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Excerpt

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CHARACTERS OF THE AFFECTIONS.

CHARACTERS in which the affections and the moral qualities predominate over fancy and all that bears the name of passion, are not, when we meet with them in real life, the most striking and interesting, nor the easiest to be understood and appreciated; but they are those on which, in the long run, we

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repose with increasing confidence and ever-new delight. Such characters are not easily exhibited in the colours of poetry, and when we meet with them there, we are reminded of the effect of Raffaele's pictures. Sir Joshua Reynolds assures us that it took him three weeks to discover the beauty of the frescos in the Vatican; and many, if they spoke truth, would prefer one of Titian's or Murillo's Virgins to one of Raffaele's heavenly Madonnas. The less there is of marked expression or vivid colour in a countenance or character, the more difficult to delineate it in such a manner as to captivate and interest us: but when this is done, and done to perfection, it is the miracle of poetry in painting, and of painting in poetry. Only Raffaele and Correggio have achieved it in one case, and only Shakspeare in the other.

When, by the presence or the agency of some predominant and exciting power, the feelings and affections are upturned from the depths of the heart, and flung to the surface, the painter or the poet has but to watch the workings of the passions, thus in a manner made visible, and transfer

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them to his page or his canvas, in colours more or less vigorous. but where all is calm without, and around, to dive into the profoundest abysses of character, trace the affections where they lie hidden like the ocean springs, wind into the most intricate involutions of the heart, patiently unravel its most delicate fibres, and in a few graceful touches place before us the distinct and visible result,—to do this, demanded power of another and a rarer kind.

There are several of Shakspeare's characters which are especially distinguished by this profound feeling, in the conception and subdued harmony of tone in the delineation. To them may be particularly applied the ingenious simile which Goëthe has used to illustrate generally all Shakspeare's characters, when he compares them to the old-fashioned watches in glass cases, which not only showed the index pointing to the hour, but the wheels and springs within, which set that index in motion.

Imogen, Desdemona, and Hermione, are three women placed in situations nearly similar, and equally endowed with all the qualities which can

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render that situation striking and interesting. They are all gentle, beautiful, and innocent; all are models of conjugal submission, truth, and tenderness; and all are victims of the unfounded jealousy of their husbands. So far the parallel is close, but here the resemblance ceases; the circumstances of each situation are varied with wonderful skill, and the characters, which are as different as it is possible to imagine, conceived and discriminated with a power of truth and a delicacy of feeling yet more astonishing.

Critically speaking, the character of Hermione is the most simple in point of dramatic effect, that of Imogen the most varied and complex. Hermione is most distinguished by her magnanimity and her fortitude, Desdemona by her gentleness and refined grace, while Imogen combines all the best qualities of both, with others which they do not possess; consequently she is, as a character, superior to either; but considered as women, I suppose the preference would depend on individual taste.

Hermione is the heroine of the three first acts of

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the Winter's Tale. She is the wife of Leontes, king of Sicilia, and though in the prime of beauty and womanhood, is not represented in the first bloom of youth. Her husband on slight grounds suspects her of infidelity with his friend Polixenes, king of Bohemia; the suspicion once admitted, and working on a jealous, passionate, and vindictive mind, becomes a settled and confirmed opinion. Hermione is thrown into a dungeon; her new-born infant is taken from her, and by the order of her husband, frantic with jealousy, exposed to death on a desert shore; she is herself brought to a public trial for treason and incontinency, defends herself nobly, and is pronounced innocent by the oracle. But at the very moment that she is acquitted, she learns the death of the prince her son, who

Conceiving the dishonour of his mother,
Had straight declined, drooped, took it deeply,
Fastened and fixed the shame on't in himself,
Threw off his spirit, appetite, and sleep,
And downright languished.

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She swoons away with grief, and her supposed death concludes the third act. The two last acts are occupied with the adventures of her daughter Perdita; and with the restoration of Perdita to the arms of her mother, and the reconciliation of Hermione and Leontes, the piece concludes.

