

## SHAKESPEARE À LA FRANÇAISE.



T this day,' wrote Wordsworth in 1815, 'the French critics have abated nothing of their aversion to "this darling of our nation." "The English with their bouffon de Shakespeare" is as familiar an expression among them as in the time of Voltaire.' And in spite of those periodical outbursts of a somewhat artificial enthusiasm, it is at least doubtful whether he is really more to the mind of the average Frenchman of to-day. Even M. Marcel Schwob's beautiful translation of 'Hamlet' failed to achieve more than a *succès d'estime*. Indeed, it would seem that Shakespeare, pure and unadulterated, is next to impossible on the French stage.

It was more than sixty years after his death that the first criticism on Shakespeare's works appeared in French. The author was Nicolas Clément, librarian of Louis XIV, who, whilst cataloguing the Royal Library, came across a copy of the Second Folio of 1632; the entry reads thus:

WILL. SHAKESPEARE,  
Poeta anglicus.

Opera poetica, continentia tragœdias, comœdias et historiolas. Angl<sup>o</sup>, Lond., Th. Cotes, 1632, fo.  
Eædem Tragœdiæ et comœdiæ anglicæ. Lond., W. Leake, 1641, 4<sup>o</sup>.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M. Jusserand, commenting on this entry, states that this second

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After the entries the cataloguer placed on record his opinion in the following terms:

Ce poète anglois a l'imagination assés belle, il pense naturellement, il s'exprime avec finesse; mais ces belles qualitez sont obscurcies par les ordures qu'il mêle dans ses Comedies.

Half a century after Clément, the sprightly author of 'Manon Lescaut' paid tribute to our great poet's strength in 'Le Pour et le Contre,' a periodical which entered on a brief and troubled existence in 1732. In his 'Lettres d'un Français' (1745), Leblanc, after censuring his grotesque extravagancies, gave whole-hearted praise to the sublimity of his style; and Voltaire, in his 'Lettres sur les Anglais,' declared himself an enthusiastic admirer of the poet. Thereupon the plays created such a stir in Paris that Voltaire grew jealous, and made a furious onslaught on the dramatist in which he referred to him as a barbarian and to his work as 'a huge dung-hill which concealed some pearls.'

A passage in William Holcroft's diary casts an interesting side-light on the French estimate of Shakespeare immediately before the Revolution. When on a visit to the Duc and Duchesse de Chartres in the summer of 1783, he was requested by his hosts to read some passages from Shakespeare. The company expressed themselves as highly delighted with the reading, but this did not prevent them from hotly urging the claims of the French poets to the prejudice of the English

volume contains not Shakespeare's works, but a selection of plays by Beaumont and Fletcher.

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master; and they succeeded so well in keeping their enthusiasm for the latter in check, that on the 25th June Holcroft addressed the following letter on the subject to his friend the Comte de Catuelan, who had been present at the discussion:

SIR,

The conversation we had on Sunday morning concerning Rousseau, Voltaire, Shakespeare, etc., started an idea as I was returning home, which I immediately put into the form you see. I would not have you suppose, Sir, I mean to depreciate the talents of Voltaire; that is far from my intention; I would only vindicate the poet who of all others within my sphere of knowledge, and as far as my judgement extends, is infinitely the greatest. I should have sent you the verses before, because I know your reverence for my favourite bard, but that I kept them to see if after sleeping two or three nights I still thought them fit to be read. I am yet in doubt; for anything middling on such a subject is contemptible. However, I have not yet shown them to any person, except you, Sir, and Mr. Bonneville, at whose lodgings they were written.

Clad in the wealthy robes his genius wrought,  
In happy dreams was gentle Shakespeare laid;  
His pleas'd soul wand'ring through the realms of thought,  
While all his elves and fairies round him play'd.

Voltaire approach'd—straight fled the quaint-eyed band,  
For Envy's breath such sprites may not endure.  
He pilfer'd many a gem with trembling hand,  
Then stabb'd the bard to make the theft secure.

Ungrateful man! Vain was thy black design.  
Th' attempt and not the deed thy hand defiled.  
Preserv'd by his own charms and spells divine  
Safely the gentle Shakespeare slept and smiled.

In a note on the above, Hazlitt wrote: 'With respect, however, to the enthusiasm with which Eng-

lishmen generally endeavour to persuade foreigners of the superlative excellence of our great dramatist, unless where it is taken up in self-defence, it is undoubtedly a species of quixotism, and of the most hopeless kind.'

But apart from these praiseworthy attempts at appreciation, it was Jean François Ducis who took in hand these crude and unpromising dramas—with all their barbarous incongruities, absurd anachronisms, and wild improbabilities—and, having purged them of the above-mentioned obscenities, shaped and rounded them off according to the unities, and arrayed them in all the pomp and circumstance of Alexandrine couplets. Yet an ungrateful British public remains deaf to the claims of the great Ducis, and his name is almost forgotten even in the land of his birth!

