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Kellogg (A. O.)

THE

HAMLET OF EDWIN BOOTH:

*A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY.*

BY

A. O. KELLOGG, M. D.,

HUDSON RIVER STATE HOSPITAL.

[REPRINTED FROM THE JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MEDICINE,  
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WHENEVER extraordinary claims to excellence in the delineation of Hamlet, undoubtedly the highest of dramatic creations, are advanced, it becomes not only the dramatic critic, but the student of psychological science, to examine the grounds and analyze carefully the qualities on which such claims rest.

The Hamlet of Shakespeare involves a most profound psychological problem, and one not yet solved to the satisfaction of many thinking minds; therefore, all studies of this character must be, to a certain extent, psychological. The line of demarcation between health and disease is here so obscure and delicately drawn, that the character, viewed from a certain stand-point, seems on one side of the boundary, and again, viewed from another, as decidedly on the other, and hence the disputes as to the real or feigned insanity.

To a question once put to the elder Booth as to whether he considered Hamlet sane or insane, he is said to have made this remarkable reply, evincing that thorough grasp and appreciation of character incident to genius: "Something of both, but always *very uncertain*," said the great actor. This answer was undoubtedly drawn from the depths of his own spiritual experience, and seems to embrace the whole subject-matter in dispute. The commentator and the character both belonged to the same order of beings, and hence the fitness and truthfulness of the comment. Both were denizens of

what we have before designated as that curious border-land that divides the realms of sanity and insanity, and both seemed sometimes on one side of the line and again on the other, as they were impelled by a strange and rare organization, over which the power of the will, at times, appeared to have little or no control. Both were "mad north-northwest," but, when the wind was "southerly," each "knew a hawk from a handsaw." When adversity, trials, temptations, and perplexities came upon them, like a piercing north wind, they were smitten and fell; but, when the "sweet south" breathed upon them as "upon a bank of violets," they revived again, and came forth in all their native and resplendent beauty and loveliness.

To have met either when the intellectual weather-vane pointed in a certain direction, no psychological lore would have been necessary to determine the question of their complete mental integrity; but, when blown about by the storms and tempests of life, without compass or ballast, no expert was needed to predict, sooner or later, intellectual shipwreck.

Hamlet, as we have shown in a former paper on this character,<sup>1</sup> was a melancholic, and melancholy is now regarded not merely as the "nurse of frenzy," into which it very frequently passes, but a distinct form of mental derangement. "Since learning this," said one great delineator of Hamlet once to the writer, "I never ask myself, in playing the character, 'Am I sane or insane?' as I constantly did before." Under the excitement of the interview with Ophelia in her chamber, and also with Laertes at her grave, he is quite beside himself, and his language, appearance, and loss of self-control on both occasions, give unmistakable evidence of mental derangement. On the contrary, during the interview with his mother, and upon other occasions, though he does not lose self-control, he seems ready at any moment to pass the boundary-line, with the same results seen both in the chamber and at the grave of Ophelia. His condition is always, in the language of the elder Booth, already quoted, "very uncertain." He has no self-reliance, neither can he be relied upon. He makes high resolves, but he executes only by impulse. Yet he

<sup>1</sup> See "Shakespeare's Delineations of Insanity," etc. Hurd & Houghton, 1866.

is honest, and means to carry out his purposes, and keep his promises, but he has not always the power to do so, and the condition which prevents him is one not merely of inherent weakness of character in certain directions, as set forth by Goethe in the subjoined extract from his "Wilhelm Meister," but of engrafted melancholia :

"Imagine to yourself a prince whose father dies unexpectedly. The desire of honor and love of power are not the passions which animate him; it is sufficient for him that he was the son of a king; but now he is under the necessity of observing carefully from a distance the difference between the king and the subject. The right to the crown was not hereditary, yet a longer life of his father might have made the claim of his only son stronger, and the hope of the crown more secure. Now, on the contrary, he must attain it through his uncle, and, notwithstanding the apparent promise, perhaps he is forever shut out from it. He now feels himself poor in graces and goods, a stranger in that which, from his youth up, he was accustomed to regard as his own by right. Here his spirit receives the first heavy stroke. He feels that he is no more than any nobleman, indeed, not as much. He regards himself as a servant of all. He is not courteous, not condescending, but, rather, bowed down and abject. He now looks upon his former circumstances as upon a vanished dream. In vain does his uncle encourage him, and seek to show him his situation from another point of view; the perception of his nothingness never leaves him.

