SHAKESPEARE: AN ADDRESS DELIVERED TO THE POSITIVIST SOCIETY OF LONDON, ON THE 2ND OF AUGUST 1885 (18 DANTE 97), AT STRATFORD-ON-AVON

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649760442

Shakespeare: An Address Delivered to the Positivist Society of London, on the 2nd of August 1885 (18 Dante 97), at Stratford-On-Avon by Vernon Lushington

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

www.triestepublishing.com

VERNON LUSHINGTON

SHAKESPEARE: AN ADDRESS DELIVERED TO THE POSITIVIST SOCIETY OF LONDON, ON THE 2ND OF AUGUST 1885 (18 DANTE 97), AT STRATFORD-ON-AVON

Trieste

SHAKESPEARE.

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED TO THE POSITIVIST SOCIETY OF LONDON,

ON THE 2ND OF AUGUST, 1885

(18 DANTE 97),

AT STRATFORD-ON-AVON.

BY

VERNON LUSHINGTON.

"Even just between Twelve and One, even at the turning o' the tide."—*Henry V.*, act ii., sc. 3.

LONDON:
REEVES AND TURNER, 196, STRAND.
1885.

16

SHAKESPEARE.

I CONGRATULATE you that through the social zeal of Mr. Frederic Harrison and other friends, we Positivists are here as a company in Shakespeare's Stratford-on-Avon. I hope you may find that Time the changer, and even the subversive hand of modern Industry, have dealt gently with the place. In any case, you must be saying, "Here, then, it was Shakespeare was born; here he lived as child and boy; in these fields, by that river, he walked and played; here he wooed his wife; here, after the struggle of his London career, he returned and made his settled home; amid this rural peace he composed his latest and greatest dramas; here, while yet in the full strength of mid-life, he died, and in yonder church he lies buried." Eye and memory and imagination work happily together. The seen calls up the unseen, helped by the kind human tradition and the remembered spell of the Poet's divine art. The things, beautiful as they are, are such as we see elsewhere—common things—the green meadows, the ripening harvest fields, the quiet flowing water, the village street, the grey parish church. But they are all touched by the grace of Shakespeare's presence. They might seem to say, each in its own way, and according to its own nature, "He saw us and loved us. And we knew him; day by day we saw him and loved him. He was not a book; he was a man." So saying, they speak of much more than Shakespeare. They speak of Humanity. They speak of Humanity's first characteristic, human solidarity,—the equal

brotherhood of quick and dead,—that strong reality, in which Theology pretends to find exceptions, but whose universality we cannot too unreservedly, too sympathetically, acknowledge. Not less do they speak of that higher characteristic of Humanity, human continuity, that most majestic and most hopeful truth, of which Theology claims a fraction for its own glorification, and contradicts all the remainder. For one of the most inevitable impressions we receive here, in Shakespeare's home and amid his memorials, is that generations have passed between him, our benefactor, and us who have since had so many other benefactors. The Earth changes, but remains: Shakespeare is dead, but he lives, his soul lives in our souls: Humanity persists and grows. Nor less again, when we look on his grave, does that other inexorable aspect of the same truth touch every one—that a man's life now determines the quality of his life after death. The night cometh, wherein no man may work.

We are here to-day to make holiday, but with something of the aim, something of the spirit, of *Pilgrims*. Is it not so? Yes, in this August, 1885, travelling with Cook's tickets, we are Pilgrims, such as the spiritual condition of the West in the nineteenth century permits—Pilgrims who have got to our place of pilgrimage. Ceremony we have little. We don't even do as the pilgrim, once described to me—I dare say it is a common case—who, on nearing the hilltop whence some sacred city—I think it was Jerusalem—was first to appear in view, halted, put off the rags he had worn on the march, and put on shining clothes. But we are here; and we may have grateful hearts.

Let me dwell on this thought of Pilgrimage, since it is a type of so much else, especially because it holds forth the union of Religion and joy, which belongs to my subject, and which I would especially make my subject.

As you all know that the avowed object of the Crusades was to win back the Holy Places in Palestine, you must in some measure be aware what an important institution Pilgrimage was to Christians in the Middle Ages. You know also, perhaps, how extensively Pilgrimage still prevails

among Mahommedans and Polytheists in the East. Yet so domineering is the scepticism which to-day encompasses us on all sides,—that same scepticism which permits even educated ladies in their conversation to profane the most venerable words in the language,—I mean such words as "awful" and "lovely,"—so domineering, I say, is this scepticism, that if you do not, like other people, regard Religious Pilgrimage with some disdain, as a foolish old-world practice, and one which with modern enlightenment cannot continue, it can only be because you are either special enthusiasts, or because you have strong Positivist tendencies. Most persons, like Shakespeare himself, have transferred their interest from social religion to personal romance; as one of his heroines says:—

> "A true devoted Pilgrim is not weary
> To measure kingdoms with his feeble steps,—
> Much less shall she, that hath Love's wings to fly."

I would have you think, however, of the vast religious services which have been rendered during all the Past by the habit of visiting sacred places. I say the habit, for much turns on that. The sacred place might be near or far,—near as local temple or parish church,—farther away, a day's journey or more, as the chief shrine or mother-city of the nation,—or far, far away,—over kingdoms,—in some distant land, where the pious visitor, arriving at last after many perils by land and sea, found himself an entire stranger,—in the Latin language, a *peregrinus*, whence our word Pilgrim. You see at once that the general habit of visiting sacred spots has ever formed the necessary basis of all organized and enduring social worship. You see also that Pilgrimage is but an extension of that habit,—spontaneous, it may be, or systematic, involving little labour or much, but in all cases implying the visitation of a sacred place with pious motive. Now observe, I pray, the powerful appeal to human affections incident to Pilgrimage. There is the personal journeying and adoration by the Pilgrim; there is the common faith and worship; there is the common shrine commemorating some benignant manifestation to men, oftenest the glorious life and death of some

man or men: for instance, one of the chief pilgrimages in the Middle Ages was to Rome, to the tombs of S. Peter and S. Paul. Observe, also, that the remoter pilgrimages did not take place in Polytheistic communities, for their religions were tribal or national; but they naturally arose when Monotheism, Christian or Mahommedan, united many peoples in one faith. Thus the Emperor Constantine and his sister Helena built splendid churches on the cave of Bethlehem and the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. And thus it was a precept of the Koran that every Mussulman who possibly could, ought once in his life to visit the tomb of the Prophet at Mecca. At almost all times, then, and under all conditions, human wisdom has made Pilgrimage a form of worship and a bond of religious union. The Pilgrimage was necessarily limited and coloured by the faith which it served: it might, as Monotheistic Pilgrimage did, cherish enmity to the alien unbeliever,—it might lead, it often did lead, to many irregularities on the way,—but within its natural limits, it was, so long as the faith remained sincere, a bond of love, and, for the most part, a means of grace and gladness. As an example of grace, take this,—that for centuries, every 9th of June, the women of Rome walked barefoot to the Temple of Vesta, the goddess of domestic union.[1] As an example of gladness, the

[1] Had time admitted, attention would have been called to an instance from the depth of the eighteenth century, the following letter of Boswell to Johnson:—

"*Sunday, September* 30, 1764.

