SHAKESPEARE IN FRENCH PROSE.

ANTOINE ET CLEOPATRE : traduction D'ANDRÉ GIDE. (*Nouvelle Revue Française*, Juillet-Septembre, 1920.)

M. André Gide's translation of *Antony and Cleopatra*, published recently in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, raises a host of interesting problems in criticism, some of which have been already treated in an excellent article from the pen of M. Henri Ghéon in the August number of the same review. The occasion of M. Ghéon's article was the performance of *Antoine et Cléopatre* at the Opéra; and his judgment will be peculiarly sympathetic to English readers in that its gist is the defence of poetry and the dramatic imagination against logic, against composition, against all that unrolling of a situation after prescribed and recognized formulæ, the necessity of which seems to us too easily postulated in the more traditional French criticism. M. Gide appears to have translated the play with a certain kind of performance in view; he has freely adapted it to the exigencies of such a performance; presumably he would not have made the adaptation unless he had supposed it consonant with the spirit of the original. M. Ghéon points out that it is, after all, not so consonant, and he proceeds with much subtlety to remark that the rationalization of form which M. Gide has effected in Shakespeare's work was only possible because Shakespeare himself had recognized and fulfilled in his own way its essential requirements. So that the question which arises in the end is whether it may not be better to be reasonable in Shakespeare's way—preserving all the shocks and surprises incidental to the medium through which he worked and gaining with the perception of these that of the light which his imagination struck out of them—than to be reasonable in such a way as grand production at the Opéra may dictate, a kind of reasonableness dangerous to the vitality of the original, with all its flashing, scattering pier thrusts of action and characterization.

The quality which M. Ghéon detects in M. Gide's reconstruction of the play in its larger outlines—where every liberty is taken except that of adding to what Shakespeare wrote—is hardly less apparent in the style of the translation itself; how, indeed, could it be otherwise, seeing that in M. Gide we have an artist at work? In the one case he rearranges and abbreviates, in the other he transposes. The tone of Shakespeare's utterance in *Antony and Cleopatra* is pitched exceptionally high; the play is written, as a musician might say, in a brilliant key. M. Gide would appear to demur to this as an extravagance; at any rate, he finds it inappropriate to the purpose he has in view. Great scenes of pomp and ceremony at the Opéra, all that apparatus of World Empire through which the tragedy moves, require in the dialogue a tone of Roman gravity, and what he chiefly associates with Roman gravity is moderation and common sense, the key of C. So he transposes the whole, resolving every hyperbole by careful exposure of the links which attach it to daily life and the normal conversation of men. When Pompey exclaims

> If the great Gods be just, they shall assist
> The deeds of iustest men.

he renders

> Si les puissants dieux ont souci de la justice,
> les hommes justes doivent compter sur
> leur appui.

exquisitely correcting that flavour of exaltation which Shakespeare delights in. Why, one asks oneself, reading the French, is Shakespeare so lofty and so pressing, when his thought is so familiar, so unstrained? And the question becomes more acute as one proceeds: for it is our experience in life that one exaggeration leads to another, and that the smallest diversion from sober truth will translate itself by rapid stages into calamitous errors and misunderstandings; whereas the dialogue of Shakespeare, however turgid or intense in detail, pursues the path of reason as perfectly as if it had been framed by a logician, and permits M. Gide to pursue his minor rectifications unintermittently without once requiring him to add a wider consistency to the discourse. In sum, just as the construction of the play, adapted as it was to the kaleidoscopic shiftings of the Elizabethan scene, survives recasting, because from the first its framework was so firmly knit, so also its high poetry, however much it may suffer in transposition to Augustan gravity, supports the transposition because all that was necessary to gravity has been allowed for and included in it.

As in the construction, so also in the dialogue, by reducing, as it were, the temperature of the play, M. Gide reveals how rich are the elements it holds in fusion. But the texture of the play, as he gives it, though solid and strong, refuses inevitably those touches of quick life which, for an English reader, are the distinguishing marks of Shakespeare's genius. Thus

> Ant.: My more particular
> And that which most with you should safe my going
> Is Fulvia's death.
> Cleo.: Though age from folly could not give me freedom,
> It does from childishness. Can Fulvia die?

becomes in M. Gide's accurate prose,

> Ant.: Un motif plus particulier, qui près de vous pourra justifier mon départ, c'est la mort de Fulvie.
> Cleo: Si l'âge n'a pas su me préserver de la folie, du moins je n'ai plus la crédulité de l'enfance. Est-ce que Fulvie peut mourir?

The sense is perfectly apprehended, but the sting is gone. Still more does this appear in

> Oh, my oblivion is a very Antony
> And I am all forgotten . . .

which, on clear analysis, gives us, it may be, no more than

> Mais pareille à Antoine, ah! j'ai déjà tout oublié,

but has lost in the analysis all that attaches it to Cleopatra and become what any mistress would say to any lover. And finally, since the whole truth must be declared, this rationalizing process has a deep danger of its own because poetry is in the last resort more irrational than reason, and in the substitution of a lesser for a greater reason the translator is sure at one point or another to go astray. M. Gide has been singularly unlucky in this respect; his most conspicuous fall occurs at the climax of the tragedy, where for

> Peace, peace!
> Dost thou not see my baby at my breast
> That sucks the nurse asleep?

he gives us only

> Regarde: sur mon sein le nourrisson s'endort en tétant sa nourrice.

Did he think that there was an extravagant reach of imagination in this which must be mitigated if French ears were to receive it? He mitigates so much that we cannot be sure, and his familiarity with our language is so firmly established in his treatment of the play as a whole that it is difficult to suppose that he has misunderstood his original in this case. But if that is all, if we have here a mistake merely, the mistake itself perhaps partly arose out of a disposition to regard Shakespeare as a poet who can easily be corrected. In saying this we do not mean to deny the aptitude of a great many of M. Gide's corrections. He has done an admirable piece of work, of which it is not the least charming feature that it can reveal even to English readers aspects of Shakespeare's work which else might have escaped them.