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# UNIVERSITY EXTENSION LECTURES.

## "THE CHARACTER OF HAMLET."

The second of the University Extension lectures on "Hamlet and the Shakespearean Drama" was delivered by Professor Henderson in the Town Hall last night. There was again a very large attendance.

Professor Henderson said it would be admitted that he had a difficult task in essaying to analyse the character of Hamlet, and he approached it with a considerable amount of humility and deference. He was well aware that thousands of men had written on the subject, and that no two of them were entirely agreed concerning Hamlet's character. That would not be a lecture on Hamlet's assumed or real madness. There was enough to occupy their time and thought that evening in considering Hamlet's character as a rational being. Hamlet, he believed, was suffering from a physical or nervous disease—"melancholia attonita." In moments of high-wrought excitement he trembled on the brink of insanity, but he was never so mad as not to be responsible for his actions. They could find the obvious characteristics of Hamlet by pursuing the dramatic method and considering him in relation to other characters in the play, who acted as a foil to him. "Hamlet," it had been said, "is morality without action, and Claudius is action without morality." This statement, although an exaggeration, contained a considerable amount of truth. In contrast with the Queen, Hamlet showed an inwardness, a profundity of thought, and an acute moral sense. In contrast with Fortinbras we got his intellectual defect. We had had the most contradictory opinions concerning what was salient in Hamlet's character. Carl Rohrbach interpreted the character as that of a mere actor, and quoted, in support of this, the command given by Fortinbras in the final scene to "bear Hamlet to the stage," the word "throne" having been changed to stage in the second quarto of the play. This passage, said Carl Rohrbach, meant—"Bear Hamlet, like a soldier (not as a soldier), to the stage; for had he been placed there, had Fate called him to the stage instead of the throne, he would have proved most royally." Carl Werder took the opposite view, and had, when his criticisms first appeared, rather astounded the world of Shakespearean scholars. We had hitherto been guided very much by Goethe's criticism in "Wilhelm Meister." We had been accustomed to think that the prevailing weakness in Hamlet's character on the intellectual side was a tendency to procrastinate. We were in the habit of considering that Hamlet should have taken summary vengeance on Claudius for the murder of his father. Carl Werder, however, suggested the question, "How could he do that? Claudius had been elected by the nobles, and how could Hamlet have justified himself if he had at once obeyed the ghost's behest?" Hamlet, said Carl Werder, had to make the King confess; he had to resort to strategy, and he assumed the role of a madman in order that he could carry out his schemes without being molested. He must "catch the conscience of the king" if he was to make him confess, and we therefore had that play within a play. We knew that he did catch the conscience of the king, who called for lights and rushed out in confusion. Werder said that the "tragic fault" in Hamlet's character was that he was too rash and the killing of Polonius, whom he took to be the king, was cited as an act of rashness. This, however, was not the theory Shakespeare had in his mind when he wrote the play. Hamlet in the numerous soliloquies hinted at some fault in his own character. An additional soliloquy had been added by Shakespeare in the seconded quarto which placed the matter beyond doubt. Goethe said that Hamlet was a "splendid failure;" he knew what his duty was, but he failed to do it. Hamlet at the same time was not incapable of all kinds of action. He could act upon impulse and he had a faculty for scheming or counterplotting, or a negative kind of action. Hamlet failed in that kind of action in which a statesman or military commander thoughtfully mapped out a line of conduct and followed it to the bitter end. He failed in that highest form of action based on a union of the intelligence and the will. He could not put a definite limit to thought and decide when action should begin. Shakespeare in the soliloquies wanted us to look for the hint of Hamlet's intellectual defect as he desired to present it. It was referred to in the fourth scene in the first act as "a vicious mole" in his nature, and it was also suggested in the famous soliloquy "to be or not to be." In the fourth scene of the fourth act it was described as "a craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the event." Words were nearer to their etymology then than now, and Hamlet's thoughts were anxious about the consequences of action. He lacked on the intellectual side the power to control his thought. On the emotional side Hamlet was a man of acute, moral sensibility. His mother's conduct had cast him into utter agony. Generally speaking, he saw no reason to doubt that Hamlet possessed true, aesthetic feeling. He thought, however, that the tenderness of Hamlet had been much exaggerated. He was cruel to Polonius, and there was a forceful instance of this side of his character in his treatment of Ophelia. He was inclined to think that Hamlet did not really love Ophelia. Hamlet had a violent excitability of temper, and he suffered the acutest reactions. Was that strength of feeling? It was more like hysteria. The temperate man in Plato's opinion was the man who was master of himself and had self-control, and it was this that Hamlet lacked on both sides of his nature. The fundamental defect in Hamlet's character was that he lacked force in the core of his being—force which made for self-control and impelled a man to do his duty. Men sometimes overcame this defect by relying on a greater and stronger power—call it Providence if they would—and came to regard themselves as instruments of divine authority. There was evidence in the play that Hamlet was without strong faith. He had no sheet anchor, nothing to help or inspire him. He did however, learn something by experience, and he began to realise that there was a greater force at work. The time came for Hamlet to learn the lesson of doing his duty. Hamlet had no strong faith, but he had enough of acquiescence in the divine will to make him feel he was an instrument, and in that conviction he went to his duty and his death.

