

SHAKESPEARE AND GERMANY

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Shakespeare and Germany by Henry Arthur Jones

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HENRY ARTHUR JONES

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AND GERMANY**

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BY

HENRY ARTHUR JONES

(Written during the battle of Verdun)

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THE German newspapers are making merry over the prospect of our forthcoming national celebration of Shakespeare's Tercentenary. The "Times" of March 3rd quotes the "Cologne Gazette" as follows:

All Germany will contemplate this celebration with amused expectation and the utmost satisfaction. The English could give us no greater pleasure. The music hall and cinematograph spirit of the England of to-day will make such a mess of it that unquenchable laughter will run through the whole of Europe. The Quadruple Entente Shakespeare will be fêted with Maori dances, Japanese acrobats' tricks, and Tarantella leaps. To complete the festival only one thing is lacking—that the dead Shakespeare should express his opinion of the living England.

From other German sources we learn that Shakespeare is essentially a German in his ideas and his conception of human affairs; that if he were alive he would be enthusiastically pro-German in his sympathies; that if England to-day were possessed with his spirit we should have won the war; that a true understanding and a worthy stage interpretation of Shakespeare are to be found only in Germany.

Taken altogether the recent German claims on Shakespeare are tokens of that same virulent epidemic of diseased brag which also claims for German prowess every valuable discovery in science, and all that is excellent in modern civilization.

With this constant evidence before us of German temper and methods, it will be well for England to be prepared for the characteristic official announcement

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which will doubtless be made in Berlin on 23rd April of the final and complete annexation by Germany of William Shakespeare, with all his literary, poetical, philosophical, and stage appurtenances, effects, traditions, and associations, and all the demesnes that there adjacent lie. Meantime we may ask by what insolence of egotism, what lust of plunder, or what madness of pride Germany dares add to the hideous roll of her thieveries and rapes this topping impudence and crime of vaunting to herself the allegiance of Shakespeare? Even were England as sunken and decrepit, as degraded and supine as Germany hugs herself to believe, yet Shakespeare, as he himself shall testify, would never abate the infinite measure of his love and loyalty for her whose jesses are his dear heartstrings.

England may rest in great peace about Shakespeare's constancy to her. "They'll never depose me to make *you* King," said Charles II to James.

Every dramatist's work, so far as it has any value at all, of necessity reveals his attitude towards the permanent verities of human nature, and the great issues of life; and also towards the fashions and problems of his own day and his own society. This revelation of his general standpoint is often a fully self-conscious one. But beyond this general, oblique, implicit, indication of his relation to the great mundane movement, every dramatist, however balanced and aloof he may strive to be, does also scatter through his work stray proofs of his own personal prejudices, opinions, and foibles; and also of the dominant passions and prepossessions of his soul. Sometimes this assertion of his own personal likes and dislikes and fixed ideas is also self-conscious and intentional.

Why shouldn't it be? The dramatist is gagged and fettered by stricter and severer laws than any of his brother artists. No rule of his art forbids the novelist to air his own views, or to break out in purple patches on every page. And the actor often makes his greatest

hit with the public when he deletes the author's words, obliterates his meaning and resplendently launches his own gag, or his own private emphasis; or when he bundles the author's character clean off the stage and substitutes his own popular personality.

Why, then, shouldn't the dramatist—God help him otherwise, poor man!—occasionally take his private impulses and prepossessions for a swaggering parade on their own account? This is what Shakespeare often does. Like Joe Gargery, he shuts up shop at any moment, and goes on his jaunts without any thought for the convenience of his customers; and though some necessary question of the play is then to be considered, he puts it aside, while he gives full tongue and strut to some glorious mouthing malapropos of his own.

Of all the dominant prepossessions of Shakespeare's soul, those central fires and passions of his being that thus spontaneously leap out, and hint or betray the guarded secrets within his breast—fierce hatred of the mob; admiration for kingliness; admiration for chivalrous soldiery; contempt for priests and priestcraft; the dread apprehension of insomnia; the sense of the stupendous aimlessness and transcendence of human life and effort as of vain shadows, inconsequent as a dream, empty and noisy and furious as an idiot's tale—of all these recurrent ideas and prepossessions, there is none more fundamental, more constantly operative, more magnificently emergent than his uncontrollable love for England as England. As in Milton, it sometimes reaches to a prophetic strain. It has the unabashed pride and willing blindness of a lover's infatuation. Much of Shakespeare's love for England is so native and assured, that it does not need to speak, but only glances and throbs. It is always there, ready to burst out in unexpected places, and from unlikely persons; as when it suddenly transforms the dull fool Cloten into a sturdy, eloquent patriot. Often it does not speak, but when it does speak—

Take away from Shakespeare all this native, intrinsic, allusive, unspoken love for England, and we will readily make a present of him to Germany along with those other renegades who made England's hour of trial and need the occasion to testify their hate of her; or to show off their mischievous, perverted cleverness, like a fool who cannot cease to play his accustomed pranks on the Day of Judgment. Germany delights to welcome and honour these renegades; we delight to kick them to her.

