

## ORIGINAL.

## CRITIQUES ON SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMAS.

(Continued from page 228.)

## IX. THE MERCHANT OF VENICE.

The critic's office is easy, only in proportion as the work he reviews presents faults or excrescences. In the cases in which there is such a harmony in the proportions, that no one part stands prominently out, his mind is forced to embrace the scheme of the whole, before he can venture to pronounce a judgment.

Nothing is more easy than the analysis of separate portions, as nothing is more difficult than a review which is pertinent without being partial, and comprehensive without being vague. When, after the perusal of any work, we find our mind to be in a state of general and vague admiration which excludes all specialities, we take that as a proof that every detail is in perfect keeping, that the different elements are smelted together into such a compact whole, as to repel any effort to decompose them. Such a production may very justly be compared to a suit of armour, so perfectly tempered, and so elegantly joined together, as to offer no one point at which the lance could hope to penetrate. This piece appears to us by much the most perfect of any of Shakspeare's which have as yet fallen beneath our observation, and is, for this very reason, the one on which we feel it to be the most difficult to express an opinion. We feel disposed to fall into that strain of general eulogium, which is always a confession, on the part of the critic, that he has failed in appreciating the precise merits of his author, and that he is obliged to pay his debts with admiration instead of criticism. We make the remark upon this piece, which, as we have already made it upon others, is not the most special that could be offered,—that, in point of character and incident, it presents materials enough from which to construct two, if not three, comedies—which, after all, would neither be meagre or unvaried. As we have also already remarked in a similar case, this plenitude of incident gives rise to no confusion, the different parts hang closely together; and although it would be too much to say, that no passage could be abstracted without destroying the whole, still there is no instance in which, such an abstraction could be considered as an improvement. Upon this piece we ground the remark, that he possesses the art of rendering his secondary personages interesting up to a point which if they exceeded in the slightest, they would interfere with the principal ones. Hence, though none of his productions ever give rise to the questions, Who is the hero? Which is the main action? still there are many of them in which we find it hard to say, that one personage, or one chain of incidents, is more remarkable than another. His differences are rather distinctions of kind, than degrees of talent. What a group of remarkable personages is presented in this piece! what exuberance of imagination was required to create them! what art was necessary to handle them when created! An inferior writer would have furnished out a play from one of the two chains of events of this one, and would have found that there was no lack of incident. Nay, more: had he been demanded to compress all that is here into his piece, he would have found himself terribly embarrassed. Out of Shylock and Antonio he would have drawn a moving drama, perhaps a deep tragedy. With Portia and her casket, and her group of motley lovers, he would have composed a very elegant opera or melodrama, with magnificent decorations, in the style of Blue Beard or Cinderella. It required Shakspeare's genius to throw the two things together, and to combine them by mutual action and reaction. The connection between the two can hardly be said to be essential, tho' close enough to satisfy the laws of dramatic probability. Portia stands connected with the fate of Antonio, inasmuch as she is the ultimate cause of the debt which throws him into the power of Shylock—love is her first link of union with the other characters; in the progress of the piece she establishes another link, which brings her into such close contact that the action finally turns upon her. All that relates to the casket and her string of suitors is completely accessory. Jessica, too, and her lover effect a juncture with the main action, towards the end of their existence, up to that period having been somewhat arbitrary and independent. Had their connection been even less close, who could quarrel with personages so very graceful, so very captivating?

If we try the main incident by the sober rules of modern history, we shall be forced to pronounce it improbable, to say the best; but if we carry back our thoughts to the supposed epoch, if it does not amalgamate entirely with the character of the period, it at least does not stand so prominently off. During the long and bitter enmity between Christian and Jew, perceptible in every country of Europe, which stained history with some of the very foulest crimes that blot her pages, and supplied the romancer with some of his darkest tints, Shylock was no unnatural personage, and Shylock's ferocity nothing impossible. What adds to the probability of the action is the scene's being in Venice. Placed in Spain or England, where the Jews were treated with most oppressive rigour, its improbability would have been glaring—in Venice, where commerce must have widened liberty, and secured to all classes of citizens something like equal privileges, Shylock's demand is conceivable, and the manner in which it is attended to, natural.

Shylock belongs to the four or five master conceptions of Shakspeare. In none of his comedies do we find a character of such remarkable stature; to find a counterpart for him we must have re-

course to his tragedies. He is the Jew in every action, yet never the vulgar Jew, he remains from first to last a romantic personage.

