THE DEVELOPMENT OF SHAKESPEARE'S FOOLS.

SHAKESPEARE began his career with a strong bias in the direction of comedy, chiefly of the light kind; in those early days he was not above writing farce for his own amusement, a thing which he did in after life only when labouring under a royal command. The 'Taming of the Shrew' is such a piece of fooling on a large scale, and is so very much more forcible than refined that the frequent revivals to which it has attained of late years throw a somewhat lurid light on the psychology of modern London audiences. From these early efforts he passed to more significant achievements, writing a good deal of light comedy for its own sake by the way, until he ended up with several things in a style quite peculiarly his own—a play, namely, in which the groundwork is a simple fairy tale of the irresponsible kind that the age was fond of, but into which so many elements of a serious kind are infused that the whole leaves a quite different and far deeper impression. 'Twelfth Night' and 'As You Like It' are such plays; their values are somewhat like those of 'Don Giovanni' and the 'Magic Flute' in another art—no one from reading the libretto of the 'Magic Flute' could give a guess as to what Mozart has actually made of it; no one

when presented with the plots, such as they are, of 'Twelfth Night' or 'As You Like It,' could imagine what effects Shakespeare has got out of them. The fools are much in evidence in the whole series of earlier comedies. Sometimes they are not a success—either because Shakespeare had to write the part when he was out of temper for it, as, for instance, the two Gobbos who set up such a disagreeable discord in the 'Merchant of Venice,' or else because they indulge themselves too freely in that mood of puns and word plays ('Echolalia' perhaps we should call it, with the sanction of Max Nordau and Bernard Shaw) which Shakespeare seems for the most part quite unable to resist, and to which he not infrequently succumbs in the very act of denouncing it. At other times they are more successful, and their part goes with a swing: Costard for instance and Moth, who fit so admirably into the infantile quaintness of 'Love's Labour's Lost'; Lance with his dog Crab, an unregenerate pair, who between them constitute pretty well all that is worth reading in the 'Two Gentlemen of Verona,' and Feste the clown in 'Twelfth Night,' a really fine fool, with brains and experience, and considerably greater concentration of speech than most of his fellows. He is older in fact as the whole play is older, and fills his proper place easily and ably in what is probably the most successful and certainly the most harmonious of all the comedies; in 'Twelfth Night,' at any rate, Shakespeare had no difficulty, as did his contemporaries and he himself elsewhere, in blending grave and gay lights into one atmosphere. Touchstone, the fool of 'As You Like It,' is a fool

of the same maturer kind, when one comes to disentangle him from the over-quotation and misquotation with which the processes of time have overlaid him. He is not only a fool who is evidently out of the twenties, but he is even rather blasé and inclined to be cynical; he marries, but his wife is beneath him in brains and station, and he is conscious that he is rather throwing himself away; moreover, he has enemies, the melancholy Jaques, who though amused at him, cannot abide him, being something of a bitter fool himself, and William, the worthy rustic from whom he filches his sweetheart Audrey, and of whose dulness he takes advantage with the most shocking callousness. Touchstone's matrimonial entanglement and the hostility which he provokes separate him altogether from his slighter and less strenuous predecessors, who are plainly far too young to think of marriage, and who may bore their fellow-characters and the reader, but would certainly never make them angry. It is to Touchstone, and in a lesser degree to the clown of 'Twelfth Night,' that we must look for the fullest development of the fool's possibilities on either side; here only has Shakespeare attempted to realize the full value of the figure in its combined capacities of buffoon, critic, and man of the world; his contemporaries, so far as I know, never attempted it at all. Moreover, Shakespeare's is the last word on the subject, in the most literal sense; his epoch was the last to whom the fool was a living reality, in later generations he could be no more than a mere revival; figures that at first sight seem akin to him, such as Goethe's Mephistopheles or Mr. Shaw's Enry

Straker, are in fact so essentially different that it is useless to compare them.

Another point which deserves passing mention is this: that whether Shakespeare's fools be successful or unsuccessful, tedious or diverting, their movements and their place in the story are always perfectly clear. Shakespeare, however lenient in other respects, was on this point uncompromising, and thereby proved the better playwright and the better actor-manager. His plays, even the greatest, show numerous faults of conduct and construction, but the plot is never confused; compared with the wild chaos of scenes that was presented to the public by his contemporaries, even his weakest effort is a miracle of order and regularity. Particularly in the matter of fools and clowns the rules of the then drama were exceedingly lax; there is the notorious stage-direction from Marlowe: 'Exit Clown, saying anything,' and many other cases are but little better. Shakespeare would have none of this. 'Let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them,' he declares in the only direct utterance on stage-craft that we have from him, 'for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too; though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered; that's villainous and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.'

