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A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

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pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

A Short Sermon on Shakespeare.

By William Sanday, D.D., LL.D., Litt.D., Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity and Canon of Christ Church, Oxford.

'And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.'—Gn 1[31].

For the last two or three weeks the country has been celebrating the Tercentenary of the death of William Shakespeare. Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616. In this year April 23 fell on Easter Day, so that the celebrations had to be postponed. We have been thanking God for the gift to this nation of him who is by common consent the greatest poet—certainly the greatest dramatic and lyric poet—that ever lived. It is hardly possible to overestimate the value of this gift. At the present moment especially, when the things of the mind and of the spirit are so all-important to us, as our best support and comfort in a time of stress and strain and sorrow, it is a happy coincidence which reminds us of Shakespeare. I need hardly say that we do not think of him in any boastful or vain-glorious spirit, but seriously, as one of whom we would try to make ourselves worthy, as the most precious of all our spiritual possessions.

Why do we call Shakespeare the greatest of poets? Why should I speak of him here in the pulpit as such a wonderful gift from God? Not because he was the most religious of poets. There are many other poets whom, especially at the first blush, we should think of as more religious. He was what we should call a worldly man; he was a shrewd man of business, who had a free and easy career and enjoyed life as it came to him. Yet this would be a shallow way of speaking. One who had such magnificent thoughts was certainly more than a mere worldling. And when Shakespeare does allude to religion, the allusions are sweet and pure; he sets a watch over his lips as the Bible would say; he speaks with reverence and understanding. Neither do we call Shakespeare the greatest of poets because he was the most sublime; because, although there are many things in his poems which, when they are rightly considered, touch the very highest point to which sublimity can go, there are other poets—such, for instance, as Milton or Dante—whose general attitude and character was more consistently sublime. Nor yet was he so great because he was the most perfect and finished of poets; because, although single passages and single lines are as perfect as human expression can be, his average style is not by any means either perfect or finished; it was in the manner of the time, which had about it something rather strained and artificial. If we are to choose any one quality that made Shakespeare the greatest of poets, it would, I think, be because he was the most comprehensive, the most *universal*. What do I mean by this? I mean because his mind included such innumerable aspects of life; because it contained within itself such a countless multitude of observations and ideas, to many of which he gave the aptest and most telling expression. His was the *largest* mind that ever was; it contained at once the infinitely great and the infinitely small. Shakespeare could pass from the one to the other with the most consummate ease. He was like his own Hamlet. You remember how, when Hamlet says that to him Denmark is a prison, some one remarks: 'Why, then your ambition makes it one; 'tis too narrow for your mind.' And he replies: 'O God! I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space.' Shakespeare could at any moment bound himself in a nutshell, and at any moment count himself king of infinite space—so astonishing was the reach of his mind. One might say that he plays with worlds and systems of worlds. There is no one who can convey such a sense of vastness. He has an extraordinary power, at the same time, of making one feel that everything which seems to us most solid is yet in a state of flux or transition. The fashion of this world passeth away.

> 'The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve;
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind.'

I said just now that Shakespeare was not exactly what we should call a religious man. And yet, after all, is there not something almost godlike in a power like this? The way in which Shakespeare looks out upon the universe—and the way in which he makes

you feel that it is a universe, called into being by the word of God and existing only at His pleasure, reminds one of the half-verse that I have taken for my text. It seems to be the nearest approach that the human mind has ever made towards this picture of God Himself contemplating His own creation. It is for this reason that such words as 'creativeness,' 'creator,' occur so naturally to the mind when we think of Shakespeare. He peoples his universe with living beings, with objects of all kinds; and then, by the force of his poetry, he lights them up (as it were) and brings out their beauty and value. He compels our attention to them and invests them with a glory which they never had before.

I will give you an example of the way in which Shakespeare speaks of Man and sets him in the framework of nature; and then I will remind you of a parallel from the Bible. Again it is Hamlet, explaining how he has fallen into a morbid state of mind in which God's creation is spread before his eyes in vain.

'I have of late,—but wherefore I know not,—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted[1] with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express[2] and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me; nor woman neither.'