"The second stroke he receives wounds him yet more, bows him yet deeper. It is the marriage of his mother. To him, a true and tender son, there remains, after his father's death, a mother, and he hopes, in company with his noble mother left behind, to do honor to the heroic form of the great one departed. But he also loses his mother, and in a manner far worse than though death had torn her from him. That perfect ideal which a well-bred child so readily forms of a parent, vanishes; from the dead there is no help, and from the living no support. She is also a woman, and from the common frailties incident to her sex she is not exempt. Now, for the first time, he feels himself truly bowed down, and no fortune in the world can

again restore to him that which he has lost. Not melancholy, not naturally reflective, melancholy and reflection become heavy burdens to him.

“Imagine, vividly, to yourself this young man, this princely son, fancy his circumstances, and then observe him when he perceives the appearance of his father’s form. Stand by him on that terrible night when the venerable spirit himself walks before him. Huge terror and amazement seize upon him. He speaks to the wonderful figure, sees it beckoning, follows and hears. The terrible complaint resounds in his ears, calling for vengeance, and the pressing and oft-repeated entreaty, ‘Remember me!’ And, when the spirit has vanished, what do we see standing before us? A young hero that pants for vengeance? A born prince that deems himself fortunate in wreaking vengeance on the usurper of his crown? No, astonishment and sadness fall upon the lone one. He becomes bitter against the smiling villain, swears not to forget the departed, and concludes with the significant expression: ‘The times are out of joint; woe unto me that I was born to set them right!’ In these words lies the key to the whole conduct of Hamlet, and to me it is clear that Shakespeare would have pictured a great deed imposed as a duty upon a spirit that was not equal to that deed. This idea seems worked out in the entire plot. Here is an oak planted in a delicate vessel that should only have contained flowers; the roots strike out, and the vessel is destroyed.

“A beautiful, high, pure moral being, without the mental strength that makes the hero, travels under a burden which crushes him to the earth, one which he can neither bear nor cast entirely from him. Every duty is sacred to him, but this is too heavy. The impossible was demanded of him; not that which was in itself impossible, but that which was impossible to him. How he writhes and turns, filled with anguish, strides backward and forward, ever being reminded, ever reminding himself, and at last losing sight of his purpose, without ever having been made happy.”

Shakespeare, whatever may have been his intention, recognized what has apparently escaped even the penetration of the great German poet and philosopher, viz., that there are



cases of melancholia, of a delicate shade, in which the intellect proper, so far from being overcome, may, perhaps, in certain directions be rendered more active and vigorous. "A mind diseased," in the ordinary acceptation of the term (a term we are scarcely willing, in the present state of science, to accept at all), need not imply a mind destroyed, or even deranged in all its faculties, but one changed in its normal operations by the intense emotions excited in it. Such a change, as we have before pointed out,<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare has given us in the character of Hamlet, with a wonderful fidelity to nature.

After these preliminary observations on the character of Hamlet, as we understand it—a character we have attempted to analyze more fully in a former essay—we approach the main idea involved in this paper, viz., the manner in which the difficulties incident to its proper delineation are met by our distinguished countryman, Edwin Booth.

That there must be a rare combination of natural gifts to meet all requirements in the proper delineation of this great dramatic creation, none will pretend to deny; and that more of these gifts are combined in Mr. Booth than in any other, now or for some time past before the public, is claimed by some of the most candid, enlightened, and intelligent critics.

These claims we here propose to analyze, and set forth some of the reasons for the faith which animates us in the supreme excellence of the delineation by our countryman.

