect dominates his moral will. The crafty transaction in the case of *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* betrays a distempered mind, overwrought by thinking. The horror of personal dissolution, foreshadowed in the purloined dispatches, renders him indifferent to the unmerited fate of his companions. Shakspere may here have simply followed the story, but it is easy to see how the leading idea of death and the future runs through the scene and controls the conduct of the prince, which otherwise would be at once treacherous and cruel. His own life must be saved, for the accomplishment of his purpose, ostensibly at all events, as being his life. When at last it becomes evident that he cannot live longer, his purpose is executed in sheer desperation. His doubts are not removed, but he cannot deliberate further. The hour for thinking has expired.

I have no intention of discussing the play of "Hamlet," which so many eminent critics have spent their strength on, but I cannot forbear to mention the circumstances of the conversation with *Horatio* by *Ophelia's* grave, as throwing light on this theory of Very. The possible future of great men, captains, philosophers, clowns, as considered by a skeptical intellect, could not be more vividly portrayed.

The notion that Shakspere was possessed by the spirit of activity, by the joy of superabundant life, that he was instinctive, impersonal, unconscious, a vital force of nature, explains many things that perplex us when we put the man alongside his works. It accounts for the coarseness of which we have heard so much. It is hardly enough to say that this is due to the age he lived in, for it conveys no more pollution than a Venus by Titian or a Grace by Raphael. Indeed, the marvel is that there is no more dirt in the plays. The grossness resembles the ugliness of nature, which is so subordinate to loveliness that we scarcely remark it. The corruption is part of the scheme of things, which could not be conceived without decay and noisomeness. There are some facts that we contemplate with disgust; but an expurgated Shakspere is very much like an expurgated universe, a world without a shadow. The entire system would have to be altered and made over new, if every disagreeable element were excluded. The frolic glee must be checked. The rotting leaves must be swept up. The exuberant animal spirits must be repressed. The riotous creative power must be limited in sway. For the thread of fancy runs through the whole composition, and cannot be drawn out in a portion here and there without injury to the work itself. Were Shakspere the moral, spiritual, or even the intellectual prodigy he has been represented, he would have avoided ugliness and evil, like Philip Sidney, or Thomas Moore, or the author of "Religio Medici"; but he was no philosopher, or ethical teacher, or apostle of the humanities. He was coarse because he was natural, not from conscious purpose or from the contamination of his age so much as from overflow of impulse.

This theory explains the extent of his popular acquaintance with science, art, literature, history, the performances of the human mind in all its variety; his knowledge of law, medicine, divinity, commerce, affairs, the manifold concerns of men. He absorbed information without seeking it. Facts gravitated to him. He knew instinctively what the world was doing. There is no evidence that he searched problems profoundly, that he was versed, as an expert may be expected to be, in knowledges that lay out of his beaten track. The arguments—there are a good many of them—that are constructed to prove that Shakspere belonged to one of the learned professions because he had so much technical learning, are more ingenious than convincing. By dint of vigorous imagination, by straining expressions, by putting into the poet's mind thoughts he never entertained, by forcing popular language to exact conclusions, it is easy to prove him an adept in almost any science; but the words themselves bear no such weight of significance. Among those who were often in his society, there must have been many legal authorities, medical practitioners, experts in public and private affairs. His various sympathy, his affluent conversation, his dazzling wit, his adaptability, his approachableness, must have drawn them to him and induced them to open their stores of experience. His democratic disposition—for we must presume that before such a temperament as his all barriers of rank and class disappeared—made him at home with people of every degree, and elicited from each the peculiar information he possessed. To such a mind there could be no secrets, no hidden places. But it does not follow that there was special knowledge. Indeed, this would be impossible except to Omniscience. No created mind can know everything. Besides, the arguments in question refute each other. Shakspere could not have been master of *all* professions, though he might have imbibed the current ideas of each; nay, could hardly, with his swift intelligence, have avoided doing so. He had but to lie abroad to do that, to act the part of a spider at watch in the center of his web. Many years ago I bought a little book entitled "The Wit and Wisdom of Shakspere," and, on reading it, was struck by the range of consideration, the rapidity of glance, the felicity of phrase, the familiarity with prevalent conceptions, the intimate acquaintance with proverbs, laws, allusions, sentences; but I was equally impressed by the absence of insight into principles. The province of religious sentiment was particularly vague, thin, unsatisfactory; while of spiritual penetration there was little or nothing,— convincing me of the purely human level of his flight.