Ducis's services to Shakespeare have been admirably summed up by the editor of the Brussels edition of his works: 'Shakespeare,' remarked that gentleman in the preface, 'almost entirely debarred of education, writing among a still barbarous people, in a language scarcely formed, and for a stage utterly without order, was either ignorant of, or disdained those rules, and that dramatic affinity, the observance of which distinguishes our theatre; and what is perhaps more painful, he often allied the truest and most sublime beauties, now with the fault of indecency, now with the vice of affectation. Ducis . . . reduced to proportion and subdued to the established laws of our dramatic system, the gigantic and grotesque works of the English dramatist. He knew how to separate the pure and sublime traits

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from the impure alloy which dishonoured them, and to render them with that force, that warmth, that truth of expression, which places imitative talent and creative genius almost on an equality. Indeed, how much of bold and profound thought, of touching and exalted sentiment, has he added to that furnished to him by his model!

But no dead poet can reasonably be called to book for the rapturous indiscretions of his living editor. Moreover, there is abundant proof that Ducis was an exceedingly modest man, of lowly fortune if lofty ideals, who won the respect of all men, the great Napoleon included, to whom he was familiarly known as *Bonhomme Ducis*. The one ambition of his life was to make his countrymen appreciate Shakespeare, and to this end he cheerfully neglected his talent for original composition that he might devote his whole energies to the adaptation of the master's works for the French stage.

Ducis brought to his self-imposed task some aptitude for dramatic composition, a sincere admiration for Shakespeare, and a monumental ignorance of the language, manners, and customs of the English people. It was early in 1769 that the French poet discovered that the play of 'Hamlet' was 'out of joint,' and being, as we have seen, a modest man, he may have declaimed against the 'Cursed spite! that ever he was born to set it right.' He persevered, however, and in the same year his version was produced with great success at the Théâtre Français. The play, according to Ducis and the unities, is simplicity itself. In the first place there is but one scene, 'the Palace of the Kings of Den-

mark, Elsinour,' and in the opening lines we are informed that, on the sudden death of his father, Hamlet has ascended the throne, and that Claudius, 'first prince of the blood,' and Polonius, 'a Danish nobleman,' are conspiring his overthrow. The reasons for this plot are not quite clear. But, according to the conspirators, Hamlet is 'sullen, unsociable, and full of rancour,' therefore half mad, and wholly unfit to reign. The late king had also in his black tyranny decreed that Ophelia, 'the sole and feeble scion of my race,' as Claudius calls her (for she is his, not Polonius' daughter), 'the light of Hymen's torch shall ne'er behold.' Here again we are left in darkness as to the cause of this decision. Whilst these two worthies are concocting their heavy villainies, the Queen-Mother, Gertrude, enters, and Polonius withdraws in order to give Claudius an opportunity of proposing to her. But the moment is inopportune. Gertrude, bitterly repenting of her share in the murder, will none of him. At this juncture, Norceste, the dearest friend of Hamlet, returns from England. This Norceste was in Shakespeare's time known as plain Horatio; but the name is apparently not in accordance with the unities. Hamlet unbosoms himself to his friend as to his suspicions of the 'infamous Claudius' and his 'perfidious mother'; suspicions which have been strengthened almost to certainty by his father's ghost appearing to him in a dream, and demanding vengeance on Claudius and Gertrude as his murderers. Although Norceste shares Hamlet's suspicions, he attributes the ghostly visitation to an overwrought imagination, acting on the news of

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the timely murder of the King of England by his treacherous consort and her lover, who now reigned in his stead. It is hoped that the story of this crime will serve the purpose of Shakespeare's play within a play to make the murderers betray their guilt. The device, however, fails. Claudius refuses to be bluffed into confession, and even Gertrude manages to keep a cheerful countenance. Hamlet, in despair, turns to soliloquizing on self-slaughter, and here we get the first faint glimpse of Shakespeare:

Mourons. Que craindre encore quand on a cessé d'être?  
La mort. . . . C'est le sommeil. . . . C'est un réveil peut-être?

Peut-être. . . . Ah! c'est ce mot qui glace épouvanté  
L'homme au bord du cercueil par le doute arrêté.  
Devant ce vaste abîme il se jette en arrière,  
Ressaisit l'existence, et s'attache à la terre. . . .

and so on to the end of the scene, Ducis follows Shakespeare—afar off!

In the fifth act, Norceste enters, bearing in his arms the urn containing the 'deplorable ashes' of his late majesty, which he restores to the tears and embraces of the unhappy Hamlet. Norceste now gives place to Ophelia, who, amid much weeping, endeavours to soften the king's heart towards her father; but failing in her object, turns on him a column and a half of rhymed indignation. In the next scene, which is most impressive and worthier of a better cause, Hamlet, unable to satisfy himself as to his mother's complicity in the death of his father, attempts to make her swear over the

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funereal urn, and the Queen faints in the act of declaring her innocence. The tragedy now reaches its climax. The conspirators attack the Royal Palace. Norceste and his friends place themselves before the King, who, after exchanging fierce words with Claudius, draws his sword and kills him. Thereupon, *exeunt* the rebels bearing the corpse of Claudius; Gertrude stabs herself; and Hamlet, having overcome all his troubles, lived happily ever after.

As for Ducis, he ended as he began, and when death overtook him in 1816, he was still busily adapting Shakespeare's tragedies.

JOHN RIVERS.