

**THE SOCIETY AND THE "FAD":
BEING AN AMPLIFICATION OF
AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE
THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB OF NEW
YORK CITY, NOV. 1, 1889**

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APPLETON MORGAN

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Fact and Theory Papers.



NUMBER II.

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By APPLETON MORGAN

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NOV. 1, 1889

BY
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E. H. Snider

THE SOCIETY AND THE "FAD."

IN a very recent issue of a young ladies' magazine (picturesquely called *Poet-Lore*) there lately met my eye the following sentence: "Browning and Ibsen are the only really dramatic authors of their century." As things sometimes strongly suggest their opposites, this sentence reminded me of one of Professor Tyndall's splendid chapters, the one entitled "The Scientific Use of the Imagination," which chapter quotes as its text the following passage from an address of Sir Benjamin Brodie to the Royal Society: "Physical investigation, more than any thing besides, helps to teach us the actual value and right use of the imagination,—of that wondrous faculty, which, left to ramble uncontrolled, leads us astray into a wilderness of perplexities and errors,—a land of mists and shadows,—but which, properly controlled by experience and reflection, becomes the noblest attribute of man, the source of poetic genius, the instrument of discovery in science, without the aid of which Newton would never have invented fluxions, nor Davy have decomposed the earths and alkalies, nor would Columbus have found another continent."

There is a use of the imagination which is of prophetic value: as, for example, the use which a poet like Goethe makes of it when he foresees, in his poetry, that which the sciences shall in due time arrange for, and the arts accomplish. Goethe himself expresses this,—

"Thus in the roaring loom of Time I ply,
And weave for God the garment thou seest him by."

There is also that nearer use of the imagination which is of immediate commercial importance, as when the promoter of a continental railway sees, in his mind's eye, a location through yawning cañons, and trackless forests on unbeaten mountain-sides, where his locomotives may clamber. And there is yet a third use of the imagination, which discerns enough importance in material and passing things (which to the general of his date seem trivial and valueless) to lead the poet to preserve and chronicle them, and so perpetuate that which otherwise would disappear, and be lost forever to the student of humanity and of history. Poetry, then, in the latter case, has its practical as well as its sentimental uses, and it is not a matter of supererogation that organizations of individuals should meet to study and interpret the works of a poet as well as the works of a publicist or a philosopher. But when the poetry of a certain poet, however magnificent, is merely delineation of, or soliloquy concerning, that of which all the race is tenant in common along with the poet, it would seem as if the organization of a great society or a learned academy to penetrate that particular poetry or that particular poet was rather what we call a "fad," or a croquet, than a work of any value to anybody. To illustrate the situation by use of an honored name (to which name I have no wish to allude other than with the highest respect: the death of Mr. Robert Browning has terminated what I think is one of the most wonderful—certainly the most unprecedented—phenomena in literature; namely, the spectacle of

a poet writing poetry, and of the simultaneous organization on two continents of learned societies to comprehend that poetry as fast as it was written. Indeed, the remark of the witty person—that, just as great physical works are beyond the capacity of individuals, and so must be intrusted to corporations, so the comprehension of Mr. Browning's poetry, being beyond the single intellect, was committed to aggregations of intellect known as "Browning Societies"—appears to have been less a *bon mot*, and much nearer the truth, than had been generally supposed; for Dr. Furnivall tells us why he founded the original Browning Society: "The main motive for taking the step," says the excellent doctor, "was some talk and writing of a certain cymbal-tinkler being a greater poet (that is, maker) than Browning. I couldn't stand that!" which rather appears to be only another way of saying that Browning was in danger of being neglected, simply because people could not readily ascertain whether there was any thing in him to study; and so that organizations must be formed, not to study something or other that was in him, but to find out if that something or other was there.

What I propose in this paper is an attempt to show, that—unlike the Browning Society—the Shakespeare Society is not an institution of this character, not organized to worship Shakespeare, or to study the Shakespearian method and form: but that it is an institution productive of real benefit, because its purpose is to study the matter (the material) in which Shakespeare deals; because we know that this matter is in him without the organization of any preliminary parsing societies—simply because, so unapproachably simple and coherent and scientific is his form, that we are able at a glance to ascertain whether he is worth studying or not.

Indeed, it would appear, from this very statement of the founder of Browning societies, that he himself perfectly well