

HAMLET, THE HINDU.

BY THE EDITOR.

DR. Arthur Pfungst, of Frankfort on the Main, a poet and a thinker of unusual talent, published an article on "Hamlet, the Indian" in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, September 15, 1906, in which he points out the many similarities in Shakespeare's "Hamlet" to the philosophy of ancient India.

Other dramas of the English poet contain remarkable thoughts which read as if they were quoted from Brahman or Buddhist scriptures. For instance in "The Tempest," Shakespeare says (Act IV, Scene 1):

"We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

Sankara, the interpreter of the Vedanta, expresses exactly the same idea, "The world is like a dream."

Shakespeare makes a pessimistic application of this observation when the king in the second part of "King Henry IV" (Act III, Scene 1) exclaims:

"O God! that one might read the book of fate,
And see the revolution of the times.
.....O, if this were seen,
The happiest youth viewing his progress through,
What perils past, what crosses to ensue,
Would shut the book and sit him down and die."

How much these statements savor of the spirit of ancient India!

Of a number of similar passages in the texts of India, one may here suffice, which is quoted from Böhlingk's *Indische Sprüche*, No. 4707: "Do not boast of riches, servants and youth, for time snatches all away. Surrender this whole world based on illusions, gain true insight and enter at once the place of Brahma."

While there are a number of such coincidences in other dramas of Shakespeare, Hamlet is full of them.

It is unquestionable that Shakespeare knew nothing of Indian philosophy. He died in 1616, and Europe became acquainted with Indian philosophy first through the Dutchman Abraham Rogers, a clergyman who lived in the north of Madras, and published in 1651 some information concerning the Brahman literature of India in his *Open Door to the Hidden Paganism*, and yet Shakespeare has numerous ideas which are kindred to those of the hermit philosophers of India. The only explanation is that he drank from the same fount as those ancient sages of the East, facing the same problems in his soul and life's experiences. A similar parallelism is noticeable in Kant who uttered many Hindu ideas without having the slightest knowledge of the Vedanta philosophy.

Dr. Pfungst undertakes to prove that in Hamlet Shakespeare represents a character who by his inborn disposition as well as the difficulties of the situation in which he lived comes to the conclusion that all individual existence consists in suffering, an idea which underlies all the philosophy of ancient India; yet Shakespeare can not make his hero rise above empirical existence, and so his fate becomes a tragedy. Pfungst does not mean to say that Shakespeare had clearly recognized the problem, he only claims that he dimly conceives it, yet he pictures thereby a world-conception which found an expression in the Bhagavadgita, about 2000 years ago.

The Bhagavadgita describes the combat between the sons of Kuru and the sons of Pandu, branches of the royal family and rivals for the possession of the kingdom. Arjuna, the leader of the sons of Pandu, is accompanied by the god Krishna who acts as his charioteer and encourages him to fight. When Arjuna sees his kin in the hostile army he drops bow and arrows and is unwilling to proceed:

"Seeing these kinsmen, O Krishna! standing here desirous to engage in battle, my limbs droop down; my mouth is quite dried up; a tremor comes on my body; and my hair stands on end; the bow slips from my hand; my skin burns intensely. I am unable, too, to stand up; my mind whirls round, as it were.

"I do not wish for victory, O Krishna! nor sovereignty, nor pleasures: what is sovereignty to us, O Gavinda! what enjoyments, and even life?

"These I do not wish to kill, though they kill me, O destroyer of Madhu! even for the sake of sovereignty over the three worlds, how much less then for this earth alone?

"Although having their consciences corrupted by avarice, they do not see the evils flowing from the extinction of a family, and the sin in treachery to friends, still, O Janârdana! should not we, who

do see the evils flowing from the extinction of a family, learn to refrain from that sin? On the extinction of a family, the eternal rites of families are destroyed."

The similarity in Hamlet is remarkable. He, too, is unwilling to take upon himself the duty of struggle, yet he is as bold as Arjuna when he has met the spirit of his father. He says:

"If it assume my noble father's person,
I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape,
And bid me hold my peace."

When this same Hamlet is expected to act he says in a monologue (in the first act):

"O! that this too, too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew;—
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 same longing for death is expressed by Arjuna when he says (Song I, v. 46):

"Alas! we are engaged in committing a heinous sin, seeing that we are making efforts for killing our kinsmen out of greed of the pleasures of sovereignty. If the sons of Dhritarâshtra, weapon in hand, should kill me in battle, me weaponless and not defending (myself), that would be better for me."

