

ORIGINAL.

CRITIQUE ON SHAKSPEARE'S DRAMAS.

(Continued from page 228.)

VII. MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.

When we reflect upon the elements out of which this piece is composed, our state of mind is much the same, as when in some anatomical treatise we find magnesia, iron, chloris, oxygen and hydrogen, indicated as the components of that wonderful piece of workmanship the human frame. Our wonder is hardly greater that these rude minerals, these stinking gases, should in combination form man, than it is to see the events and personages of a remote antiquity, the characters and ideas of modern days, the fantastic beings of the imaginary world, smelted into one harmonious (homogeneous) whole. The elements seem as dissimilar, as incapable of producing the result, in the one case as in the other.

When the different parts of a piece are apparently in harmony, the critic may be allowed to exclaim if any one, upon minutest inspection, should be out of keeping. For instance, he would have reason to censure the introduction of "the national anthem" into a play whose epoch was that of Richard III. But where there is not even a pretension to such a harmony, censure must more properly be directed against the design than the execution. It may be allowable to impugn Shakspeare when he makes Troilus quote Aristotle, inasmuch as the piece wherein this happens has something like an air of regularity; but to attack the anachronisms of this one would be to censure, not scattered passages or separate characters, but the very essence and design. Its eccentricity is not the result of accident, but of calculation. It is not the imagination breaking loose from the reason, but the imagination secretly led and regulated by the reason. Still, were it possible to decompose these two elements, and to state the proportions in which they enter, the former would be found to predominate.

Philosophy made a great stride towards truth, when she banished such formulas and divisions as those which portioned off the mind into separate parts, and when in their place she adopted that view, that the faculties are but the same mind under different phases. Agreeably to this, we can now, without a paradox, look upon the imagination as but the reason subtilized, the reason, accompanied by emotion, under a state of excitement. Still if we understand the thing, there is no harm in employing the ancient modes of expression. And so employing them, we pronounce this piece to be the achmé, the master-piece of Shakspeare's fancy, as we regard Hamlet the chef d'œuvre of his matured reason. Theseus, with his Amazon spouse Hippolyta, and his title of duke—a title which, by the way, he bears in *Chaucer*, and in the tales of the middle age in which he figures, thrown into company with fairies and hobgoblins of a pure English breed, and rude artisans of the same nation, is certainly enough to frighten those puny literateurs who cannot go beyond the form, whose talk is of decency, convenience, and the laws of time and place.

This seems to be the fittest occasion to say a word as to Shakspeare's nature. In general his duties as a dramatic writer forbid his expatiating at length upon natural scenery, and therefore we are in most cases forced to collect our opinions of his talent in this way, from the short but brilliant passages besprinkled here and there throughout his dialogue. In this instance his duties were less rigorous, his character and action required little exposition, and he was at liberty to abandon himself, as he has done, to a style of poetry almost purely lyric, almost throughout picturesque. His nature resembles much more that of the older than the modern poets. His is not a vague and general picture of some of her larger aspects, brought in rather as accessories than for themselves, but a living reflection of her in a thousand of her lovely and most delicate phases—proving an ocular and familiar acquaintance with the objects he depicts, and a heart intoxicated with their charms. He does not speak of the breath of flowers, the warbling of birds, the murmuring of fountains—but he names his flowers, he shows you them tipped with dew, you hear his birds sing each after his kind, and his fountains murmur each after its manner. He is precise, without being tame—actual, but never prosaic. Virgil and Delille often remind you of a versified herbarium, or a collection of dried plants and flowers; here, the veil of poetry, the gauze of the most painted style of diction, is cast over the processes of nature. His landscapes are quite as fresh and quite as natural as those of Chaucer, but, unlike his, they are never tame or long drawn out. Language fails us often, but never more than when we essay to define the charm which natural objects possess, when we see them decked in the naive and somewhat quaint style of our older poets. We know of no description, whether in Latin, Italian, or French, in which the language and the object appear to us in such exquisite harmony. Our modern poets seem to us often to look at nature from a window, or to observe her in a hot-house; but there was a line of bards, beginning with Chaucer, and ending, we suspect, with Thomson, who, with less parade of words, but with more real tenderness, have described her as she is, proving that they had dwelt and lingered over and felt their inspiration in the scenes themselves. In this line Shakspeare, as in each one which he has attempted, holds the first place. Endeavours have been made to continue and improve upon their style. In our own days a groupe of little men have seated themselves among some of the fairest spots in our is-

land, where they watch nature, if we are to believe their own accounts, with a most praiseworthy attentiveness, comparing and correcting their observations together. From time to time they send forth a statement of their operations to the public. But it has been affirmed, and we think with all justice, that that inspiration to which they pretend is forced, that they are minute philosophers and microscopic poets, who are altogether unworthy to tread in the footsteps of their forefathers.

