Shakespeare Tercentenary : 1616-1916

The New York Times

April 16, 1916

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Rose Caron as Desdemona

Mounet-Sully as Othello

HE CONQUERED FRANCE BUT SLOWLY

The Long, Hard Battle of Shakespeare's Fame to Overcome the Wall of Prejudice Erected By Voltaire

Written for THE NEW YORK TIMES

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THAT Shakespeare was wholly unknown in France during the century of Louis XIV. is nothing that need astonish, since ignorance of all foreign affairs was so complete and so patent that a contemporary could write facetiously that in the estimation of the Parisians everything outside of their country "ate hay and walked on four feet." Diligent search has, however, revealed that two copies of his works existed in the country. One was in the King's library, the catalogue of which was completed in 1684, and was recorded as follows: "Will Shakespeare, poeta anglicus, operae poetica contenentia tragedias, comoedias et historiolas Angle, London. Th. Cotes, 1632, fo."

In Prévost's "Memoirs" a considerable part is devoted to England and her literary men. "I have witnessed several of their dramas," he writes, "and they seem not inferior to the Greek and the French ones. I even venture to say that they would surpass them if their poets put more regularity in them." He had seen "Hamlet" and plays by other writers, and found infinite pleasure in them.

From the above it will be seen that, contrary to general belief, Voltaire was not the first to call the attention of the French to Shakespeare. But it is no doubt true that, as far as the public was concerned, it remained densely ignorant of the very existence of the poet until the famous "Philosophical Letters," or "Letters About the English"—for Voltaire himself used both titles—called attention to the fact that beyond the Channel there lived a playwright of whom the English thought as much as did the French of Racine, Corneille, or Molière. The little book appeared in French in 1734.

What shocked Voltaire on first acquaintance with Shakespeare was his total disregard of the consecrated unities of time, place, and action. That a dramatic action should occupy more than the regulation twenty-four hours was considered bad; that it should take several years was simply inconceivable. Then, again, the changes of place from act to act, and even from scene to scene, the bloodshed, the use of violent, gross, or even familiar language in a serious play, all disturbed Voltaire beyond belief, accustomed as he was to the uniform loftiness of speech, decorum in form, and refinement in manners of the French tragedy. Yet in spite of all their unpardonable faults those "monstrous tragedies" never bored, always interested. This Voltaire attributed to flashes of genius in the untutored Elizabethan, who, so Voltaire thought, wrote in a barbarous age for a rude crowd. Had he but lived in more civilized times those "monstrous farces" would have become beautifully polished and highly decorous tragedies in five acts and regular rhymed alexandrines.

He proceeded at once to add to his own tragedies some of the things he admired most in the British plays, namely, action, color, picturesqueness. His innovations were timid, indeed, judged by modern standards; but he knew the temper of his countrymen, and that they considered their own dramatic masterpieces perfect. He adapted "Julius Caesar" to the French taste, and called it the "Death of Caesar"; he introduced ghosts in several of his plays, and wrote tragedies without love. The best of his dramas, "Zaire," if not imitated from "Othello," bears at least a remarkable resemblance to it.

All his life he was haunted as much by Shakespeare as by the fear that the French people should know him too well and admire him. He put ghosts in "Eriphyle," which is of 1732, and in "Semiramis," of 1748. In doing so he recalled his model, and admitted the beauty of that device in "Hamlet." Yet he could not help adding that "Hamlet" was "a coarse and barbarous play which would not be tolerated by the lowest rabble of France or Italy." In 1746 the public knew of Shakespeare only what Voltaire had told them. But things were going to change. In that year appeared the first installment of a so-called translation by Laplace, which was to be complete in four volumes.

The translation was a great success, and Voltaire was not satisfied. Why were not the French content with what he had told them about that dead Englishman? He had given them the soliloquy of Hamlet and two scenes from "Julius Caesar," with a suitable appreciation of the poet's genius. That should have been enough. Through the very imperfect rendering of Laplace Shakespeare began to arouse interest, and those who divined his greatness from the available fragments began to utter the opinion that perhaps the native tragedy might not be the ultimate expression of dramatic art. Voltaire was scandalized, perhaps in all sincerity, but perhaps, also, because his own supremacy was questioned by implication. But the worst was yet in store for him.

