

SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET.

THE character of Hamlet as delineated by Shakespeare has caused more perplexity and discussion than any other character in the whole range of art. The charm of his mind and person amounts to an almost universal fascination; and he has been well described as "a concentration of all the interests that belong to humanity."

One man considers Hamlet great, but wicked; another, good, but weak; a third, that he lacks courage and dare not act; a fourth, that he has too much intellect for his will, and so reflects away the time of action. Some consider his madness half genuine; others consider it altogether so: while a third class of critics considers it wholly feigned.

Notwithstanding this diversity of opinions, all agree in thinking and speaking of Hamlet as an actual person. Regarding him as such and not merely as a product of the poet's imagination, we can, with a greater degree of interest, enter into a study of his character.

It has been variously argued whether Hamlet's madness be real or feigned, or whether it be sometimes the one, sometimes the other. On no point do critics engage in so much controversy; and yet the subject remains an unsettled one.

From a careful study of the play we are forced to conclude that Hamlet feigns madness. The main reasons for this judgment are as follow:

1. We have in Hamlet's own words a striking proof that his madness is feigned:—

"Here, as before, never, so help you Mercy,
How strange or odd, soe'er I bear myself,—
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on, &c."

These words prove conclusively that Hamlet intended to feign madness. So that his actions throughout the play, when he starts off into such wild courses of behavior, do not justify us in concluding that he is really mad, seeing that we have in his own words an expression of his intention "to assume an antic disposition."

2. His power to adapt his conduct and conversation to the disposition of the person with whom he is conversing proves that he is not mad.

If Hamlet were really mad he would certainly, on some occasions, act so towards all persons with whom he comes in contact. But such is not the case; for on all occasions we find his conversations with those who were present when the ghost first made its appearance to him, and who were therefore in the secret, to betray anything but a spirit of madness. We cannot fail to be impressed with the profound sense and judgment which