

## SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES.

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(Continued from the February issue.)

### II. Tragic element and humour.

Meredith's minute study of the comic spirit has finely brought out how much it is akin to the tragic—and we would find that Shakespeare's development of the comic art is but the history of the growth of his tragic sense.

The first two dramas clearly show how far he was from the mature humorist of the later days—the great dramatist that had learned much from his 'owers of thousand pounds'—who, while privately buying land himself, could with a grim humour in his own *Hamlet* take up a skull and recognise in it some great past owner of land. In fact, at the beginning it is quite apparent that he is still too much of the lampooner of Sir Thomas Lucy. But his humour is in the go-cart and fast wearing out its nonage under the sound schooling of the tragic wand. The last scene of the *Comedy of Errors*, with its Browningian presentation of a 'situation' when the Lady Abbess suddenly reveals herself as the self-same Aemilia who 'for thirty-three years had but gone in travail' for 'the fair sons' 'that she bore' old Aegeon 'at a burden,' brings before us not so much the good old '*Deus ex machina*' but rather the tragic linings of the comic sock, the 'long grief' needed to produce 'such festivity'? So also *Love's Labours Lost* with its prospect of 'tears and lamentations in a mourning house' for the king or 'of moving wild laughter in the throat of death' for Biron 'does not end like an old play' and what others would have made a 'Jack hath Jill' ending of a comedy is made, so to speak, the first act of a tragedy.

Shakespeare is learning the philosophy of humour in that how it is above 'wit' of 'mocks and comparisons and wounding flouts'—the wormwood of a fruitful brain. True there is humour enough in the first plays but it is not to be discerned so much in the stains on the back of poor Dromio or the 'translation' of innocent Bottom but rather in the self-conscious ridicules which spare not

the humourist's own breast. Thus we would see that Shakespeare the greatest impersonal artist would come more and more to his own as he becomes conscious of his own innate personality. We recognise him already the first-rate humourist when he levels shafts at Euphuism, all the time wide awake as to his own Euphuistic failings or when he mercilessly exposes the ridiculousness of a lantern being a moon, or more so the man holding the lantern in hand being in the moon—while himself giving us dreamy 'shadows' offending all sense of reality.

In the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *the Merchant of Venice* the tragic potentialities have vastly increased—'Shakespeare has grown sad'—he is only having a foretaste of the throes he is to be thrown in very soon. Now as a transitional stage, a little removed from perfection is the best study of one's failings and foibles, we would see that the *Merchant of Venice* as well as the far-removed *Measure for Measure* give us ample reasons to say that Shakespeare's weak point in comedy, if any, lay in a tendency of the tragic to relegate the comic to the background.

Take again, Shakespeare's greatest comic character, the Titanic Falstaff, what is he but 'a comic Hamlet'? Not only humorous himself but cause of humour in others, the comic spirit incarnate as he is—is he not a loaded gun—for though there is not even a flash in the pan—only a cool 'Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pounds', do we not all feel his tragic potentialities? In fact his comedy lies in his being born 'in joint with the times.' When the time changes, when the age of boys passes away, and 'his own sweet boy' 'runs bad humours on him' (for what is great Harry V. himself but the Aristotelian pupil of 'this giant of circumstances?')—we feel the broad heaving breast about to burst and though his humour is still sufficient to make him 'a match for all of them together' he slips gently away from the time grown 'out of joint,' with the innocent mirth of a chrysome child. Thus there is always a tragic curl to Shakespeare's laughter, be it 'as broad as that of ten thousand beeves at pasture.' And as the tragic propensity goes on increasing, even the Fool in spite of its cap and bells gives signs of being 'a bitter fool.'

Aristotle has said, 'Poetry is the result of self-controlled emotions' and the two greatest comedies, *As you Like It* and *Twelfth Night* are the result of the successful self-possession of the greatest poet-dramatist at much pains to drive away 'loathed melancholy' by his 'Peace ho ! I bar confusion.' Even here if we just compare any of the characters of the English Dramatist with any from the pages of the greatest French Comedian, Moliere, we would be able to realise how much tragic the former is. In '*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*' Monsieur Jourdain to be cured of his vanity is subjected to the same treatment as Malvolio. But while in his case the 'bastinado' given on his back for being created 'Mufti' is instinctively felt not to be sufficient enough—a minute's presence in the dark-chamber of punishment in the other case makes us involuntarily turn to the door for Olivia's intercession and send our voice to swell Malvolio's just and indignant protest.

In fact, if we are to go by Lessing's definition that 'a comedy tends to universalise characters, and tragedy to individualise them' and realise at the same time that every bit of Shakespeare's comic creation has a sparkling individuality of its own, we are constrained to admit in spite of the larger output of comedies that the genius of our mature dramatist was essentially tragic. We feel how far Touchstone and Feste are from Costard and how much on their way to the poor Fool in *Lear*. And '*Measure for Measure*' shows how difficult it was for even Shakespeare to maintain a slight equipoise between the tragic and the comic of his soul. The process of 'sucking melancholy out of eggs' had gone too far and in all the succeeding so-called comedies we feel the whole atmosphere surcharged with the tragic spirit and we see the comic smile only by the flash of the tragic lightning. We have to sail away to the enchanted regions of the poetical Prospero with 'calm of mind all passion spent,' to be barbarously drunk with Stephano and Trinculo with the wine of unreality and romance in order to taste of the untainted humours of a mirthful Ariel.

(To be continued)

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