

**THE THEME OF HAMLET. A
PAPER: READ BEFORE
THE FORTNIGHTLY CLUB
OF ROCHESTER, N. Y.**

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The theme of Hamlet. A paper: read before the Fortnightly Club of Rochester, N. Y. by Martin W. Cooke

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MARTIN W. COOKE

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THE THEME OF HAMLET.

"Thou art, too, like the spirit of Banquo."

A PAPER :

READ BEFORE THE FORTNIGHTLY CLUB OF ROCHESTER, N. Y.,

By MARTIN W. COOKE.

PRIVATELY PRINTED.

INTRODUCTION.

It would seem to be the duty of one who proposes to discuss the theme of Hamlet, to begin with an apology. Every one who rises to speak in a debate which has continued for over one hundred years, ought humbly to crave the indulgence of his audience and preface his remarks with a declaration of his willingness to vote in favor of a motion for the previous question. This I do.

My confidence, in submitting these investigations, is inspired by the trust that my readers will be like-minded to a writer in *Blackwood's Magazine* who says: "We ask not for a picture of the whole landscape of the soul nor for a guide who shall point out all its wonders. But we are glad to listen to every one who has traveled through the kingdom of Shakespeare. Something interesting there must be in the humblest journal, and we turn with equal pleasure from the converse of those who have climbed over the magnificence of the highest mountains there, to the lowlier tales of less ambitious pilgrims who have sat on the green and sunny knoll beneath the whispering tree and by the music of the gentle rivulet."

I have not aspired to the rôle of painter, guide or mountain climber; nor, do I boast of sitting on the green and sunny knoll; but, in the effort to say an un-said word of Hamlet, I admit a weakness which has led me to emulate the zeal of the young anatomist of to-day who burns his midnight oil in the seemingly hopeless task of discovering an unknown tissue of the human body; or, rather, the ambition of the mariner

who refuses to profit by the failures of his predecessors and risks his reputation and his life in the effort to find, explore and reveal the fugitive northern pole. Furness says: "Upon no throne built by mortal hands has 'beat so fierce a light' as upon the airy fabric reared at Elsinore." I confess a loving labor with my little mallet and chisel with which I have busied leisure hours in pecking at this literary sphynx.

I would prove a peace-maker harmonizing the fierce contestants who have quarrelled over the problem. I would enlist for my cause and convert to my standard the champions of feigned insanity and of real insanity and their followers; and, allied with the smaller independent bands, I would storm this seemingly impregnable Castle of Hamlet, and let into it the light of day and open to view the dingy, ghostly rooms where mystery has reigned supreme for centuries.

Shakespeare pondered much upon the human mind. He created men with abnormal minds, and showed by their conduct, speech and tragic fates the personal, social and political ends of those who are "slaves of passion," and so demonstrated what the human mind is not or ought not to be. His greatest work was to show what the spirit of man is in this world.

In Hamlet he sought to reveal the thought that without and above man is a power which has relation to him and whose mandates constitute the law of his being. He postulated simply the fact of the supernatural and its relation to man. What that power is, whether the "unknown power" of the modern scientist or the revealed Creator; what its nature, other than that it is supernatural, he does not seek to impart. Man he represents as a being endowed with reason, will and subordinate spiritual forces—the passions. In this world man, so organized and constituted, begins his existence and tarries till death; and, while he tarries he is in anticipation of another or further existence beyond the grave. The end of man's creation

is not here, and beyond the veil of death we know not what will be. He rests this part of the delineation with the fact simply that we will be—that there *is* “something after death.” Here the state is one of struggle. We “look before and after,” but our vision is limited by birth in one direction and death in the other. His purpose is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to the spiritual life of man in this world.

THE THEME OF HAMLET.

The play of Hamlet is the master-piece of the master-mind in literature. Its power to interest and entertain all men—the ignorant and the learned—is not possessed to the same degree by any other play of Shakespeare. The place it occupies in literature, its universal power to please, and the varied interpretations of it by the keenest critics, seem to justify renewed efforts to solve its mystery and discover its meaning and the secret of its power.

If one should read the criticisms of the play, with no other knowledge of the work, he would naturally infer that it was without meaning, and designed by its author as a literary puzzle. Did Shakespeare purposely create a purposeless production? Or, had he a consistent dramatic idea? Was he feigning insanity when he put forth this marvel of literature? Hamlet was one of the few plays that he re-wrote or revised. Shall we indict him for a second offense of fraud?

We have no sympathy with the suggestion that its author was merely a playwright, and wrote simply for ephemeral dramatic effect; or, that he aimed only at popular applause and the filling of his purse without regard to the meaning or worth of his productions. It is a libel against the intelligence of the playgoers of the time as well as an aspersion upon the author himself. Such a fling is the answer which not a few make to any effort to discover the theme of Hamlet. It is apparent from the work itself, and the study it has evoked, that it plunges deep into the mysteries of the life of man, not his political or social life, but his spiritual life;

and, if the interpretations which deal with it as a simple production, illustrating some one phase of man's being, have been so varied, so contradictory and unsatisfactory, is it not wise to look for a deeper meaning? It is fair to assume that Shakespeare had a definite theme before his mind, although Thomas Campbell says: "Shakespeare himself, had he even been as great a critic as a poet, could not have written a regular dissertation upon Hamlet." The true explanation, if it is ever discovered, will, doubtless, be consistent with *all* the facts of the delineation and, at the same time, account for the universal admiration and intense interest which the play commands with the people of every nation, for its power over the coarsest as well as the most delicate sensibilities, and for the diversity of the views as to its meaning.

Volumes have been written to demonstrate that Hamlet exhibits the vagaries of an insane person. Many contend that it represents the felicitous manoeuvres of a skillful artist feigning insanity to confound his associates. Others claim that it represents genuine madness, resulting from the effort to counterfeit the reality. One critic, in 1796, published a treatise on the play, and in his second edition apologized for the typographical errors of the first by asserting that it was published in haste for fear some other person would anticipate his discovery of the true intent and meaning of the author, and his theory was that the play was designed as an attack on Mary, Queen of Scots! This idea was revived and refined, in 1880, by a wiseacre in Germany. A German professor, in 1861, profoundly observed: "Protestantism will never fulfill its calling so long as its adherents are content to oppose the inexhaustible strength and cunning of its ancient evil foe with the mere consciousness of their righteous cause, so long as they will not learn to unite with the virtues of the Christian, the calm dispassionate prudence and consequent energy of the man: