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Characters of Shakespeare's Plays

The critic, essayist and painter William Hazlitt (1778-1830) published and lectured widely on English literature, from Elizabethan drama to reviews of the latest work of his own time. His first extended work of literary criticism was *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, published in 1817. This volume from 1908 takes the text of the first edition and adds notes explaining complex terms to readers and an introduction by J. H. Lobban, a lecturer in English at Birkbeck College. As such it is the ideal introduction to Hazlitt's criticism. Hazlitt's political view of Shakespeare drew the ire of the *Tory Quarterly Review*, whose hostile review destroyed sales of the second edition. The work remains of value, however, both as a contribution to the study of Shakespeare and, as with all of Hazlitt's prose, as a model of an elegant, persuasive essay.

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WILLIAM HAZLITT

EDITED BY J. H. LOBBAN



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English Literature for Schools

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WILLIAM HAZLITT

CHARACTERS
OF
SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

Edited with Introduction and Notes by
J. H. LOBBAN, M.A.,
Lecturer in English Literature, Birkbeck College, London

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PREFACE

OF Hazlitt, more than of any other English critic, it may be said that to every writer whom he touches he affords the best and most inspiring introduction. In many respects of great importance to the student of English literature he has no equal as a critic. In the Introduction I have endeavoured to vindicate this claim. It is sufficient here to advance the conclusion that Hazlitt is one of the greatest teachers of literature because he had a great enthusiasm for his subject, and had the secret of imparting his enthusiasm.

The text is reprinted, with a few verbal alterations, from the first edition, a copy of which was kindly placed at my disposal by Mr A. R. Waller. To the edition of Hazlitt's works by Mr Waller and Mr Arnold Glover I am indebted, as all editors of Hazlitt henceforth must be, for the aid given in the identification of numerous quotations.

J. H. L.

LONDON,
20 *October*, 1908.

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INTRODUCTION

“ONE of the finest and wisest spirits breathing,” “one of the keenest and brightest critics that ever lived,” are Lamb’s and Thackeray’s famous tributes to the genius of William Hazlitt, a critic whom every critic delights to honour. With the steadily increasing interest that is now manifested in literary criticism, it is natural to find an ever increasing respect and admiration for the work of Hazlitt. In our own day he has well been called “the critics’ critic,” and the fitness of the designation has been generally allowed. In one not unimportant particular the eulogies of Hazlitt command special respect. No deduction has to be made from them, no allowance for the hyperbole of affection. His personality had little attraction for his contemporaries. They admired him in spite of himself. So, too, he appeals to his readers by virtue mainly of one quality—his sincere, enlightened, and passionate enthusiasm for the best in English literature. He is more than the critics’ critic just because of this union of enthusiasm and insight. To the critic he is suggestive no less when he is manifestly wrong than when he is most happily inspired, but scarcely less valuable is the other quality of his work which makes it for readers with no critical pretensions the most attractive and eloquent call to the love of books. In books

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Hazlitt found his firmest friends, and he writes of them with an ardour that is irresistible. To understand the hold he takes on the minds of book-lovers, it is enough to listen to any of the numerous avowals of his love. "They sit with me at breakfast; they walk out with me before dinner. After a long walk through unfrequented tracks, after starting the hare from the fern, or hearing the wing of the raven rustling above my head, or being greeted by the woodman's 'stern good-night,' as he strikes into his narrow homeward path, I can 'take mine ease at mine inn,' beside the blazing hearth, and shake hands with Signor Orlando Friscobaldo, as the oldest acquaintance I have. Ben Jonson, learned Chapman, Master Webster, and Master Heywood are there, and seated round, discourse the silent hours away. Shakespeare is there himself, not in Cibber's manager's coat. Spenser is hardly yet returned from a ramble through the woods, or is concealed behind a group of nymphs, fawns, and satyrs. Milton lies on the table, as on an altar, never taken up or laid down without reverence. Lyly's Endymion sleeps with the moon, that shines in at the window, and a breath of wind stirring at a distance seems a sigh from the tree under which he grew old. Faustus disputes in one corner of the room with fiendish faces, and reasons of divine astrology. Bellafront soothes Matheo, Vittoria triumphs over her judges, and old Chapman repeats one of the hymns of Homer, in his own fine translation! I should have no objection to pass my life in this manner out of the world, not thinking of it, nor it of me: neither abused by my enemies nor defended by my friends; careless of the future, but sometimes dreaming of the past, which might as well be forgotten."

