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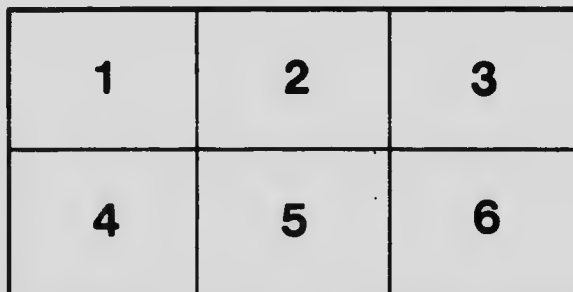
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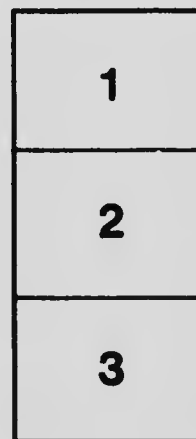
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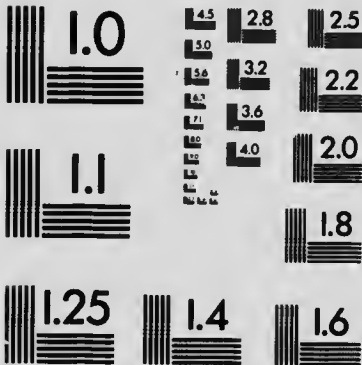
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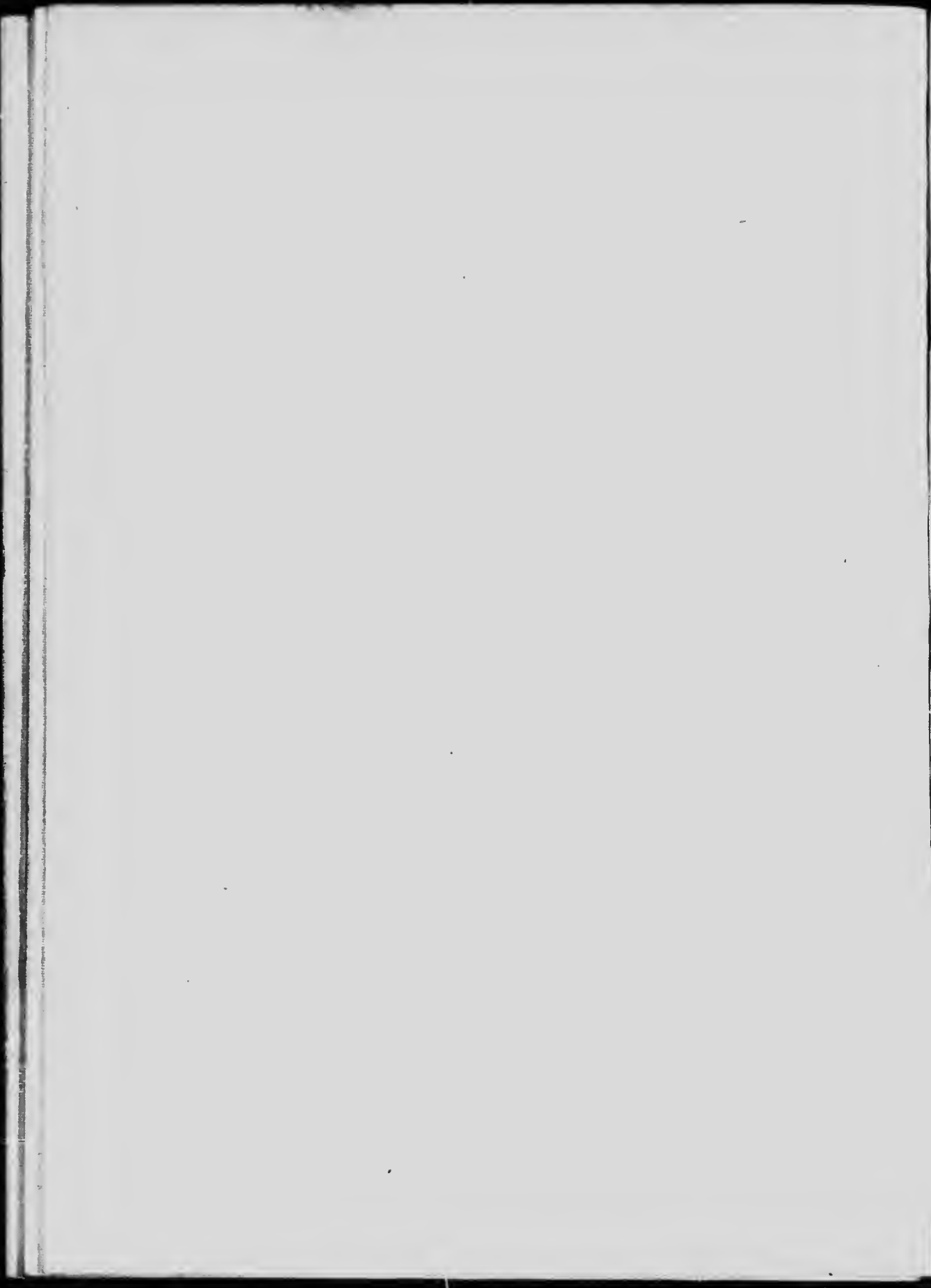
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The Catholic Atmosphere
OF
Shakespeare's Dramas