The impersonality of the poet is accounted for on this theory of his passion for activity. Instinct is ever impersonal. So is childhood. Nature gives no sign of personal willfulness. It flows inaudibly. One cannot hear the grass grow. Day uttereth wisdom unto day, and night showeth knowledge unto night. There is no speech nor language; their voice is not heard; yet their sound goeth forth to all generations. Whether it be true or not, as Carlyle taught, that self-consciousness is an evidence of depravity, certain it is that the intrusion of private peculiarities, whether personal, intellectual, or moral, is felt to be a deduction from power. It is associated with the controversial temper, with obstinacy, with partisan or sectarian feeling. Saintliness is impersonal, but such impersonality does not belong to Shakspere, who, by general admission, was no saint. He was impersonal as nature is, not as God is; impersonal as one may be who is entirely a creature, who is immersed in the world, not as one may be who is above the world. The ethical indifference of Shakspere has been already referred to. It is the moral unconsciousness of a child who has not experienced the difference between good and evil, not of an angel who dwells serenely aloft in the presence of absolute perfection. One is not sensible of being rebuked by these dramas. At most he wonders at the display of power. He may be astonished; he is not touched or overawed. He does not fall prostrate to the ground. Oftenest he is absorbed as in the unaccountable gambols of a kitten whose torrent of strength is amazing. No sentiment of blame attaches to its recklessness or its cruelty. It is unprincipled, but it is bewitching.

Does not Very's view go far to render conceivable Shakspere's strange disappearance behind his works? One of the hardest problems connected with the authorship of the plays is the difficulty of supposing him to have written them. It is not easy, on any hypothesis of self-centered genius, to put the dramas and their author together. This consideration lends the chief strength to Judge Holmes's argument against the Shaksperian origin of the dramas. One is sometimes tempted to regard them as a literature, the product of an age, not of an individual mind; but such a supposition is rendered extremely improbable by the unity of the whole series, as well as by the early association of the collection with the name of the actor. The failure of all attempts to show that Bacon or any society of wits wrote the pieces for a purpose, political or other, is strong negative proof that they proceeded from the brain of this man. The arguments have so much value, to say the least. Had they not been produced, the case they were meant to overthrow might not have been established. But the mystery remains why Shakspere, having written as he did, so spontaneously and affluently, wrote no more. Why did the flow cease except with life itself? Why were the poet's closing years conventional, commonplace, ordinary, worldly, cheap? Two explanations of this may be offered. On one hand, it may be said, the author had written as much as he was compelled to. He was well-to-do, prosperous, famous. He had attained to the height of his ambition, and could afford to indulge his inclinations, which were those of a quiet citizen of a provincial town. Stratford being his native place, it was natural that, after the turmoil of a metropolitan existence, he should wish to go back there, buy a house, and spend the remainder of his days in respectable ease. This account of the matter would be sufficient if the plays themselves had been of a character different from what they are, less irresistible, more artificially planned and composed. But they are not the work of a man of letters, or of any mere artisan in literature. They do not seem to have been deliberately purposed for an object, to make money, express the feelings of an artist, add to the number of existing manuscripts. They read like the overflow of a living mind. They are a stream from a full fountain that ran because it could not help it. A man who could have produced those plays might, we should suppose, have produced plays without end; nay, must have done so, as inevitably as nature creates grass. It is not a question of age, but merely of creative power. Nature does not sow flowers everywhere. There are sandy wastes and heaps of rocks where no verdure can take root; the conditions for verdure do not exist. So it may have been in the experience of Shakspere. For, on the other hand, it may be urged that the period of energy was ended. May it not be true that instinctive force has a limit; that the flood must ebb as well as flow; that even an ocean is not always at high tide? The years of creative vitality having passed, the teeming mind is at rest, quiet, motionless, if you will. Shakspere becomes an ordinary person, sauntering along the streets, hanging over the gate, chatting with his neighbors, in no way distinguished from other townsmen. His energy is devoted to the task of gathering up the fragments of his former diligence. He cannot make new dramas; has no intellectual strength to make them. The water is out. It never comes again. He dies exhausted, in the fullness of his physical vigor. What he did abides, but to do more of the same sort was impossible.