If contempt be applicable only to the hypocrite, and if every one who acts from conviction, in whatever manner he acts, be possessed of some degree of dignity, then is Shylock a dignified personage—for every action of his seems to receive the approbation of his conscience. Cupidity the most sordid, and hatred, the most inhuman, lose in him a part of their loathsomeness, because flowing from a creed which held these things to be good when exercised against a Christian. In his moments of repose his Jewish nature is less conspicuous, but all the remarkable peculiarities of his race break forth in the seasons of passion. He possesses all the sordid rapacity of his nation; his burst of wrath almost destroys in him the claims of natural affection; the loss of his ducats affects him more than that of his only and amiable child; in all this he differs not from others of his tribe, and Shakspeare has insisted upon this feature of his character only to give prominence to its most remarkable trait—that spirit of demoniacal revenge which completely swallowed up the other passion. He who bewailed his ducats more than his daughter is an ordinary Jew—as such he is a ludicrous and a contemptible personage; but all feelings of this kind are absorbed in emotions of a much more powerful nature, when we behold him casting off his slough of avarice to abandon himself, without controul, to the dictates of a far deadlier feeling. In this case we mortally hate, but we cannot for our souls despise him. He is a powerful reasoner after his own manner; he stands by the strict letter of the law, and disavows such motives as generosity and mercy. These are things of which he holds no count; they are no pleas in his code of equity. So far are they from influencing him when urged to him, that he does not even seem to listen to or understand them. He wants the sense necessary to appreciate them, just in the same degree as the blind man wants the perception of colours; and therefore it is not by such weapons that he is or can be discomfited; the edge of that law to which he appealed is turned against him. He acknowledges its force, and does not endeavour to disarm it by the supplications to which he himself had already turned a deaf ear. He only quarrels with its leniency, which spares his life while it bereaves him of his ducats, "his Christian ducats." And in this last particular he reverts again to his primitive Jewish nature, above which passion had lifted him for a time.

There is at least a wonderful consistency in all this, and if consistency without another virtue entitles its possessor to admiration, Shylock may be classed among heroes. This return to his ordinary character is a remarkable proof of art, as it shews the profoundest insight into human nature. It was also a most felicitous idea to make him draw from the Bible so much of his best argument and illustration. It needed not Shakspeare's intelligence to know this book to be the literature, the law, and the religion of the nation, but we think we recognise all his own peculiar talent in the manner in which he has brought this knowledge into play. There is one moment, and but one, in which the harsh nature of Shylock softens down almost to the tone of gentle feeling, and at that moment we feel half disposed to pity if not to love him. It is when he says, "I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys."

It did not suit the author's design to dwell upon it. A few such traits, and he would have foiled his own purpose.

The main action is brought to an end in the fourth act. And what an act, what action, and what characters! Shylock, with greedy eyes fastened upon his victim, for whom in the very court he whets his knife, rebutting with calm indifference the cutting sarcasms of the enraged Gratiano, or repelling, with an appeal to justice, the arguments of mercy addressed to him by the others. Antonio led like a lamb to the slaughter, and joining in the discourse only to assuage the grief of his friends. Bassanio divided between sorrow for his benefactor and rage at his oppressor. Gratiano's coarser and more volatile nature a prey to ungovernable rage which can find no words strong enough for its expression. Portia, the able, dexterous advocate, who touches on the chord of mercy, but finding that it had no echo in the flinty heart of Shylock, attacks him with his own weapons and foils him. The Duke or Doge, the upright representative and administrator of his republic's laws, lending the influence of his voice to the arguments of Portia, but venturing not to interpose the authority of his office between the law and his victim. And then the new aspect which the question assumes, the glee of the advocate, the calm joy of Antonio, the exultation of the others, and the stern composure of Shylock while he is the object of universal execration. If there be in the range of our dramatic literature a scene comparable with this, it must be in the writings of the same author, for we have no other equal to such an effort. But all is not yet over. Had the piece ended here, we should not have had time to recover from the conflict of painful and pleasant emotions awakened by the above transactions. Space is afforded for this in the fifth act, which moreover unfolds to us another world of charms, differing indeed in kind, but no-way inferior in degree to those we have already met with. It opens with the scene of the two lovers, who, seated on a bank of flowers, the moon above, and the soft sky of Italy around them, yield themselves up to the enchantment of the hour, catch from nature her stillness, and communicate in their turn new charms to her. The situation is no new one, it has been described since there was a poet to sing or lovers to sing of; it has been described more lengthily, with greater pomp of words, with more display of senti-

ment, with larger pretensions to feeling; and yet we know not one instance in which thought and language are in more exquisite sympathy, in which the one possesses more real tenderness, or the other more perfect melody. History is called in to vary the range of idea, and Lorenzo and Jessica suffer their thoughts to steal back to Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Æneas and Dido, Medea and Æson.