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Hazlitt was born at Maidstone in 1778. When the child was two years old, his father, a Unitarian minister, removed to Bandon, Cork, subsequently going to America. Hazlitt was about nine years of age when his father returned to England to take charge of a Unitarian congregation at Wem in Shropshire. Until his fifteenth year he was educated at a local school, but probably owed his best instruction to his father, of whose letters Hazlitt says that "for ease, half-plays on words, and a supine, monkish, indolent pleasantry, I have never seen them equalled." In accordance with his father's design that he should be a dissenting minister, Hazlitt spent four or five years at a Unitarian College at Hackney, where he was found to have "a dry and intractable understanding." The fact was that Hazlitt was resolved against entering the ministry, and at this time preferred philosophy and politics to theology. It was in 1798, the year of his return home, when he was still unsettled as to a profession, that a great influence came into his life by his meeting Coleridge, who, while preaching at Shrewsbury, paid a visit to the Hazlitts at Wem. It was from this meeting that Hazlitt dated his intellectual birth, and he has left a detailed account of it in his delightful essay, "My First Acquaintance with Poets"—the other poet being Wordsworth, to whom Coleridge speedily introduced him. Coleridge he was to live to criticise, but his obligations he expresses in the most ungrudging way. "My soul has indeed remained in its original bondage, dark, obscure, with longings infinite and unsatisfied; my heart, shut up in the prison-house of this rude clay, has never found, nor will it ever find, a heart to speak to; but that my understanding also did not remain dumb and brutish, or at length found a language that expresses itself, I owe to Coleridge."

When he was only thirteen, Hazlitt had made a precocious start as a writer in a letter defending Priestley—an interesting letter were it only for the boyish author's definition of intolerance as "the worst of devils." But it was Coleridge who first fired his determination to be a writer, and at his instigation Hazlitt completed an ambitious philosophical thesis which he had planned when he was only eighteen. The necessity of choosing a profession became more and more pressing, and Hazlitt, at the age of twenty-four, set out for London in the hope of following in the steps of his elder brother, who by this time had attained success as a miniature-painter. For some months he studied in the Louvre, and on his return went on a professional tour as a portrait-painter through the north of England. His career as an artist, though not undistinguished, was not successful, mainly, it would seem, from his own exacting standard. Northcote records the opinion that, if he had stuck to his brush, he would have made a great painter. But Hazlitt could not realise his ideals, and for him that meant impossibility to go on. His best known portrait is that of his new friend, Charles Lamb, in the dress of a Venetian Senator. As it proved, his years of art study were not thrown away. Later on he was to make brilliant use of his knowledge of painting in his literary criticism, which owes some of its most famous passages to the parallels he institutes between the sister arts.

In 1806 he definitely entered on the career of letters. His first efforts were chiefly political and philosophical, but included a considerable quantity of skilfully executed hack-work. To this last category belongs his "Eloquence of the British Senate," interesting as containing Hazlitt's first attempts at character-sketches, in

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which he was later to attain so great a mastery. His marriage in 1808 led to his settling in London, and soon he was strenuously at work as journalist, essayist and lecturer. He wrote parliamentary, and, later, dramatic reports for the "Morning Chronicle" and lectured on philosophy to the Russell Institution. From this time till his death he wrote steadily for a great variety of newspapers and magazines, and he himself collected and edited a large number of his lectures and essays in his "Table Talk," "The Round Table," "Characters of Shakespeare's Plays," "The Plain Speaker," "The Spirit of the Age," and the series of lectures on English Poets, English Comic Writers, and Elizabethan Dramatic Literature. In 1814 he became a contributor to the "Edinburgh Review," and at different times was associated with Leigh Hunt on "The Examiner" and "The Liberal," and contributed to the "London Magazine" and "Colburn's New Monthly."

