

SHAKESPEARE,

THE SEER—THE INTERPRETER.

I. INTRODUCTION.

§ 1. *The Era of Shakespeare.*

Why do the men of this generation turn back their thoughts so often to the generation of their fellow-men who lived some three or four hundred years ago? It is because that generation witnessed the commencement of a great crisis in human affairs, which affected deeply, in a variety of ways, our forefathers of *that* day, and their brother-men throughout all Europe; which has affected every generation of the descendants of these; which affects all Europe now; and through it, touches ourselves and all other communities of men on these western continents. The movements begun at the commencement of the crisis, three and four hundred years ago, have not worked themselves out. We all feel ourselves this day borne onward on one or other of the liftings in the great undulation of thought and new experience which then had its beginning, and which must be looked at in its origin, or it cannot be understood. The more the era referred to is studied, the more firmly will it be believed that there was about that time a special "lighting-down" of the divine Arm upon the earth, with a mingled purpose of justice and mercy:—an interposition, not miraculous in the common acceptation of the term, but one of which men, unconsciously but peculiarly fitted, were made the instruments.

It would seem as if, in the order of Divine Providence, the fulness of time was come when men should be permitted to make great discoveries; when glimpses were to be allowed them even into the economy of the physical universe; when it was to be made known, by certain undeniable proofs, that the globe which they inhabit is not, as it had been mostly imagined, the centre of the celestial system, but a mere unit in an unnumbered multitude of worlds—a revelation of itself sufficiently startling to revolutionize the prevalent philosophy and theology of the era;—and in corroboration of the new cosmical doctrine, the round earth was to be circumnavigated; the way to the East was to be seen to be by the West; and in following that track vast islands, new continents, which barred the way, with nations and tribes and languages undreamed of, were to be stumbled on; and enkindle the wondering sympathies of all hearts and all imaginations.