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William Maginn

Excerpt

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# SHAKSPEARE PAPERS:

## PICTURES, GRAVE AND GAY.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF DR. MAGINN.



WILLIAM MAGINN is no more! The bright spirit whose wit was the delight of thousands, — whose learning was the admiration of a quarter of a century, — whose poetry could win the applause of Byron himself,—and whose guileless simplicity and modesty were the charm of all who knew him, has now some years passed the portals of death, and his place knoweth him no longer! The drama is over—the last scene of his eventful history has descended, and the picturesque little village of Walton-on-Thames now contains all that was mortal of one of the most distinguished critics and scholars of the age. He died

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[More information](#)

in his forty-ninth year, August 1842, leaving a wife and family to lament their irreparable loss.

Born in July 1794, the precocity of his talents astonished all who knew him, and gave a cheering presage of his future eminence. He entered college in his tenth year, and passed through it with distinction, winning all the honours that dignify and adorn an University career. For a few years he assisted his father in conducting a large and celebrated academy in Cork; but on the first appearance of *Blackwood's Magazine* he quitted Ireland, and edited that journal in Edinburgh. His papers are eminently original and fine; they attracted considerable attention, and would do honour to the loftiest name in our literature. Having by his connection with this periodical, and his contributions to the *Quarterly Review*, fully established his name as a writer of first-rate ability, he came to London, and was soon appointed to the joint-editorship of the *Standard* with the amiable and learned Dr. Giffard. On the establishment of *Bentley's Miscellany*, Dr. Maginn became a contributor to its pages. To him the public are indebted for the able series of articles entitled *The Shakspeare Papers*, (contained in this volume,) which have been so justly admired.

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[More information](#)

The following sketches of him, as he appeared about this period, have been drawn by a man of no slight talent, and with great powers of observation—the late Dr. Macnish, better known by his assumed signature of the Modern Pythagorean.

“I dined to-day at the Salopian with Dr. Maginn. He is a most remarkable fellow. His flow of ideas is incredibly quick, and his articulation so rapid, that it is difficult to follow him. He is altogether a person of vast acuteness, celerity of apprehension, and indefatigable activity both of body and mind. He is about my own height; but I could allow him an inch round the chest. His forehead is very finely developed, his organ of language and ideality large, and his reasoning faculties excellent. His hair is quite grey, although he does not look more than forty. I imagined he was much older-looking, and that he wore a wig. While conversing, his eye is never a moment at rest; in fact his whole body is in motion, and he keeps scrawling grotesque figures upon the paper before him, and rubbing them out again as fast as he draws them. He and Giffard are, as you know, joint editors of the *Standard*.

“I had some queer chat with O’Doherty. I did not measure Maginn’s chest, but I examined his head.

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[More information](#)

He has a very fine development of the intellectual powers, especially ideality and wit, which are both unusually large. His language is also large, and he has much firmness and destructiveness, which latter accounts for the satirical bent of his genius. That beautiful tale, *The City of the Demons*, he informed me, he wrote quite off-hand. He writes with vast rapidity, and can do so at any time. He speaks French, Italian, and German fluently ; these, together with a first-rate knowledge of Latin, Greek, and English, make him master of six languages, so that you can allow him one. He is altogether a very remarkable man. Indeed, I consider him quite equal to Swift ; and had his genius, like Swift's, been concentrated in separate works, instead of being squandered with wasteful prodigality in newspapers, magazines, &c., I have no doubt it would have been considered equally original and wonderful. He was much tickled with the apotheosis which I recited to him. I told him you were master of seven languages. Had you been present, I would have confined your abilities to a smaller number, lest he had taken it into his head to try you with the others. The letter-press of the *Gallery of Literary Portraits* he hit off at a moment's notice, and in the course of a few minutes."

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PICTURES, GRAVE AND GAY.

5

Scarcely less flattering is the following picture, drawn by the elegant pen of Dr. Moir of Musselburgh, a distinguished poet, and a good man, of whom Maginn always spoke, as he deserved, in the highest terms :

“To a portion, and no inconsiderable one, of the literary world, Dr. Maginn is known *par excellence* as *the Doctor* ; in the same way as Professor Wilson is recognized as *the Professor*. Nearly twenty years, *ehu! fugaces, Posthume, labuntur anni!* have glided over since the Doctor and I were *co-litterateurs* ; and yet, strange to say, we have never chanced to meet. By every one capable of judging, the powers of Dr. Maginn are acknowledged to be of the highest order. Has he given the world assurance of this in the way he might have done? We doubt much ; but from *The City of the Demons, The Man in the Bill, Colonel Pride, The Shakspeare Papers*, and many other things, posterity will be able to appreciate him. *Ex pede Herc.*”

Such was William Maginn as he appeared to these two eminent men. And truly can it be said that the portrait is not overdrawn ; or that if in any way unlike, it is because it scarcely does justice to the merits of its original. It is, to be sure, enviable praise to be