They gaze into the blue vault of heaven, and give a language and a music to the spheres—for what is there to which passion does not communicate its own hues and colours? We do not at present recollect in his regular dramas a passage in which Shakspeare has more fully and completely abandoned himself to his emotions of the beautiful.

There is no one of his plays from which there stand off so many of those passages which form part of our memory, being registered there never to be erased; and what is singular, there is no one in which the dialogue, dramatically speaking, is more perfect throughout.

Upon the whole, the timest portions are those which speak of Portia's lovers and her casket.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN OLD SAVOYARD.

I left my native mountain land more than eighty years ago, with a pair of brushes, a pike, and a marmot. As I ranged at liberty through the fields, I imagined myself master of the world. I managed to employ myself, however, on my route, so that with my little earnings, I was able to buy a monkey at Chambery, a magpie at Grenoble, and a bear at Lyons. I was active, hearty, daring and light-hearted, thus partaking of the nature of the rock, the chamois and the bird, among which my infancy was passed. The most flattering prospects opened before me. My magpie chattered, my monkey played antics before the mirror, and shaved himself, and I succeeded in training my voice to such touching inflections, that, on arriving at Paris with my dumb companions, I soon gained the hearts of the *Estrapade*. At the *Gros Caillou* I produced the same sensation; but no heart was so hard as to resist the attraction of so young and precocious a child.

As my purse grew heavier, my ambition rose. I knew that a poor man in London, had become Lord Mayor, and had gained an immense fortune in India by means of a cat; so I said to myself, that poor man had but one animal, I have four; since with a single cat one may become Lord Mayor, with a menagerie I shall be a Prince. Absorbed by this idea I arrived in London, and took up my quarters at Charing-cross, and I can flatter myself, that not a single citizen of Picadilly can say, "He has not been in my house," for I have swept all its chimnies from top to bottom. And there is not a young woman in the Haymarket who has not stopped to admire my dancing, and say "What a fine fellow!" to which my magpie would smartly reply, "A penny if you please." By dint of sweeping these chimnies, and the patronage of these young ladies, I obtained a free passage on board a vessel sailing for India, and being weary of having no chimnies to sweep on my voyage, I rendered myself useful with my brushes on board, and amusing by my agility in climbing to the mast-head.

Among my native mountains, I had employed myself in making wooden clocks—in India I made spinning wheels, and machines of various kinds. The India Company soon took me into their service as a mechanic; from that office I rose to be book-keeper, then principal agent, then treasurer, then administrator to the Honourable East India Company, and in a few years found myself a *millionaire*; but I still retained my early simplicity, and sighed for the happiness of my chimney-sweeping life.

I lived in India thirty years, but there were three things in that country to which I never could reconcile myself, and these were—a flat surface, an unchanging sky, and effeminate manners. As long as ambition swayed me, I suffered comparatively little, but that being gratified, I felt as if I bore the great Indies on my shoulders. I returned to London with my fortune, and with a yearning for an immediate return to France.

The English banker who had charge of my affairs, wrote to a Parisian confederate, requesting him to prepare all that was necessary for the return of a rich nabob to the French capital. A Hotel was rented for me in the *Chaussée d'Antin*, equipages were purchased, and a large number of servants engaged for my establishment. The most splendid reception awaited me.

While these preparations were in progress, I arrived from Calais in Paris on foot with a knapsack on my back; and being curious to see the mansion prepared for me, I presented myself at the door, *incognito*, as an old savoyard, with two young assistants of the same nation, whom I had found at the first *barrier*. While, by the orders of my steward, these little rogues swept all the chimnies, my footman proposed to me to black his shoes; my butler that I should go into the pantry and take a glass with him; and all this embroidered rabble said unto me, with a cuff now and then on my ears, "We'll recommend you to the nabob when he comes, old fellow; but you'll pay for that small glass."

I understood from what I saw, that I was about to become the slave of a thousand new wants; and shut up, as in a chrysalis, in all this splendour, I should be deprived of the pleasures of my pipe and marmot. Wishing to enjoy the short space of time remaining to me, I began to stroll over the city with my little compatriots, and came, in the course of our rambles, to the *Estrapade*. The