

ÆSCHYLUS AND SHAKESPEARE.

THE "EUMENIDES" AND "HAMLET."

"IT is a dull play" was the criticism which more than once met the ear of the spectator of the "Eumenides" as given at Cambridge this December, 1885. The music, the *mise-en-scène*, the spirit, grace, and beauty of the actors, all had their full meed of praise, but it was somewhat at the expense of the poet, who was felt to have kept his audience a long time listening to a story which contained very little incident, character painting, or fine poetry. The remark, together with the reminiscence which the play suggests of one which has never been thought dull, must have set more than one spectator pondering on the different kind of interest demanded by an Athenian and an English audience; and the question, how it is that human nature changes its demand for particular kinds of interest with the progress of the ages is a problem of perennial interest.

Perhaps we may imagine the difference between the kind of attention given to dramatic representation by Athenians and by modern Englishmen, if we conceive a child thinking he is to be taken to see Madame Tussaud's, and finding himself among the Elgin marbles. The demand for a story, as we understand the words, in connection with the drama, would probably impress a Greek much as the demand for the accessories of waxwork among sculpture would impress us. It was not that they were wholly without any conception of this kind of interest, there is a great deal of it in the "Iliad." The conversation between Helen and Priam on the walls of Troy, for instance, has much of the vivid expression of individual character which a modern playwright seeks to produce. But this kind of interest must have been deliberately renounced by the great dramatists. They *chose* that austere simplicity which is, to our taste, so undramatic. The play of various

human character is present in the poem which was to them at once their Bible and their Shakespeare, at least as unquestionably as it is in any modern poem, but the sharers in Homer's immortality reject his method, and if we look for that kind of interest in their work, we shall find none at all. The paradox involves the whole difference between the ancient and the modern view of this our human life, with all its issues of right and wrong, sweet and bitter, true and false. Much light is thrown on this difference by carrying out the comparison suggested above, and setting the "Eumenides" beside a play of Shakespeare's so similar to it in plot that we should certainly have credited the English poet with copying it, if he could have read Greek. The similarity of position between Orestes in the Greek and Hamlet in the English play brings out strikingly the radical divergence between the spirit of the two writers and the two nations.

The common elements are indeed remarkable.* Orestes and Hamlet have both to avenge a beloved father, who has fallen a victim to the guilty passion of an unfaithful wife; in each case the adulterer has ascended the throne; and a claim of higher than mere mortal authority demands his punishment; for the permitted return of Hamlet's father from the world beyond the grave may be set beside the command of Apollo to Orestes to become the executioner of the wrath of Heaven. These similarities—though they are probably quite accidental—are sufficiently important and specific to bring out in all its marked contrast the opposite feeling with which the two pictures, in their main outlines so similar, have been filled in. Observe, first, that Hamlet is complete in itself. We do not want to investigate the murder of Hamlet's father—unlawful passion is the adequate and declared temptation which has caused his murder; we have not to get behind that motive, or to have its genesis in any other. But the "Eumenides" is a manifest fragment. We begin in the middle, the first start of the play implies a past. Orestes appears flying from the Furies, the shade of his mother arises to quicken their wrath—a curious combination of the resemblance of the play to "Hamlet" with its extreme divergence of spirit. It may be answered that this is a mere question of nomenclature, and that the "Eumenides" should in fact be regarded as the last act of the "House of Atreus" (as a graceful translator has named the whole trilogy). It is true that we must take the "Eumenides" not as a play, but as the last act of a play, and the remarks which follow so treat it; but if we go back to the first act—the return of Agamemnon from the siege of Troy, and his murder by Clytemnestra—the

* A French translator of "Hamlet" (Ducis) puts in the mouth of the Prince what is almost a description of the murder of Clytemnestra, as something from which he recoils.

story still implies and needs a past. Guilty passion is the theme of the "Agamemnon" just as it is of "Hamlet," but it is not merely by the singular purity of the tragic muse that the reader's attention is directed elsewhere; the guilty lovers have their wrongs to avenge; the daughter of Clytemnestra, the father of Ægisthus, each seem to call from their tombs for vengeance, as Clytemnestra herself does in her turn. We start with a record of sin, the *damnosa hereditas* is there from the first. The vicissitudes of an individual conscience and will are too slender a theme to bear the stress of the poet's genius, he must deal with a larger whole.

