

ORIGINAL.

(We have been favoured with several *Critiques on Shakspeare's Plays*, and have the pleasure of laying two numbers, of the series, before our readers this week. The critiques are brief and characteristic; they evince the deep thinking and extensive reading of the writer,—and will be found to contain striking views of our great poet's works.)

I. THE TEMPEST.

To enjoy the whole charm of this play, it is necessary to make ourselves one of the age in which it was written. That which now seems to stand so glaringly off, from probability, was not, we conceive, viewed in the same light by our forefathers. If it did not exactly meet their belief, it revolted less than it does ours. Caliban, Ariel, and Prospero, may be said to have harmonized with the ideas of a period, whose first sage was a believer in demonology, and whose wisest monarch wrote treatises upon witch-craft. Other circumstances favoured its *vraisemblance*. The new world, though discovered a considerable time before, had not yet been so thoroughly explored, that much free space was not left to the imagination to descant upon. What could there be improbable after the wonders that travellers had beheld, or fabled in that vast continent! The island with its grotesque personages, really presented nothing very incredible to those who were yearly in the habit of swallowing in the real or fabled wonders, that were recounted of America. In this respect, Shakspeare's position was most favourable. He stood at a point in history when superstition, if it had lost some part of its influence over the learned, adhered with full force to the common mind. He had probably the advantage of being unaffected himself, while he had the full persuasion that nothing which he penned in this sort, would fail to move the popular understanding.

Every thing about this piece seems to indicate it to be a production of his youth. We are so destitute of chronological information as to our author, that we are perhaps about to prove from internal evidence, what a hundred commentators have already proved by historical facts. The play is unquestionably an ebullition of youth. There is in it no lack of art, no want of manly reason, no proof of immaturity of taste, but its main characteristic is the freshness of an untarnished fancy, the turbulence of an unsubdued imagination. The author is the bride-groom who rejoices to run a race, the courser compelled to spurn the ground, to throw off his superabundant energies. The first movements of the imagination are like the first motions of childhood, they are instinctive, necessary, and bring with them their own reward. Compare the impetuosity of this piece with the subdued and chastened strength that pervades Hamlet and Othello. Still we meet with nothing in it that justifies the imputations of wildness or irregularity that have been brought against Shakspeare—that is to say, if by wildness be meant those cases in which the imagination seizes the bit in her teeth, and pursues her mad career without the governance of reason. Such a wildness is not to be met with here or in any other portion of his writings. Nay more, it is not to be found in any one truly great poet, throughout the whole range of literature. Theirs is a calculated wildness, in which the fancy, acting under the guidance of reason, pursues an end, and attains it, though her course be eccentric, and her movements apparently capricious. In them reason is the dexterous angler that plays the trout about, but never suffers it to snap the line. The characteristic of his later productions is towering reason, in harmonious union with a vigorous fancy—in this and some other works of his youth, it is, exuberant imagination, but never without the domain of reason.

We are ignorant from what sources he may have drawn either the story or the decorations. The origin of a host of these tales that sprung up during the middle ages, is very often a mystery—we know not whether it be so in this instance. We are almost as much at a loss to understand from what materials he constructed those incantations with which the piece is interspersed. Did he follow any model, did he borrow from the ballads and fairy-legends which, without doubt, abounded at the period, or did he with a stroke of his wand, call this airy world from the capacious chambers of his own extraordinary intelligence? This at least is certain, that whether he followed a model or not, he has been the model in this department to all his successors—and we discover rich infusions from his sketches of the supernatural, in Ben Johnson, Milton, Gray, Byron, Scott, Goethe, and Shelly. These incantations, snells and ballads, have that freshness about them which renders it a certainty to us that they were taken directly from nature, consequently written ere the impression of his native fields was yet dimmed by a sojourn in cities. The smell of flowers is yet fresh upon them, the dew is not yet brushed off. He seems to have bestowed more care upon their versification than he generally gives to his passages, for they are all music—all sweetness.

The masque is introduced with just about as much art as such things are commonly ushered in. That is to say, he has by no means blinded us to its unconnectedness with the main business of the piece—but has silenced censure by the beauties of the thing itself. Such pageants, belonged more to the pompous spirit of the age, than to the man. The interest of the piece depends very slightly upon the plot, in which there is little action or progression—it is to the accessories and adjuncts, that it owes almost all its effect, and these are so very artfully intermingled, that the poverty of the plot is certainly not the first impression that strikes the reader.