It was as inevitable as it was unfortunate that Hazlitt's growing reputation should have met with bitter detraction. In one sense it was no doubt a great compliment to his contemporary standing that he became the favourite target for the artillery of "Blackwood" and "The Quarterly." The chapter is not an edifying one in the history of English literature, and it is not easy with any accuracy to allocate the blame. It is safer to refer it to that useful abstraction, the spirit of the age, for that allows us to say without fear of partiality or offence that it was a very evil spirit. Criticism degenerated into mere horse-play and ruffianism, and resembled nothing so much as a town and gown fight carried to regrettable extremes. The Tory "gownsmen" pelted the Cockney "cads," and the latter shouted death and defiance to the "Blackguards' Magazine." Perhaps there were some

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hearts as well as reputations broken in the strife, but it seems a mistake to regard it too seriously. The history of the matter reminds us of some of our Indian frontier wars where the hillmen, after seeing their wives and children in the safe custody of their enemies, proceed to enjoy a game of shooting at sight. It is an ungentle sport which costs blood and tears, but it springs from nothing worse than exuberant spirits. And some of the combatants are certain to forget that it is a game, and some will even deign to stab from behind. At least that is how we choose to regard this war of words. There was no malice certainly in Christopher North, but when he encountered a Radical writer he could no more refrain from trying to fell him with his crutch than can a schoolboy from training his catapult against the household cat. The schoolboy would probably expiate his success with repentance. Certainly the giant Christopher regretted his triumphs, and his remorse in the case of Leigh Hunt moved him to pen a sentence that of all his writings is the best remembered and the one that keeps his name "sweetest in the mention"—"The animosities are mortal, the humanities live for ever." Unfortunately Hazlitt had not the understanding or the temperament necessary for this game, and his chief enemy was not a sportsman. Gifford "sniped" at him from the secure breastwork of "The Quarterly," and at last Hazlitt was goaded into firing at him a deadly shell, called "A Letter to William Gifford, Esq." The letter told Mr Gifford that "there cannot be a greater nuisance than a dull, envious, pragmatical, low-bred man, who is placed as you are in the situation of the editor of such a work as the 'Quarterly Review.'" And it ends with the drastic announcement, "But you are a nuisance, and should be abated." Some writers on Hazlitt

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applaud this famous letter, but probably more deplore it. It was a mistake to fight the enemy with their own weapons. A little humour would have dismayed them and disarmed them. This unfortunately was not in Hazlitt's equipment. It is the strangest enigma in his character that as a critic he could expound with rare success and apparent enjoyment qualities that his own life and conduct never reveal.

"I have loitered my life away, reading books, looking at pictures, going to plays, hearing, thinking, writing on what pleased me best. I have wanted only one thing to make me happy, but wanting that have wanted everything!" From the first Hazlitt's marriage had proved unfortunate, and it was the culmination of a long estrangement rather than an unexpected rupture that happened in 1823 when his wife and he obtained divorce under the law of Scotland. The immediate cause was Hazlitt's extraordinary infatuation for Sarah Walker, the daughter of his lodging-house-keeper, which he recorded with astonishing candour in his "Liber Amoris." After awakening from this short-lived delusion, Hazlitt married a second time, but his wife left him in less than a year. His unhappiness in marriage can be understood by the difficulty with which he retained his truest friends. There were few like Charles Lamb prepared to make generous allowance for his splenetic temper and to recognise the many fine qualities which it dimmed. Lamb's words do equal honour to Hazlitt and to himself, and they are specially interesting as having been written in Hazlitt's lifetime and at a time when their friendship had undergone temporary eclipse. "I stood well with him for fifteen years (the proudest of my life), and have ever spoken my full mind of him to some to whom his panegyric

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must naturally be least tasteful. I never in thought swerved from him ; I never betrayed him ; I never slackened in my admiration for him ; I was the same to him (neither better nor worse), though he could not see it, as in the days when he thought fit to trust me. At this instant he may be preparing for me some compliment above my deserts, as he has sprinkled such among his admirable books, for which I rest his debtor ; or, for anything I know or can guess to the contrary, he may be about to read a lecture on my weaknesses. He is welcome to them (as he was to my humble heart), if they can divert a spleen or ventilate a fit of sullenness. I wish he would not quarrel with the world at the rate he does ; but the reconciliation must be effected by himself, and I despair of living to see that day. But, protesting against much that he has written, and some things which he chooses to do ; judging him by his conversations, which I enjoyed so long and relished so deeply, or by his books, in those places where no clouding passion intervenes—I should belie my own conscience if I said less than that I think W. H. to be, in his natural and healthy state, one of the wisest and finest spirits breathing. So far from being ashamed of that intimacy which was betwixt us, it is my boast that I was able for so many years to have preserved it entire ; and I think I shall go to my grave without finding, or expecting to find, such another companion.”

