

ACT IV

PAGE

123 "At first he completed the drama in three acts. It was not till several months after, when at Florence, that he conceived that a fourth act, a sort of hymn of rejoicing in the fulfilment of the prophecies with regard to Prometheus, ought to be added to complete the composition." —From Mrs. Shelley's note.

It is strange that Sidney Lanier, a critic so generally discerning, should have written as follows of this fourth act: "Act IV is the most amazing piece of surplussage in literature; the catastrophe has been reached long ago in the third act, Jove is in eternal duress, Prometheus has been liberated and has gone with Asia and Panthea to his eternal paradise above the earth, and a final radiant picture of the reawakening of man and nature under the new régime has closed up the whole with the effect of a transformation-scene. Yet, upon all this, Shelley drags in Act IV, which is simply leaden in action and color alongside of Act III, and in which the voices of unseen spirits, the chorus of Hours, Ione, Panthea, Demogorgon, the Earth and the Moon pelt each other with endless sweetish speeches that rain like ineffectual comfits in a carnival of silliness." —*The English Novel*, pp. 103, 104.

William Michael Rossetti, on the other hand, finds it "difficult to speak highly enough of the fourth act so far as lyrical fervour and lambent play of imagination are concerned, both of them springing from ethical enthusiasm. It is the combination of these which makes this act the most surprising structure of lyrical faculty, sustained at an almost uniform pitch through a very considerable length of verse, that I know of in any literature. One ought perhaps to except certain passages, taken collectively, in Dante's *Paradiso*."

Certainly, if Lanier's criticism were to stand, it would become necessary to curtail some of Shakespeare's plays and Thackeray's novels, as concluding with other than structurally necessary passages. Though it is true that the essential dramatic *action* is ended with the third act of *Prometheus*, yet the drama itself is incomplete, for the movement has been directed toward a catastrophe so stupendous and revolutionary that the reader instinctively feels — as Shelley felt — the need of another act, both to give reality in celebrant music to the central idea of the entire drama, and to relieve overcharged emotions. If Act III had been allowed to remain as the concluding act, the finale would have been one of ungrateful and almost unconvincing abruptness, and the æsthetic result one of a surprise and joy so unrelieved as to be almost painful. The "silver lining" apparent in the coming of Fortinbras