SHAKESPERE'S PREDECESSORS.*

It was with high expectations that we looked forward to the perusal of a book upon the pre-Shakesperian drama, by that accomplished literary veteran, the author of the "Renaissance in Italy." It seemed that one who had written so well upon the Greek poets, and who had mastered all that relates to the modern rebirth of the human intelligence, could not fail to impart to the reader something of the rapture of discovery he must have felt when, with "optic glass," he swept that part of the heavens where Marlowe's morning star gleams in the radiance of the opening dawn. The conditions seemed exceptionally favorable for the production of a great work. The historian of the Renaissance was to crown his work by describing the finest product of the Renaissance in England,—indeed, if we include Shakespere, as Mr. Symonds still intends to do, we may call it the finest product of the Renaissance in Europe. Could an Englishman whose spirit had been so finely touched to such fine issues, and who knew the Renaissance so well, fail to be adequately acquainted with the marks left by that tidal wave of human energy upon the coast line of the English mind? Our expectations being strung so high, we were the more deceived. The very preface inspires a qualm of misgiving, for there it is stated that this book is a revision of work laid aside as unfit

* SHAKESPERE'S PREDECESSORS IN THE ENGLISH DRAMA. By John Addington Symonds. London: Smith, Elder & Co.

for publication more than twenty years before. This, however, but poorly prepares the reader for the successive disappointments in store for him in the course of his perusal of these pages.

Not that this is a valueless book; it is simply, as a whole, unworthy of the author's great reputation. It has its sound and excellent portions, but it is full of inequalities. At times the tone is that of a youthful aspirant for magazine honors; again it is that of the literary master which Mr. Symonds now is. He who goes to it for his first introduction to the subject, will find much that is interesting and instructive, and will doubtless part with the author on friendly enough terms. There are fifteen chapters, dealing with the rise of the English drama from its origin in the miracle plays to its full evolution as a species in Greene and Marlowe. There are chapters dealing with such related topics as theatres, playwrights, actors, play-goers, masques at court, etc. The last three chapters (pp. 170) are devoted to John Lyly, Greene, Peele, Nash, Lodge, and Marlowe. Naturally many illustrative side-lights are thrown upon the condition of English society during the period treated. A large number of old plays, inaccessible to most readers, are skilfully analyzed, the raciest and most poetical passages being quoted. There is a full table of contents at the beginning of the book and at the head of each chapter; but we miss an index, especially an index to the numerous valuable passages cited. The following list of *errata* may be of service to some one: At p. 237, Bacon is said to have been in his twenty-third year in 1587; he was, in fact, born in 1561. At p. 326, the date, 1515, is wrong, being probably a misprint for 1575. At p. 580, the name of E. W. Gosse is misprinted. At p. 596, last line, for *lamb* read *iamb;* p. 597, seventh line from foot, for *fourth* read *third;* p. 638, second quotation, for *illiteral* read *illiberal.*

In an excellent passage at the beginning of the book, the author lays out an excellent programme, showing that he well knows what is expected of a writer who undertakes a study of this nature. "The ruling instinct of the present century demands," says he, "and in my opinion demands rightly, some demonstration of a process in the facts collected and presented by a student to the public." Some principle of evolution must be disclosed "before we have a right to style the result of our studies anything better than a bundle of literary essays." This is sound doctrine, but one must look elsewhere for its realization. Take, for instance, the chapter entitled "Masques at Court." Roughly speaking, about half of this chapter is devoted to descriptions of certain Italian masques, and the other half to those of Ben Jonson and Milton, who were about as truly "predecessors" of Shakespere as Keats and Tennyson were predecessors of Wordsworth. Since, however, the author's special fitness to discuss the Elizabethan drama appears to consist in the fact that he is the historian of the Renaissance, the indulgent reader will readily pardon digressions like this upon the Italian masques, especially as it is all so interesting. But let us not be misled by any such solemn delusion as that all these things form an essential part of a "demonstration of a process." Mr. Symonds records, at p. 337, the fact that the masque "received no adequate treatment in England during the reigns of our Tudor sovereigns." If, then, it was not till Shakespere's work was nearly done that the masque was developed, why give it such prominence in a work devoted to men and things which made straight the way for Shakespere? In general, the same criticism must be passed upon the work as a whole. Mr. Symonds has said it: his book is merely "a bundle of literary essays," — a few in his best style, several indifferent, all interesting, — the whole lacking that organic symmetry and completeness which it is so much easier to dream of than to achieve.

