
Lectures on Shakespeare

Hudson Henry Norman

Title: Lectures on Shakespeare

Author: Hudson Henry Norman

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LECTURES
ON
SHAKSPEARE.

BY
H. N. HUDSON.

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LECTURES ON SHAKSPEARE.



LECTURE IX.

TEMPEST—MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.

TEMPEST and Midsummer-Night's Dream are the two plays in which Shakspeare has most daringly and most successfully carried nature beyond herself; his understanding and imagination having here apparently changed places with each other, to the end that the former might employ its energies and resources in building up "a local habitation and a name" for the airy sportive creations of the latter. Both plays exemplify throughout the triumph of essential truth over circumstantial falsehood; the real world undergoing a temporary suspension of its laws as if to celebrate the advent of the ideal, and the understanding cheerfully acquiescing in a sweet contradiction to give freer scope for the beautiful and the pure. The two resemble each other in respect that they proceed in part by the agency of supernatural beings: further than this, however, they have no resemblance whatever; for Shakspeare's supernatural beings are as clearly and distinctly individual in all their features and movements as his most human characters. So perfectly, also, does the poet observe the

distinction between the supernatural and the antinatural, that even when he takes us farthest out of the actual world, we scarcely think or feel that there is any thing but nature about us : indeed we may almost say, that in his hands all the forms of nature become alive, and all the forms of life become natural ; the most airy dream-like conceptions are clothed with the reality of earth, the dullest and heaviest clods of earth informed with the breath of intellectual life. When he creates a new object for our vision, he at the same time creates as it were a new sense within us to perceive it with ; and the sweet fairy visions, with which he enchants us, seem so much a part of ourselves that we can hardly tell, for the time, whether the imaginary is turning out to be real, or the real to be imaginary ; whether the poet is drawing us into an illusion, or waking us out of an illusion ; and whether his creations or ourselves be more truly but

“ Such stuff
As dreams are made of, and whose little life
Is rounded with a sleep.”

Equally ideal in its substance, the *Tempest* is, however, far more actual in its circumstances than *Midsummer-Night's Dream* ; the former transcending, the latter mocking reality ; the one representing human life in an ideal form, where every thing is subject to order and reason, the other representing it as merely a dream, where every thing gives way to fancy and feeling. For evidence of “omnipotent creativeness,” the *Tempest* probably surpasses all the rest of our poet's works. The play unites the two extremes of human imagination ;

for we can scarce conceive a greater diversity in created beings than that between Ariel and Caliban ; the one an ethereal intelligence, the other an intelligent vegetable. Nearly as strong, though of an altogether different sort, is the contrast between Caliban and Miranda ; the former a loathsome embodiment of spiritual deformity, who seems to have been dug up out of the ground, with merely the power of thought ; the latter the embodied quintessence of spiritual beauty, who seems to have dropped down from heaven, with merely human vestments. The moral antithesis between Prospero and Antonio, scarcely less marked than the others, makes up this wonderful dramatic combination,—undoubtedly the most wonderful ever formed : yet all these strangely-assorted characters converge into such unity and harmony of impression, that we cannot see how any one could be what it is without all the others.

Among the many marvellous accounts given to the world by the navigators of the sixteenth century, there was probably none more marvellous than that of the “still-vexed Bermoothes,” now known as the Bermuda Isles. Sir George Somers having been shipwrecked there in a storm, the fruitful imagination of the age pictured them as a land of devils,—“a most prodigious and enchanted place, subject to continual storms and supernatural visitings.” All that was wild and fearful and wonderful in the facts and fictions of the past, was fancied to have made them its chosen dwelling-place. Thither had flocked all the beautiful and terrible visions, all the fairy and fiendish shapes, which advancing civilization had frightened out of the old world. It was there, accordingly, that Shakspeare