That something of national pride should enter into and influence to a certain extent the judgment of Americans is natural, and perhaps not altogether unavoidable, but we hope in pursuing our analysis to divest ourselves as much as possible of this feeling, and rely upon facts, evident to all of whatever nationality, and reasonable and unprejudiced deductions from the same.

As the physical qualities necessary to the proper delineation of this character, and which are so happily combined in Mr. Booth, have been repeatedly set forth, we pass them by in this connection, and come at once to the consideration of those which more especially interest us, viz., the psychological. The truly great delineator of Hamlet must possess certain

<sup>1</sup> See "Delineations of Insanity," etc., p. 36, *et seq.*

natural, mental, and moral characteristics, as well as the physical qualities above glanced at, to enable him to meet successfully all its severe requirements.

He must have not only that education in art necessary to the proper impersonation of any great tragic conception, but he must have passed through a rare and rich experience, and, to a certain extent, represent in his own life-history what he professionally portrays, and as Hamlet feel and think, "live, move, and have his being," in his daily walk and conversation. Hamlet is not something "that a man may play" successfully by merely donning the "trappings and the suits of woe," but there must be "that *within* which passeth show," a deep, rich, sympathetic nature.

The actor, of all artists, must possess such a nature, for without it there is no complete and abiding success. His heart must be attuned to every human sympathy, otherwise his impersonation is indeed a sham, and not a life-picture, as it should be. It is one thing to "speak the speech trippingly on the tongue," and another to feel its full force in the depths of his own heart. The one is merely to "split the ears of the groundlings" and obtain an ephemeral notoriety; the other is to put himself in true sympathy with thoughtful minds and feeling hearts, and permanently to control them.

Now, we are aware that these are great demands, but they are legitimate, and, as we expect to show, are met by Mr. Booth in his delineation of Hamlet in a manner most unusual, if not hitherto unequalled.

The gifts which enable him to meet these demands have, in the first place, come to him by natural descent from an illustrious father, who was himself a man of great and acknowledged genius; and these powers were educated and developed under the eye of this parent from early youth to manhood. In the second place, these powers have been developed by an extraordinary combination of circumstances and life-experiences, so sad as to have overwhelmed an ordinary nature; but tending, when applied to such as his, to deepen the "native hue of melancholy" which belongs to it, and bring out those tints, sombre indeed, but none the less lovely, which otherwise might forever have been concealed from view.

To an intelligent American, supposed to be acquainted with the history of the drama in his native country, and also the connection of the Booth family, not only with that history, but with the great national tragedy, in which one was, alas! the chief actor, it would scarcely seem necessary to do more than glance at these circumstances. But there are those abroad who are not as well informed in these matters; indeed, scientific journals of high standing, both in France and England, have confounded John Wilkes Booth with his father, Junius Brutus Booth, who died in 1852, and both with him whose name stands at the head of this paper.<sup>1</sup> Such, of course, have never reflected on the influence this crushing sorrow may have had on the full development of the powers of Edwin Booth, perfecting him in his great interpretation of this least understood, most subtle and profound, of the dramatic creations of William Shakespeare.

We now come to consider a component in the intellectual character of our gifted countryman which has, in the estimation of the writer, contributed more to his extraordinary success in the delineation of the character of Hamlet than any thing else.

Edwin Booth inherits from his illustrious father, not only great dramatic genius, but that tendency to melancholia which, as has been shown before in our analysis of the character of the father,<sup>2</sup> is so frequently an accompaniment of great intellectual powers. But this is not all; as every man is said to be a compound of qualities, good or bad, that have previously characterized some one of his progenitors, there has descended to the son, from some ancestral source, a certain moral and intellectual balance, not derived from or possessed by his immediate progenitor. This element has been the conservative force in the character of the son—the good angel of the intellectual household, shielding him from all danger, guarding him in the hour of temptation, and guiding him through the fiery furnace of affliction so safely that he has

<sup>1</sup> See *Journal of Mental Science*, London, 1869; and *Annales Medico-Psychologiques*, Paris, 1869.