The closing years of Hazlitt's life show him struggling against ill-health and pecuniary misfortunes. He was then engaged on his “Life of Napoleon,” the largest and most systematic of all his works and the one by which he hoped his name would live. Hazlitt made a fetish of consistency and prided himself on the fact that his

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early enthusiasm for Buonaparte never underwent a change. His idolatry of Napoleon and the publication of Scott's rival work in the preceding year made the commercial failure of his book inevitable.

Through the bankruptcy of his publisher Hazlitt lost the reward of three years' work and became involved in difficulties which he did not live to overcome. His "Life of Napoleon" has many passages of splendid description, but it does not constitute a vital part of his literary renown. Hazlitt was ever seen at his best when he was writing about pictures and books and the history of his own mental development. In one of the last essays he wrote, "The Sick Chamber," we find Hazlitt reverting in words made touching by their circumstances to the passion which he had fostered with a life-long loyalty and from which he had reaped the chief happiness of his life. "A rose smells doubly sweet after being stifled with tinctures and essences, and we enjoy the idea of a journey and an inn the more for having been bed-ridden. But a book is the secret and sure charm to bring all these implied associations to a focus. I should prefer an old one, Mr Lamb's favourite, the 'Journey to Lisbon,' or the 'Decameron,' if I could get it; but, if a new one, let it be 'Paul Clifford'.... Well, then, I have got the new paraphrase on the Beggar's Opera, am fairly embarked in it; and at the end of the first volume, when I am galloping across the heath with the three highwaymen, while the moon is shining full upon them, feel my nerves so braced, and my spirits so exhilarated, that, to say truth, I am scarce sorry for the occasion that has thrown me upon the work and the author—have quite forgot my Sick Room, and more than ready to recant the doctrine that Free Admission [to the theatre] is

The true pathos and sublime
Of human life,

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for I feel as I read that if the stage shows us the masks of men and the pageant of the world, books let us into their souls and lay open to us the secrets of our own. They are the first and last, the most home-felt, the most heart-felt of all our enjoyments!" In his love of books we have the most delightful instance of Hazlitt's "pertinacity of opinion." They were the only friends he never quarrelled with or changed. Perhaps they were the subject of his last thought and the justification of his dying words, "Well, I've had a happy life."

Some of the most interesting side-lights we possess on Hazlitt's methods of work we owe to his friend, Procter, the minor poet better known as Barry Cornwall. "With the exception of a very rare dinner or supper with a friend or intimate, his time was generally spent alone. After a late breakfast he took his quire of foolscap paper, and commenced writing, in a large hand, almost as large as text, his day's work. There never was any rough draft or copy. He wrote readily—not very swiftly, but easily, as if he had made up his mind; and this was the manuscript that went to the printer...He had a very quick perception of the beauties and defects of books. When he was about to write his 'Lectures on the Age of Elizabeth,' he knew little or nothing of the dramatists of that time, with the exception of Shakespeare. He spoke to Charles Lamb and to myself, who were supposed by many to be well acquainted with those ancient writers. I lent him about a dozen volumes, comprehending the finest of the old plays; and he then went down to Winterslow Hut, in Wiltshire, and after a stay of six weeks came back to London, fully impregnated with the subject, with his thoughts fully made up upon it, and with all his lectures written. And he then appeared

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to comprehend the character and merits of the old writers more thoroughly than any other person, although he had so lately entered upon the subject."

