

ORIGINAL.

CRITIQUE ON SHAKSPEARE'S DRAMAS.

(Continued from page 212.)

V. MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Has this in common with others of his pieces, such as "All's Well that Ends Well," "Much Ado about Nothing," and the "Merchant of Venice," that the main action is diversified and contrasted with lively interludes, which are most skilfully embroidered upon it.

Schlegel has remarked, that Shakspeare, in this instance, brings his poetry into closer relation with criminal justice than he is generally in the habit of doing—all the personages of the piece, from the pure Isabella down to the brutal Barnardine, coming into collision with it.

There is considerable improbability in the conception, and not a few incongruities in the execution. The idea of a sovereign throwing aside his dignity, entrusting his kingdom to others, and considering from under a disguise the conduct of his substitutes, is somewhat too forced. It reminds us indeed of Haroun al Raschid, but is justified by no event which we know of in European history. This circumstance is rendered still more unnatural by the conduct of the piece. The pretext under which the Duke resigns the government is, that his substitutes should apply a vigorous remedy to the disorders which had blown up too rifely during his reign. But how this object is attained by the denouement, in which all the guilty—the brutal Barnardine not excepted—are pardoned, would be hard to say. Upon the whole, this Duke, with all his good qualities, has the fault of preferring a winding to a straight path, as is evident by his whole conduct from first to last. For instance, why that complexity of the fifth act?—why suffer Isabella to be suspected of false witness?—why conceal Claudio's fate so long? For all this we can assign no other reason but the rule which prescribes five acts to a dramatic writer, and something like an equal length to each of these. There can be no question that the piece would have been much more natural without this complexity. Another fault in the action, and one which is quite as destructive of probability, is the double character assigned to Angelo. That the Duke should have been deceived as to him, and have supposed him a saint while he was at heart a libertine, is perfectly natural—that Angelo should have been ignorant of his own nature, and have believed himself proof against temptation, is reconcilable with all that we know of mankind; but that the Duke, aware of his conduct to Mariana, should seriously consider him a model of sanctity, and as such set him up as a pattern to his kingdom—that he should have forgotten this remarkable incident until it is corroborated by the rest of his deputy's conduct—that Angelo himself, capable of such a baseness, should sincerely think well of himself, and with good faith set about a reformation of public morals, are contradictions which we find it very difficult to swallow.

The interest depends entirely upon the action, and curiosity is very slightly concerned in the unravelling of the plot—for we have the Duke, under his monkish disguise, always by to watch over the conduct of his representative, and to avert the threatened dangers. Isabella is the master-piece of the play, the salient point on which hangs more interest than on all the rest together. There is something angelic in her nature, so unstainedly pure is she. She comes out of the lofty tranquillity of her nature, but to spurn, with all the scorn of indignant virtue, at the deputy's base propositions, and to kneel, with a seraph's tenderness, by the side of the disconsolate Mariana. She comes from her convent, like a good angel, to diffuse blessings all around her—ought she not to have been all perfection, to have entered into it again, and have completed her vows? We think she should, and yet we cannot blame her for the touch of womanhood that led her to prefer connubial happiness with the good Duke, to the visionary sanctity of a monastic life.

In reading this piece we are compelled, very frequently, to transfer ourselves to the age of the author, to avoid those censures which we would be obliged to pass, should we consider it with the feelings of our own period. The main incident verges closely enough upon indecency, to have rendered the author peculiarly careful as to the tone of the minor ones. But, on the contrary, never has he given himself more unbridled licence, never has he spoken out more nakedly and grossly.

Mariana is placed in a position, in which no one of her sex could now put herself without incurring degradation—and even the virtuous Isabella abets her in bringing about what we should now call her infamy. Such an incident suited the temper of the patriarchal times (see Genesis) it may have been looked upon as innocent in the days of Shakspeare, to our modern ideas it is sovereignly offensive. But it is in the secondary personages and minor incidents, that we meet with the most flagrant transgressions against decency. These personages are, a bawd, a pimp, a young libertine, and foolish old constable. The conversation of the three former is quite in character, consisting of indecency, broadly stated, or covered by that veil of double-meaning which rivets the attention upon them—the latter is a Dogberry of an inferior species.

