

MISCELLANEOUS.

WAS HAMLET INSANE?

To the Editor of The Open Court:

Professor Flint in the May number discusses this question largely from the standpoint of an alienist; and for that reason his judgment must carry weight. But having for years given much attention to this play, and having for some time been of the opinion that Shakespeare intended to depict Hamlet as really insane at times, I for one am not quite convinced by Professor Flint's arguments to the contrary. There appears to be this material fallacy in his reasoning, that he assumes in Shakespeare such an accurate knowledge of the various forms of insanity, as no one but an alienist could have. Yet Professor Flint, in discussing King Lear further on, himself declares that Shakespeare is in error, from the standpoint of an alienist, when he describes the king's sudden return to mental health from senile dementia. There is also, as I believe it is commonly recognized, another scientific error concerning insanity in Hamlet. Hamlet, as proof to his mother that he is not insane, says,

“My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,
And makes as healthful music.”

Professor Flint may enlighten us on the question, whether an irregular pulse is a symptom of delusional insanity, as Shakespeare here assumes.

There are certain passages which Professor Flint has not mentioned, or to which he has apparently given but slight attention, that seem to me to give evidence that Shakespeare intended to depict Hamlet as at times genuinely insane. First, in his conduct immediately after his first interview with the ghost, he betrays such an excited state of mind as borders on insanity, and sometimes even passes over the border. Horatio is compelled to reprove him for his “wild and whirling words.” Indeed, even before Horatio and Marcellus had rejoined him, there is a trace of whimsicality, when Hamlet, musing on what his father has told him, pauses to write on his tablets what occurs to him as a clever epigram.

“O villain, villain, smiling, damnéd villain!—
My tables,—meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
At least, I am sure it is so in Denmark. (*Writing.*)
So uncle, there you are. Now to my word.”

Where Hamlet, in this scene, passes beyond the line of sanity, is in his jesting

with the ghost at the time he swears his companions to secrecy. To accost the spirit of his father as, "true-penny," and speak of him as "this fellow in the cellarage," and "old mole," is shockingly irreverent, and at that time peculiarly flippant. Either Hamlet was "not himself" at this time, or else he was beginning already to play the part of a madman. But if he was simply playing mad, it was foolish of him to tell the trick at the same time.

"How strange or odd, soe'er I bear myself;—
As I, perchance, hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on."

It was also, in any case, foolish of Hamlet to attempt to make a jest of the whole transaction, when he could not help showing how agitated he was, nor help assuring them that the apparition was "an honest ghost." In fact, from the interview with his father, to the close of the scene, Hamlet's mind appears to be distracted and wavering.

Passing over the intrusion into Ophelia's room, and the whimsical letter he wrote her, concerning which things something could be said on either side, we come to his conduct with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, at his first meeting with them in the play. Through most of this interview he shows himself very shrewd, sifting their purpose and then with a pretense of frankness telling them just what he would like them to think. But before he gets through with them, he begins to give hints of his secret—speaks of his "uncle-father" and aunt-mother," in allusion to what he considered an incestuous marriage, and in a very humorous way insinuates that he is sane enough when it suits his purpose to be so. Hamlet doubtless chuckles to himself when he tells these spies he can tell a hawk from a henshaw if the sun is not in his eyes; but it was really very foolish of him to say it under the circumstances. It was fortunate for him that these two young men were so stupid they did not even report these tell-tale speeches to the king.

In the interview with Ophelia, when Polonius and the king were concealed behind the tapestry, we must ask, If Hamlet was deliberately acting a part in this scene, what was his purpose? was it to deceive the king? But the king was not deceived.

"Love! his affections do not that way tend;
Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,
Was not like madness. There's something in his soul,
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood;
And, I do doubt, the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger."

True enough it is, that Hamlet's words to Ophelia "lack'd form a little"—especially when they are compared with the sublime soliloquy that had preceded them. It is to be noted that the king does not deny Hamlet's insanity, but only his madness, which would be a violent form of the disease. He gets indeed very close to the prince's secret, but does not suspect that the prince is only feigning to be insane. We too should hardly think of such a thing, were it not that Hamlet himself on several occasions hints of putting an antic disposition on. Professor Flint says, "A few rare instances are on record, one of which came under my own observation, in which persons, actually insane, have feigned insanity, but it is not supposable that this idea

occurred to Shakespeare." Why is it not supposable? The idea is thinkable enough.

But to return to his interview with Ophelia. Hamlet asks, suddenly, as if he had just come to suspect that Polonius was spying on him, "Where's your father?" Ophelia replies, dishonestly, "At home, my lord." Hamlet then says, and probably means it for her father's eavesdropping ears, "Let the doors be shut upon him; that he may play the fool nowhere but in his own house." If Hamlet, then, is conscious he is being watched by Polonius, it is certainly injudicious of him to make the following threatening fling at the king: "I say, we will have no marriages; those that are married already, all but one, shall live."