Here we have the modern point of view and the ancient in their most distinct contrast. To the Greek, the individual man is a fragment. To concentrate attention on *his* destiny was to shiver the snowy Parian block that the sculptor might have convenient material for carving isolated hands and feet. The ultimate object of all Greek attention was not an individual, but a group. Whereas we conceive the State as a collection of individuals, they conceived the individual as a fragment of the State. Our sympathies seek no larger resting-place than the desires and aspirations of an individual soul, theirs craved some corporate unity of which the individual was a mere member. We are accustomed to recognize this difference on the field of Politics; we feel that the ancient city was a more deeply felt reality than the modern nation, that patriotism was, in classical ages, available at a lower temperature than it is with us. But we do not recognize that the difference is as potent in art and in morals as in politics, that it created a different ideal of individual life,—that it set artistic attention in a different groove. And nothing ought so much to help us to realize this as a comparison of the two great dramatists severally of Greece and of England.

The Greek and the Englishman had something in common beside genius. The roseate glow that comes in the dawn of a nation's life was around them both. Æschylus lived in that brief gleam of splendour between the war which made Greeks discover that Greece was a unity, and the war in which they forgot it. Shakespeare lived in that steady, increasing radiance when England first awoke to feel her power and delight in her freedom. Both were animated by an awakening national life, both sung the glories of their country. But how strikingly the resemblance brings out the difference! We may take Henry V. as a sort of symbol of Shakespeare's pride in England; the hero king shines forth as a type of all that should gather up the loyalty, the patriotism of a subject of Elizabeth; his portrait is painted in Shakespeare's richest hues, and set in his clearest light. The whole play is full of a glowing pride in England, and defiance to her enemies, and this feeling finds its focus in the conqueror of Agincourt; the glory of England is summed up in the glory of an

Englishman. But, when we turn to the play in which the like sense of a nation's triumph bursts forth in the verse of Æschylus—like, but infinitely greater, for even the new sense of freedom, when the black thundercloud of the Armada rolled away, must have been feeble in comparison with the raptures that succeeded Salamis—when we turn to the play in which that rapture of relief is commemorated, we remark with surprise, that while it is filled with the names of Persians, real or invented, Æschylus has studiously avoided the name of a single Greek. That concrete embodiment of national pride, which was indispensable to the Englishman, was abhorrent to the Athenian. He is absorbed by a religious sense of the invisible bond which made his people one, of the Divine power which had fought on their side. “Who is their shepherd and their master? * who leads them to the fight?” asks the mother of Xerxes, and we can imagine what an overpowering thrill of emotion went through the crowd of spectators as they heard the answer given by the humbled foes of Greece, “They are subjects of no man.” Loyalty was a feeling which would have roused nothing but dread in an Athenian. The subject of reverence was the city, the invisible would endure no rivalry on the part of the visible. Æschylus was recounting the events in which he had borne a part: and doubtless the honour of the warrior was dearer to him than the honour of the poet. Yet all the more he felt that the interest of the drama of the deliverance of Greece must centre in a throne filled by no visible form. Shakespeare makes the most of Henry V.; Æschylus does not take cognizance of the very existence of Miltiades or Themistocles.

The different ideals which come out in these two national dramas are visible whenever we contrast the life of the modern and the ancient world. In some sense we are forced to realize this difference whenever we look backwards. We see not merely that the Greek was a different kind of being from the Englishman, but that he was trying to be something different. The ideal state of the wisest Greek would have revolted the practical moral standard of the least virtuous Englishman. Men are separated, not by their ideal of what is good, but by their ideal of what is best; for by the correlation of moral force the whole of life is altered when we alter its hierarchy of reverence. It is of no avail that two men should agree that individual life is sacred, and that membership in a State is sacred, if they differ as to which is to come first. From the ancient point of view goodness was invisible in the individual, the group was the smallest organism in which it could be discerned. Hence all that belonged to individual relation was comparatively uninteresting. The one strong emotion which forms almost the theme of modern art, which every one thinks he can draw from imagination and most people

* “*Persæ*,” 246.