By the time he was writing 'Hamlet,' from which these words are taken, Shakespeare's mind had become altogether alienated from the fool of the old convention; he was at work on very different

tasks, and was indisposed to let the predilections of his audiences interfere with them more than he could avoid. The four tragedies into which he put his best work, 'Hamlet,' 'Othello,' 'King Lear,' and 'Macbeth,' contain no comedy for its own sake, save for one scene in 'Othello,' so short that it goes for nothing. On the other hand, Shakespeare in these plays put the fool to an entirely new use; he is no longer the central figure of a pastoral or quietly serious action; he is introduced as an auxiliary figure into the description of an emotional crisis of the utmost violence, which he serves to intensify by the contrast of his jest in sheer and immediate contact with tragedy. The grave-diggers in 'Hamlet' preparing the way for Hamlet's funeral meditations and the burial of Ophelia, the crapulous porter who occupies the few moments between the two central scenes of 'Macbeth,' and finally the fool who was Lear's only companion in the storm that overthrew his reason—these are the instances of Shakespeare's new method. The last is much the most elaborate and striking, as indeed the whole play occupies a special position in Shakespeare's work. The conflict between his genius and the exigencies of the contemporary stage is nowhere so acute as in 'Lear,' and nowhere is his impatience so plain of the grosser elements that were constantly threatening to subdue his hand to what it worked in. Hence arises an obvious disparity between the framework of the play and its poetic value. Looked at from the technical point of view, it is full of faults; it is poorly constructed, and the hypothesis on which

14 it rests, that of a king dividing all he has among his

daughters after a test of fine phrases, is an outrage on even the most romantic probability, while much of what takes place incidentally is no easier to believe. On the other hand, when we look at it from the spiritual side, it is a supreme achievement; there is perhaps no poem which has in such few words so wide-reaching a significance; the very sound of the lines seems to send an echo through infinite dark stretches of meaning, and the incomprehension, wrong, outrage, and humiliation of generations to find a voice in the agonized cries of Lear. The fool enters only into the first part of the play. Lear, it will be remembered, does not definitely lose his reason until the piece is more than half done; the fool is his close companion from the first awakening of his anger until this point; afterwards he disappears and we hear nothing more of him. This is the natural consequence of his place in the scheme of the whole; he resumes and gives expression to that inexorable logic of events which is first set in motion by Lear's reckless generosity, and which drives him thenceforward continually closer to and finally over the edge of madness. When Lear is mad, the logic of events, while continuing to fling his body from place to place, can no longer make any appeal to his reason. There is therefore no further use for the fool, and he goes out of the play. It is hard to estimate how much the play would lose in poignancy if Shakespeare had not introduced the fool at all. Doubtless Lear would still be Lear, and his sufferings and end would still take the course they do; but there would then have been left obscure an essential

point, which Shakespeare seems at this time to have been most strongly impressed with: the discord, namely, between the moral and the material world, the fact that Nature neither forgives nor forgets, and that any man may, as a consequence of some pardonable failing, or even some virtue in excess, suffer complete material and intellectual shipwreck. This fact is brought out into full clearness by the fool. His comments on the situation, which grows more and more intolerable to Lear, are an unanswerable exposition of the actual course of events; he appreciates the position on the positive material side just as clearly as Lear himself does on the moral side; moreover, he is the only character in the play who has the courage to speak all out, whereas Lear's other companions are either for passing it over altogether, or for saying as little about it as they can. It is true that Lear, exclusively occupied as he is with the outrage done to his feelings, pays little attention to what the fool is saying, and that, even if he did, the situation is already beyond him; that is his tragedy. But, just because the fool is not fully understood by any of his fellow-actors, he is essential to the full comprehension of the play by the audience; and the burden of tragic irony thus laid upon him singles him out for a quite peculiar position in the series of Shakespearian fools.

With 'King Lear' the subject comes to a natural close; in the three comedies which make up the output of what is called his last or Stratford period, Shakespeare either did not employ fools at all, or employed them as conventionally as in his earlier days.

VICTOR SCHOLDERER.