Much has been written upon his philosophy—we feel in what it consists, but we feel also a difficulty to explain our perceptions. One thing, at least, is certain, that it is not that ideal philosophy which loses itself in speculations as to the infinite. Its subject-matter is real life, the actions and motives of men in general. On some few occasions it goes beyond this range, and proposes doubts

and queries as to what we shall be after this life; these are the exceptions, its common object is to look into man as he is. It is, we think, grounded on a basis of scepticism. We do not snatch this conclusion from scattered passages, but gather it from the general tenour of his writings. It is far from being optimism—that doctrine is, we believe, a Christian one, and was never seriously adopted but by a believer; it approaches more nearly to pessimism, for though he has not failed to present us with models of human perfection, and although his spirit was by much too ample to take restricted views of things, still we look upon him as most truly in his element when he draws an evil man, and expressing his most intimate doctrines when he descends upon the littleness and the wickedness of human nature.

There is a strong tinge of misanthropy throughout all his writings—had he been less truly lofty, he would, perhaps, have yielded himself up to this influence, and then he would have seen but one side of life, and that side the dark one; and then he might have given us Richard, Othello, or even Hamlet, but certainly not Falstaff, Caliban, or Benedict. But the faculties of his god-like nature were in too perfect equipoise for him to yield himself up to any one influence; and although we recognise his inherent disposition to have been melancholy, yet it was not that melancholy which preys upon itself, but one which could give way to the most lively impressions of the humorous.

Like his own Cassio, he "sees quite through the hearts of men." His thoughts do not often take a religious cast—when they do so, it appears to us that he employs religion as a decoration, without betraying any intimate conviction of its force and truth. As in his descriptions of passion, it is said that he himself remains unaffected, calculating the precise effect they will produce upon the listener, so when he gives way to the emotions of piety, we think we observe the same thing.

In one sense, Shakspeare, like every true poet, is religious; but his religion is an enthusiasm for the grand, the beautiful, the noble,—a religion of sentiment rather than of principle,—one which has its seat more in the heart than the head,—which moves the feelings rather than it regulates the conduct.

In the whole list of metaphysicians we know of no deeper reasoner than he. When he chooses, he pursues out a thought into its most subtle ramifications, its most remote consequences, without ever losing a link in the chain. What renders this more wonderful is, that he combines this depth and continuity of thought with elevation of language and exposition of character. It is very rare his language suffers from his thought, rare that his philosophy assumes a stiff and scholastic form, rare that it interferes with the action and sentiment of the piece by taking the style of dry and inconsequential axioms. It is deep, yet not the less practical, consequent, yet living.

Shakspeare's age, like the following, was one of deep thinkers, as is evidenced, not merely by the professed philosophers, but by the poets also. To such a degree is this true, that we recollect to have heard a professor, of high reputation, refer his students for deep views of life, not to the metaphysicians of our country, but to its poets and dramatists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While we allow the difficulty of accounting for the peculiar character exhibited by an age, we contend that some of the causes can generally be discovered. In this peculiarity of Shakspeare and his period, we make no doubt that we see the results of the scholastic discipline which, in spite of its aridity, seems to have given a firmness of texture to the mind which we do not observe since the system has become obsolete.

The Duke's reasonings on death, to Claudio, remind us of the ingenious but one-sided apothegms of the ancient Greek philosophy—especially the Stoical. This is the dark side of the picture, but he could look at both sides, as we see in Claudio's musings upon the excellence of life. (Act III)

Claudio's look into the future is hardly inferior to Hamlet's.

The scene between Froth and the Clown is sufficiently insipid—all turns upon double meanings. This clown is not a professional one—his profession is a bawd.

The beauty of Isabella's pleading is greatly heightened by the aside remarks of the fantastic Lucio.

Nowhere do we see a higher tone of morality than throughout Isabella's whole character.

In those portions of his dialogue where he is merely explanatory, he at times is wanting in simplicity.

The Gallius Morkus, and cuckoldum, two of the most frequent sources of his familiar humour.

Here, as in the former, he talks of "an action of battery," and, as in the former, the latin quotation, "Cucullus non facit modicum."

He does not much mind adopting his names to his country—in his foreign pieces, he gives most of his characters Italian ones. This is the only piece we recollect, of which the scene lies altogether in Germany.

One of the strongest peculiarities of his language is, the use he makes of the convertibility of the substantive into verb. His words are very often employed in their primitive latin significations.