<sup>2</sup> See *Journal of Insanity*, April, 1868.

emerged not only unscathed, but purified, strengthened, and ennobled.

We now come to consider certain epochs of sorrow in the life of Edwin Booth, in order to contrast them with those woven by the dramatist into the life-history of his immortal conception, and this parallelism is, to us, singularly interesting. The more we have reflected upon it, the more strongly have we been impressed with the thought as to how far the life-history of the delineator has tended to influence the character and success of his great delineation. Notwithstanding the free use the public claim to make of all that is most sacred in the private life of eminent public favorites, we hope to approach this branch of the subject with all the delicacy which legitimately belongs to it, especially during the lifetime of the individual.

Like Hamlet, Edwin Booth's first great sorrow was the death of a kindly, generous, and illustrious father, alone, and in circumstances peculiarly painful to his devoted family. Up to this time father and son had scarcely been separated, and although the son pleaded earnestly to accompany his father on this last journey, as he had on all others from earliest youth, he was not allowed, the father insisting on his remaining in California to pursue his profession. The farewell was forever. On the journey home he was seized, on board a Mississippi steamboat, with one of those rapidly-fatal diseases of the Southwest, and died suddenly, his only attendant being the steward of the boat.

Thus fell upon the tender and youthful heart of the son its first great sorrow, like a thunder-bolt from a clear sky, and its traces, heightened by others in after-life, can be seen indelibly impressed on those extraordinary features, which have been the study of so many artists, and the admiration of so many thousands of every age, sex, and condition in life.

For a long time, the youth is said to have been inconsolable, brooding in silent sorrow over his irreparable loss, and,

—“with veiled lids,  
Sought for his noble father in the dust.”

The noble words which Hamlet addresses to his mother, when she seeks to rally him from his excessive grief at the

death of his father, seemed the eloquent and only expression of the state of mind and feelings of the youth, in view of his great bereavement :

“ Seems, madam! nay, it is ; I know not seems.  
’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected havior of the visage,  
Together with all forms, modes, shows of grief,  
That can denote me truly : these, indeed, seem,  
For they are actions that a man might play :  
But I have that within, which passeth show ;  
These, but the trappings and the suits of woe.”

The next great sorrow which overshadowed him also bore a certain resemblance to that which came upon Hamlet in the estrangement and death of Ophelia, whom, as he says, he had loved with more than the love of “ forty thousand brothers.” This sorrow was the death of a wife, a woman of great personal charms and loveliness of character, and one every way worthy of that deep affection which only such a nature as his can lavish with unselfish devotion upon another. By this blow he was nearly driven to despair, but Providence, whose dealings, though sometimes dark and strange, are ever kindly, had provided a way to save him from utter desolation of heart, and, perhaps, moral and intellectual shipwreck ; for such natures, without some support, cannot always, and under all circumstances, stand erect. The same blow, we believe, that deprived him of a wife, left him a tender child, upon whom to lavish the wealth of his affections, and who can say how much dramatic art in America is indebted to this child, now a deep-eyed, brown-haired little maid of eight years ?

Not long after this second great affliction he made his first deep and abiding impression upon his countrymen, by enacting Hamlet for one hundred consecutive nights to crowded houses—something unprecedented, we believe, in the history of the drama. Who can say to what extent the success of the delineation was dependent upon the recent affliction of the delineator ? As the audiences looked into his sad, thoughtful

countenance, the deep melancholy of which was not necessarily assumed, they read not only the history of the thoughtful, melancholy Dane of the great dramatist, but the life-history of his most truthful interpreter.

Time had barely toned down this sorrow when a calamity fell upon the nation by the hand of a younger brother, which, while it seemed for a time to threaten the destruction of the whole body politic, carried not only death and desolation, but calumny and dishonor, into the family, of which he was the acknowledged head.

