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THE ABBÉ PRÉVOST AND SHAKESPEARE.

Had the Abbé Prévost written nothing but his appreciation of Shakespeare, he would be entitled to remembrance. To his own countrymen he is famous as the author of *Manon Lescaut*; to English readers he is interesting as the first Frenchman who drew attention to the intrinsic merits of Shakespeare's works. Prévost's investigations into English literature are of genuine importance. In 1731 he was first struck by the ignorance which prevailed in France respecting England. He had then returned home after a three years' stay in England, whither he had gone in 1728, in consequence of a quarrel with the Benedictines of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and he resolved to publish his impressions of the country he had visited. Hence the issue in 1731 of his *Mémoires d'un homme de qualité*, which contains piquant observations on the idiosyncrasy of the English, and a shrewd judgement on English literature. The *Mémoires*, it may be noted, appeared three years before Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques*. Shakespeare is not, indeed, specially mentioned by Prévost; but in a list of examples, cited to support the contention that, with greater regularity, the productions of the English stage would equal (and perhaps surpass) those of the French or ancient Greek theatre, *Hamlet* is given first place. Prévost again visited England in 1733, and soon set to work on *Le Pour et Contre*, a journal which came out at irregular intervals during the next seven years. His main object was to popularize English literature in France; in the fourteenth volume we have the most generous and informed criticism of Shakespeare yet formulated by a French writer. When compared with Voltaire's meagre comments, Prévost's appreciations will be found to prove his importance as a *vulgarisateur* of Shakespeare's works in France. No doubt Voltaire did more than Prévost to stimulate interest in these works; but to stir curiosity is one thing, and to illuminate with information is another. Voltaire's immense vogue entailed consequences. When he described Shakespeare as a 'drunken savage,' he conveyed to Frenchmen the impression that

the English dramatist was an illiterate barbarian for whom the 'rules' of dramaturgy did not exist. This impression Prévost sought to remove, and, in dealing with Shakespeare in *Le Pour et Contre*, his chief concern is to defend the dramatist's attitude to prevailing literary conventions.

In attempting this quasi-apologetic task, he ran counter to most contemporary critics, English and French. By the latter, ignorance of the ancients and neglect of the 'rules' were regarded as heinous offences. Prévost carried the war into the enemy's camp and readily admitted that Shakespeare was guilty of both 'offences.' As to the first charge, it is now doubtful whether Shakespeare was really as lacking in classical learning as Prévost assumes; but, lest there should be any doubt respecting what was probably accepted as a fact, the Abbé is at pains to prove his assertion. Shakespeare, he maintains, received little education, and no classical training whatever. There is nothing in his works which appears to be borrowed or imitated from the ancients. But it must not be thought that Shakespeare's ignorance of these matters impoverished his plays; on the contrary, this omission in his education was a positive advantage. A knowledge of the ancients might have made him more 'correct,' but a regularity, so laboriously acquired, would have diminished 'cette chaleur, cette impétuosité, ce délire admirable, si l'on ose s'exprimer ainsi, qui éclate dans ses moindres productions. Il n'y a personne qui ne lise avec plus de plaisir ces pensées neuves, ces imaginations extraordinaires qui lui sont si familières, que la simple traduction d'un passage grec ou latin, avec quelque art et quelque agrément qu'il eût pu le rendre dans notre langue¹.' However, Shakespeare had a sufficient smattering of Latin, says Prévost, to enable him to scatter a few tags about his works: as, for instance, in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

'Shakespeare did not need the "rules"; they would probably have hampered him.' Such, reduced to its lowest terms, is Prévost's criticism of Shakespeare's attitude to literary *bienséances*. The poet did not choose to rely on Art alone for guidance; his compass was Nature². But this does not imply that he allowed imagination to run riot, that he flouted all principles of judgement and taste: if he did not conform to all the rules, this was because 'his manner of thinking was so elevated above the ordinary as not to need the help of guidance and

¹ *Le Pour et Contre*, vol. xiv, p. 28. This confession that Shakespeare would have attained regularity at the cost of spontaneity is interesting, coming, as it does, from a Frenchman writing in the first half of the eighteenth century.

² *Le Pour et Contre*, vol. xiv, p. 301.

method.' Prévost's final remark is notable for its discrimination: 'Il y aurait donc de l'injustice à vouloir le juger par les règles de l'art, puis qu'il ne les a jamais connues. C'est au Tribunal du bon sens qu'il faut le citer.'