Start a poet on the theme of his country and we immediately take the measure of him. Shakespeare's love for England, always hotly smouldering through his plays, breaks out in many jets and spires that curl round her in little intromissary endearments and caresses—"Gracious England"; "England's blessed shore"; "Dear Mother England," and a hundred others. While in "King John" and "Richard II" he flames up in great starry pointing pyramids of devotion and adoration for her.

It is scarcely likely that the Germans will act "King John" and "Richard II" at their Shakespearean Tercentenary Celebration. But if they wish to know what would be Shakespeare's feelings for England if he were alive to-day, let them carefully study the well-known passages in the first scenes of the second acts in each of these plays. They will then get their answer not from the lips of Shakespeare's characters, Austria and John of Gaunt, but from the veritable lips and inmost heart of Shakespeare himself.

In "King John" Austria is the enemy of England. A poorish creature, with a calfskin hanging round his own recreant limbs, he yet sells the lion's skin before he has killed him. He is assuring his ally that England shall be conquered and shall make submission:

Austria. [*Speaking to his ally.*]

Upon thy cheek I lay this zealous kiss,
As seal to this indenture of my love,

That to my home I will no more return,
Till Angiers and the right thou hast in France,
Together with that pale, that white-faced shore, . . .

Austria is going on to announce the imminent capture of England. This is too much for Shakespeare. He shuts Austria's mouth, hustles him off the scene, and to the woeful confusion of dramatic propriety, continues Austria's speech in his own person, breaking out into rapturous adoration of England, proclaiming her impregnable and inviolable:

Whose foot spurns back the ocean's roaring tides,
And coops from other lands her islanders,
Even till that England, hedged in with the main,
That water-walled bulwark, still secure
And confident from foreign purposes,
Even till that utmost corner of the west . . .

Having thus discharged his own sentiments and convictions, Shakespeare retires and allows Austria to finish the speech, with a notable and fitting declension into bathos; or with a little hidden sting of irony, according as we may take it.

Even till that utmost corner of the west
Salute thee for her King; till then, fair boy,
Will I not think of home, but follow arms.

Let Germans dissect and digest that speech before they boast that Shakespeare's sympathy and allegiance would have gone to them in this war.

Again, let Germans note and apply to the present situation the closing speech of King John, where the rich, deep diapason of Shakespeare's love for England again enlarges its compass, and ceases in a triumphant assurance to Germany that, unless England helps to wound itself, it shall never lie at the proud foot of a conqueror; and a triumphant assurance to England that the three corners of the world shall not shock her if she obeys the very simple condition of resting true to herself.

But if in "King John" Shakespeare sufficiently derides and tramples on these German boasts of his allegiance, what shall we say of "Richard II"? Let Germans undeaf their ears, and bring their acknowledged and unrivalled powers of critical analysis to the study of the ever quoted, never stale, dying speech of John of Gaunt:

Gaunt. Methinks I am a prophet new inspired,
 And thus expiring do foretell of him:
 His rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last,
 For violent fires soon burn out themselves;
 Small showers last long, but sudden storms are short;
 He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes;
 With eager feeding food doth choke the feeder:
 Light vanity, insatiate cormorant,
 Consuming means, soon preys upon itself.

This is rather poor stuff. John of Gaunt gets tired of it, and finding it hopeless to prophesy about Richard II, begins to prophesy about England. Shakespeare gets tired of it, and shuts it off. Suddenly, from this commonplace level of jingling platitudes, his love for England blazes out, with no cause of ignition, and springs upward like a pyramid of fire.

This royal throne of Kings, this sceptred isle,
 This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
 This other Eden, demi-paradise;
 This fortress built by Nature for herself
 Against infection and the hand of war;
 This happy breed of men, this little world,
 This precious stone set in the silver sea,
 Which serves it in the office of a wall,
 Or as a moat defensive to a house
 Against the envy of less happier lands;
 This blessed spot, this earth, this realm, this England,
 This nurse, this teeming womb of royal Kings,
 Feared by their breed, and famous by their birth,
 Renowned for their deeds as far from home,
 For Christian service and true chivalry,
 As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry
 Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's son;