Now let us go back to that famous soliloquy. Hamlet is at this time deep in a plot to surprise the king into a confession of his guilt. He has also the ulterior purpose, to murder Claudius in revenge for the wrongs against his father. The time is almost at hand to spring the "mouse-trap" upon his uncle. Is not this a strange time for the young man to pause and meditate on death and suicide? Surely here is a defect of will that borders on insanity.

The soliloquies generally, in fact, show such a defect of will. The first ends in the despairing cry, "Break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue!" In the second, he vows to keep the words of the ghost ever uppermost in his mind. In the third, he first reproaches himself for his lack of emotion, till he succeeds in working himself into a wordy passion; then he reproaches himself again for that; and finally sets his brain to work contriving the plot whereby the king's guilt might be discovered. In the fourth, he muses on death and suicide; speculates, with pertinacious pessimism, on the evil "dreams" that may come to the dead, if consciousness persists; and indirectly excuses his own indecision by the reflection that many great enterprises are stopped by dread of possible evils in the unknown hereafter. In the fifth soliloquy, he does at last seem ready for action and "bitter business." But in a few minutes he has an opportunity to kill the king at prayers, and — soliloquizes. In the seventh and last, after meeting the army of Fortinbras, he reproaches himself for his "craven scruples," and consequent delay in the execution of revenge. But even then his resolution is, characteristically, that his "thoughts," not deeds, "be bloody."

Besides this shrinking from action, do not these soliloquies show a morbid tendency to excessive introspection and self-reproach?

In the burial scene, Hamlet's insanity appears to take a violent form. For it is incredible that there could be any element of feigning here. Inhuman indeed he would be, if he could deliberately desecrate the funeral of a lady he had once loved — especially when it was plain to him that her death was peculiarly tragic, and had been caused by his conduct. Hamlet himself, next morning, admits to Horatio that he forgot himself on that occasion, and confesses,

"Sure, the bravery of his grief did put me
Into a towering passion."

As Hamlet is always frank with Horatio, we may be sure that it was passion and not feigning that caused Hamlet's shocking conduct at the grave. And if it was passion, it must have been insane passion. Hamlet, a few minutes later, apologises to Laertes, and solemnly proclaims that his misconduct

toward him was due to madness. It is difficult to think he was not sincere at this time. Is it not possible that, in a moment of exceptionally clear vision, he was enabled to survey past actions and perceive how irrational they were? I know an insane person that asked me, "Would you like to read about my case? You will find it in the article on Insanity in the cyclopedia."

My opinion, to conclude, is still that Hamlet was a man of exceptional intellectual power, but whose mind was clouded by a melancholy that was very near to madness, and that sometimes passed well over the line. This affliction began before his interview with the ghost, but was aggravated by that and subsequent experiences. This diagnosis may be absurd to an expert alienist. Would it, however, seem absurd to Shakespeare, who, for all his genius, must have depended for his knowledge on the subject to chance observations, some reading, and perhaps mainly to introspection—who, in short, was not a specialist, and had no statistics or laboratory methods to aid him?

JOSEPH C. ALLEN.

MR. GEORGE BRANDES ON THE SHAKESPEARE-BACON PROBLEM.

To the Editor of The Open Court:

In your pages for April, 1904, your learned and able contributor, Edwin Watts Chubb, Esq., quotes Mr. George Brandes as follows:

"It is well known that in recent years a troop of less than half educated people have put forth the doctrine that Shakespeare lent his name to a body of poetry with which he had really nothing to do . . . which has fallen into the hands of raw Americans and literary women."

Mr. Brandes is one of the most brilliant of the younger generation of Scandinavian critics. Attracted, as most Continental critics are, sooner or later, to Shakespeare, he produced in the year 1898 a work that is universally admitted by English-reading people to be almost the very finest work on Shakespeare ever written outside of England, almost equaling Gervinus in Germany, and certainly surpassing Taine, Stapfer, and Jusserrand in France. But—*Quando dormitat bonos Homerus*; and Mr. Brandes overlooked a passage on page 48 of Sir James Prior's *Life of Edmund Malone* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1859, line 1, *et seq.*). From that passage Mr. Brandes would have learned that the anti-Shakespearean Authorship Theory sprang up, or at any rate existed, in London, in and about the year 1780, among men, and not among women; and among Englishmen and not among Americans (who at that date were not exploiting literary but rather very strenuously fighting for certain political theories). Sir James Prior's work is entirely a record of the first "Shakespearean Revival" (as we should call it now) in England. Up to that "Revival," Shakespeare had been taken for granted and read and praised unstintedly by such great authorities as Dryden, but no examination had been attracted to his biography or environments, his circumstances or neighborhoods.

Mr. Brandes, in putting together a history of Opinion on Shakespeare, should by no means have overlooked this volume, since nowhere else is the subject so detailedly followed as in these five hundred or so pages. To find that, actually concurrent with the examination of Shakespeare's biography, a doubt of his authorship occurred, was a fact too important to have been