In the historical plays especially, Shakespeare was justified in rejecting the 'unities,' so as to preserve the actual events of history and their fit duration; his neglect of the 'rules' is insignificant beside the merits of these plays—the depicting of manners, the portraiture of character, the expression of sentiments, the play of passions: 'on ne trouvera presque rien dans toutes ses œuvres qui ne puisse être justifié, et de toutes parts il s'y présente des beautés auxquelles on ne saurait accorder trop d'éloges.' In the plays, the plots of which are taken from English and Roman history, the characters are faithfully limned, and, so far from attempting to preserve the unities of time and place, Shakespeare boldly reveals in his titles that he proposes to present an entire career, as *The Life of King John*. Much more skill, so Prévost insists, was needed to sustain a character, and preserve constant consistency and force, throughout a long history, than to present certain aspects of that character in a few fleeting episodes connected by the 'unities.' The character of Henry VI is a masterpiece, 'où l'on trouve ce qu'il y a de plus précieux dans nos meilleurs historiens.' Henry convinces by virtue of his simplicity, patience, feebleness: on the other hand, justice is done to his good qualities, and interest and sympathy are awakened by representing him as saintly, disinterested, resigned to the decrees of Providence. In Prévost's view, such brilliancy of dramatic conception and execution would have been impossible had Shakespeare submitted to the 'rules': 'C'est dans ces grands contrastes, où l'auteur s'attache à la nature des choses et la fortifie sans jamais s'écarter, que son génie brille avec bien plus d'éclat qu'il n'aurait jamais fait par l'observation de quelques petites règles qu'il aurait suivies froidement sur l'autorité d'autrui.'

Notwithstanding his ignorance of the 'rules,' Shakespeare often rises above the 'masters' of antiquity, and Prévost illustrates his case by an interesting comparison between *Hamlet* and the *Electra*. Sophocles' play, at first replenished with true pathos, degenerates into an outrage on Nature and humanity; the scene in which Orestes slays his mother transgresses the elementary laws of nature, and is all the more censurable for being composed by one of the 'maîtres de l'art—ceux d'après lesquels on a formé les règles.' Shakespeare, on the other hand, has represented Hamlet with as much respect for his father, and as much

resolution to avenge his death, as Sophocles has shown in picturing Orestes. Hamlet feels the same horror at his mother's crime, and, in his case, horror is deepened by suspicion of a worse iniquity. But Shakespeare's inherent good sense and critical judgement prevented his offending the susceptibilities of the spectators by the spectacle of a son murdering his mother: 'Avec quelle habileté notre poète n'a-t-il pas su écarter toute indécence de cette nature, en mettant dans la bouche de l'esprit une défense absolue de penser à cette horrible vengeance.'

Having championed Shakespeare's position towards literary conventions, Prévost goes on to give examples of the poet's dramatic craftsmanship in dramatic-drawing and in the handling of plots. Apart from their intrinsic value, Prévost's criticisms of *The Tempest* and *The Merry Wives* have an additional interest from the fact that Voltaire, in his *Lettres anglaises*, was concerned solely with Shakespearean tragedy, and does not mention Shakespeare in his *Lettre sur la Comédie*. For this fatal omission Prévost made amends. *The Tempest* he calls 'one of the most celebrated' of Shakespeare's comedies. The English rightly set a high value on this play, and maintained that the 'rules' were observed in it; indeed, Prévost continues, characters and style are alike irreproachable. The critic announces his intention of translating the scene between Miranda and the Prince of Naples, 'qui est remarquable en effet par mille traits dignes de la réputation de Shakespear¹' (*sic*). Anticipating the possible objection that the magic element is ridiculous, Prévost pleads that Shakespeare's use of magic was everywhere justifiable, and quotes an English critic to support this view. Again, he argues that Dryden was not far wrong in calling Falstaff the most perfect character in the range of comedy. The two intrigues in *The Merry Wives* are dovetailed with greater skill than in most English plays. After quoting the judgements of contemporary English critics, Prévost gives his own opinion of *The Merry Wives*, a piece which he has read several times and which he has seen played by the most celebrated actors in London. Prévost's conclusion is that, allowing for certain faults which all sensible Englishmen would readily recognize, the invention and development of the intrigue, and the character-drawing, deserved the praise bestowed on them; and, regretting that a

¹ Prévost constantly deplores the fact that the French had no good translation of Shakespeare, and that they were reduced to making translations of English criticisms of the plays. In *Le Pour et Contre*, he gave analyses of the plots of the chief plays, hoping thus to remedy the defect in some measure.

comedy so renowned should be unknown south of the Channel, he calls for a translation of the play into French¹.