Emerson agrees in the main with his friend. His wonderful lecture on Shakspere in "Representative Men" was delivered long after he had read Very's essay. The specific views of that essay do not appear in the lecture, which is learned and brilliant far beyond Very's modest performance. Emerson, nevertheless, suggests the earlier critic's opinion from an independent study of the poet's works. He cannot reconcile the man with the plays, or any theory of conscious effort. Without trying to pull Shakspere down, he will not accord to him all the inspiration that his adorers claim. "He was master of the revels to mankind"; but the office of master of the revels is by no means the highest. The master of the revels is not king or duke, statesman or judge. The impression left by Emerson's lecture is that, in his estimation, Shakspere was a phenomenon, of wonderful beauty, but destitute of spiritual completeness. The absence of moral feeling afflicted that serene and lofty mind. "Are the agents of nature, and the power to understand them, worth no more than a street serenade or the breath of a cigar?" "The world still wants the poet-priest, a reconciler who shall not trifle, with Shakspere the player, but who shall see, speak, and act with equal inspiration." "Solitude weighs Shakspere also, and finds him to share the halfness and imperfections of humanity." "He never took a step which seemed inevitable to such genius, namely, to explore the virtue which resides in these symbols and imparts this power,—what is that which they themselves say? He converted the elements which waited on his command into entertainments." It is Emerson's doctrine, to which Shakspere is no exception, but a striking confirmation rather, that great men are great only as they express the burden of thought in humanity. "It is easy to see," he says in this very lecture, "that what is best written or done by genius, in the world, was no man's work, but came by wide social labor, when a thousand wrought like one, sharing the same impulse." "In the composition of such works the time thinks, the market thinks, the mason, the carpenter, the merchant, the farmer, the fop,—all think for us." In conformity with this idea, no individual, it would seem, could far outstrip his generation. All views must be partial.

A serious, profoundly thoughtful man, who had given years to the study of the subject, used to say that Shakspere was deficient in imagination philosophically apprehended. He had infinite fancy, a boundless reach of sympathy, endless variety, a keen sense of beauty, a marvelous fund of imagery; but he was fantastical, eccentric, grotesque, wayward; he lacked the sentiment of order, harmony, symmetry, subordination of lower to higher, that we associate with imagination; his insight into principles was neither sharp nor deep; his perception of analogy between heavenly and earthly things was blunt. In other words, Shakspere was not, in this critic's judgment, a prophet or a seer, but simply a poet whose eye,

> "With a fine frenzy rolling,"

took in the appearances of terrestrial phenomena. This man had no patience with clergymen who quoted Shakspere to fortify their opinions. Their duty, he considered, was to proclaim the eternal truths of reason, the intuitions of the soul, the divine messages of God to men, not to indulge in the fanciful lucubrations of the natural understanding. This verdict, though on quite other, indeed on precisely opposite, grounds, corresponds with M. Taine's sentence. Taine is a naturalist who confines himself to the region of visible forms. The person I speak of was a supernaturalist who dwelt in the world of ideas, and believed in celestial creations, in communications through Christ to mankind. The concurrence of two such differently constituted intelligences lends plausibility to their view. There are certainly no more unlike minds than Taine, Very, Emerson, and the thinker I speak of; yet their judgment is essentially, though not formally, the same. Starting from opposite points, calling up different details of illustration, they nevertheless arrive at similar conclusions, namely, that Shakspere was not a seraphic creature; that even as a poet he had his limitations, if not his idiosyncrasies, peculiar to his time and genius.