Such, in few words, is the dramatic situation. The character of Hermione exhibits what is never found in the other sex, but rarely in our own—yet sometimes;—dignity without pride, love without passion, and tenderness without weakness. To conceive a character, in which there enters so much of the negative, required perhaps no rare and astonishing effort of genius, such as created a Juliet, a Miranda, or a Lady Macbeth; but to delineate such a character in the poetical form, to develop it through the medium of action and dialogue, without the aid of description; to preserve its tranquil, mild, and serious beauty, its unimpassioned dignity, and at the same time keep the strongest hold upon our sympathy and our imagination; and out of this exterior calm, produce the most profound pathos, the most vivid impres-

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sion of life and internal power :—it is this which renders the character of Hermione one of Shakspeare's masterpieces.

Hermione is a queen, a matron, and a mother : she is good and beautiful, and royally descended. A majestic sweetness, a grand and gracious simplicity, an easy, unforced, yet dignified self-possession, are in all her deportment, and in every word she utters. She is one of those characters, of whom it has been said proverbially, that “still waters run deep.” Her passions are not vehement, but in her settled mind the sources of pain or pleasure, love or resentment, are like the springs that feed the mountain lakes, impenetrable, unfathomable, and inexhaustible.

Shakspeare has conveyed (as is his custom) a part of the character of Hermione in scattered touches, and through the impressions which she produces on all around her. Her surpassing beauty is alluded to in few but strong terms :

This jealousy

Is for a precious creature : as she is rare,

Must it be great.

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Praise her but for this her out-door form,
 (Which, on my faith, deserves high speech—)

If one by one you wedded all the world,
 Or from the all that are, took something good
 To make a perfect woman ; she you killed
 Would be unparalleled.

I might have looked upon my queen's full eyes,
 Have taken treasure from her lips—

————— and left them

More rich for what they yielded.

The expressions “most sacred lady,” “dread mistress,” “sovereign,” with which she is addressed or alluded to, the boundless devotion and respect of those around her, and their confidence in her goodness and innocence, are so many additional strokes in the portrait.

For her, my lord,

I dare my life lay down, and will do 't, sir,
 Please you t' accept it, that the queen is spotless
 I' the eyes of heaven, and to you.

Every inch of woman in the world,
 Ay, every dram of woman's flesh, is false
 If she be so.

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I would not be a stander-by to hear
 My sovereign mistress clouded so, without
 My present vengeance taken !

The mixture of playful courtesy, queenly dignity, and lady-like sweetness, with which she prevails on Polixenes to prolong his visit, is charming.

HERMIONE.

You'll stay ?

POLIXENES.

No, madam.

HERMIONE.

Nay, but you will.

POLIXENES.

I may not, verily.

HERMIONE.

Verily !

You put me off with limber vows: but I
 Tho' you would seek t' unsphere the stars with oaths,
 Should still say, " Sir, no going !" Verily,
 You shall *not* go ! A lady's verily is
 As potent as a lord's. Will you go yet ?
 Force me to keep you as a prisoner,
 Not like a guest ?

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And though the situation of Hermione admits but of few general reflections, one little speech, inimitably beautiful and characteristic, has become almost proverbial from its truth. She says

One good deed, dying tongueless,
Slaughters a thousand, waiting upon that.
Our praises are our wages : you may ride us
With one soft kiss a thousand furlongs, ere
With spur we heat an acre.

She receives the first intimation of her husband's jealous suspicions with incredulous astonishment. It is not that, like Desdemona, she does not, or cannot understand ; but she *will* not. When he accuses her more plainly, she replies with a calm dignity—

Should a villain say so—
The most replenished villain in the world—
He were as much more villain : you, my lord,
Do but mistake.

This characteristic composure of temper never forsakes her ; and yet it is so delineated that the impression is that of grandeur, and never borders