There is a strong resemblance between the colouring of this piece and that of Milton's poetry; especially the lyric portions of it, which convince us that he must have drawn largely from his great forerunner.

We have here four groups of personages, which are sometimes separate, but more frequently in contact, interesting in both aspects, but most amusing when together, on account of the vivid contrasts which arise from their contact. Theseus and Hippolyta—the lovers—the craft's-men, and the supernatural personages. As in all his pieces, the action is abundant and even-complicated, but without the slightest entanglement. The fairies greatly assist in carrying forward the plot, and all the while that they are performing this useful labour, enchant us by the graces of their motions, the philanthropy of their natures, and the charming spells, and incantations which they utter. After the intrigue is unravelled, and the fate of the principal characters decided, there is still a new call upon our interest in the masque performed by the amusing mechanics. This engrafting of a play upon a play, of which the present is not the only instance in his writings, reminds us of the somewhat similar practice of the old romancers, of inserting a story within the main one. There is this difference, however, that in the latter case the episode leads off the attention from that within which it is inserted.

(Here might be placed some remarks on the origin and nature of the ancient Masque, of which this piece is an example.)

It has many features in common with the *Tempest*, which we think it excels, in splendour of poetry at least. The *Tempest*, however, possesses one character, that of Caliban, to which this can present no equal. It is impossible to imagine more lively or more humorous contrasts than this exhibits. The graceful shapes of the fairy-world set in opposition with the grossest beings in this—Titania, and Bottom the Joiner. His fairy-world is composed out of the current of popular superstitions, brought into England by our Saxon ancestors. We enter into no comparison between these and the ancient mythology, but when we read the brilliant poetry of this piece we do not envy Homer or Virgil their Satyrs, their Fauns, their Naiads, or their Sybils. These superstitions have, no doubt, undergone a very considerable transformation in his mind ere they could assume so vivid a form. He has done for them what Hesiod did for the ancient mythology. The dialogue never fetters him here; he interweaves upon it long descriptive passages, almost as if the poem were not of a dramatic character.

The structure of his verse is more regular than in almost any of his pieces—few careless lines—numbers of singular strength and melody. And yet the piece is not altogether fantasy. There are not a few passages containing the deepest meaning, and keen insight into the heart, which characterize his later works.

(We shall speak of his lower orders hereafter.)

The devices of the craftsmen, to fit up their play as well as many parts of the play itself, probably have a double design. They, no doubt, contain an indirect allusion to those *green-room scenes*, to which Shakspeare had been lately introduced, and whose absurdities he wished to ridicule. We see throughout his plays, passages that prove him desirous to give a higher character to the stage than it then possessed.

For the Pearl.

SONG.

Away, away, where all is free,
Beneath the sky's blue dome—
Far o'er the deep dark-heaving sea
In gallant guise we roam.
The freshening gales swell out our sails,
And proudly on we steer,
To those fair isles where Nature smiles
Serenely all the year!

The boundless sea, the circling sky,
Are all we now can view,
Save you bright orbs hung out on high
Amidst the ethereal blue;
Yet on our way through ocean's spray
In gallant guise we go,
To those fair isles where Nature smiles
No dark'ning winter know!

THE GREEN LANE.

MAY.

It is a fine glowing evening, towards the end of May; a fresh breeze is stirring among the tree tops; the thristle is perched upon some favourite spray, singing sweet hymns to the setting sun; and that magnificent luminary is sinking in the west, begirt with deep-dyed splendours, like the departing spirit of some great good man,

that catches a glimpse of the other world as it takes its leave of this, and passes from earth encircled with the glory of opening heaven.

Leave we the dusty highway to dip into the freshness of this verdant lane!

Match me, ye climes which poets love to laud!

Climes of the beautiful! ye classic realms! Greece! Italy! match, if you can, the Green Lanes of Old England!