It is not denied that the "bard of Avon" used a vast accumulation of stories that were current among the playwrights of his day, and in some instances may have followed them literally, as in the tale of the caskets and the quibble about the drop of blood in the "Merchant of Venice," the episodes in "Hamlet," and many instances besides. Some of these remain as inconsistencies in the conception of character, as in the sacrifice of poor *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern*, the demoniac refusal to assassinate the king at his prayers, which a great actor regarded as a sign of moral depravity in the prince, and quite incompatible with the idea of philosophic virtue. The words and deeds of the Christians in the "Merchant of Venice" cannot be reconciled with any lofty conception either of justice or of mercy, though strictly according to the sentiment of the age. Sometimes, as in "Antony and Cleopatra," he adhered closely to the story. Plutarch's "Lives" were readily accessible through translations. An immense fund of dramatic literature existed, the property of the theater, not of individual authors, and it was quite permissible for any new playwright to submit plays to fresh treatment. A long line of brilliant men — Marlowe, Greene, Dekker, Webster, Heywood, Middleton, Ford, Massinger, Beaumont, Fletcher, Jonson — preceded or were contemporaries of Shakspere. Into this rich heritage Shakspere entered, and faithfully he used his opportunity. He was an unscrupulous borrower, a debtor in all directions. Malone computes that in "Henry VI." there are 6043 lines, of which 1771 were written by some author preceding Shakspere, 2373 were written by him on the form prescribed by others, while but 1899 were wholly his own. Scarcely a single drama, if one, was of his absolute invention. The argument that quality outranks quantity, that one of Shakspere's lines is worth a thousand by lesser men, that his touch changed dross into gold, his glance turned nebulæ into stars, is valid only where Shakspere's lines are discovered, or his touches detected. Emerson is confident that *Wolsey's* soliloquy in "Henry VIII.," and the subsequent talk with *Cromwell*, betray the first performer's hand. Perhaps he is right, but the passages are of the more obvious description. Can plays of greater subtlety be so analyzed? Is it possible to take to pieces "Othello" or "Macbeth"? "The Tempest" or "As You Like It"? Is not eulogium of Shakspere on this score made on general principles, and more or less in the dark?

That Shakspere was an actor is conceded. The making and producing of dramas was his business — a business then very popular in London, much patronized by the multitude. The player's calling was followed by the brightest wits, as well as by strolling ranters, when they wanted to catch the attention of the people. The conditions of successful labor on the stage were combinations of skill in pleasing. Was not Shakspere, who made money by the profession, obliged to conform to these conditions? Could he venture to play the philosopher even if he were inclined to? Must he not attract the crowd to his theater? Did they go to be instructed, or to be entertained? Did they not demand that their mood should be met? Did they give their shillings for metaphysics, or for high speculations, or for profound psychological analyses of character? Were they not drawn by the hope of finding amusement? The familiar stories must have been in their minds with such flavor of wit or brilliancy as made them welcome to the palate. Dullness or dogmatism or pedantry would have soon emptied even those benches, as none knew better than the manager. The supposition that Bacon and others made these tragedies and comedies the covert vehicle for publishing their political heresies is sane in comparison with the notion that Shakspere used them as a medium for his philosophical lucubrations. The psychology must have been as completely hidden as the statesmanship. Success as a playwright referred directly to popularity, and popularity meant variety combined with ease. It is evident that Shakspere did not go far out of the path of common applause; that he struck the happy mean of truth to the current expectation, and was able, therefore, after a few years, to leave the stage a prosperous man, having reaped the reward of his surprising talent. Had he been a sage in disguise, he would neither have fared so well nor have stopped so soon. His mask would have been stripped off or thrown off. If he could have preserved his incognito as an actor,— which is hardly conceivable,— he had abundant leisure afterwards for expressing his real ideas. The plays were not his amusement, as in Bacon's case they are feigned to have been. They exhausted the mind that made them, yet were the works of a player still.

