

Shakespeare and Patriotism

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Character is the momentum of our past; environment is its chief formative agent. It is that, not only of character, but of disposition. There may be abnormal cases in which a strong hereditary taint will resist the atmosphere in which it is placed; but they are the exceptions which prove the rule.

William Shakespeare was a man of transcendent genius but of normal temperament. He loved the flowers, the beauty of the Warwickshire lanes and the sweet scenes of boyhood; he loved family life and he mixed freely with men. His parents were of the middle and higher classes, respectively, of English society; and thus both by heredity and environment he fell ready heir to the love of country which is the very essence of patriotism. It permeates his works, not with a blatant repetition, but with the deep note of sincerity. As an example, no mere conventional form could have prompted the burst of feeling in Lancaster's appealing words in Richard II.:

"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 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 plot, this earth, this realm, this
England!
This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear
land!"

When the poet reached the climax, "This England, this dear, dear land," we know by intuition that his heart was full indeed.

Apart, however, from the gracious influence of good birth and lovely surroundings, Shakespeare lived when his country was awakening into a new sense of power, and into a greater place among the nations. He stood at the gateway of a new England and eventually of a crowned Union; and the great Elizabethan period had a deep influence on his life work. That influence can be traced in the fact that he wrote so many historical dramas, not only those with kingly titles, but others bearing the historical impress in plot and speech. His heroes include men whose patriotism feeds on the springs on Virtue's summit. In King Henry V. it breathes throughout and is epitomized in the trumpet call:

"On, on, you noblest English!
"Follow your spirit; and, upon this charge,
Cry 'God for Harry! England and Saint
George!'"

Richmond also in the tragedy of Richard III is an example of the militant patriot whom the poet glorified. These words are inspiring:

"Then, if you fight against God's enemy,
God will, in justice, ward you as his soldiers;
If you do fight your country's foes,
Your country's fat shall pay your pains the
hire;
Sound the drums and trumpets, boldly and
cheerfully;
God and Saint George! Richmond and Vic-
tory!"