Like Hamlet, he could bear up under all the sorrows death could inflict, for death involved only the ruin of his affections, and the blasting of cherished hopes; but again, like him, when, with this desolation of heart, calumny and dishonor were heaped on the head of innocence, the sorrows, not only of Hamlet, but of Job and the weeping prophet, seemed for the time to be laid upon him. We will not seek to follow him through the dark valley he was made to thread, sustained only by his strong faith in the divine order of all things, and leaning upon one friend, America's most promising sculptor, who, during the whole pilgrimage, like Faithful in the immortal allegory, stuck "closer than a brother." Neither will we seek to draw these sorrows from their abode in the breasts of the two friends, and hold them up to the gaze of a morbid, sensation-hunting public; we allude to them here only because they seemed necessary to the analysis we have undertaken, and to show with what sincerity of heart he could apply to himself the words of Hamlet he had so frequently repeated to enraptured thousands:

"O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!  
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God!  
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on't! O fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,  
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely."

The actor and sculptor above alluded to stand in the same relation to each other as did Hamlet and Horatio, and those

who know the sculptor best will be the first to admit that he possesses, in a marked degree, many of those admirable qualities of head and heart delineated by the poet in the character of Horatio which fit him for the bosom-friend of such a man. Intelligent, genial, sympathetic, watchful of his varying moods, and meeting them with an ever-ready sympathy, he has ever been to him, in all his afflictions, a tower of strength, and an inexhaustible fountain of consolation and support. Such a friendship as this Shakespeare himself must have experienced in order to have depicted it so truthfully in the case of Hamlet and Horatio.

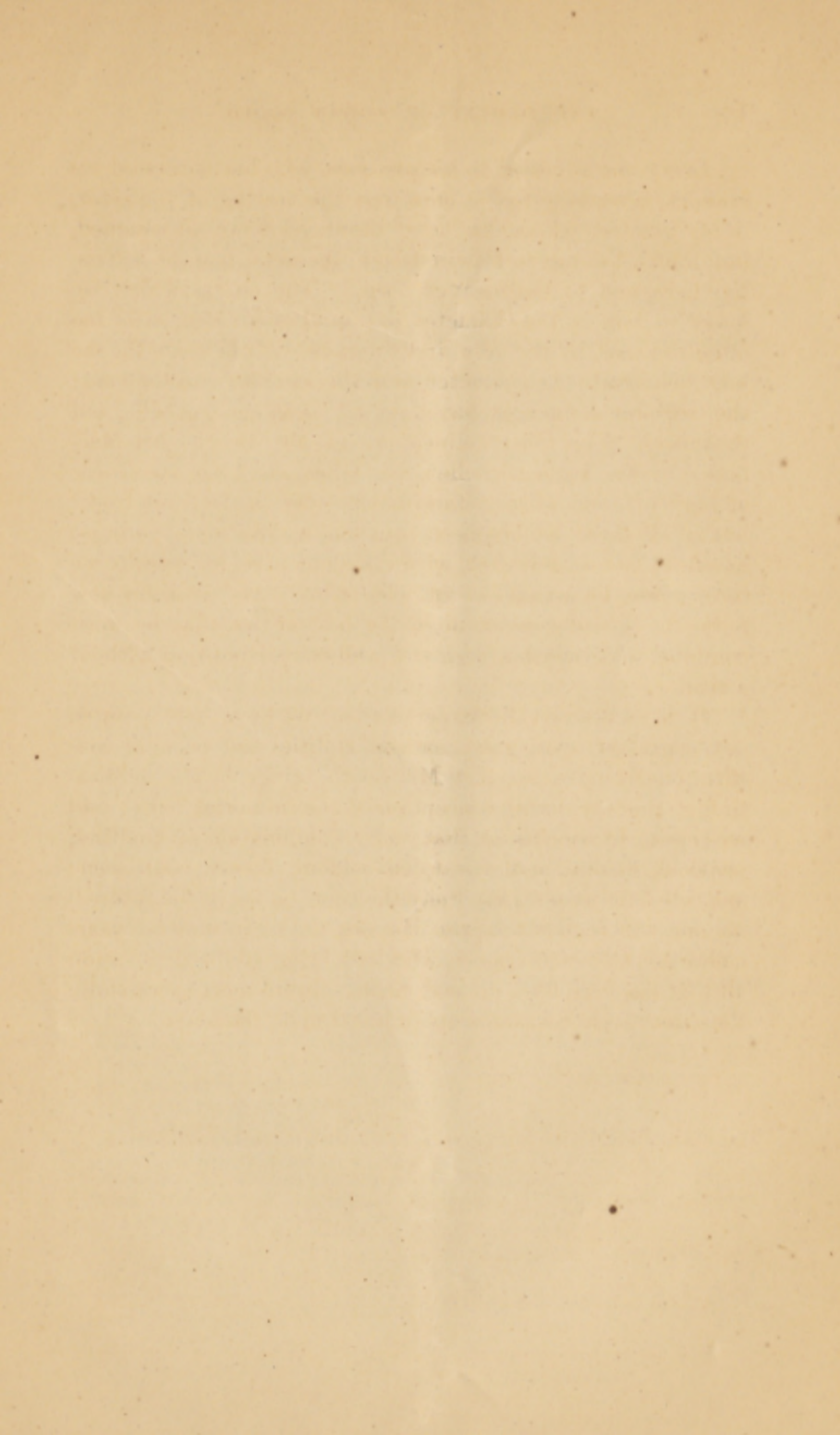
Between the character of Hamlet, as drawn by Shakespeare, and that of Edwin Booth, as seen by his most intimate friends and associates, there are certain points of resemblance which, to those who have made a study of both, are strikingly significant. There is a strange, silent, thoughtful, melancholic mystery about both not easily penetrated, or analyzed fully. At the same time this mystery is not repulsive, but, on the contrary, it has a curious fascination, which, while it attracts with a power which is irresistible, baffles all solution and all attempts at complete analysis. "I have been long acquainted with him," said a very intelligent lady once to the writer, "but he is a strange mystery. I cannot understand him fully; he is too deep for me, but I believe he is goodness and generosity to the very bottom. I know he is, as far down as I have been able to sound him." Let any attempt, however, be made to "pluck out the heart of his mystery" by those animated by motives of interest or impertinent curiosity, and such will find themselves very soon in the same position as were Rosencranz and Guildenstern when sent to spy out Hamlet. They would learn that to "play on that pipe" was, indeed, *not* "as easy as lying."