The plain truth about Shakspere is what we wish to arrive at. No theories about him, whether such as pull him down to the level of his generation or such as exalt him above all generations, are in demand at this juncture. An instance of the latter tendency is found in the common interpretation of the character of *Shylock* in the "Merchant of Venice." It is customary to make the play end with the trial scene, as if that was the natural close of the piece, the fate of the Jew being regarded as the crowning feature of the plot. The personification of the Israelite by the leading performer, and the interpretation of the character in the light of modern conceptions, add to the illusion. As originally designed, however, *Shylock* was a secondary and incidental personage, intended to represent the comical aspects of the situation. The interest of the play centers in the loves of *Portia* and *Bassanio*, of *Lorenzo* and *Jessica*. *Antonio* is the grand figure. The Christianity of Shakspere's day was a thing of creed and ceremony, not of sentiment, still less of conduct. The Jew was a despised creature, cringing and base, fit only to spit on and kick about, and laugh at—a contemptible being who can be cheated, robbed, derided with absolute impunity. His daughter steals his jewels and runs away from his house without blame or compunction. The theft is a good joke because it was practiced on a Jew in the interest of a Christian. The elopement is praiseworthy because *Lorenzo* is of the true belief. The traits of *Shylock* are described as being greed for gold and aversion to *Antonio*, whom he hates because he brings down the "rate of usance" in Venice, and because he is "a Christian." As I sat, a few evenings since, and listened to Mr. Irving's *Shylock*, the reflection forced itself upon me that the Hebrew of Shakspere's time was not in any respect the Hebrew of ours, that religion had put on new attributes, and that it is preposterous to apply modern ideas of equity or of pity to the creations of three hundred years ago. Think of *Antonio's* petition to the Duke that *Shylock* might have his life on condition of his becoming a Christian! After all that had happened! Would not the author of the play open his eyes in astonishment if he could see it acted in New York to-day? The picture of a Jew as cherishing pride of race, or any kind of personal pride, would strike him as inconceivably strange. Can it be believed that Shakspere anticipated the authoress of "Daniel Deronda," and the religious hospitality of the nineteenth century; that the ideal Hebrew was in his mind, or the vision of a brotherhood of faiths in his heart?

This example is chosen because it furnishes the most obvious instance of the practice of putting new wine into old bottles. There is no objection to the practice so long as the bottles keep the wine sound and good; but what if the bottles burst? What if the text of "Lear," "Othello," "Hamlet," fails to embody the various interpretations that are put upon the main personages, upon *Iago*, *Lady Macbeth*, *Desdemona*, *Cordelia?* What if the author was quite innocent of any metaphysical intention? An ancient jar, of accustomed or graceful form, may contain water, milk, beer, various kinds of vintage; but surely it is not just to credit the vase with its contents, to say the jar turns the water into wine. We are so much in the habit of imputing to Shakspere premature ideas, that it is exceedingly difficult to measure his language. One is tempted either to make serious deductions from his expressions as being overwrought and excessive, as M. Taine does, or to load them with thoughts which the words may suggest but do not implicitly convey. Either course is vicious, though the first is, perhaps, nearer the truth of criticism as at present apprehended. Even Emerson falls into the vein of eulogy, as when he ascribes to Shakspere the qualities of lover, statesman, humorist, philosopher, sage. I well remember how I was scandalized once by reading in a now forgotten book, entitled "Woman and her Era," how Shakspere painted women according to his notions of the sex, and how unfortunate the man must be who had not met with finer girls than any he described,—or something to that effect. I confess that to this day, though my acquaintance with society has been pretty large, the superiors of *Portia*, *Miranda*, *Rosalind*, *Isabella*, to name these alone, have not been seen. Thus there may be exaggeration on one side and on the other. What we want is the exact truth, if we can find it. Much might be gained if we could make allowance for the imperfections of the plays, their defects of plot and development; their inconsistencies of character; the author's indebtedness to his predecessors and contemporaries; the literary usages of the period; the diction of poets and prose-writers, of historians and wits, of courtiers and leaders of society; the peculiarities of the writer's genius. The Shakspere Society has done something; the critics have done a good deal; but scientific scholarship has still a task before it, and the task in great measure consists in the effort to get rid of the associations that cluster round the name, and render appreciation all but impossible, so that none but people of considerable discernment are able to read Shakspere at all. They who peruse his writings with ordinary eyes cannot understand him, wonder often where his greatness lies. The verdict of general readers, including the multitude of bright-minded men and women, would probably be adverse to the claim of a few that here is a world-wide poet, an "eternal man"; while, if we could get at the estimate of his time, we should possibly be surprised at the difference of their judgment from that of the commentators of our own generation. The grudging commendation of his contemporaries goes for something. Ben Jonson's tribute has been taken for all it is worth, probably for more. It points at qualities which are not usually attributed to the poet, whom we think we know better than he did. With fullest acknowledgment of the likelihood that Jonson thought himself the better poet of the two, the greatness of Shakspere could hardly have been so transcendent if it was so easily overlooked. The silence of his compeers is not without its significance for us. Can all this be ascribed to inadequate perception? Matthew Arnold, in his sonnet to Shakspere, says:

> "And thou, who didst the stars and sunbeams know,
> Self-schooled, self-scanned, self-honored, self-secure,
> Didst tread on earth unguessed at.—Better so!"

But is not this the very question, whether Shakspere did know the stars and sunbeams,—whether he was self-schooled, self-scanned, self-honored, self-secure? Would he have been unguessed at if he had possessed these high qualities? Of course there is such a thing as unappreciated genius, but a good many have always paid it homage in its living day. No Milton ever was "mute and inglorious" to almost the whole of his contemporaries. There was a large party that confessed his greatness and admired his power. The merely literary beauty was praised more afterwards, when party passion had died away, but the commanding mind was seen and felt as it worked. In the case of Shakspere there was no party passion, and the mind worked freely on materials of its own choosing.

It is a curious if not a noteworthy circumstance that Shakspere flourished near the beginning of the century that is famous for the decline of the sacerdotal and fanatical spirit, and for the advent of the opposite spirit of rationalism in politics as in religion. The obstinate association of his name with that of Lord Bacon, whose reputed authorship of the plays, fanciful in many respects, is yet significant in this, attests the drift of his teaching. With the spread of "humanism," as it is called now, with the final outbreak of the genius of the renascence, the downfall of religious intolerance, the passion for Shakspere augmented. The silence of his contemporaries has been already alluded to. For a hundred years his greatness was not suspected. Two hundred years passed after his death before laudatory voices were raised in any considerable number in his praise. The prevailing traditions of the stage were all of another character—heroic, sentimental, "classical." The first clear notes came from Germany, the land of anti-supernatural speculation, and from Goethe, the apostle of literary excellence as distinguished from evangelical credence, the man of letters, the "realist," as it was the fashion to term him half a century ago. We all remember the penetrating glance that he threw into the motive of *Hamlet*. The eminent merits of Shakspere were made known to the English-speaking world, unless my memory betrays me, by Coleridge, a student of German philosophy. The transcendentalists of New England, men and women who exalted nature and who raised ordinary faculty to the heavenly sphere, celebrated the poet of human nature and human life simultaneously with Goethe, Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge. Shakspere's fame goes hand in hand with the cause of education, nurture, accomplishment, science, art, elegant cultivation, the varied play of social forces. The serious people who dread dancing, frolic, amusement, joyousness, the revelry of animal spirits, dread the influence of this literature. The renowned dramatist is too secular for them. Should the new doctrine of evolution, with its implications in regard to the origin of mind, come to prevail, we may expect to see the worship of Shakspere disappear; for this doctrine tends to remove the prestige of individual intellects, takes mountains from their place, and substitutes a slow, gradual advance along an inclined plane for abrupt invasions of genius. Until such a time shall come, and it may not arrive within computed distance of years, the name of Shakspere will stand first in the list of those who have glorified humanity in its terrestrial aspects. His tragedies will report the movements of the human conscience and the devices of the human will. His comedies will present the manifold capriciousness of human nature and the singular eventualities of human existence. He will be the favorite of the vigorous and the bright-hearted, but not the companion of the solitary or the oracle of the sage; a rank, luxuriant creature who "warbled his native wood-notes wild," but hardly an authority for the theologian, or a pattern for saintly souls. It is easy to concede his supremacy in his sphere. It is difficult to grant that he was the poet of all time, or of the upper regions of space. To literary men he must always be dear on account of the brilliancy of his style, the terseness of his sentences, the variety and aptness of his illustrations, the momentum and the beauty of his expression; but to purely spiritual insight he will ever seem defective.

O. B. Frothingham.