In 1760 there appeared in the Journal Encyclopédique an anonymous article which was given as a translation from the English. In it a parallel was drawn between Shakespeare and Corneille. Both writers were called the fathers of dramatic poetry in their respective countries. Both were called great in their way, but still the crown was given to Shakespeare, who was said to be the mirror of nature "in which all traits of the human soul are reflected as perfectly as the features of the countenance are displayed in the glass of an ordinary mirror." The conclusion was that "Shakespeare was incontestably a great poetic genius, and Corneille an excellent dramatic poet."

That was more than Voltaire could stand. He forthwith composed an appeal to all the nations of Europe to decide the momentous question of superiority between the English stage and the French. The very idea of such a procedure was absurd enough, but the manner in which it was proposed was the acme of absurdity. All the world knew the French classic writers, and practically no one knew Shakespeare. But Voltaire would furnish Europe the means of knowing him. He gave a fairly detailed account of "Hamlet," a dozen passages being translated into French prose, each accompanied by depreciatory comments. Besides these he gave what Laplace, out of a natural sense of propriety, had omitted from his version of "Othello," but what Voltaire considered essential for a true appreciation of the whole work, namely, the coarse speech of Iago announcing the flight of Desdemona with the Moor. On such evidence was intellectual Europe to base its verdict, and to such childish, not to say contemptible, means did a great genius stoop in order to belittle a dead rival.

Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet

Jean Mounet-Sully as Hamlet

Constant Coquelin as Petruchio in The Taming of the Shrew

From that time on Voltaire let no occasion pass by to attack him, never with sound critical judgment, but with abuse. To Samuel Johnson's reference to his unfair strictures as "petty cavils of petty minds" Voltaire replied that he did not wish to suspect Johnson "of being a sorry jester too fond of wine, but that he finds it a little extraordinary that he should count buffoonery and drunkenness among the beauties of the tragic theatre." And again he quotes some offensive passages or, from the French viewpoint, absurd situations, made worse by his blunders and willful distortions. He kept up the fight to the end of his long life. In spite of him, however, Shakespeare gained in favor on the Continent. In Germany he was played and much admired. In France discontent with the classic rules became more pronounced from day to day, and Voltaire felt that literature was going to the dogs. "We are in the mire," he wrote in 1767, and three years later: "I have been told of a tragedy in prose which, it is said, will meet with success. That is the finishing stroke given to the fine arts." The old man was genuinely distressed at the threatened downfall of a dramatic system in which he had gained renown after his great masters, Corneille and Racine, and at the growing popularity of the foreign intruder, who was to his mind at the antipodes of good taste.

Of this hated author's works France was to have at last a complete translation. In 1776 Letourneur began it with two volumes containing "Othello," "The Tempest," "Julius Caesar," a dedication to the King, and a long preface. The first volume gave a list of 800 subscribers, including the most illustrious people of France and of the rest of Europe. It was stated in the preface that Shakespeare had been slandered and misrepresented, either through malice or ignorance. The comparison made between him and the greatest French dramatists turned out decidedly in his favor.

Voltaire, seeing that his appeal to the nations had brought no results, now had recourse to the supreme judgment of the Academy. His state of mind is sufficiently indicated by the letter he wrote to his friend, d'Argental, who was to transmit his appeal to the august body to which both belonged. On July 19, 1776, he wrote to him: "I must tell you how angry I am * * * against a man named Tourneur. * * * Have you read two volumes of this wretch? * * * There are two volumes which one would imagine to be pieces to be played at the fair. * * * Have you read this abominable stuff of which we are to have five more volumes? Do you feel sufficient detestation for this impudent fool? * * * The blood boils in my old veins. * * * What is frightful is that the monster has a following in France, and to fill the measure of my chagrin it was I who first long ago spoke of this Shakespeare. I it was who first showed the French a few pearls I found in that huge dunghill. I did not then think that some day I was to help trample under foot the crown of Corneille and Racine in order to adorn the brow of a barbarous mountebank."

That letter was a prelude to the memorial he addressed to the Academy. His object was to show up Shakespeare to that eminent body "in all his abominable and incredible vileness." "The main thing," he wrote again to d'Argental, "is to inspire the nation with the disgust and detestation it ought to feel for buffoon Letourneur, extoller of buffoon Shakespeare." His denunciation was read before the Academy and duly approved. It was the official sanction placed upon the unworthiness of the foreign author.