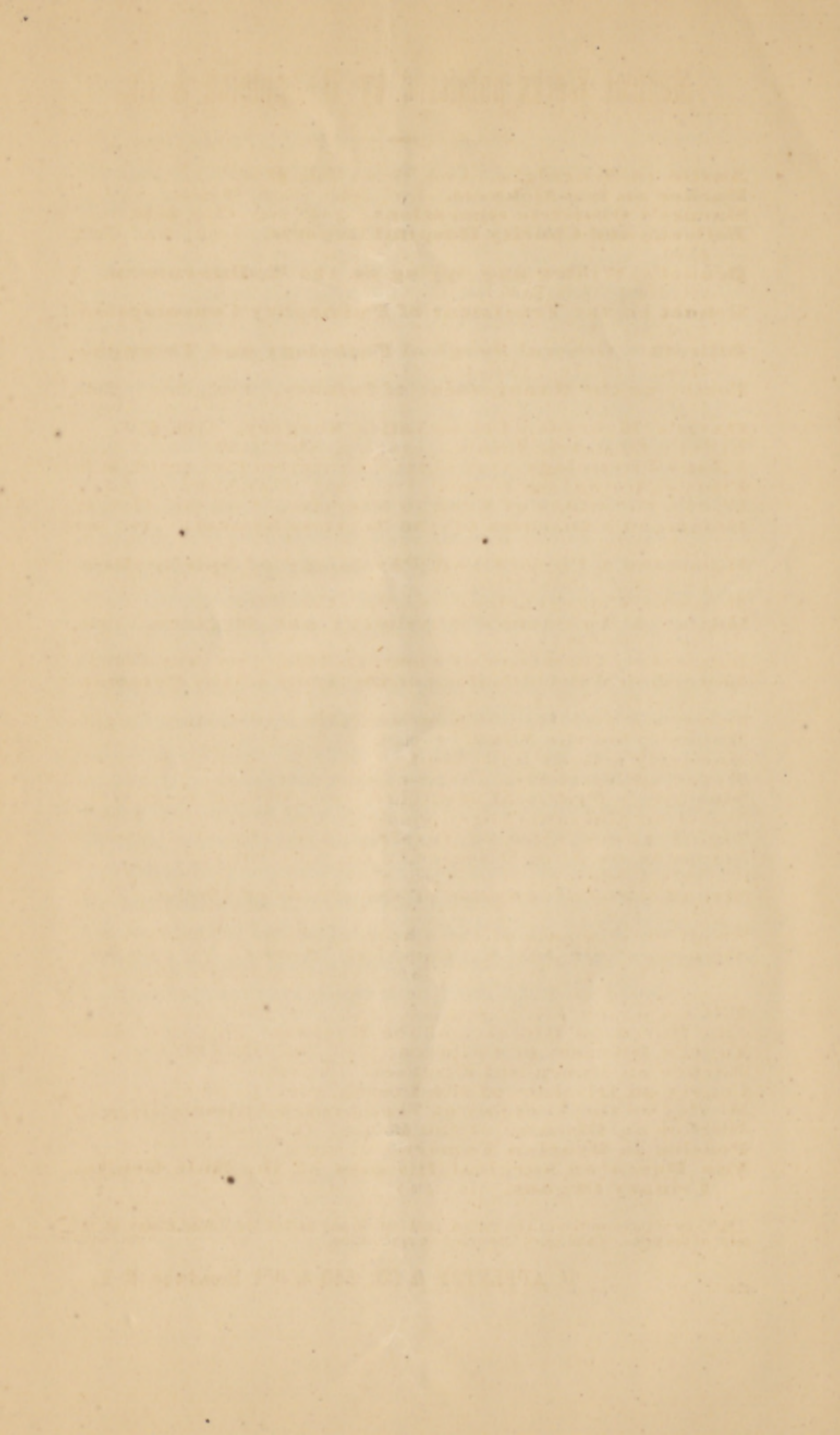
Toward his intimate friends and associates, his bearing in private is marked by a refined and unobtrusive courtesy, and a quiet geniality and generosity of character and sentiment, which, if any thing, is more fascinating than any of his public performances. He seems to have laid well to heart the advice which, as Hamlet, he gives to Polonius, "Use every man after your own honor and dignity."