Prévost's praise of *Othello* is less whole-hearted. He detects two grave flaws in the plot: firstly, Desdemona's passion for a Moor was highly improbable; secondly, the handkerchief episode was not sufficient warrant for Othello's ferocious jealousy. The character of Iago, however, can be easily defended as in consonance with reason and probability. To say that vice should not be represented on the stage is to betray a narrow mind; virtue is best shown in opposition to vice; true virtue implies a knowledge, and consequent hatred of vice: to present such a villain as Iago on the stage was no worse than to represent the vast consequences of love, ambition, or anger. Prévost completes his remarks on Shakespeare with a short reference to *Hamlet* which, as he repeats, the English rightly consider the masterpiece of the 'Prince of their Stage.' Again lamenting the absence of a good translation of the original, and deploring the fact that the French knew *Hamlet* merely from translations of English criticisms of it, he offers his readers, by way of compensation, the story of the plot, which he gives in detail.

Such is the Abbé Prévost's estimate of Shakespeare—'one of the greatest geniuses who have ever honoured dramatic poetry.' The scope of modern criticism is not much wider than Prévost's. At a time when literary judgements were apt to be crude and cramped, Prévost rejected current standards and attained an independent personal point of view; his test of excellence is—not the rigid observance of artificial 'rules,' but—the intrinsic value of the works under discussion. In two respects Prévost may fairly be said to have anticipated modern developments. He employed, and was among the first to employ, the historical method: he considered Shakespeare's works in their relation to the age in which they were produced. Unluckily the method is misapplied, and his observations on this head show less than his customary acumen and accuracy: assuming that Shakespeare lived in a more or less barbarous age, when ignorance and bad taste prevailed and when the drama was amorphous, he alleges that these circumstances go towards extenuating such breaches of the 'rules' as the dramatist may have committed. Manifestly, Prévost had not wholly shaken off the academic orthodoxy which was the base of eighteenth century criticism; but this is not surprising, for contemporary English critics were no better informed concerning Elizabethan literature.

¹ Prévost hints vaguely at making such a translation himself: we have no trace of it, if it was ever begun.

Again, Prévost used what we may call the 'geographical' method of criticism. Every country, he avers, has its own customs and 'mode of thought'; hence every country has its characteristic literary standards, and an excellent work, which satisfies the standards of one country, may easily fail to satisfy the standards of another country. Reviewing *The Merry Wives*, he says it was only after he had been long conversant with English tastes and manners that he began to think favourably of the play; were it not that he allowed for differences of custom and 'mode of thought,' he would, he confesses, have passed over as coarse and ridiculous innumerable points which, according to English canons of taste and beauty, are so many strokes of genius. By his faculty of distinguishing between the essential features of the literatures in different countries, and by his gift of indicating the precise cause of such distinctions, Prévost was not only in a fair way to assimilate the spirit of the Shakespearean drama: he incidentally made a useful contribution to the literature of cosmopolitanism. To comprehend English works, he perceived the necessity of being 'Anglicized,' of becoming imbued with English literary ideals, of growing acquainted with English manners; these conditions were peculiarly needed for the due comprehension of Shakespeare, whose works differ radically from French classical tragedy inasmuch as they teem with contemporary ideas and allusions to contemporary manners.

That Prévost fulfilled these necessary conditions is indisputable; further, he fulfilled the conditions precedent to a right understanding of Shakespeare. The most enduring impression left by his appreciations is that of complete sympathy with his subject. He succeeded in clearing his mind of prepossessions which had been carefully fostered by dull academic routine. In some respects Prévost is more akin to the nineteenth century than to the eighteenth; at the lowest he represents a transition between the two centuries. He was by no means faultless; he allowed his imagination an unfettered liberty; he gave free (perhaps too free) expression to his passion; he was Rousseau's forerunner in the cultivation of the 'ego.' His impetuous temperament enabled him to follow Shakespeare in his emotional flights, and in the works of the great dramatist he saw the perfect expression of that primitive energy which verges on ferocity—that 'poésie farouche' which stirs the soul to its depths, and which was wholly wanting in the conscientious imitations of the ancients so much in vogue in France. When originals were available, Prévost disdained translations, and a close study of these originals, joined to the accurate knowledge of the English

people which he had obtained during his two visits to this country, placed him *en rapport* with Shakespeare. His personal tastes, too, helped to complete his understanding; he was an ardent lover of that liberty, that spirit of individualism, which is a characteristic and constant trait of English literature.

The Abbé Prévost's share in the revelation of the authentic Shakespeare to the French is of real literary significance. In any description of Shakespeare's vogue on the continent, Prévost's name deserves a prominent place. Among Prévost's achievements in the sphere of literary 'vulgarizations,' his contribution to Shakespearean criticism is only less important than his renderings of Richardson's novels.

J. C. CARPENTER.

LONGTON.