This singularly interesting feature of landscape scenery is peculiarly our own. It is essentially English. We cannot meet with it in any other country on earth. America may boast her sea-like rivers and lakes; her far-stretching prairies; her pathless and interminable forests: but where are her green lanes? In vain we seek them among the cornfields and vineyards of sunny France, leading from farm to farm, and from village to village—bowery, verdant, and refreshing. Switzerland, with her mighty hills and sweet valleys, cannot exhibit them. Nor shall we find them in the land of song—the classic land of Italy—the land of the fair—so renowned for the loveliness of her scenery. Good reason have we to pride ourselves on this bewitching feature of our landscape—the leafy, green, and cotted lane—which has given birth to some of the sweetest pictures our painters have produced, and some of the most exquisite descriptive passages to be met with in the writings of our authors. To poets, and such-like lovers of nature, the lane has ever possessed an indescribable charm. They have delighted to pursue the pleasant windings of its rutted road, beneath green hedgerows and embowering trees; by cot, and farm, and village; by mossy well and tinkling streamlet; schooling their minds amid its quiet and seclusion, and feasting on the many beauties that adorn their path.

Here is a sonnet from the pen of William Howitt. He, it seems, loves a ramble through the rural lane. Listen to what he sweetly says:

When I go musing, in this happy time—
The opening of a late, but shining May—
Through winding lanes, which over me display
High banks, with the wood-sorrel's flowers in prime,
And rich luxuriant herbage, with the rime
Of night-dews slightly silver'd; when the gay,
Light, young-leaf'd branches all around me sway:
And when I hear the old familiar chime
Of chaffinch and wood-creeper, and that voice
Of summer nights, the cowering corn-crake's call;
I can no more keep down the sudden leap
Of my touched heart, thus bidden to rejoice,
Than I could charm back nature into sleep,
And chill her bosom with a wintry pall.

Beautiful! Long, long may he continue to perambulate our green lanes, and cogitate those charming works which have yielded us so much delight!

Hear also the Bard of the Sofa—Cowper; these same lanes had a fascination for him. He says:

For I have loved the rural walk through lanes
Of grassy sward, close cropp'd by nibbling sheep,
And skirted thick with intertexture firm
Of thorny boughs.

And Leigh Hunt, in an elegant Sonnet to Hampstead, written while in prison, beautifully sings:

Sweet upland! to whose walks, with fond repair,
Out of thy western slope I took my rise,
Day after day, and on these feverish eyes
Met the moist fingers of the bathing air—
If health, unearned of thee, I may not share,
Keep it, I pray thee, where my memory lies,
In thy green lanes, brown dells, and breezy skies,
Till I return and find thee doubly fair.

And what says the contemplative Wordsworth on this subject? the "Prince of the bards of his time!" Have the green lanes of his native country no charm for him! Has the pen of Wordsworth recorded no love for the many beauties with which they abound! Listen! Speaking of himself in "The Excursion," he says:

I, whose favourite school
Hath been the fields, the roads, and rural lanes!

So they have been his favourite school! and the heart of every man of warm poetic temperament, young or old, must have a liking for the beautiful scenery of the English lane.

Reader! here, then, is one of those same lanes, sequestered and still, pleasantly winding among the farms and fields. Let us plunge into its shadiness, and pursue its sinuosities by the side of this tinkling runlet, and beneath the overarching green of these trees. How cool, how refreshing after that hot walk along the straight and dusty highway! And what a stillness! No sound reaches us from the throng of rattling vehicles we have left behind. We are, as it were, out of the world, amid the profound quiet of the cloister-shade. Here might the meditative man muse undisturbed, and the poet "revolve his orb'd thoughts," without interruption or annoyance. How delightful the young breeze that flutters among these branches, and keeps its original coolness in this leafy prison! How lovingly it greets our cheek! How softly it kisses the clustering blossoms of the snowy stitchwort on that grassy bank! How gently it stirs the sunlit foliage of these embowering trees! Let us inhale this delicious puff of fragrance from the hawthorn bloom! On either side, the hedges are covered with its odorous flowers. The air is laden heavily with its sweets. As some one says:

The breeze doth rob the odorous hawthorn bush,
Nor cares to keep it secret; for the deed
To all is blazoned by the plunder shed.

* See "Les enfans d'Edouard" of Casimir Delavigne.