Meanwhile Letourneur went on unconcerned with his great undertaking, and brought it to a successful termination. It is still a readable though an imperfect translation. He helped to a truer appreciation of Shakespeare, if he did not actually promote his popularity. This was mainly accomplished by another man who did not know a word of English, namely, Ducis. Already in 1769 he made a French adaptation of "Hamlet" in the familiar classic style, five acts in alexandrines. It was a tame affair, and recalled the original only remotely, for all he knew of Shakespeare he got out of the fragments of Laplace. "Romeo," "Othello," and other pieces were similarly handled, although later on he took Letourneur for his source.

The public's distorted conception of the English master was due then in part to Voltaire, who hated him, and in part to Ducis, who loved him well but not wisely. This lasted through the French Revolution, through the reign of Napoleon, through part of the Restoration period. Ducis's adulterations were followed by others. In 1816 there appeared an adaptation of "Hamlet" as a pantomime with music by Gallenberg; in 1817 "The Visions of Macbeth," or "The Witches of Scotland," melodrama with grand spectacle; in 1818 "The Moor of Venice, or Othello," pantomime with dialogue and dances. To the public's mind Shakespeare was a kind of legendary purveyor of popular and sensational dramas. The few who knew better were unable to get a hearing. Besides, Laharpe, Voltaire's friend and disciple, was the only critic whose writings were studied in schools, and Laharpe, who did not know a word of English, shared Voltaire's views and prejudices in nearly all respects.

In 1819 Merle, manager of the Porte Saint Martin Theatre, visited England, and came back full of enthusiasm for the stage of that country; and when, in 1822, there landed an English company in Paris, he hastened to conclude with its manager, Penley, a contract for a series of six performances. The Liberal papers announced the news in words which betrayed uneasiness on their part. The Constitutionnel noted that "some persons find strange that foreign productions should be offered in Paris; yet why fear comparison? Molière has never yet found an adversary worthy of himself." The Album concluded its announcement of the coming event with the ominous words: "Look out for fun."

The English company was to make its début on the 31st of July. Posters were placed all over Paris announcing that: "By His Britannic Majesty's most humble servants will be performed the tragedy of 'Othello' in five acts by the most celebrated Shakespeare." Such an announcement was sure to be unwelcome to a considerable section of the Paris population, those who worshipped Napoleon and hence hated the English, and those who feared Shakespeare.

From the box office point of view the Shakespeare première in Paris was a distinct success. Every seat was sold, and huge crowds had to be refused admittance. From the moment the actors uttered the first words laughter arose in various parts of the house at the strange sounds never before heard on a Parisian stage. Soon the laughter became cat calls, whistling—the French equivalent for hissing; soon rotten apples, bad eggs, and pennies came raining down on the stage. The editor of a Royalist paper tried to rebuke the disturbers and to obtain fair play for the visitors. Missiles found their way to his box and he was ordered out of the theatre by the crowd. The actors and actresses were thoroughly frightened. In order to cut their ordeal short it was decided to jump from the middle of the third act to the fifth. But the choking of Desdemona was hardly calculated to calm that now seething mob.

Had the performance lasted a little longer the house would have been wrecked. As it was, the spectacle ended in a tumult and amid the cries of "Down with Shakespeare. He is a henchman of Wellington." The theatre was, however, wrecked two days later when another attempt was made by the Penley company.

During the years following many things occurred to prepare at least a fair hearing for Shakespeare. Canning, once an enemy of France, had become a friend. In 1822 and 1823 Stendhal published two pamphlets, entitled "Racine" and "Shakespeare." Armed with his sharp and deft pen and a complete disregard of tradition and authority, he set about demolishing pseudo-classic productions, and sapped the very foundations of the tragedy, according to Racine and Voltaire, by calling the alexandrine a cloak for nonsense. He was a true disciple of Voltaire when it came to killing with those terrible weapons, epigram, sarcasm, ridicule. Youth admires rebels, and it was to the young that Stendhal appealed, for, said he, "how are we to convince men of 50 who find Zamore of Voltaire's 'Alzire' natural and brilliant, that Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' is one of the masterpieces of the human mind?" In 1825 the most talented and learned critic of the day, Villemain, wrote a eulogy of Shakespeare in the "Biographie Universelle," while the year before was founded an excellent journal which was from its very inception to start a systematic campaign for the reform of the stage under the auspices of Shakespeare. It bore the significant name of Le Globe. The classics still resisted, but they were less aggressive, and hardly a match for Stendhal and the Globe.