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[More information](#)

associated with so brilliant a name as Swift; but, much as we admire the writings of the Dean, we must in justice say that they are far short of those of Maginn. For Swift was morose, and cynical, and austere,—Maginn was kind, and gentle, and child-like. Swift's whole conversation was irony or sarcasm; Maginn's was entirely genial and anecdotal, and free from bitterness. Like the lives of all literary men, that of Dr. Maginn will be best found in the series of his publications. We do not know a single individual to whom the praise of Parr on Fox more perfectly applies, and never do we peruse it that we do not almost fancy it was written expressly for Maginn.\*

Can anything more exquisitely portray the kindness of his heart, and his devotion to his children, than

\* If you had been called upon to select a friend from the whole human race, where could you have found one endowed as he was with the guileless playfulness of a child, and the most correct and comprehensive knowledge of the world; or, distinguished as he was by an elegant taste in the dead and living languages, by a thorough acquaintance with the most important events of past and present times, by a profound skill in the history, and by a well-founded and well-directed reverence for the constitution of his country, and by the keenest penetration into all the nearer and all the remoter consequences of public measures?—PARR. *Character of Fox.*

## PICTURES, GRAVE AND GAY.

7

the following verses, inlaid in this place like pieces of rich mosaic? They are simple and homely; but it is the spirit they breathe for which we love them.

## “ TO MY DAUGHTERS.

“ O my darling little daughters!  
O my daughters, lov'd so well!  
Who by Brighton's breezy waters  
For a time have gone to dwell.  
Here I come with spirit yearning,  
With your sight my eyes to cheer,  
When this sunny day returning  
Brings my forty-second year.

“ Knit to me in love and duty  
Have you been, sweet pets of mine!  
Long in health, and joy, and beauty,  
May it be your lot to shine!  
And at last, when God commanding,  
I shall leave you both behind,  
May I feel with soul expanding  
I shall leave you good and kind!

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[More information](#)

“ May I leave my Nan and Pigeon\*  
 Mild of faith, of purpose true,  
 Full of faith and meek religion,  
 With many joys, and sorrows few !  
 Now I part, with fond caressing,  
 Part you now, my daughters dear—  
 Take, then take your father’s blessing,  
 In his forty-second year !

W. M.”

We hope it will not be found that the young and interesting family of the great man, whose genius reflects credit on our country,—whose single-heartedness and benevolence were immediately observed by all who approached him,—who, in the course of as diversified a life as ever literary man led, never had but one foe,—whose political principles swerved not from their original path, but continued steady and firm to the last,—whose intellect adorned every theme that he touched, and whose only fault was to be too careless of the morrow (that prime failing in men of the loftiest minds),—we hope that this man’s children will be provided for by the resources of such a country as ours. Literary men too rarely leave fortunes to their

\* A pet name for his youngest daughter.



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PICTURES, GRAVE AND GAY.

9

children ; but the present is, perhaps, the most distressing instance that has happened for many years in England.—*August* 1842.

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The following literary retrospect of Dr. Maginn will be read with interest :

BEFORE I close my desk, as I sit in my moonlit chamber this fine summer evening, let me recall one sufferer, now at rest,—slightly known to me, indeed, but remembered with a fearful distinctness—so slightly, that if you were to ask me his Christian name I could not tell it. A clear remembrance of his blanched cheek and wandering eye dwells in my memory. Who when I add the faltering voice, the symmetrical features, the grey hair, even in comparative youth,—the slashing reply, the sweet, good-natured smile,—who will not recall the name of Dr. Maginn ?

I saw him one evening—how well I remember it, and with what throes and throbs the remembrance is even now recalled!—yes, even now. It was in an evening-party where ;—but what has the world to do with our private reminiscences ? And what am I, a stupid old man, (to night in one of my low-spirited

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seasons,) that I should aim at exciting the interest of the bright-eyed, blooming creatures who will bend over this page next month, perhaps as the travelling-carriage carries them far from London and distraction, to read the newspaper to papa, maybe, in some country parsonage, or to listen to the recital of Brother Tom's first essay in hunting and shooting, or to be the hand-maiden of mamma's charities, or the happy representative of Aunt Bountiful at the Sunday-school.

Let me return to Dr. Maginn; and for an instant mingle with the thoughts of him the recollections still dear to this elderly heart.

It was a low, long, narrow room through which I made my way into the throng of a party. That gentle confusion prevailed which shows that all is "going off" well. That Trophonius's-cave look which we sometimes see on the faces of those who are coming out as you go in, and which appears to proclaim that they are never to smile again, was not to be observed. And yet there was no singing, no dancing, no charades—and yet,—it was that hateful assemblage known by the name of a literary coterie.

I made my way into the very thick of the throng; elbowed a poetess to the right, trod upon the slipper of a lady historian, touched the saintly shoulder of some