Every one admitted to his presence, who has witnessed his Hamlet, is made to feel at once that the bearing of the actor, in his greatest delineation upon the stage, is not all assumed, but that it belongs to Edwin Booth, the man, that he is "native here, and to the manner born." The charm which belongs to him in the character is not all dissipated, as is too often the case, by the very first utterances of the man, for the man belongs to the character, and the character to the man; the refining influences have not all been on one side, but reciprocal. The other delineations of Mr. Booth—his Macbeth, Othello, Iago, Richelieu, Sir Giles, etc.—are specimens of high art, and as such stand confessedly in the front rank; but in all these he has been equalled, and in some, perhaps, excelled; not so, however, with Hamlet; here, for reasons we have given, he stands out in bold relief. And it seems now to be the settled conviction of the best critics, that he must continue to occupy his high and well-earned position without a rival.

It is such a rare life-experience as we have here pointed out, engrafted upon great natural abilities and peculiar constitutional tendencies, that Mr. Booth brings to the delineation of this wonderful conception of the immortal bard; and we repeat, in conclusion, that such a combination of qualities, physical, mental, and moral, has seldom, if ever, been seen; and when he passes away (may the time be far in the future!) no one will remain to enact Hamlet. And it may be years before another will appear, who will bring to the delineation all that has here been noticed, fitting him to meet successfully the most severe requirements imposed upon the actor.







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