have known by experience, had a subordinate place on the Athenian stage. The love of man for woman, so far as it ever appears there, is something quite secondary, something more or less to be kept out of sight. In the guilty love of Clytemnestra for Ægisthus there is indeed something pathetic and tender, but it is hardly allowed to appear at all; we are made to feel that she hates her husband much more than that she loves her paramour; the sense of destiny is a much stronger element in the murder than the sense of choice. In the classical ideal man's love for woman is almost nothing. In the chivalric idea it is almost everything. In Hamlet we see the chivalric ideal stamped by the individuality of a great original genius. Hamlet thinks, on the tomb of the drowned Ophelia, that he loved her more than twenty thousand brothers. Ah, how like human nature! We seemed to have loved so passionately when we have lost. We *do* so love what is gone out of reach. While Ophelia was living, to be chilled or warmed by Hamlet's love, he took very little thought of her. Other feelings were not stronger than his love of her, perhaps, but quite as strong, and there were many of them. What a wonderful knowledge of the human heart lies in that combination of the cool lover and the passionate mourner! We know no other delineation of man's love that can be put by its side. An inferior artist would have painted so slight a love as Hamlet's for Ophelia only in the portrait of a slight character. Shakespeare knew that a love may be indestructible, and rooted in a deep nature, and yet in itself may be a small thing; for he knew the heart of man. We fancy that those words are the mere equivalent of the statement that he was a great poet. But we are now comparing Shakespeare with a poet as great as he was, and surely more original, who did not know the heart of man, and did not care to know it. He was not studying the springs of individual character. He cared only for that which was universal.

What Æschylus was studying was not the heart of man, but the mind of God. What is the Power that rules the world? What is the law by which He rules it? How may man approach Him? These were the problems that filled the mind of the poet. Whatever were those lessons which he learnt at Eleusis of the hopes of immortality, we may see that they had deeply impressed him, that in imagination he was constantly piercing the dread barrier of the tomb. Whatever deeply interested him must be supernatural. And the ordinary course of history, in his day, may almost be called supernatural. He had fought at Marathon. He had seen the whole might of Asia shattered on the rock of Greek freedom. He had seen his country defended from arrogant power as by a miracle. Hence in his desire to comprehend the law by which the world was ruled, and which he knew as destiny, there was a profound faith in

ultimate righteousness, though the faith was not wholly dominant, and much that was there also was inconsistent with it. The Mysteries give the key-note to his music; we compare him with Shakespeare to discover difference, for resemblance we must turn to Dante. He saw that quality in sin which to the imagination of Dante created an endless hell, as an inheritance of guilt; or from another point of view, as the passing over of guilt to fate. Surely in this vision he is not less true to reality than Shakespeare is. Who does not know how the errors of life hover to the eyes of memory in some dim region between sin and calamity, and change with the parallax of life's movement from the one position to the other? We never seem to have begun at the beginning! Always there was a past that domineered over our present! And then, at last, we feel that our life is moulded by the lives that have gone before, and thus that the seeming separateness of life is in part delusive. This idea seems to have haunted the Greek mind with a recurrent insistence of perplexity. When the object of attention changed from the group to the individual, that which lies at the very core of the individual life—the will—came into a new distinctness. A new interest in human character is a new belief in human will, and we recover the old point of view only with a certain effort. We imagine that will is denied where it is hardly conceived. Till each man became a whole in himself Will was only dimly conceived as a moving force in human affairs; that law of moral evolution which they knew as *Fate* was a much more distinct element in human experience. Hence Guilt was something different to them and to us, and throughout all their grandest poetry they seem always seeking to answer the problem of what it really meant. Orestes is vindicated by Apollo, but the Furies have much to say for themselves. We do not feel that the last word rests either with the God of Day or the Daughters of Night. The Goddess of Wisdom harmonizes both views. But though there is balance here, there is no variety. The drama, and all his dramas, is full of a sombre, awful monotony. Divine Law leaves no room for human character.

