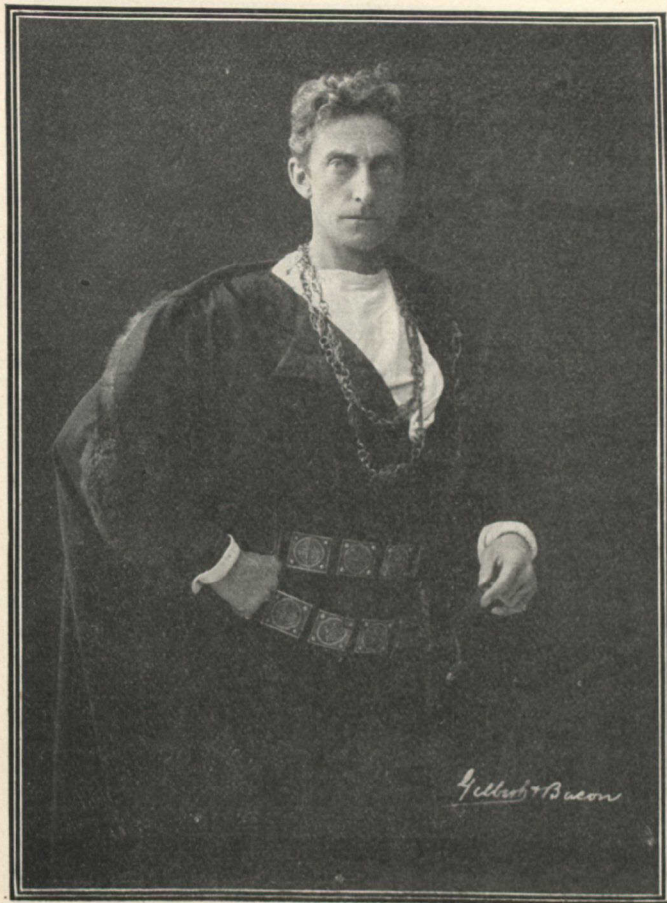




Mr. Forbes Robertson, as "Hamlet."

An Ever Popular Prince

IN the case of almost all the other plays of Shakespeare a production is spoken of as a "revival" but the phrase is seldom or never used with regard to "Hamlet." How can one revive that which is continuously alive and present with us? The title role of the tragedy is unique in that it knows no ups and downs in popular esteem. It is the ambition of every actor to play the part; it is the desire of every one who has learned to read with discrimination to see the play. This is the case even with men who regard the theatre as a whole an undesirable form of amusement.

Yet it would appear that "Hamlet" achieved its pre-eminent place in the British theatre less than one hundred and fifty years ago. It is true that it was the favourite role of Thomas Betterton, the first English actor of whom the records seem to indicate what we now term genius, but in Garrick's time the play seems to have been held in less esteem than some of Shakespeare's other creations. Betterton must have been remarkable in the part when he could win the esteem of Samuel Pepys whose tastes did not lie in the direction of tragedy. He was born in 1635, nineteen years after Shakespeare's death, but the gossip of the time was that Sir William Davenant who schooled him in the part, was the natural son of Shakespeare and had learned from the dramatist's own lips his ideas of how it should be acted. If this be true, we have a continuous tradition in connection with the role dating back to Shakespeare, for all subsequent performances trace back in some degree to the wonderful performance of Betterton, which so impressed itself on a frivolous epoch. In Garrick's time, however, while the play was valued for the opportunities its leading role affords to the actor, the critical tendency was to treat it in a cavilling manner. Voltaire, who saw it when he visited England, would have none of it, and Dr. Johnson most effectively "damns it with faint praise." He indeed throws some light on the mode of acting it then in vogue by the chance phrase "the pretended madness of Hamlet causes much mirth." Garrick in 1771 altered the play and thought so well of his version that he at one time contemplated publishing it. A forgotten critic, David Erskine Baker, whose

"Companion to the Playhouse" was a popular work in the latter part of the eighteenth century, singularly anticipates the modern view of Garrick's proceeding when he says: "This alteration is made in the true spirit of Bottom the Weaver, who wishes to play not only the part assigned him, but all the rest of the piece." He adds, "Since the death of the player, the public indeed has vindicated the rights of the poet by starving the theatres into compliance with their wishes to see Hamlet as originally meant for exhibition. * * * * * No bribe but Garrick's own inimitable performance could have prevailed on an English audience to sit patiently and behold the martyrdom of their favourite author."

The role commenced to tower above all other parts in the repertory of the British theatre in the time of the Kembles, and it is probably due to John Philip Kemble that the tradition of solemnity in connection with the play became established. He was a man of saturnine temperament and one may be sure that his pretended madness did not cause mirth. The English speaking stage has seldom been without an acceptable Hamlet. It is unnecessary to examine the accuracy of George Henry Lewes' statement in his essay on Charles Fechter that no good actor ever wholly failed in "Hamlet." What is really meant perhaps was that the role is the finest ever written in the opportunities for acting it offers. We know that Mr. E. S. Willard did not satisfy either himself or his friends in the role when he played it ten years ago and the eulogists of Edmund Kean have little to say about his performances as the Prince of Denmark. But there were at least four actors in the nineteenth century whose interpretations of Hamlet gave keen pleasure to the critical, Macready, Fechter, Henry Irving and Edwin Booth.

In Mr. Forbes Robertson the play-goers of the present day have a Hamlet who measures well up to the best traditions associated with the part. His interpretation will be more and more appreciated as time goes on. Perhaps Hazlitt was right when he maintained that the average of excellence in acting changes but little from one generation to another.

H. C.



Miss Gertrude Elliott, as "Ophelia."