This, however, is by no means the worst, and of that *worst* it is an ungrateful task to speak. In plain English, Mr. Symonds is frequently guilty of encumbering his book with that kind of literary ballast known in editorial cant as "padding." That this is a serious charge to bring against one of the foremost Englishmen of letters of the day, the present writer is painfully aware; but several passages of trivial or irrelevant matter compel the conclusion that the author felt bound by some exigency to make a book of a given size, and that, not possessing the requisite amount of sound material, he was driven to shifts unworthy of his reputation in order to "bombast out" his chapters, some of which read as if they had been hastily concocted for some ephemeral magazine. But two instances of this inferior work shall be mentioned. At pp. 260–1, he treats us to a welcome translation from the Italian of Cecchi, in which the "Romantic Drama" is genially personified as a "fresh country lass." This passage is racy, natural, charming. But Mr. Symonds cannot stop there. Mindful, one is forced to think, of the demands of inexorable publishers, he carries on the allegory through three pages more, insisting at the close upon seeing the lady home "to torchlit chambers of Whitehall and Greenwich," when he drily observes: "You may call her a grisette." Pass for the dignity of history; but this is the indignity of poetry! Again at p. 571, finding himself at the end of his account of Peele's plays, he introduces a quotation of fifty-three lines from

one of his odes. Although related in no wise to the subject of the book, it is good in itself, and, padding for padding, much more acceptable than the author's prose. But the climax is reached when, after informing us that the same spirit animates Peele's poem on the Order of the Garter, Mr. Symonds proceeds to quote a dozen lines from that poem, consisting solely of an enumeration of the names of the first knights of the order. While the reader is rubbing his eyes over these lines, the following foot-note catches his attention and gives him a lesson in human nature which alone is worth the price of the book:

"Piety to these knights of the French wars, among whom I count a collateral ancestor, Sir Richard Fitz-Simon, rather than admiration for the poetry of this passage, makes me print these lines."

Here we have, at last, the "link of connection between man and man" which furnished a motive for the introduction of these two pages from Peele's odes. We can imagine what Thackeray would have said to this: he would have indulged in his favorite quotation from King Solomon.

Even in the sound and weighty portions of the book, one fails to find the marks of the master-hand so frequently traceable in the history of the Renaissance in Italy. There the author moves with the security and freedom of one "to the manner born." Here he is, like those he guides, an alien but partially domesticated. He is a companionable guide wherever others have gone before and marked the way; but he draws back from the tangled forest, accepts not the challenge of the mountain peak, leads to no exhilarating explorations of the mysteries of unpenetrated glens. Metaphor aside, there is nothing new in the book, nothing that has not already been as well or better said, nothing that makes it either indispensable or even very useful to the student who has already broken the ground. In extenuation of all this the author would doubtless plead what, indeed, he distinctly states in his preface: viz., that the book was not written for scholars — that its aim is the honorable one of making the subject familiar to readers who might shrink from the perusal of a work like Professor Ward's "History of English Dramatic Literature." This plea might make the present criticism seem futile, were it not for two circumstances: first, the just expectations aroused by the high reputation of the writer; secondly, the promise, made at the outset, of exhibiting the subject as a uniform growth with its organic interdependence of parts. Considered merely as an attempt to popularize a somewhat remote portion of literary history, this work is capable of being very useful, although it falls short of the high standard fixed for this class of books by the accomplished contributors to Mr. John Morley's series of literary biographies, among whom Mr. Symonds himself holds an honorable place.

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