These statements, which are corroborated by the evidence of the elder Patmore and others, suggest some of the outstanding characteristics of Hazlitt's critical method. They correspond, also, very exactly with his own descriptions of his methods and aims. In the strictest sense of the term Hazlitt's criticism is intensive. He does not weigh one author against another. Even for purposes of illustration he does not range beyond very definite limits. He approached an accepted classic in precisely the same manner as a conscientious reviewer would a new book. He took nothing for granted. He did not think it necessary to read round about his subject. He never had occasion to cross swords with other critics, for he did not conceive it his business to become acquainted with their opinions. To this he owes very much of his freshness and charm. The scholarly critic, by virtue of his learning, has, in forming his judgments, to contend against innumerable *idola theatri*. But suppose for a moment that a naturally great critic were to have submitted to his judgment as new books a number of accepted world's classics, and that he should be asked to report upon them with nothing beside him but the authors' works. His pronouncements could not fail to be of engrossing interest however much they might conflict with authority. There is, of course, a fallacy underlying this very supposition, since ample knowledge is a pre-condition of critical ability. But to as large an extent as is possible for any critic, Hazlitt's practice squares with this hypothesis, and it is to this fact, we take it, that he owes the secret of his special charm. He

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approached his author without fear or prejudice; he read his works with an alert and acute mind; nothing that is beautiful as literature or subtle as philosophy escaped him; and while the zest of the chase had not yet left him, he reported his impressions with a quite unique enthusiasm. Be it "for" or "against," Hazlitt was perfectly frank in giving the reasons for his decision; he had ever the courage of his opinion and a reason for the faith that was in him. Hazlitt was no ordinary critic, and what is true of him cannot be made a generalisation. His method was justified by his genius, and gives no authority for supposing that in criticism ignorance is bliss. For it is only Hazlitt that has Hazlitt's defence: "To a want of general reading I plead guilty, and am sorry for it; but perhaps if I had read more, I might have thought less. As to my barrenness of invention, I have at least glanced over a number of subjects—painting, poetry, prose, plays, politics, parliamentary speakers, metaphysical lore, books, men and things. There is some point, some fancy, some feeling, some taste, shown in treating of these. Which of my conclusions have been reversed?" This is a bold challenge flung to time. There never yet was a critic that has not lost some case in the appeal-court of Time. Hazlitt himself is no exception. But in one important particular he is indeed exceptional. His favourable awards have never been set aside. It is his great glory as a critic that he never praised amiss. Prejudice and bias led him astray in his censures, but his critical genius never betrayed him into errors of praise. He was even so good a critic as to be aware of this himself, for into Lamb's mouth he put the perfectly true words, "I always believe you when you praise, not always when you condemn."

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Of his "Characters of Shakespeare's Plays" Mr Ireland, to whose brilliant anthology is mainly due the revival and survival of Hazlitt's fame, justly remarks that "although it professes to be dramatic criticism, it is in reality a discourse on the philosophy of life and human nature, more suggestive than many approved treatises expressly devoted to that subject." And not less justly Mr Ireland selects the best description of Hazlitt's intention and success from Jeffrey's article in the "Edinburgh Review." Supplementing Mr Ireland's quotation, we would give the whole of Jeffrey's two opening paragraphs as an admirable appreciation of this famous work. "This is not a book of black-letter learning, or historical elucidation;—neither is it a metaphysical dissertation, full of wise perplexities and elaborate reconcilements. It is, in truth, rather an encomium on Shakespeare than a commentary or critique on him—and is written, more to show extraordinary love than extraordinary knowledge of his productions. Nevertheless, it is a very pleasing book—and, we do not hesitate to say, a book of very considerable originality and genius. The author is not merely an admirer of our great dramatist, but an Idolater of him; and openly professes his idolatry. We have ourselves too great a leaning to the same superstition to blame him very much for his error; and though we think, of course, that our own admiration is, on the whole, more discriminating and judicious, there are not many points on which, especially after reading his eloquent exposition of them, we should be much inclined to disagree with him. The book, as we have already intimated, is written less to tell the reader what Mr H. *knows* about Shakespeare or his writings than to explain to them what he *feels* about them—and *why* he feels

so—and thinks that all who profess to love poetry should feel so likewise. What we chiefly look for in such a work, accordingly, is a fine sense of the beauties of the author, and an eloquent exposition of them ; and all this, and more, we think, may be found in the volume before us. There is nothing niggardly in Mr H.'s praises, and nothing affected in his raptures. He seems animated throughout with a full and hearty sympathy with the delight which his author should inspire, and pours himself gladly out in explanation of it, with a fluency and ardour obviously much more akin to enthusiasm than affectation. He seems pretty generally, indeed, in a state of happy intoxication—and has borrowed from his great original not indeed the force or brilliancy of his fancy, but something of its playfulness, and a large share of his apparent joyousness and self-indulgence in its exercise. It is evidently a great pleasure to him to be fully possessed with the beauties of his author, and to follow the impulse of his unrestrained eagerness to impress them upon his readers."