Let us set by the side of this the 8th Psalm:

'I will consider thy heavens, even the works of thy fingers: the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained.

'What is man, that thou art mindful of him: and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

'Thou madest him lower than the angels: to crown him with glory and worship.

'Thou makest him to have dominion of the works of thy hands: and thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet.

'All sheep and oxen: yea, and the beasts of the field;

'The fowls of the air, and the fishes of the sea: and whatsoever walketh through the paths of the seas.

'O Lord our Governor: how excellent is thy name in all the world!'

The poetry of the Psalm is simpler, but not less impressive. And there is an added lesson, inasmuch as it brings out at once the littleness and the greatness of man: in comparison with nature man seems so small; and yet how great he is, and how precious in the sight of God!

It is difficult to stop when one begins to speak on such a theme. I know that I must stop; but I think you will allow me to add a few words.

I said just now that this side of Shakespeare's genius was godlike. To prove it, if it needed proof, I would only ask you to think of the Sermon on the Mount. The words of our Lord Jesus Christ are austere in their simplicity. He does not allow them to expand into what we commonly call poetry; and yet the essential poetry shines through them.

'Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

. . . .

'And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin.

'And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these.

'Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven: shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?'

Here are these two humble forms of God's creation, the birds and the flowers. I must allow myself to give you examples of what Shakespeare can make of them.

A young girl, gathering flowers, lets her fancy and her imagination wander and play about them, and becomes for the moment a poet like Shakespeare himself:

[1] *I.e.* adorned as a ceiling is adorned.

[2] *I.e.* finely shaped or moulded.

'I would I had some flowers o' the spring that might
Become your time of day; and yours, and yours,
. . . . O Proserpina!
For the flowers now that frighted thou let'st fall
From Dis's waggon! daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty; violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
Or Cytherea's breath; pale prime-roses,
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phœbus in his strength, a malady
Most incident to maids; bold oxlips and
The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds,
The flower-de-luce being one. O! these I lack
To make you garlands of, and my sweet friend,
To strew him o'er and o'er.'[1]

And then take this, from one of the Sonnets, The poet pictures himself in a state of deep depression and melancholy:

'Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee,—and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising,
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate.'

That tiny speck lost in its 'privacy of glorious light': what music! and what rapture!

I go back to the Gospels. And just one more touch I will ask you to notice of which—if it had been a disciple who was speaking, and not the Master—we should have said, How Shakespearian—How more than Shakespearian! For there is a lofty serenity and divine authority about it which goes beyond Shakespeare:

'Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

'But I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you;

'That ye may be sons of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust.

. . . .

'Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

'He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust!'

Of course there is a problem in the very existence of Evil; and these words certainly have a bearing on that problem. Perhaps they even in part suggest a solution of it. But at all events they—and Shakespeare with them—help us to understand how—in spite of evil—God could yet look round upon the world that He had made and pronounce it 'very good.'

[1] It is worth while to observe the wonderful ease and freedom with which Shakespeare handles the old pagan mythology—the element which came to him through the Renaissance. We can appreciate the special quality in this if we compare it—let us say, with Titian's 'Bacchus and Ariadne' in the National Gallery, a picture which derives part of its beauty from the flowers: the rich warm glow of the latter, and the cool glancing lightness and delicacy of the former, a very miracle of grace and charm. The phrase about the daffodils is, I must needs think, the *ne plus ultra* of purest poetry.

Eastern Religions in the West.

By Professor the Rev. J. S. Banks, D.D., Headingley College, Leeds.

One of the most interesting and yet least generally known passages of history is the one concerning the invasion of the West by Oriental religions in the early centuries of our era. The religions of Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria, Persia carried on a vigorous missionary crusade in Rome and countries under Roman influence with considerable temporary success. This supposes a vacuum to be filled, a want to be supplied; and such was the case. The old religion of myth and legend which had reigned so long in Rome and Greece held its ground among the masses, but among the higher classes it was utterly discredited; there its value was only symbolical. Philosophy had taken its place, and philosophy can never be a substitute for religion. There are needs of human nature which it does not even profess to satisfy. It did not even in Greece, where it was carried to such a height of