

difficulty I saw it reported the other day in the newspapers that the Ven. Archdeacon Farrar had said that we could better afford to do without Shakespeare than without Milton. I do not think that that is a sound judgment, and I am glad to be able to set against it the opinion of Mr. Ruskin that Milton is "not among the first or wisest"—not for instance so full and wide and deep as Shakespeare or Dante. In any case—and this is what I should like to impress upon you—to understand a play of Shakespeare is a work of extreme difficulty. Shakespeare does not say to himself: "Go to, let me make a play to teach my fellow-countrymen the danger of unhallowed ambition, or excessive speculation, or filial ingratitude." Any one who thinks that these superficial lessons exhaust Macbeth, or Hamlet, or Lear, has not only not learned what these plays have to teach, but he has not caught the artistic point of view at all. Why should we have an elaborate play merely to imprint on our minds lessons on the level of the copy book heading, "Honesty is the best policy"? The complex nature of Macbeth is not expressed in saying that he is over-ambitious, any more than one of us would consent to have his character formulated in such catchwords as honest, avaricious, self-seeking, industrious. Hence I say that to study a play of Shakespeare is not a trifling thing, but to do it well a very difficult thing. What we should aim at is to build up in our minds the various characters in their action and reaction on one another, as nearly as possible as they presented themselves in the mind of the author. And that is manifestly so hard a task that we who are not Shakespeares or Miltons, or even Grays or Cowpers, must snatch eagerly at all aids to our reflection which we can obtain. Suppose, by way of illustration, that you

wish really to understand the play of Macbeth. Probably you have read it cursorily in a mood between sleeping and waking, and you know that it contains witches and a dagger scene—"Is this a dagger that I see before me?"—that it tells how Macbeth, incited by ambition and worked up to the "sticking-point" by his wife, murdered Duncan, was haunted by the ghost of Banquo—"Hence, horrible shadow!"—and finally slain by Macduff; while Lady Macbeth, too fragile to bear the weight of so great a load of crime, went mad, and walked and talked in her sleep. This floating and wavering image of the play must, first of all, be made precise and definite, and so the whole of it must be read through with care and attention. Then, you go back over it, and, with the aid of a good edition, find out the meaning of all the obsolete words and phrases it contains. Next, you try to get the key to the character of the chief personages, and go on to ask whether such persons would act as they do in the circumstances in which they are placed. Then you note the striking passages, turning them over and over, and trying them by the response of your own mind and experience.

Perhaps, you further wish to know something of the materials out of which Shakespeare has constructed this work of art, and how his skill as an artist is displayed in it. Again, you try to find out the author's age at the time of its composition, and ask yourself how the play harmonizes with that period of his life. When you have done all this, honestly and faithfully, you may then conclude that you know a little of the mind of Shakespeare, and of his view of human life; but your knowledge even then must be meagre and imperfect, until you have similarly analyzed Shakespeare's other plays, compared them with one another, and essayed to follow the