From the "RAINBOW"
LORETTO ABBEY, TORONTO

DEAN HARRIS



The Catholic Atmosphere of Shakespeare's Dramas

THE extraordinary and spontaneous celebrations staged over the English-speaking world last April to pay honour to the memory of the great dramatist, William Shakespeare, were splendid manifestations of reverence and of admiration for the genius of the undisputed king of Elizabethan literature. People of every clime, complexion and degree entered enthusiastically upon these ovations to a great name, Shakespeare, with the vision of a seer, anticipated in his "Julius Cæsar" the universality and popularity of the admiration of yet unborn generations for the marvellous productions of his genius. When Cæsar, strack to death by the hand of Brutus, fell at the base of Pompey's statue, Cassius cried out: . . . "How many ages hence shall this, our lofty scene, be acted over, in states unborn, in accents yet unknown." Only Shakespeare could have framed that sentence and now Shakespeare himself and his "Julius Cæsar" are being acted over by all the races of the world.

Perhaps the greatest tribute paid to the memory of the poet was that of Sir Sidney Lee who, in brief anticipation of the public ovations, contributed to Shakespearean literature "A Life of William Shakespeare." In this scholarly work of critical research the author apparently demolishes the foundations supporting the Baconian authorship of the plays and rejects as idle gossip the "irresponsible report that the poet dyed a Papyst." Father Thurston's clever article in the Catholic Encyclopedia on "The Religion of Shakespeare" does not affirmatively answer the question in favour of the poet's orthodoxy. Dr. Thomas Walsh in "America," (April 24,

1916), after carefully summarizing the testimonies for and against the Catholic belief of the dramatist, concludes his paper, "Was Shakespeare a Catholic?" with this positive statement:

"After this review of the evidence I cannot but conclude that Shakespeare died a Catholic but also lived one." Dr. Walsh's arguments, while not convincing, are very plausible and persuasive. The learned Doctor maintains that Shakespeare's mother lived and died a Catholic, and that "one of the prominent members of her family (the Ardens) suffered death for the Faith."

There are extant two documents which, if their genuineness could be proved, would settle to a finality the religion of Shakespeare. These are (a) "The Tile Will" and (b) "The Davies Statement." The Tile Will is a parchment said to have been found, in 1770, under the tile shingles of a house in Stratford on the Avon, owned or occupied by John, the father of William Shakespeare. The "Statement," if authentic, would at least prove that William Shakespeare was baptized by a priest, and lived for a long time in a Catholic atmosphere. Father Thurston, who has examined closely into the matter, is inclined to believe in the genuineness of the document.

About seventy years after Shakespeare's death, the Venerable Archdeacon Davies edited the biographical works of Reverend W. Fulman, a Church of England clergyman. Archdeacon Davies was an antiquary and local historian, living in the County of Staffordshire. He was an Anglican clergyman, whose studies and researches carried him into old libraries and out of the way places. In his supplementary notes to Fulman's writings, the Archdeacon stated that a monument had been built in Stratford to Shakespeare, who "Dyed a Papyst." Adverting to this declaration, Father Thurston writes: "It is by no means incredible, but it would be obviously foolish to build too much upon an unverifiable tradition of this kind." But Father Bowden, who wrote "The Religion of Shakespeare," ably contends for the reliability of the tradition, while Sir Sidney Lee attaches no importance to it.

Dr. Thomas Walsh assures us that the Archdeacon is writing what he knew to be the truth, but Malone, having gone carefully into the matter, relegates Davies's statement to the scrap heap. So there you are. It's a case of "You pays your money and you takes your choice."