Hamlet is filled with a longing for deliverance, but he has been educated in traditions which make the situation more complicated for him, for he feels himself in conflict with divine commands, while Arjuna suffers only from the doubt whether he who acquired insight should act. We might also compare with Hamlet and the Bhagavadgita the lines of Thomas Hood, who two hundred years after Shakespeare wrote:

"Mad from life's history,
Glad to death's mystery
Swift to be hurled,—
Anywhere, anywhere,
Out of the world."

Arjuna's solution of the difficulty is formulated in these words: "Thou art Brahma and in Brahma thou art absorbed."

Arjuna has a teacher and counselor in Krishna, while Hamlet is helpless in the whirlpool of life, and the result is that the Bhagavadgita takes a different turn from Shakespeare's drama.

Richard Garbe in his edition of the Bhagavadgita points out that two ways of salvation are recommended: one is an absolute

withdrawal from the world; the other, energetic action without desire. As soon as the slightest wish enters the soul of the actor, be it even for the success of his ideals, he has not yet freed himself from the evils of life. Garbe indicates that Krishna apparently prefers the latter course, but the author of the Bhagavadgita does not dare to condemn the former and leaves both on equal terms, allowing the pious to choose between the two.

Krishna's principles are represented in Hamlet by Fortinbras, whom Hamlet admires for the boldness with which he and his followers march to the grave as if they were going to bed, while Krishna declares (Song IV, v. 6):

"If wickedness rises and piety begins to totter, I reincarnate myself by the power of my own will."

Hamlet feels the duty of action but is not strong enough to follow it. He says:

"The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!"

Krishna insists on lovingkindness and a patient indifference toward life. He says: "Whoever hateth none of all beings, is full of lovingkindness and merciful, to whom pain and joy are the same. Who is patient. . . . who knows neither joy nor hatred, neither care nor desire. . . . who minds neither pleasure nor pain. . . . he is dear to me." Krishna further points out that the man who has attained this condition is beyond good and evil. He can do no wrong even though he might commit murder. He says:

"He who has no feeling of egoism, and whose mind is not tainted, even though he kills all these people, kills not, is not fettered by the action."

Hamlet expresses a kindred thought in the often quoted sentence (Act II, Scene 2):

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

Hamlet acts in this way, i. e., as one who is beyond good and evil. He shows no compunction of conscience when he kills Polonius, nor when he sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into death. From Deussen's Vedanta translation Pfungst quotes the passage:

"Is not the father the father, and the mother the mother. . . . is not the thief the thief, and the murderer the murderer? He who knows this is not overcome by either whether he has done evil while he was in the body, or whether he has done good, for he has overcome both. He is not touched by what he has done nor what he has not done."

This may be compared to what Hamlet says (Act I, Scene 4) :

“So oft it chances in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth, (wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature can not choose his origin).”

And further (in Act V, Scene 1) :

“Let Hercules himself do what he may,
The cat will mew and dog will have his day.”

Krishna says (Song XVIII, vs. 59-61) :

“Even against thine own will thou must act as nature made thee. The spirits who in themselves have taken residence guide all beings, Arjuna, as marionettes on wire.”

In another part of the Bhagavadgita we read :

“God dwells in the hearts of all beings, and Arjuna whirls about by his magic force all beings like figures in a puppet show.”

How much these passages remind us of the well-known words of Shakespeare in “As You Like It” :

“All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players,
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.”

Hamlet in the famous monologue, “To be or not to be,” discusses the problem of suicide, but he shrinks from it because he feels that death may not be the end of all. It may be a sleep and yet he feels that terrible dreams may trouble this sleep, and thus “conscience makes cowards of us all.”

The problem of suicide does not exist to the leader of the Bhagavadgita, because there is no escape into the realm of not-being, for we read in the second song (verse 16) : “The not-being will not receive existence, the being no non-existence.”

Georg Brandes said of Hamlet “that of all Danes there is only one that has become famous on a large scale, and that one has never existed.”

Pfungst quotes it but not without disapproval, because Denmark has produced an unusual generation of prominent men ; but he adds, “Hamlet did not live in the Occident ; he never saw Helsingör or Wittenberg. His home was India.”

Would it not be truer to say that what Dr. Pfungst regards as typically Indian is typical rather of a certain class of thinkers, and they may be found scattered all over the face of the civilized world?