

**THE SHAKESPEAREAN INTERPRETER,
WITH MEMORIAL WORDS RESPECTING
HENRY NORMAN HUDSON; AN
ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE
ALUMNI OF MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE**

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The Shakespearean interpreter, with memorial words respecting Henry Norman Hudson; an address delivered before the alumni of Middlebury College by J. E. Rankin

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J. E. RANKIN

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SHAKESPEAREAN INTERPRETER

WITH MEMORIAL WORDS RESPECTING
HENRY NORMAN HUDSON

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE ALUMNI OF MIDDLEBURY
COLLEGE BY J. E. RANKIN, D. D.

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ADDRESS

EVERY creator needs an interpreter. Indeed, the difference between a creation and a commodity ; between a thing that is born and a thing that is manufactured, lies right here : the first can be interpreted, its clew can be found, its fundamental principle can be reached ; you can cut through into its germ, and show it in embryo, the last can be pulled to pieces, till you name and count all its dead parts, and leave them dead as they were. In schools, the pupil is taught structural botany ; how to analyze flowers ; that is, how to find the stamens and pistil, the corolla and calyx ; a purely mechanical separation of these fragile structures into their constituent members, as though they were put together by hand on a stem of wire ; were made of paper or wax. God's flowers, the buttercups and daisies that toss in the fields, are creations ; the flowers that toss with toss of pride or grace upon the hats of ladies, are commodities.

In *Wilhelm Meister*, you remember how the great Goethe describes the attempt of the hero, to act the character of Hamlet. He began by approaching it from the outside; by committing to memory the strong passages, the soliloquies; those outbursts which seemed most characteristic, most to emphasize Hamlet's peculiarities. What college boy has not spouted, "To be or not to be?"—the question still. Then, he tried to take over upon his own shoulders that load of melancholy, which weighed his prototype to the earth, as young men, who read Byron, conceive themselves to be at war with all the world, and with God who made it, and try to write poetry in that vein, the vein of Mephistopheles. At last, he hit upon the thought that what he wanted, first of all, was a key to Hamlet himself; to what Hamlet was, before his father's death; to what he was, independent of the command, so strangely and awfully laid on him by his father's ghost; independent of his weak mother, his uncle, guilty and suspicious, the crafty Polonius, Horatio the true, Ophelia the pure. Getting that clew, all the rest was easy. And into this Hamlet that was, he would first throw himself, that he might understand

how Hamlet would comport, as, by degrees, he became environed by his new surroundings. Thus Wilhelm's Hamlet came to be the interpretation of Shakespeare's Hamlet; Hamlet seen through Goethe's oriel window.

In his *Pendennis*, again, Thackeray has given us Miss Fotheringay, as Ophelia. It is Miss Fotheringay in the character of Ophelia, and not Ophelia herself. She performs, as Thackeray describes, with "admirable, wild pathos; laughing, weeping, waving her beautiful white arms, and flinging about her snatches of flowers and songs; with most charming madness"; while, as a corpse she is unequalled, though at the instant when Hamlet and Laertes are battling in her grave, she is looking out from the back scenes to see how her acting has affected *Pendennis* and the family. She was not interpreting the character. She had been taught to make the most of Ophelia, as she interpreted Miss Fotheringay. Ophelia was the lay figure, on which Miss Fotheringay tried on her attitudes and charms.

The subject which I shall discuss is THE SHAKESPEAREAN INTERPRETER.

No man ever can forget the hour when he read the first page of Shakespeare. The memory of it will go with him to his grave. It marked the beginning of a new era. It was the diet of the gods, the taste of which will never leave his mouth. It gave him something new to live for ; it made the world new to him. It was in his boyhood. Perfectly ignorant of the unities and harmonies, nay, of all the rules of dramatic art, and happy in his unconsciousness of it, he reads, for the first time, the ghost-scene in Hamlet ; he sees the sentinel-watch interrupted by the apparition of the dead king ; he hears Horatio's greeting :

" What art thou, that usurp'st this time of night
Together with that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march?"

It is not in the power of acting to thrill him as Shakespeare's uninterpreted art has done. " I care not," said Abraham Lincoln, " how Shakespeare is acted ; with him, the thought suffices." Richard Grant White is right, when he says, " In reading Shakespeare, the first rule, and it is absolute, and without exception, is to read him only. Throw the commentators and the editors to the dogs. Read no

man's notes, or essays, or introductions; æsthetical, historical, philosophical, or philological." Yes, and throw, also, the actors to the dogs. Every creation, whether of God or of man has its own language; its one language. Let no man mouth it over to you; or into your ear. There is only one first time that a pilgrim ever stands in sacred places; ever reads a great author. Of the memories of that first time, he can never be rid; but, in their first freshness, those impressions can never return at all; they can never return except as memories. When Robert Burns wrote in his "To Mary in Heaven,"

"Ayr, gurgling, kissed his pebbled shore,
O'erhung with wildwoods, thick'ning green;
The fragrant birch, and hawthorn hoar
Twined am'rous round the raptured scene:
The flowers sprang wanton to be pressed,
The birds sang love on every spray;"

he recorded an experience never to be repeated. Those hours of first love could never come back again. The emotions of his soul so quickened, he transferred to all inanimate things: to water, woods, flowers, birds. They were alive with this new passion; transfigured by it. At that moment, they all spoke