"MY EVER DEAR AND MUCH RESPECTED SIR,—You know my solemn enthusiasm of mind. You love me for it, and I respect myself for it, because in so far I resemble Mr. Johnson. You will be agreeably surprised when you learn the reason of my writing this letter. I am at Wittemberg in Saxony. I am in the old church where the Reformation was first preached, and where some of the reformers lie interred. I cannot resist the serious pleasure of writing to Mr. Johnson from the tomb of Melancthon. My paper rests upon the gravestone of that great and good man, who was undoubtedly the worthiest of all the reformers. He wished to reform abuses which had been introduced into the Church; but had no private resentment to gratify. So mild was he, that when his aged mother consulted him with anxiety on the perplexing disputes of the times, he advised her to 'keep to the old religion.' At this tomb, then, my ever dear and respected friend, I vow

good fellowship of Chaucer's Pilgrims will naturally occur to you, but it is by no means the best instance, because the pleasure is often far apart from the faith. The union of religious fervour with social joy is a special characteristic of the pilgrimages practised under the more genial Polytheisms. Let me read you the opening passage of a most instructive book on Central India, by Sir William Sleeman, who knew the country well and its inhabitants.

"Before setting out on our journey towards the Himmalah, we formed once more an agreeable party to visit the marble rocks of the Nerbuddah at Beraghat. It was the end of October, when the Hindoos hold fairs on all their sacred streams, at places consecrated by poetry or tradition as the scene of some divine work or manifestation. These fairs are at once festive and holy,—every person who comes enjoying himself as much as he can, and at the same time seeking purification from all past transgressions by bathing and praying in the holy stream, and making laudable resolutions to be better for the future. The ceremonies last five days, and take place at the same time upon all the sacred rivers throughout India; and the greater part of the whole Hindoo population, from the summits of the Himmalah mountains to Cape Comorin, will, I believe, during these five days, be found congregated at these fairs. In sailing down the Ganges, one may pass in the course of a day half a dozen such fairs, each with a multitude equal to the population of a large city, and rendered beautifully picturesque by the magnificence and variety of the tent equipages of

to thee an eternal attachment. It shall be my study to do what I can to render your life happy; and if you die before me, I shall endeavour to do honour to your memory; and, elevated by the remembrance of you, persist in noble piety. May God, the Father of all beings, ever bless you; and may you continue to love your most affectionate friend and devoted servant,

"JAMES BOSWELL."

Having written this letter, Boswell kept it back, fearing "lest he should appear at once too superstitious and too enthusiastic." Nearly thirteen years afterwards, hearing that his old friend was ill, he sent it to him. Another thirteen years, and he published (1790) the "Life of Johnson."

the great and wealthy. . . . Our tents were pitched upon a green sward on one bank of a small stream running into the Nerbuddah close by, while the multitude occupied the other bank. At night all the tents and booths are illuminated, and the scene is hardly less animating by night than by day; but what strikes an European most is the entire absence of all tumult and disorder at such places. He not only sees no disturbance, but feels assured there will be none; and leaves his wife and children in the midst of a crowd of a hundred thousand persons, all strangers to them, and all speaking a language and following a religion different from theirs, while he goes off the whole day hunting and shooting in the distant jungles, without the slightest feeling of apprehension for their safety or comfort."

The writer marks here, perhaps unconsciously, the distinction between the semi-barbarous personal pleasure of the modern European materialist and the religious social pleasure consecrated by antique faith. At any rate so orderly, so happy, so widely beneficent Pilgrimages may be; such, on a wide scale, and for ages, under favouring circumstances, they have been. And now I venture to ask: Neglected as Pilgrimages now are, may there not be a happy habit of Pilgrimage in the future, when the Religion of Humanity shall have attained, as it must seek to attain, a fit and beautiful Worship, and when it shall have imparted something of a happy order to our now distracted Modern Society? For Positivism, with complete purpose, incorporates into its system the undying Fetichistic spirit which has been the spontaneous source of all Pilgrimages: especially do we love and reverence the Grave. Positivism also surpasses every Theocracy in veneration for the Past; it puts yet higher the consecrating power of Death. Again, more truly than ever Greek or Roman faith, it honours human heroes, for it admits no divine rivals. Again, its faith is both more definite and more generous than Catholicism or Islam, for it is the faith of Humanity, which embraces all science, all art, and all human achievement whatsoever, and sympathizes with every form of human happiness; and its love, unlike that of any Monotheism,