Fond of antithesis, a figure much in use in his times—"The goodness that is cheap in beauty, makes beauty brief in goodness."

Is not this Euphuism?—"The very stream of his life, and the business he hath beloved, must upon a warranted need give him a

better proclamation." Yet it is the use of language such as this, that often enables him to lock in a most complex idea within so few words. It appears to us that he puts this style into the mouths of his head personages—which would seem to indicate that it was a distinctive mark of the court and nobility in our author's days.

For the Pearl.

EXTRACTS FROM MEMORANDA OF COLLEGE EXERCISES.

NO. I.

Part of an Ode, 1st Lib. 1st. Satires of Horace, turned freely into English Verse.

"O fortunati mucatores gravis annis
Miles ait, multo jani fractus labore."

O happy he, the worn-out soldier cries,
Whose every want successful trade supplies,
Yet as his fears the raging storm alarms,
Happier the merchant deems the trade of arms.
When frequent clients thump the lawyer's door
At early dawn, perhaps an hour before,—
E'en Giles, the farmer, as he yokes his team,
Does happier to the sleepy lawyer seem.
But should the fates on Giles's prospects frown,
And legal process drag poor Giles to town,
How soon will he, the beggar'd farmer, swear
That wealth and ease can only flourish there.
There and of such the long, the endless bail,
To reckon o'er, would verberose Fabius fail.
Now let some God to all these grumblers say,
Your prayers are heard, have all for which ye pray—
Go, murmuring soldier, and at once be thou
A trader, go, the stormy billows plough;
Come, master lawyer, cease thy discontent,
Straight to farm shalt thou at once be sent;
And pray, good farmer, cease henceforth to frow
For thou may'st have the bustling joys of town,
Begone, let each his occupation change;
Why do ye stand? forsooth it's passing strange,
What! fickle mortals, do ye now refuse
The very lots your hearts but late did choose?
Such conduct, sure, your very weakness speaks,
See angry Jove puffs out his reddened cheeks,
Suppliants no more, before his throne appear,
For, mark, he'll never lend a listening ear.

Sydney, Cape Breton, July 2d, 1840.

THE FATE OF THE BLENHEIM.

Not more than one hundred miles from the southern extremity of England, rise in awful majesty above the tempestuous ocean, the dreadful breakers of the Dead Man's Ledge. Nothing can exceed the solitary appearance—the look of dreary loneliness that they present to the eye of the watchful seaman when the heavy swell of Biscay comes rolling up towards the northern ocean, and the light scud spread its fleeting screen of frosted silver before the face of the broad red harvest moon. When the night comes on in black rolling shadows from windward, and the stormy petrel calls his little band together, to dance upon the foam that hisses in the vessel's wake, may be heard the terrific music of the Dead Man's Ledge, louder than the roar of heaven's artillery, louder than the wail of the canvass splitting tempest, louder than the moan of the wilderness of waters, as it heaves up its blackened breast to own its Maker.

From the days of the earliest navigation, these rocks have been famous in story, and when the shades of evening settle upon the deep, woe be unto the outward bound mariner, that sees not their dark summit sink in the waste of foam-capped waves astern.

It was at the commencement of the nineteenth century, when a heavy armed corvette, under double reefed topsails, came running before a heavy south wester, and just at evening discovered St. Agnes' light ahead. Proudly she dashed along the billows, and with the setting of the sun a lantern rose to her ensign peak, and a heavy cannon mingled its notes with the thunder of the elements around. A larger ship now arose upon the horizon astern, and soon a light gleamed high over the peopled deck. A bright flash soon showed that the cannon of the three decker had answered the signal of her consort, and then the thick haze of the evening storm hid them from each other's view.

'Forecastle, there,' thundered the officer of the deck.

'Aye, aye, sir,' answered the master's mate.

'Keep a bright look out ahead, sir,' said the officer.

'Aye, aye, sir.'

The captain now came upon deck; long and anxiously he looked towards the light, and then as his eye rested upon a break in the waters he said:

'There they are. Mr. Cutharpin, send the best men to the wheel.'

'Aye, aye, sir,' said the first lieutenant, and soon a hardy set of old quarter masters grasped the spokes.

'Man the relieving tackles,' thundered the captain; they were manned instantly, the ship answered her helm promptly, the cested