

A THOUGHT ON SHAKSPERE

The most distinctive poems--the most permanently rooted and with heartiest reason for being--the copious cycle of Arthurian legends, or the almost equally copious Charlemagne cycle, or the poems of the Cid, or Scandinavian Eddas, or Nibelungen, or Chaucer, or Spenser, or bona fide Ossian, or Inferno--probably had their rise in the great historic perturbations, which they came in to sum up and confirm, indirectly embodying results to date. Then however precious to "culture," the grandest of those poems, it may be said, preserve and typify results offensive to the modern spirit, and long past away. To state it briefly, and taking the strongest examples, in Homer lives the ruthless military prowess of Greece, and of its special god-descended dynastic houses; in Shakspeare the dragon-rancors and stormy feudal Splendor of mediaeval caste.

Poetry, largely consider'd, is an evolution, sending out improved and-ever-expanded types--in one sense, the past, even the best of it, necessarily giving place, and dying out. For our existing world, the bases on which all the grand old poems were built have become vacuums--and even those of many comparatively modern ones are broken and half-gone. For us to-day, not their own intrinsic value, vast as that is, backs and maintains those poems--but a mountain-high growth of associations, the layers of successive ages. Everywhere--their own lands included--(is there not something terrible in the tenacity with

which the one book out of millions holds its grip?)--the Homeric and Virgilian works, the interminable ballad-romances of the middle ages, the utterances of Dante, Spenser, and others, are upheld by their cumulus-entrenchment in scholarship, and as precious, always welcome, unspeakably valuable reminiscences.

Even the one who at present reigns unquestion'd--of Shakspeare--for all he stands for so much in modern literature, he stands entirely for the mighty esthetic sceptres of the past, not for the spiritual and democratic, the sceptres of the future. The inward and outward characteristics of Shakspeare are his vast and rich variety of persons and themes, with his wondrous delineation of each and all,--not only limitless funds of verbal and pictorial resource, but great excess, superfoetation--mannerism, like a fine, aristocratic perfume, holding a touch of musk (Euphues, his mark)--with boundless sumptuousness and adornment, real velvet and gems, not shoddy nor paste--but a good deal of bombast and fustian--(certainly some terrific mouthing in Shakspeare!)

Superb and inimitable as all is, it is mostly an objective and physiological kind of power and beauty the soul finds in Shakspeare--a style supremely grand of the sort, but in my opinion stopping short of the grandest sort, at any rate for fulfilling and satisfying modern and scientific and democratic American purposes. Think, not of growths as forests primeval, or Yellowstone geysers, or Colorado ravines, but of costly marble palaces, and palace rooms, and the noblest fixings

and furniture, and noble owners and occupants to correspond--think of carefully built gardens from the beautiful but sophisticated gardening art at its best, with walks and bowers and artificial lakes, and appropriate statue-groups and the finest cultivated roses and lilies and japonicas in plenty--and you have the tally of Shakspeare. The low characters, mechanics, even the loyal henchmen--all in themselves nothing--serve as capital foils to the aristocracy. The comedies (exquisite as they certainly are) bringing in admirably portray'd common characters, have the unmistakable hue of plays, portraits, made for the divertisement only of the elite of the castle, and from its point of view. The comedies are altogether non-acceptable to America and Democracy.

But to the deepest soul, it seems a shame to pick and choose from the riches Shakspeare has left us--to criticise his infinitely royal, multiform quality--to gauge, with optic glasses, the dazzle of his sun-like beams.

The best poetic utterance, after all, can merely hint, or remind, often very indirectly, or at distant removes. Aught of real perfection, or the solution of any deep problem, or any completed statement of the moral, the true, the beautiful, eludes the greatest, deffest poet--flies away like an always uncaught bird.