"HAMLET" AT BOOTH'S THEATRE.

BY RICHARD GRANT WHITE.

[From "The Chronicle" of Feb. 14.]

Of Mr. Booth's performance of "Hamlet" little can be said, at least in praise, that has not been we'l said already. Probably no more thoughtful and finished a representation of that character has been seen since the play was written. It is more spoken, perhaps to more the mere surmise, but I doubt if so much was made of the character and of the tragedy, if the significance and dramatic value of every line and almost every word uttered by the principal personages was so carefully sought out and weighed, when it was first produced under Shakespeare's own eye as is now done under Mr. Booth's. And as to the mounting of the piece, the material form in which it is presented, it is needless to say that nothing like it was dreamed of then, and safe to say that nothing superior if equal to it has since been seen in any theatre. Every scene is a grand and impressive historical picture in which the figures move and speak. It is difficult to conceive of stage effects more real in their seeming, more brilliant and imposing, and more in harmony with the sentiment of the tragedy, than those we have here produced. Each one is a study, a composition, and brought out to the minutest details. The great hall in which the second act and most of the third act pass, the grouping and the movement of the personages down to the most unimportant of them, the churchyard, the burial of Ophelia, are poetic conceptions, pictorial treatments of their subjects, which in spirit, keeping and composition, and even in effects of color, few living painters could hope to rival. They are so complete that they leave nothing to be desired that is attainable by thought, research, apple resources, and the artist's skill. The most exacting spectator confesses that his imagination of these scenes has been fully equalled, if not surpassed. And in this last point is to be found one reason of the dramatic failure and aesthetic emptiness of this performance. For in *Hamlet* of Booth's Theatre is a splendid blunder.

The blunder is in the purpose. The end in view is attained with a completeness almost without a parallel in the history of the stage; but that end is a false one, and all the means by which it is sought are directly at variance with the spirit of the play, and with the most fastidiously proper of the author.

Hamlet is an ideal, romantic drama; a tragedy the creation of a poet such as conceived as possible, if possible at all, only in the rudest times and among a people barely lifted together by sufficient cohesive social power to be called a community. Shakespeare, taking a story made to his hand, disregarded absolutely all unity of time, of place, and even all consistency of action and character, and of manners, that he might present in its hero his ever-living conception of a moping, wayward, procrastinating, purposeless man, whose inactivity over one form his action, checked as that is by reflection so quick and penetrative that he perceives no both sides of every question, not successively, but at once.

Now this supremely ideal and extravagantly romantic tragedy, a play the conditions of which, regarded from the point of physical possibility, are impossible, Mr. Booth—yielding, as he must needs yield, to the demands of a degraded dramatic taste—has chosen to present, or attempts to present, as if it were a composition in the real school of art, a drama of real, every-day life, in which he and the actors are to represent, and can represent, that which has been or might have been, exactly like Tom Taylor's cleverly constructed "Mary Warner," which gives Miss Bateman such fine opportunities to move the heart of the audience to sympathy with sorrows which might be their own—that which may daily. The realism of the representation sometimes embodies conceptions of great material grandeur, as in the scene which is placed in the gallery over the arches in the great hall, from which the personages descend the long flights of the grand staircase; and therefore, on the other hand, more consistently cares even for the minutest detail of a representation of court etiquette. No obeisance due to the heir apparent is omitted; and even when the two recorder-players are seen in their flame-colored robes, the Prince of Denmark does not receive an instrument from one of them, but through the hands of a courtier. But the realism of the representation goes further: it begins, perhaps, with Mr. Booth himself, and his speech. Of this an instance, exhibiting perhaps the most extraordinary combination of attitude and elocution ever seen on the stage, appears in the first act. When the ghost appears, saying, "Hamlet, remember me," Mr. Booth, who has listened kneeling, falls to the ground, representing Hamlet as overwhelmed by the tumult of his emotion. He lies still a moment, and then, tossing about as a man might who had been in a violent fit and was so exhausted, he begins the following soliloquy before he rises, and actually speaks the last line, "all you have lost of heaven O earth! What else? And shall I couple hell?" etc., lying that all the time back looking up to the sky, and with his head toward the audience. Now, as soliloquy represents, in the only possible way, man's unuttered thoughts and feelings, such a delivery of this speech as Mr. Booth gives it would very likely, and almost sure, to happen in real life, were a man so prostrated by the effect of such a mishap. Before he could speak sufficiently to rise and become self-possessed and coherent, he would begin to think thoughts that spoken would be exclamations. But we may be sure that Shakespeare had no such delivery of this soliloquy in mind when he wrote it; for there is so great an incongruity between the realism of the actor's treatment and the ideal and romantic conception of the scene as to void the performance of all dignity, and to make it appear as nearly to the ridiculous as possible in the hands of an artist of Mr. Booth's histrionic power.

Briefly, Mr. Booth has attempted what is impossible, and what would not be desirable even if it were possible. To put *Hamlet* correctly upon the stage as to the scenery and costume is here quite out of research and the attainment of art; for some parts of it, it is needs be badly and bluntly incongruous with others.