Before we begin to examine the internal evidence of the dramatist's religious belief furnished by his writings, we must advert to the traditional religious and moral laxity which, with rare exceptions, belonged and belongs to a stage-player's or actor's profession. We may also remark that the poet lived in an age of religious transition when the prejudices and opinions of his time were so bitterly hostile to "popery" that a deadly feud existed between the partisans of the old religion and those of the new formed creeds. Shakespeare, in his role of a popular dramatist, might, in harmony with human experience, have yielded to human frailty and to the prejudices of his day, and have exposed Catholic dignitaries, Catholic institutions, ceremonies and practices to the ribald laughter of the members of a dissolute court and aristocracy. He might have held up for ridicule the bishops and priests, the world and despised religion, and have pilloried before the public the members of the religious orders, did not some reason stronger than self-interest, impel him to withhold his strokes.

Now, along the whole range of his wonderful works we do not encounter a solitary sarcasm, sneer, nor insulting remark, levelled against a religion which the Parliament of that time had vilified, condemned and stigmatized. His church dignitaries, his bishops, abbots and priests are from the most of Rome, not from the new creed pulpits whose fulminations were a defamation.

Assuming that the religion of Shakespeare was known to his patrons and to the public of his day, we could not have received from his pen more accurate and faithful illustrations of Catholic life and character than those with which his dramas abound. To the shame of Dryden, a professing Catholic, we find in his writings, apart from his "Hind and Panther," no strong attachment to his religion, no pronounced Catholicism.

timents, nor admiration for heroic or saintly Catholic men and women. But Shakespeare's cardinals and priests, friars and nuns, are invariably introduced to us as honorable men and women who invite our respect and admiration. In confirmation of what we may regard as the Catholic spirit of the poet, and in support of our contention for the Catholic atmosphere of his dramas, let us illustrate our affirmation by a few examples selected from his plays. Note the respect for the character of a priest, and entire freedom from levity, in this passage from "Twelfth Night." While Olivia and Sebastian are discoursing, a priest enters the hall:

Olivia—

"Now go with me, and with this *holy man*,
 Into the chantry by; there beforehand,
 And underneath that *consecrated roof*,
 Plight me the full assurance of your faith."

* * * * *

Sebastian—

"I'll follow this *good man*, and go with you;
 And having sworn truth, ever will be true."

Olivia—

"Then lend the way, *good Father*; and Heavens to shine
 That they may fairly note this net of mine."

In "Measure for Measure" how respectful and reverential is the manner of the Duke to Friar Thomas, in the scene when he asks the Friar to assist him in obtaining a monastic robe as a disguise. The nun, Francisca, and Friar Peter, in the same play, though comparatively unimportant characters in the drama, are presented under colors in harmony with the sacredness of their vocations.

The Friar in "Much Ado About Nothing" is a dignified gentleman who gives expression to some of the finest passages

in the play. Read the following striking language in which he champions the innocence of Hero:

Friar—

“Hear me a little:

For I have only been silent so long,
 And given away unto this course of fortune,
 By noting of the lady; I have marked
 A thousand blushing apparitions start
 Into her face: a thousand innocent shames
 In angel whiteness bear away those blushes;
 And in her eyes there hath appeared a fire,
 To burn the errors that these princes hold
 Against her maiden truth. Call me a fool;
 Trust not my reading nor my observation,
 Which with experimental seal doth warrant
 The tenor of my book; trust not my age,
 My reverence, calling, nor divinity,
 If this sweet lady lie not guiltless here
 Under some biting error.”

“Good Friar,” “Holy Friar,” are the complimentary terms by which he is addressed by the actors in the drama, in seemingly direct opposition to the no-popery opinions which popularly represented the monks of the Catholic Church as types of vulgarity and sensualism.

It is the abbess who delivers these splendid lines on melancholy in the “Comedy of Errors”:

“Sweet recreation barr’d what doth ensue,
 But moody and dull melancholy,
 Kinsman to grim and comfortless despair,
 And at her heels a huge, infectious troop
 Of pale distemperatures, and foes to life?”