This appreciation of Jeffrey's needs little addition or qualification. If its expression is Georgian, its truth is sempiternal. Not the least valuable part of it is enshrined in its concluding words. For assuredly part of the secret of Hazlitt is his power as a teacher. He not only felt enthusiasm but he imparts it. No man's work better justifies the title of a labour of love. He wrote with gusto—that was his own favourite expression ; and we may truly say of him, borrowing and applying the noble words used by a distinguished metaphysician of last century towards a still greater philosopher, that no calculus can integrate the innumerable little impulses to literary understanding and enthusiasm that Hazlitt has made to vibrate

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in the minds of succeeding generations. On one point Jeffrey is silent where he might justly have been critical. Had Hazlitt's reading been wider, he would not have described his work on Shakespeare's plays as an attempt to rival Schlegel. He would rather have gloried to call himself the successor of the long line of eminent Shakespearean editors and commentators of our own eighteenth century.

J. H. L.

PREFACE

It is observed by Mr Pope, that

“If ever any author deserved the name of an *original*, it was Shakespear. Homer himself drew not his art so immediately from the fountains of nature; it proceeded through Ægyptian strainers and channels, and came to him not without some tincture of the learning, or some cast of the models, of those before him. The poetry of Shakespear was inspiration: indeed, he is not so much an imitator, as an instrument of nature; and it is not so just to say that he speaks from her, as that she speaks through him.

“His *characters* are so much nature herself, that it is a sort of injury to call them by so distant a name as copies of her. Those of other poets have a constant resemblance, which shews that they received them from one another, and were but multipliers of the same image: each picture, like a mock-rainbow, is but the reflection of a reflection. But every single character in Shakespear, is as much an individual, as those in life itself; it is as impossible to find any two alike; and such, as from their relation or affinity in any respect appear most to be twins, will, upon comparison, be found remarkably distinct. To this life and variety of character, we must add the wonderful preservation of it; which is such throughout his plays, that had all the speeches been printed without the very names of the persons, I believe one might have applied them with certainty to every speaker.”

The object of the volume here offered to the public, is to illustrate these remarks in a more particular manner by a reference to each play. A gentleman of the name of Mason, the author of a Treatise on Ornamental Gardening, (not Mason the poet) began a work of a similar kind about forty years ago, but he only lived to finish a parallel between the characters of Macbeth and Richard III. which is an exceedingly

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ingenious piece of analytical criticism. Richardson's *Essays* include but a few of Shakespeare's principal characters. The only work which seemed to supersede the necessity of an attempt like the present was Schlegel's very admirable *Lectures on the Drama*, which give by far the best account of the plays of Shakespeare that has hitherto appeared. The only circumstances in which it was thought not impossible to improve on the manner in which the German critic has executed this part of his design, were in avoiding an appearance of mysticism in his style, not very attractive to the English reader, and in bringing illustrations from particular passages of the plays themselves, of which Schlegel's work, from the extensiveness of his plan, did not admit. We will at the same time confess, that some little jealousy of the character of the national understanding was not without its share in producing the following undertaking, for "we were piqued" that it should be reserved for a foreign critic to give "reasons for the faith which we English have in Shakespeare." Certainly no writer among ourselves has shewn either the same enthusiastic admiration of his genius, or the same philosophical acuteness in pointing out his characteristic excellences. As we have pretty well exhausted all we had to say upon this subject in the body of the work, we shall here transcribe Schlegel's general account of Shakespeare, which is in the following words:—

"Never, perhaps, was there so comprehensive a talent for the delineation of character as Shakespeare's. It not only grasps the diversities of rank, sex, and age, down to the dawnings of infancy; not only do the king and the beggar, the hero and the pickpocket, the sage and the idiot speak and act with equal truth; not only does he transport himself to distant ages and foreign nations, and pourtray in the most accurate manner, with only a few apparent violations of costume, the spirit of the ancient Romans, of the French in their wars with the English, of the English themselves during a great part of their history, of the Southern Europeans (in the serious part of many comedies) the cultivated society of that

