Shakespeare in France under the ancien régime

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A new translation of Shakespeare into French is shortly to be published in Paris. It will differ from those already existing by being extremely literal, the intention of the author, M. Jules Lermnim, being to enable his readers to read the real Shakespeare through the medium of another language. "Hamlet" and "Romeo and Juliet" are to be published in October. The work will be illustrated by M. A. Robida.
BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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LONDON: T. FISHER UNWIN.
SHAKESPEARE IN FRANCE

THROUGH THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

By F. J. BISMARCK

[Image]
SHAKESPEARE IN FRANCE

UNDER THE ANCIEN REGIME

BY

J. J. JUSSERAND

London

T. FISHER UNWIN
Paternoster Square
MDCCXCIX
Shakespeare in France

In this curiously interesting volume Monsieur Jousseaud tells the story of the slow growth of the appreciation of Shakespeare in France and its present status. Nothing could show more clearly the great difference in the mental quality of the two nations than the utter inability of the cultured Frenchman to understand or recognize the genius of the great Englishman.

The first mention of Shakespeare in France is found in a catalogue of the library of Louis XIV., where the king's librarian records the works of "Will. Shakespeare, poëta Anglicus," and is good enough to state that this author "a l'imagination assez belle, il pense naturellement, il s'exprime avec finesse; mais ces belles qualités sont obscurcies par les ordures qu'il mêle dans ses Comédies." For a hundred years nothing more is heard of Shakespeare in France. In 1727 the Abbé Prevost visited London, learned English, and became an enthusiastic admirer of Shakespeare. He did his best on his return home to educate his countrymen into a better understanding of the English people and English literature. Later came Voltaire, who acknowledged that Shakespeare "had a genius full of strength and fecundity, of naturalness and sublimity, without the least spark of good taste and without the slightest knowledge of rules." He called his tragedies "monstrous farces," declared it undignified for Hamlet to sit on the floor, and in the opening scene of the play that it was an abominable vulgarity for a revery to speak "before the first person of the nation."

After the death of Voltaire there came a strange revulsion of feeling and a mania broke out for the plays of Shakespeare. But they were not the plays that we know. They were "adapted" out of all recognition. Donin, one of the translators, says of Othello, "Only the unities of time and place are wanted to make it regular as any of the Greek and French tragedies. I have tried to bring the Moor of Venice into the exact limits of these two unities." The original contains scenes of low comedy, he says, but he "has remedied, as far as possible, that essential fault." He proposes to employ his leisure in translating all of Shakespeare's plays, "reserving only the liberty of cleansing the plays, both comic and tragic, by pruning their superfluity and reducing them to the limits of three unities." Another translator, Butini, says: "I shall not waste time in explanation upon a few changes indispensable in Shakespeare's plays. Everybody must feel that it is necessary to whiten Othello's swarthy face, to soften the ending, suppress a few scenes, simplify the action, and reduce the whole to these three unities." And he modestly adds that "if they prove not unpleasing to men of taste the glory will be chiefly due to Shakespeare!" But the most sustained effort to introduce this sort of Shakespeare to the stage was made by Jean François Ducis, "Bonhomme Ducis," as Napoleon was wont to call him. "Hamlet" was his first essay, and out of the original he fabricated a hybrid drama, Greek and Danish, French and English, all at once. New characters are introduced; Ophelia is made the daughter of Claudius, the episode of the player-king and queen is left out, and much of the action is replaced by descriptions put in the mouths of the characters. Hamlet becomes king, and Claudius, his tricking
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