Hence the fate of the principal personages is not the point on which the feelings fasten, although the loves of Ferdinand and Miranda are narrated with an enchanting softness, although a charm is thrown about "the good old lord Gonzalo;"—we almost forget all this to burst out into an uncontrollable fit of laughter at the doings and sayings of the "motley" Trinculo, the ruby-nosed Stephano, and the humourous goblin Caliban. Their humours raise in us no faint smile that curls the lip, or steals from the eye, but that honest emotion which our German neighbours term *belly-laughter*, "shaking both our sides." The humour has the great merit of being broad and strong, without ever descending into vulgarity. What daring genius was there in the association of three such anomalies as Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban! They form one of the oddest confraternity that ever was met together; they remind us upon the whole of one of those groups of Satyrs and wood gods, which the sculpture of antiquity has transmitted down to us, on which the artist has exhausted his fancy to produce the most motley union of brute and demon. Caliban especially is a wonderful conception. His name marks an order of beings. He is so strange a cross between the *gnome* and the brute, that it is impossible to say in what proportion their elements are combined in him. Upon the whole however the brute predominates. His demon mother has left him little of her nature but her malice. Still he is no vulgar brute—there is something poetical about him which he never belies. Hence his language never stoops to humble prose; the whole character is in verse. The author has exhausted his whole dictionary of words to find for him a vocabulary harsh, rugged and unbending as his own nature. In form as in temper he is the exact counterpart of the "most delicate Ariel"—a spirit who is all spirit, and to whom we find it difficult to attach any of the gross attributes of humanity. Charming as is this latter personage, we prefer his gross counterpart, whose character is hewn out with a vigor which we have never seen equalled. In the line of poetry we recollect some spirits that may bear a comparison with Ariel, we remember no goblin that can rival Caliban. The only other plays into which he has introduced similar personages are "*Midsummer Night's Dream*," and the "*Winter's Tale*." The secondary characters, such as the rough swearing boatswain, are hit off with much vigour. We shall often have occasion to speak of his language. It is essentially and throughout metaphorical. We have the metaphor under every possible form, full, allusive, or latent. He walks you up to the object compared, until it stares you in the face, so that there is no mistaking it. He is the first of that line of metaphysical poets, who find resemblances between objects apparently the most heterogeneous.

The play acted under this name is said to have been altered from Shakspeare by Dryden and Davenant.

THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA.

It is very far from our intention to present a systematic analysis of each piece. This would be almost as absurd, as if we were to offer a sketch of the plan and incidents of the *Iliad*, or the *Paradise Lost*. We shall do no more than record the general and often scattered remarks occasioned by a hasty perusal.

This play, like very many of his, is a vivid reflection of the age. What histories should we have would their authors think of drawing from such sources!

If we are to judge from such records as this, the orders of society were in those days fixed with a precision to which we see nothing similar now. This remark is derived from the prevalence of what we may term *fixed personages*, in the whole dramatic literature of these olden times. What play was then without the master and his valet? this last an odd compound of dulness and humour, of lowliness and *espieglerie*, something causing us to laugh at his witty sallies, as often the cause of wit in others by his clownish stupidity? or without the mistress and her waiting maid, who half malice, half good nature, ridicules the coyness, or sympathises in the sorrows of her superior, shews her her own mind in the glass of raillery, and aids her with her counsel in moments of difficulty. In short she is the French confidente, with considerably more wit than her descendant. It is a part of the character of these personages, that in all combats of logic or humour between them and their superiors, they should invariably get the better, and always have the laughers on their side. They remind us of the Roman or Grecian slave who was often wiser than his master. We know of no character of our own day which can more properly be compared to them than the clown or merry andrew of our own puppet shows. It would be but a poor compliment to Shakspeare, however, to maintain that there is an accurate resemblance between his creations and a personage so humble. Still a likeness exists, if not in the substance, at least in the form and manner.

Schlegel, whose work, with all its merit, is rather an eulogium than a critique, has laboured hard to prove Shakspeare's buffoon one of the most remarkable of his characters, and has laid much stress on the circumstance that he was, strictly speaking, an actual personage of the period. We do not altogether assent either to the judgment or the historical assertion. We do not deny that, upon the whole, he is a personage who serves as an agreeable interlude, sets off the principal character, and furnishes a fund of humour which is often good and generally diverting. Still if we were called upon to reply to the questions, does he never occupy a disproportioned share in the business of the piece, does his humour never degener-

ate into insipid word-play, idle quips and quirks, and tiresome double-entendre,—we could not avoid answering in the affirmative. No—in criticism, as in religion, let us scorn at being swayed by "the fear of men"—let us be guided by the principle, that every writer must have his faults, and that it is our office to expose them, and let us remember that by so doing we place ourselves upon a high vantage ground, from which we command the credit of our fellow men, when we exchange the censor for the encomiast.