For all the above reasons the chances were in favor for the renewed effort to present Shakespeare which was made in 1827. The Globe was jubilant at hearing that a company under the management of Yates was to come and settle for some time in Paris. Other papers announced the coming event with veiled or open hostility.

The performances, given at first at the Odéon, the second national theatre, were highly successful from the start. The first one was given on Sept. 6, 1827. It was a gala affair, at which all social, literary, and artistic Paris was present. One of the actors recited a prologue in English and made a little speech in bad French, both of which were received with much approval. On Sept. 11 "Hamlet" was performed with Charles Kemble in the leading rôle. The Globe was happy. In its criticism it wrote: "Let us congratulate ourselves for this event as for a victory. Art has crowned its work. Hamlet has at last appeared on the French stage in all his truth, and he has made his appearance amid unanimous applause." Between Sept. 6, 1827, and July 25, 1828, "Hamlet" was given seven times, "Romeo and Juliet" and "Othello" five times, "King Lear," "Macbeth," and "Richard III." three times, and "The Merchant of Venice" six times. English comedies and dramas by other authors were presented, the most popular being "Jane Shore," which was given thirteen times.

Cappiello's cartoon of Bernhardt as Hamlet.

Kemble, Kean, and Macready, the three greatest tragic actors of England, were seen in turn in Paris; of them Macready scored the most genuine success. Kean, though still comparatively young, was in his decline, while his rival was near the zenith of his powers. It would be interesting and instructive to review some of the criticisms made by the leading newspapers of the day, but space forbids this here. Perhaps the following from the Figaro of Oct. 10, 1827, will do as a summing up of the results achieved: "The genius of Shakespeare has triumphed over the old prejudices of the French Nation"; and this from the Débats, the mouthpiece of the ultra classicists: "As long as there will be place left for a superior genius, it will be assigned to Shakespeare." Nothing could henceforth be more obvious to the French than the fact that England had at least one great dramatist. During the month of December, 1829, alone the Odéon, threatened with bankruptcy, saved itself by presenting translations of "Hamlet," "Macbeth," and "The Merchant of Venice." Perhaps the greatest triumph was that the Comédie Française, the stronghold of classicism, performed de Vigny's translation of "Othello" in October, 1829.

The effect of the Shakespeare performances of 1827-28 on the men of letters then coming prominently to the fore was very great. Charles Nodier was the acknowledged leader among the younger set of poets and artists, although he was already a man of middle age. He had never seen the real Shakespeare performed. He witnessed the première of "Hamlet" at the Odéon. To one of his friends he whispered: "Ah! there at last is tragedy for you!" He wrote in the Mercure, No. 19: "The establishment of the English theatre in Paris is one of the events of our times, one of those events the importance of which will be only fully appreciated by its results. * * * The results have judged the cause. Shakespeare has become for us a conquest * * * more enduring than war, with its pillage and blood, could bring us."

The author of "Victor Hugo; Told by a Witness of His Life," writes: "These admirable dramas, admirably played, moved Mr. V. Hugo profoundly. He was at that time writing his preface to 'Cromwell.' They filled him with enthusiasm for this god of the theatre, in whom seemed united in one trinity the three great geniuses of our stage, Corneille, Molière, and Beaumarchais."

Artists did not escape the effects of their contact with the real Shakespeare. Deveria and Boulanger made a souvenir album with scenes taken from the different plays performed. The classic painter Ingres placed Shakespeare's image in his "Cortege of Homer," timidly it is true, and close to the frame of the picture, which now hangs in the Louvre, Delacroix, the greatest painter of the romantic period, was obsessed by Shakespeare, whom he studied all his life, as is borne out by his journal.

But the one who came most deeply under the great playwright's influence was Berlioz. He had read and admired him in Letourneur's translation. He idolized him the moment he saw him interpreted by Miss Smithson. Years afterward he wrote about his experience: "When Shakespeare fell upon me so unexpectedly, I was thunderstruck. His lightning flashes opening the heaven of art with a sublime tumult, illumined for me the farthest depths. I recognized true grandeur, true beauty, true dramatic truth. I realized at the same time the enormous absurdity of the ideas spread in France by Voltaire. * * * I lived * * * I understood * * * I felt that I must rise and go forward." Shakespeare became the inspirer of the music of Berlioz and of his life, and the pathetic and dolorous pages he devotes to the memory of his wife are a monument to the Ophelia of his younger years, but also an apotheosis of the poet to whom he owed the purest and most enduring joys of his restless life.

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