

CHARACTER READING IN JULIUS CÆSAR.

“ There is no art
To find the mind’s construction in the face.”

Macbeth, Act 1, Scene IV.

“ Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
May read strange matters.”

Macbeth, Act 1, Scene V.



SHAKESPEARE is such a master of consistency that he seldom contradicts himself. Yet in the two quotations above, both of which are taken from the same play, there is an evident contradiction. If we accept the first maxim, which is uttered by Duncan on learning that Cawdor has been a traitor, a circumstance that is well calculated to justify the truth of the exclamation, we must reject the second, which is expressed by Lady Macbeth, when she encounters her husband nervously excited by the thought of the murderous designs against the king, to which she afterwards works him. However, I do not think the two quotations indicate an inconsistency in Shakespeare’s mind, but that, since they are expressed by two different characters, they only serve to illustrate the varying opinions that are commonly held regarding character-reading.

To read the mental capacity of a man, or the good or evil designs of his heart, from an observation of his physiognomy or an examination of his activity or works, is a faculty common to all, in a measure. Were it otherwise, our lives would be one continuous chain of surprises and astonishments. In ordinary matters we usually judge correctly. When our friend does us a good turn, we accept it as a matter of course, because it coincides with our opinion already formed of him, that there is a vast region of charity in his heart, which must periodically produce material fruits. When we see a life-long acquaintance become our bitterest enemy, we take it logically, because, on a little reflection we see that he never did a kind act towards us, never even wished us well. On this account surprises in our judgments of ordinary men and everyday affairs are the exception instead of the rule.