Hamlet is, from beginning to end, in its external conditions and in its very structure and spirit, one monstrous anachronism. The play moves and ends in absolute defiance of material coherence and physical possibility. The period of its action is the most indeterminable problem in dramatic literature. It runs through a possible range of nearly a thousand years, and while some passages take us back to the mooted ways of Saxon days, others are not less essential bring us down to the time of Shakespeare himself. What need to trouble ourselves about correct conformity to the architecture, the furniture, and the costume of Denmark before the tenth century, when we must listen not only to the firing of cannon but to the talking about them, and when the turbulent clon of the tragedy is brought about by a duel with rapiers in which all the terms of the modern fencing school are used by the combatants and the bystanders? In such a play of what value is correctness of costume? What correctness can there be? The very upper and lower limbs of the personages at Booth's Theatre are at variance, open and palpable; the legs tied up with cross-bands in the style of the bayeux tapestry, and their arms hanging rapiers which did not come into use until the reign of Elizabeth, six hundred years afterward. "Hamlet" and "Laertes," to fight in character, should hack at each other with double-edged axes. And not content with such anachronisms as those already indicated, Shakespeare gives to the Dane in the dark ages the English coroner's inquest with its laws, and the funeral ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church; although the period the story on which the tragedy is founded is four centuries before that at which Christianity was introduced into Denmark.

Finally, the anachronism of this great tragedy will not intend to its material forms and physical conditions, to points of costume, of custom, or even of law. The anachronism most monstrous of all is in *Hamlet* himself, embodying as he does in act and speech the thought, the spirit, the purpose of the tragedy. All are of the many centuries during which the events of the tragedy may be supposed to have taken place, and certainly at that chosen, and well chosen, by Mr. Booth, such a character as "Hamlet" was impossible, or, if not such a character, at least a character so revealing itself in words. The period of the story which is the frame-work of the play, and that indicated by the events in the play itself, is one of barbarism and the reign of physical force, over which "Hamlet's" introspective philosophizing was as absolutely impossible as "Polonius's" reference to the supremacy of France in the realm of fashion. To Ambleth the Dane, the soliloquy "To be or not to be," and the musings in the churchyard, the reflection on man, indeed almost every thought uttered by Shakespeare's prince, were as unintelligible as a discourse on the mode of telegraph or a discussion of the law of nations. Wise men live in all ages of the world's progress, and among all peoples; but speculations in psychology and introspective dissections of man's hidden motives belong to periods of high intellectual culture, when brute force has long been subjected to reason, and the mind of man, grown familiar with the world's outside, begins to turn its eye upon itself. In the Iliad, the Nibelungenlied, the Chanson de Roland, and the Norse Sagas—those great and almost contemporary epics of rude times, like those to which the Hamlet presented to us in the old tale and at Booth's Theatre lived—we find no trace of the introspective habit and power of mind, the representation of which in an extreme and morbid form is the chief end and purpose of Shakespeare's tragedy.

To attempt the representation of such a play as this in a realistic style is preposterous, to seek the unknown and tries the impossible; and more than all, it is at war with the very purpose and spirit of the work. The Hamlet, costume, scene, all material forms and physical conditions are nothing. Here, more even than in any other of his plays, Shakespeare deals with the naked soul of man. The scenery required is only enough to suggest the situations. Indeed, to put *Hamlet* on the stage as Shakespeare wrote it with realistic scenery would be a physical impossibility. In the *Hamlet* of our stage, even with Mr. Booth's intelligent and powerful restoration, much of the original is omitted. To present the succession of scenes that Shakespeare wrote in the play in which Mr. Booth produces it would be beyond the ingenuity of the carpenter and the art of the scene painter. As to the omitted scenes, it may well be that of any period except our own—that of Elizabeth's day, in which we may be sure it was first performed, that of Charles the First's time, or even the bob-wig, broad-lapped velvet coat, and knee-buckle which Garrick played in, or any other that would remove the action from associations of our own time and manners. Indeed, not only point as to the scenery and costume of this play which is absolute and essential to its representation, in which neither should attract any attention; a good point as to the scenery and costume of this play which is above burlesque or spectacle, an important point as to high comedy and tragedy, but most important as to the realism of such tragedies.

CITY BULLETIN.

—The stated meeting of Councils was held yesterday afternoon. In the Select Branch Mr. Shallcross presented the following:

Resolved, That the counsel for the plaintiffs in the case of the City of Philadelphia vs. Daniel M. Fox, Mayor, et al. (Board of Trusts), be directed to appear, and be authorized in their discretion to enter an appeal to the Supreme Court, and that in case of such appeal the Mayor be and he is hereby authorized and directed to provide bail in error, &c. Agreed to.

Mr. Barlow, Chairman of the Special Committee on the Contested Election Case of Cozens vs. Hodgson, presented a report setting forth after hearing all the evidence, that the contestants have failed to sustain the material averments of their petition, and that Alexander L. Hodgson, the sitting member, is entitled to the seat