Turn to the other side of the contrast and mark the change. What a wondrous gallery of rainbow-hued variety rises up before the mind's eye at the name of Shakespeare. When we make his name into an epithet we give a picturesque synonym for *various*. No one type of character, feeling, or belief occurs as *Shakespearian*; the word suggests what is vivid and many-sided, and nothing else. This efflorescence of a wealth of various beauty for all the ages chronicles the first awakening of modern Europe to the sanctities, the interests, the ideals of individual life. It is an expression, on the field of art, of the spirit which on the field of theology gave us the Reformation, setting the human spirit face to face with the

Divine, and bidding it trust to no intervening entity—no external citizenship in the City of God—but as the sole creature alone with the Creator learn what mystic channels are opened between the finite and the infinite within the “abysmal depths of Personality.” It would not appear that Shakespeare had any special sympathy with the Reformation, it would even seem that so far as any religion had a hold upon his mind it was that of the ancient Church. At least, he, addressing the England of Elizabeth, the England which was ready to fight against all that was involved, for the men of that time, in the doctrine of Purgatory, makes a spirit from beyond the grave announce that he is

“Doomed for a certain time to walk the night,
And for the day, condemned to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.”

But however little of a Protestant was Shakespeare the poet, his was the artistic expression of the same spirit that made Protestantism. The City had passed away, and for a thousand years the Church had taken her place. Now the Church, too, was called upon to yield, and the *home* was lighted up with a new life. Man was interesting not only as the member of the State, called upon to serve her with his life or his counsels; not only as a son of the Church, called upon to partake in her rites and submit to her decisions, but as a son, a father, a lover, a husband—as a *man*. As a learned bishop was describing the earth as a *new star*; as men were learning to regard this dark centre of the universe as a radiant wanderer in the heavens, so human life was clothing itself in a new brightness, and taking its place in that clear, open realm of Nature to the study of which the intellectual world was awakening with a passionate activity. And the expression of this truly named Renaissance, in the world of Art, may be summed up in the name of Shakespeare.

If Shakespeare be the best representative of this new spirit, Hamlet may be taken as its best specimen among his works. It is perhaps the most various of Shakespeare's plays. A little biographical incident gives us a double reason for claiming it as the most Shakespearian of Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare's only son was named Hamlet (or Hamnet—only a varied form of the same name). Nine years he experienced the wonderful fortune of having for a parent one who, if his works express his nature, must have been the most sympathetic of mankind, and then he went elsewhere and left, perhaps, a terrible spasm of longing in the heart of the poet for ever associated with a play consecrated to the love of a lost father. This surely is the dormant feeling in the play. Hamlet is much besides—the friend of Horatio, the lover of Ophelia, the patron of the theatre, the heir expectant of the kingdom. Something individual, something characteristic, comes out in all these characters. But he

is above all a son. What a profound filial tribute is there in his correction of the courtly eulogy of Horatio: "He was a goodly king." "He was a *man*." We fancy a double emphasis there. "He was a *man*, what matter whether he dwelt in a palace or a cottage?" "*He* was a man, unlike me his wretched irresolute son." The self-scorn marks, perhaps, the furthest point of Shakespeare from Æschylus. The elder self is too simple, too small to leave any space for any conflict of opposing principles. Between the two poets *Self* has taken a development which makes room for a dualism within, such as was undreamt of in the ancient world. There is none of that swerving—none of that sudden glimpse of the self from some mysterious point that seems at once beyond and within it, of which we have some examples from every modern writer who paints the heart, and so many in Shakespeare. Here the moral attitudes are entirely monotonous. The Æschylean version of the theme of Hamlet unfolds the problem of inherited guilt, and never turns aside to mark a single trait of individual character. There is a certain grandeur in Clytemnestra and weakness in Ægisthus, but we cannot say that Orestes bears the mark of any quality whatever, good or bad. There seems a sort of curious carelessness in all that relates to him, except so far as he is the engine of Heaven's wrath to the guilty queen. For instance, how impatient must the poet have been of all that paints individuality when he lights upon the trivial and impossible test by which Electra assures herself of the presence of her brother after his long banishment. She sees a footprint near the altar, she puts her own foot into it, and discovering that the mark just fits her, she comes to the conclusion that her brother is near. So her foot must have been just the size of a full-grown man's, for the deeds of Orestes attest that he could not have been less than full-grown. The incident, it may be said, is not the work of a more careless imagination than that which describes two duellists exchanging their weapons unawares. No, but the carelessness of Shakespeare is the mere indifference to a particular kind of probability which has nothing to do with human relations, and the carelessness of Æschylus is a want of interest in human relations. No one who realized the anxiety of a sister to know that a long-lost brother was near could imagine her drawing any inferences from the probability that their feet should be the same size.* But the meeting of the brother and sister demanded a kind of attention which the poet was not prepared to supply. It is not the characters of Orestes, of Ægisthus, of Agamemnon which interested him; his creations, if they are to be impressive, must be

