

Practical Department.

ELOCUTIONARY STUDIES.

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The Trial Scene—Merchant of Venice.

Schlegel has pronounced the "Merchant of Venice" to be one of the most perfect of Shakespeare's works; and it may be safely added that in no other dramatic production of any author can there be found a single scene equal in dramatic effect, in completeness of design, in the absorbing interest of the plot, but, above all, in the varied manifestations of character, to the Trial Scene. It is, as the same critic observes, "in itself a perfect drama, concentrating in itself the interest of the whole." It is these high qualities that commend the Trial Scene as an admirable study to the elocutionist. Criticisms, commentaries, philological notes, and explanations of difficulties will aid the end in view. But the elocutionary study takes higher ground than these. The most important passages of this or any other dramatic scene depend upon a just understanding and vivid truthful conception of the characters; the analysis of their mental condition as they speak must be realized, to represent what Shakespeare has created, by tones of voice and facial expression, by the glance of the eye and the silent eloquence of the hand. It is the study of human nature when hatred and terror and justice and mercy meet in mortal conflict, and are manifesting their most awful or their holiest attributes.

The principal characters in the scene are Shylock, Portia, Antonio the Merchant, and Bassanio the husband of Portia. It is scarcely necessary to describe the special characteristics of each of these persons. Portia, the impersonation of womanly intellect of the highest order, and of womanly loveliness which surrounds and pervades and guides that intellect, so as to take from it all the sternness and repulsiveness which mere intellect without amiability tends to inspire, has been described by no commentator with more force and eloquence than Mrs. Jamieson. But the student of Shakespeare must act rather upon his own judgment, guided but not governed by critics; and a just reading of the play will be the best preparation for the study of Portia, when she takes upon herself the office of advocate in the judgment hall. Before entering upon the analysis of the scene, I must, however, give a brief view of Shylock and Antonio. Before the time of Macklin, who was a contemporary of Pope, the character of the Jew was utterly misconceived, and his impersonation was assigned to a low comedian, who, with grimaces and buffoonery, excited laughter and mockery where terror and aversion only should be awakened. I cannot account for this strange conception of a character whose language is so marked by the eloquence of malignity and whose burning hatred of his Christian persecutors becomes sublime in its very fervor; unless we are to understand that the public prejudice and injustice, which almost justify the malice of Shylock, prevailed long after Shakespeare's time, and forbade the people to believe a Jew could feel the sense of wrong so deeply as to have passions aroused which in their power commanded respect because they excited terror. But it is certain that when Macklin threw all the energy and poetry of tragedy into his impersonation, Pope instantly appreciated the just conception which the actor, and not the commentator, had formed, and exclaimed,

"This is the Jew
That Shakespeare drew."

From that time the Merchant of Venice has continued to be one of the most popular of the Shakespearian dramas, and Shylock has held rank amongst the highest of tragic representations. But com-

mentators have passed from one extreme to the other in the estimate of the character, and now generally unite to pronounce him utterly cruel, vindictive, bloodthirsty and favaricious. But the avarice was rather an instinct of self-preservation than a vulgar greed of money. There was no justice nor mercy for the Jew in that persecuting age. Scorn, contempt, fraud, robbery and the *auto da fe* conspired to bear down his race; and all the Christian nations of the earth regarded it as a Christian duty to rob and cheat and persecute the people whose financial skill was often indispensable to their commercial prosperity and their national existence. Hatred and revenge seem to be the master passions in the nature of Shylock; but when the student has read that indignant reply to Antonio, in which he recounts the intolerable wrongs, the meanness of the persecutions which Antonio and his noble friends had been in the daily habit of pouring on the Jew because he was defenceless, he must admit that, from a human and Jewish point of view, the hatred and the revenge of Shylock were the inevitable results of injustice and of that resentment which the sense of wrong excites in all men, especially when they feel as Shylock felt, that they are in mental powers superior to their persecutors. Of course, I form this view from the Jewish standpoint, and with the object of aiding the student rightly to comprehend the character. The highest elocution is that which gives truthful expression to the language which embodies thought and passion, and the student must have no antipathies, but only the fullest sympathy with the character he is to represent.

Antonio is a character of less importance and difficulty. But commentators are disposed to give him all the qualities of generosity, liberality and manliness, which they deny to Shylock. He is generous to his friends. But he who could trample upon the weak, and cast every insult upon a persecuted race because it was helpless, was wanting in some of the highest qualities of true manliness. When Shylock says:

"You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,"

there was not only cause to justify hatred but to despise the persecutor. During the trial scene the better qualities of Antonio are exhibited. He neither whines nor trembles before his unrelenting enemy; and as it is this manly bearing which redeems him from much that is mean in his character, it is from this aspect that he must be represented in this scene.

I must here state that the study of this scene is founded upon the regular play, not upon the mutilated abstract of it in the Fifth Reader.

In the opening of the court, the Duke, with great condescension and dignity, appeals to the mercy of Shylock. All that can be said about the delivery of his speech is that it simply demands calmness marked by an expression of respect for the Jew and of sympathy with Antonio in the period under which he lies. But there must be an instant change of tone and manner in the reply of Shylock. Appealing only to law, and relying on the right which justifies his demands, his bearing is stern, commanding and relentless. He speaks as one who neither expects nor intends to show mercy; and from that point of view, arguing simply on the legality and the justice of his claim, his defence is unanswerable. In the utterance of the oath,

"And by our holy Sabbath I have I sworn |
To have the due and forfeit of my bond"—

he must, with eyes and hands uplifted, assume all the religious solemnity which as a Jew Shylock feels for that Sabbath; while in the second line his inflexible purpose is uttered in loftier tones, marked by a sternness of hatred and a merciless determination which become grand in their very terror. To give effect to both lines, pervaded as they must be by the suppressed passion, the words must