The third and concluding lecture of the series will be on "The Teaching of Hamlet," and will be delivered in Queen's Hall to-morrow night.

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# PROFESSOR HENDERSON LECTURES.

## THE CLOSE OF THE SERIES.

## "THE TEACHING OF HAMLET."

The last of the series of University Extension Lectures arranged by the Swan River Mechanics' Institute was delivered by Professor Henderson in Queen's Hall last night. The lecture last night was the third on "Hamlet and the Shakespearean Drama." There was again a large attendance, over which His Excellency the Governor presided. Lady Bedford was also present.

Professor Henderson said he proposed to discuss the teaching of Hamlet in relation to the personal character of Hamlet and to the play itself. There was a necessary distinction between lyrical and dramatic poetry. In the former we got a direct expression of personality, whereas in dramatic poetry the author revealed himself indirectly. A little world of characters was created, and the work of the dramatist was to make us understand them in relation to one another, to indicate the outcome of a certain tragic fault, as it was called, in the leading character of the play, and to enable us to understand his own views on the great forces which were at work in the world and governed the lives of human beings. Hamlet was moody and melancholy. We noticed the "asides" in his remarks, and how he seemed to soliloquise when he was talking to other people. He was living in a world within himself. He was not interested in the outer world. He had withdrawn himself to such an extent that his mind was diseased, and instead of endeavouring to cure the melancholy tendency in his nature he encouraged it by keeping everyone at a distance, with the exception of Horatio. The consequence was that the balance of the man's nature was lost. Hamlet should have adopted some means of restoring this balance. John Stuart Mill in such circumstances spoke of the healing power of Wordsworth's poetry. One writer had observed that the man who gave way to brooding melancholy was on the high road to ruin. Hamlet wanted more expressions from the external world, for he had lost the balance of his nature and was being brought nearer and nearer to the very brink of madness. In the division of labour such was the pressure sometimes brought to bear on those who undertook mental work that they had little opportunity of maintaining that balance which was essential to life and health, and found themselves, like Hamlet, losing the capacity for action. Coleridge said that "In the healthy processes of the mind a balance is constantly maintained between the impressions from outside objects and the inward operations of the intellect; for if there be an overbalance in the contemplative faculty, man thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation, and loses his natural power of action." There was an educational point here which he would emphasise. At the two great universities of the old world sport was made an important part of the students' training. It was necessary to distinguish between true sport and sport which might take the form of gambling. Hamlet had lost the capacity for action, because, he told Rosencrantz, he had abandoned the exercises he was accustomed to in his college days. He had lost grit or force in the care of his being. Educational experts were coming to realise that in this matter of organised sport they might foster force and grit and cultivate that something which Hamlet lacked. There was the idealist and the strenuous idealist, and Hamlet was not a strenuous idealist. The idealist was a high type, but the strenuous idealist was a higher still. So much for the lessons he gathered from the personality of Hamlet. He would now turn to the play itself and try to ascertain what Shakespeare thought about those forces working in and through the lives of men as they were indicated by the grouping of the personae dramatis. There were many people who had a vague kind of belief that in any tragedy punishment followed upon moral culpability. Shakespeare did not assume in his tragedies that there was a necessary proportion between moral transgression and suffering. This point, which the lecturer illustrated from the Book of Job, was, he said, that which underlay the teaching in Shakespeare's dramas. An incongruity