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time, and the former rude and barbarous state of the North ; his human characters have not only such depth and precision that they cannot be arranged under classes, and are inexhaustible, even in conception :—no—this Prometheus not merely forms men, he opens the gates of the magical world of spirits ; calls up the midnight ghost ; exhibits before us his witches amidst their unhallowed mysteries ; peoples the air with sportive fairies and sylphs :—and these beings, existing only in imagination, possess such truth and consistency, that even when deformed monsters like Caliban, he extorts the conviction, that if there should be such beings, they would so conduct themselves. In a word, as he carries with him the most fruitful and daring fancy into the kingdom of nature,—on the other hand, he carries nature into the regions of fancy, lying beyond the confines of reality. We are lost in astonishment at seeing the extraordinary, the wonderful, and the unheard of, in such intimate nearness.

“If Shakespear deserves our admiration for his characters, he is equally deserving of it for his exhibition of passion, taking this word in its widest signification, as including every mental condition, every tone from indifference or familiar mirth to the wildest rage and despair. He gives us the history of minds ; he lays open to us, in a single word, a whole series of preceding conditions. His passions do not at first stand displayed to us in all their height, as is the case with so many tragic poets, who, in the language of Lessing, are thorough masters of the legal style of love. He paints, in a most inimitable manner, the gradual progress from the first origin. ‘He gives,’ as Lessing says, ‘a living picture of all the most minute and secret artifices by which a feeling steals into our souls ; of all the imperceptible advantages which it there gains ; of all the stratagems by which every other passion is made subservient to it, till it becomes the sole tyrant of our desires and our aversions.’ Of all poets, perhaps, he alone has pourtrayed the mental diseases,—melancholy, delirium, lunacy,—with such inexpressible, and, in every respect, definite truth, that the physician may enrich his observations from them in the same manner as from real cases.

“And yet Johnson has objected to Shakespear, that his pathos is not always natural and free from affectation. There are, it is true, passages, though comparatively speaking, very few, where his poetry exceeds the bounds of true dialogue, where a too soaring imagination, a too luxuriant wit, rendered the complete dramatic forgetfulness of himself

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impossible. With this exception, the censure originates only in a fanciless way of thinking, to which every thing appears unnatural that does not suit its own tame insipidity. Hence, an idea has been formed of simple and natural pathos, which consists in exclamations destitute of imagery, and nowise elevated above every-day life. But energetical passions electrify the whole of the mental powers, and will, consequently, in highly favoured natures, express themselves in an ingenious and figurative manner. It has been often remarked, that indignation gives wit; and, as despair occasionally breaks out into laughter, it may sometimes also give vent to itself in antithetical comparisons.

“Besides, the rights of the poetical form have not been duly weighed. Shakespear, who was always sure of his object, to move in a sufficiently powerful manner when he wished to do so, has occasionally, by indulging in a freer play, purposely moderated the impressions when too painful, and immediately introduced a musical alleviation of our sympathy. He had not those rude ideas of his art which many moderns seem to have, as if the poet, like the clown in the proverb, must strike twice on the same place. An ancient rhetorician delivered a caution against dwelling too long on the excitation of pity; for nothing, he said, dries so soon as tears; and Shakespear acted conformably to this ingenious maxim, without knowing it.

“The objection, that Shakespear wounds our feelings by the open display of the most disgusting moral odiousness, harrows up the mind unmercifully, and tortures even our senses by the exhibition of the most insupportable and hateful spectacles, is one of much greater importance. He has never, in fact, varnished over wild and blood-thirsty passions with a pleasing exterior,—never clothed crime and want of principle with a false show of greatness of soul; and in that respect he is every way deserving of praise. Twice he has portrayed downright villains; and the mastery with which he has contrived to elude impressions of too painful a nature, may be seen in Iago and Richard the Third. The constant reference to a petty and puny race must cripple the boldness of the poet. Fortunately for his art, Shakespear lived in an age extremely susceptible of noble and tender impressions, but which had still enough of the firmness inherited from a vigorous olden time not to shrink back with dismay from every strong and violent picture. We have lived to see tragedies of which the catastrophe consists in the swoon of an enamoured princess. If Shakespear falls