The buffoon nowhere occupies a greater share in the action than in this piece. We have him under two shapes, in the two serving-men—*Speed* represents the more refined form, while in *Launce* he appears under his vulgarest aspect. The two characters are not, however distinct throughout—*Launce* at times steps into the shoes of his rival, and in so doing exchanges his broad farce, for the other's puns and quibbles. This play then is an example which we would adduce where buffoonery engrosses more than a fair portion of the action. Shakspeare, like *Moliere*, is generally esteemed to have been most advantageously placed as a dramatic artist. His position seems to us to have had its disadvantages also, amongst which we count the necessity of stooping at times to the level of the vulgarer part of his audience, when he flattered their coarse palates with wit such as abounds here—for we cannot prevail upon ourselves to think, that in this he obeyed the unbiased dictates of his own taste and understanding. We grant that no one could have stooped more gracefully—that no one could more skilfully have reconciled the exigencies of his present situation, with the loftier claims of the genius of poetry within him—but what we will not grant, although there are many who require it at our hands, is, that these things which we look upon as venial and necessary blemishes, should be registered among his peculiar excellencies.

It may be fancy on our part, yet we imagine that we discern in this piece, as in most of Shakspeare's, strong symptoms of that *scholastic discipline* to which the intellect of his period was subjected. These conceits of thought, these fantastic figures, this continued logomachy, this perpetual word-play, may, we think, all be traced up, more or less directly, to that logic of Aristotle, which, with all its excrescencies, was so instrumental in giving an acute and vigorous cast to the intellect of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. His comic personages are not the only ones who take delight in playing with the ambiguity of language; his lovers themselves, at the very full tide of their passion, will "run through all the predicables," and find solace from their griefs in twisting and untwisting thought into most quaint and fantastic combinations. We of the nineteenth century are in the habit of thinking, that such exercises demand a degree of mental repose and indifference, incompatible with the higher flights of emotion. We are right in respect of our own epoch, but let us not be too hasty in imposing as a rule for our forefathers what we can only affirm with certainty of ourselves. In one point, at least, we regard their age as being less passionate than our own—we allude to the sentiment of love. The chivalrous spirit, which was far from extinct, seemed to have led them rather to worship women as divinities, than to love them as beings of the same clay with themselves. Their feelings towards them hovered between this exalted strain of adoration, and its opposite, though separated by a narrower interval than we might suppose, natural concupiscence. In the whole line of poets from Chaucer down to Waller and Cowley, we meet with little that resembles our present perhaps exaggerated notions of the strength and influence of this passion. It is in most cases a theme on which the writer racks his fancy, to discover fantastic conceits and ingenious figures, not a channel into which he pours the full tide of sincere and irresistible emotion. The moral of the piece is contained in the words of Proteus—

"In love
Who respects friend?"

a moral upon which many a tale has been hung, since the story of *Palamon and Arcite*, and upon which Shakspeare himself has more than once commented. It is one from which very powerful consequences may be drawn—for what can well be more interesting than the struggle between the two most absorbing feelings with which our nature is endowed? We venture to say that there is too much suddenness in the manner in which Proteus changes his affections. A modern dramatist would have brought this about more gradually. Perhaps our ancestors were more instinctive than we are. A fault somewhat similar is the suddenness with which the outlaws name Valentine their captain. That a lady should by means of a disguise conceal herself from her lover, and remain in attendance upon him without being discovered, requires a great stretch of faith to credit. This is not the only instance in which Shakspeare gives us the same incident. Such things must be set down in the list of *stage-tricks* which ought not to be looked into too closely. There is great sweetness in the love scene between Proteus and Julia. The character of Silvia is finely imagined, there is an innate dignity about her which she never loses. The poetry seldom stands out of the dialogue, and yet there are a few scattered passages of singular separate sweetness—such as Julia's commentary on Proteus's letter—her ruminations over Silvia's picture—Valentine's meditation among the outlaws, &c. &c.

Never was humour broader than *Launce's* reflections on his dog. He excels in drawing those beings who stand at the lowest point in the scale of intellect. See *Launcelet Gobbs* and many others. We see the host but for an instant, and yet it is in a most characteristic attitude. He falls asleep during the serenade that interests Julia