

THE POETRY REVIEW SEPTEMBER 1912

REVIEW OF *GOOD SIR PALAMEDES*

WHAT shall be said of *The Equinox*? It is alarming indeed suddenly to chance upon it in the full bloom of its eighth year, a biannual published in March and September of some 800 pages the two issues, "The Official Organ of the A.:A.:", "The Review of scientific illuminism"—so alarming that I hardly dare pronounce myself. And *The Equinox* would not concern THE POETRY REVIEW were it not for the open secret that *The Equinox* is the poet, Aleister Crowley. Poet I call him, particularly because I cannot consider him here in his capacity of (retiring) editor, or of Chancellor of the A.:A.: The specific interest of his periodical must be that nine of its chief literary items are his, and that *The High History of Good Sir Palamedes*, besides many of his other works, first appeared in its pages.

For purposes of review it may be hazarded roundly that the whole of *The Equinox* is a creation of the amazing Mr. Crowley. His antics are as wild as the devil's, he dances through its pages like a mad magician. It is a sort of enchanted variety entertainment. I cannot discover when it is not serious. But there are moments when Mr. Crowley is serious, the moments of such passages as these (in the drama "Adonis"):

Astarte. Nay, never wake! unless to catch my neck
And break me up with kisses—never sleep,
Unless to dream new pains impossible
To waking!
Girls! with more than dream's address
Wake him with perfume till he smile, with strokes
Softer than moonbeams till he turn, and sigh,
With five slow drops of wine between his lips
Until his heart heave, with young thrills of song
Until his eyelids open, and the first
And fairest of ye greet him like a flower,
So that awakened he may break from you
And turn to me. . . .

But too often he is fooling—fooling us, fooling himself, fooling life, fooling death, and what he cannot fool he fools for not

being foolable. Unfortunately, only four of his contributions to the present issue are in verse; I must not fail, however, to draw attention to one of the two fine plays that happen to be written in prose. "The Ghouls" is possibly the most ghastly death-dance in English literature. If Oscar Wilde had written it (but he could not have) every one would know it. It is the very pith and marrow of terror. Cynical it may be, indecent it may be, but I defy the lord of dreams to send any more plutonian nightmare to haunt our mortal sleep.

Mr. Crowley plies the knack of writing as if he would have us believe he can make poetry, but, for some reason, does not wish to make it. It is hard to tell whether he thinks all his readers inevitably such fools that it cannot be worth while to give them true sense; or whether he is but praising the old ruse of covering an inability to be serious by the pretence of preferring to be flippant. Superficially speaking, *The High History of Good Sir Palamedes* is something between *The Hunting of the Snark* and *Don Quixote* without the particular individual qualities of either; but, seriously speaking, it is a religious poem, and a great work of art. Again superficially speaking, it is the master-limerick of a buffoon; again, seriously speaking, it is the epic of the eternal seeker.

Sir Palamedes, found the worthy and chosen knight for the adventure of the Questing Beast, searches the world for it; a hundred times thinks he has the clue, but a hundred times is baffled and cheated.

"Yea!" quoth the knight, "I rede the spell.
This Beast is the Unknowable.
I seek in Heaven, I seek in Hell. . .
I know him? Still he answers: No!
I know him not? Maybe—and lo!
He is the one sole thing I know!

There is plenty of fun and twaddle, entertaining or not, according to the disposition of the reader:

immeasurable,
Incomprehensibundable,
Unspeakable, inaudible.

Intangible, ingustable,
Insensitive to human smell,
Invariable, implacable,

Invincible, insciable,
Irrationapsychicable,
Inequilegijurable,

Immamemimomummable.
Such is its nature. . . .

There are few passages of sustained poetry. Mr. Crowley has a fine power of swiftly combining the description of a situation with that of the emotions it provokes:

Hush! the heart's beat! Across the moor
Some dreadful god rides fast, be sure!

The listening Palamedes bites through
His thin white lips—what hoofs are those?
Are they the Quest? How still and blue
The sky is! Hush—God knows—God knows!

Exhausted and frenzied with the quest, the knight at last attains the vision of Pan in a green valley. He regains strength and youth:

Sir Palamedes the Saracen
Hath seen the All; his mind is set
To pass beyond that great Amen.

And then, in a final effort upon the loftiest mountain top, he sees *Nought*, and even that is not the Beast.

"Faugh!" cried the knight. "Thought, word, and act
Confirm me. I have proved the quest
Impossible. I break the pact."

Returning to Camelot to announce his failure, he finds himself involved in a kind of miracle,

. . . . with vigour rude,
The blast tore down the tapestry
That hid the door. All ashen-hued

The knights laid hand to sword. But he
(Sir Palamedes) in the gap

Was found—God knoweth—bitterly
Weeping. . . .

And there, in the Hall, the Beast comes nestling and fawning to him, and the assembled knights through him and with him attain the quest.

Sir Palamedes is a "Fool of God": a great, shy, strong, bungling creature, all instinct and impulse. His brain suffers terribly; the quest drives him temporarily mad:

The last bar breaks; the steel will snaps;
The black hordes riot in his brain;
A thousand threatening thunder-claps
Smite him—insane—insane—insane!

His muscles roar with senseless rage;
The pale knight staggers, deathly sick;
Reels to the light that sorry sage,
Sir Palamedes the Lunatick.

He becomes a fanatic; he performs outlandish rites, but:

O thou most desperate dupe that Hell's
Malice can make of mortal men!
Meddle no more with magick spells,
Sir Palamedes the Saracen!

Over and over again he turns philosopher; but his reasoning is always tinged with a delicious innocence. He is a poor, puzzled fellow; he must return to the conclusion:

Then, since the thinker must be dumb,
At least the knight may knightly act:
The wisest monk in Christendom
May have his skull broke by a fact.

I have not quoted the best verses in the poem. They are difficult to extract from their context; I have tried rather to give the gist and scheme of the whole. Mr. Crowley is extraordinarily entertaining, and, of course, he is also much more than entertaining. *Sir Palamedes*, though probably not his best work, should on no account be missed. It is a work that superficial criticism might as easily compare to some of the productions of Byron, as overlook with a sneer. I doubt, in fact, whether the

question of its place in literature is one to be decided by contemporary criticism at all. I, at any rate, will not commit myself to attempting a decision.

— Harold Monro