* The device impressed even the contemporaries of Æschylus as somewhat absurd, and Euripides wrote one scene as an elaborate caricature of it ("Electra," 511-540). It is curious as almost the only specimen of parody in Greek art.

colossal. All the swaying of various impulse that occupies the play of "Hamlet" is by him condensed into a few lines where Orestes tells how the oracles of Apollo have denounced the most awful curses against him if he leave his father's death unavenged, and again in the one line where, for a moment shaken by the entreaties of his mother, he asks Pylades if he shall

"Through filial reverence spare a mother's life." *

This ideal conflict, which we know on the page of Shakespeare in association with all that is most human, most vividly imbued with personal idiosyncrasy, is set forth, in the Greek drama, in its purely abstract form. It appears not as a double consciousness, but as a changing Deity. The Furies absorb all interest to themselves; they are the embodied conscience, but also they might seem, from some points of view, the Greek equivalent to Satan. They are "daughters of night," they enter into conflict with the god of day, who shelters from them the object of their pursuit, banishes them from his temple with fierce invective, and forces them to surrender their victim to his protection. We are reminded of Satan by them more than by any other representation known to classic thought—sometimes even of the vulgar Satan with horns and hoofs, of Mephistopheles clamorous for his prey, for they inspire horror by their mere aspect, and their haunting presence is the worst torment they can inflict on their victim. And then, again, even in their more spiritual aspect, they take the same place as Satan, when he appears among the sons of God to bear witness against Job, or when he revealed himself to the Saviour as seeking to have Peter, that he might sift him as wheat. But we know these goddesses *both* as the Furies and the Gracious Ones; and it is surely an error to suppose that the latter expression is a mere euphemism, as we call a person "well-meaning" whom we find intolerable, or as they called the Black Sea "the hospitable." One felt at Cambridge that if such a thing had been possible, and not too suggestive of Harlequin or Pantaloon, there should have been some sort of transformation in the scene in which they become reconciled to the Goddess of Wisdom—that some hideous mask should have been laid aside, something that expressed a total change of aspect, and recalled the lines,

"Stern Lawgiver!
Yet thou dost bear the Godhead's most benignant grace."

The Goddess of Wisdom appeases the pitiless beings, she even induces them to take up their abode in the city which has dared to shelter from them their victim. The daughters of night are to have a place in the elect city, the nightingales are to fill their grove with music, and though here the passer-by may not set foot without impiety,†

* "Eumenides," 899.

† See the "Œdipus at Colonus" of Sophocles.

yet no Greek landscape is associated with images more remote from horror, nor is any Greek poetry fuller of solemn beauty than her vindication of the claim to reverence of that severe influence which to the bright Sun-god is visible only as hopeless remorse. The city which makes no room for this influence, which pays no homage to a righteous severity, misses, she declares, half of that which makes life blessed. To the light and lively Greek the sense of sin was almost as repugnant as sin itself, the two were often confused; Apollo, in face of the Furies, seems to express the spirit of art in face of the spirit of holiness—the bright pleasure-loving genius denouncing the stern voice that does but give expression to the conscience. But the Goddess of Wisdom shows us that even for the Greek this was not the ultimate truth. She gives a warning to all time—perhaps more especially for our times—when she bids the Athenians remember,* in words which we give, as they recall in their rhythm Wordsworth's well-known lines to Duty, and which in their feeling and moral truly sum up the spirit of the whole drama—

“Yea, even from these, who, grim and stern,
 Glared anger upon you of old,
 Oh citizens, ye now shall earn
 A recompense right manifold.
 Deck them aright, extol them high,
 Be loyal to their loyalty;
 And ye shall make your town and land
 Sure, propped on Justice' saving hand
 And Fame's eternity.”

JULIA WEDGWOOD.

* “Eumenides,” 1005–1013, Morshead's Translation.