

THE ENERGY OF EVIL IN "KING LEAR."



LT was only the other day that a prominent lecturer adverted to William Shakespeare as "the greatest human being that ever lived." While exception might be taken to this on the comprehension of the word great, as an uninspired intellect he is undoubtedly the world's greatest. His greatness is multi-form. Not only is he the greatest poet and the greatest dramatist, but almost every branch of science finds in him a master. Physicians declare that he displays wonderful skill in medicine; antiquarians that his knowledge of the customs of all ages and nations was marvelously accurate; lawyers that he was profoundly learned in judicial science; logicians that he was a most artful reasoner; and everyone acknowledges that his insight into human nature was unequalled by any but sacred writers. Any one of these distinctions would have made his name immortal, but the attribute which surpasses all these and which is the highest encomium that can be bestowed upon an author, is that he is one of the world's greatest moralists, both because he has given to mankind the wisest lessons in human life and because he has made those lessons the most vivid, practical, and enduring.

That he is a moral teacher does not mean that every page of his contains a sermon, every line an exhortation; nor does it mean that he was an idealist, making his characters, as in the ancient morality plays, mere personifications of virtues and vices. As a dramatist he had to draw his characters from real life with a mixture of good and evil in all. Moral lessons given through other media would

be less practical for the world as it is. Shakespeare's morality is on a larger, grander scale. It lies not in mere words or single acts, but in the great issues of human life. Every play presents to us a view of a portion of human existence working out the proof of some great moral truth.

The whole trend of the "Merchant of Venice" for instance, is to enunciate the principle that the greatest right when pressed to the extreme may become the greatest wrong; that law is to be enforced not in the letter but in the spirit; and that "earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice." In the tragedy of "Macbeth," the wretchedness, remorse of conscience, and very hell of terror that pursue the regicide usurpers of the throne are held up to the world as an awful example of inordinate ambition.

In the struggles between virtue and vice, virtue ever triumphs in the end. We are never dismissed from the closing scene without a firmer confidence in virtue and a stronger conviction that a good life is preferable to a bad one. Indeed, if you take them in the natural, temporal sense, good does not always come off victorious in his plays; the rightful king is not always restored to the throne, the dutiful daughter to her earthly dower, or the true love to his betrothed. But in the higher, spiritual sense it is invariably true that the principle of good triumphs and evil is confounded. In other words, Shakespeare always sees to it that St. Michael conquers Satan.

One of the best instances of Shakespeare's profundity as a moralist is his tragedy of "King Lear." In this masterpiece he has concealed a deep inner meaning, so striking that, in the struggles