Not even in English history has there been a more constant and perhaps effective mark for book and pulpit invective against Papist supremacy in England than the historic surren-

der of his kingdom to the Pope by King John, and his resumption of it as a fief of the Holy See. Here was an invitation to Shakespeare to yield to the no-popery" spirit of his country by denouncing the Papal Legate, Pandulph, whose strong language and firm attitude compel the act of submission. We know from the temper of the times that Shakespeare would have been hailed with applause if he had yielded to popular clamor and denounced as priestly insolence and usurpation the demands of the Legate. Now how does the poet present Pandulph to his audiences in "King John?" Not, indeed, as an object of hatred, nor of ridicule, nor of contempt, but as a man in the full pomp of his legatine character, and in the garb of historic and unvarnished truth. King Philip of France thus proclaims the entrance of the Roman dignitary:

"Here comes the *holy Legate* of the Pope!" to which Pandulph replies in the language of grave and dignified authority:

"Hail, you anointed deputies of Heaven!
 To thee, King John, my holy errand is.
 I, Pandulph, of fair Milan cardinal,
 And from Pope Innocent the legate here,
 Do, in his name, religiously demand,
 Why thou against the Church, our holy mother
 So wilfully dost spurn, and force perforce
 Keep Stephen Langton, chosen Archbishop
 Of Canterbury, from that holy see?
 This, in our foresaid holy father's name.
 Pope Innocent, I do demand of thee."

He who was so courageous as to frame such language for a Vatican Legate must have had an exalted opinion of the authority and prerogative of the Catholic Church. King John challenges with haughty air the credentials of Pandulph, and the canonicity of his summons, upon which the Legate excommunicates the monarch. Here an opportunity opens for Shakespeare to hurl into the face of the Roman Legate insult and reproach from the ribald tongue of the bastard Falcon-

bridge, but the poet does nothing of the kind; he suffers Pandulph to deliver, unattacked, his extemporary addresses. When the King, trembling for his own security, delivers his crown to the Papal Envoy, the language of Pandulph is full of proud dignity:

Pandulph—

“Take again (giving John the crown)
From this my hand, as holding of the Pope
Your sovereign greatness and authority.

* * * * *

It was my breath that blew this tempest up
Upon your stubborn usage of the Pope:
But since you are a gentle convertite,
My tongue shall hush again this storm of war
And make fair weather in your blustering land.”

Even the anger of Louis of France, when the Legate proclaims John's submission to Rome, expresses itself more in the language of strong protest than of disrespect.

Then notice how strictly in harmony with the character of a Christian prelate is the Bishop of Carlyle's dignified exhortation to Richard II.:

“Fear not, my lord; that power which made you king
Hath power to keep you king, in spite of all.
The means that Heaven yields must be embrac'd,
And not neglected; else if Heaven would,
And we will not, Heaven's offer we refuse;
This proffer'd means of suceonr and redress.”

The Archbishop of York in “Henry IV.” is too robust a member of the Church Militant to pose as a very edifying prelate, yet how finely Shakespeare unites the dignity of his

office to his ardour for martial enterprise. And what a happy sentiment is expressed in these lines:

“A peace is of the nature of a conquest,
For then both parties nobly are subdued
And neither party loser.”

The great dramatist might pardonably have yielded to the temptation to contrast the piety and subdued language of the Christian priest with that of the warlike and haughty prelate.

The play of “King Henry V.” opens with a strikingly dignified conversation between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely. Persuaded by the arguments of the Archbishop, the King declares war on France. Returning from the victory of Agincourt, Henry orders a public thanksgiving by a proclamation befitting a Catholic monarch. In “Henry VI.,” Cardinal Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester, is a faithful portraiture of the haughty and ambitious prelate who, to attain his purpose, stopped not at crime itself. His participation in the burning of Joan of Arc excludes him from human sympathy. But, notice this, Shakespeare does not over-charge him with atrocity, but from the side of his unrepentant death-bed he draws this truly Catholic moral:

King Henry—

“Peace to his soul, if God’s good pleasure be;
Lord Cardinal, if you thinkst on Heaven’s bliss,
Hold up thine hand; make signal of thy hope.
He dies and makes no sign. O God, forgive him!
Warwick, so bad a death argues a monstrous life.”

King Henry—

“Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all;
Close up his eyes, and draw the curtains close.
And let us all to meditation!”

In "Richard III.," the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Bishop of Ely are characters more prominent in the pageantry than in the play.

'Tis not easy to conceive a more delicate subject for the pen of Shakespeare to have attacked than that portion of Henry Eighth's life which covered the repudiation of his marriage with Queen Katherine of Arragon, and his espousals with Anne Boleyn. Had the poet wished to pay court to the reigning sovereign, he could have thrown around the affair less of the historic and more of a fanciful coloring.

It was easy to have minimized the argument in favor of the validity of Katherine's marriage or the nobleness of her personal character; to have blackened the character of Cardinal Wolseley; brought into more brilliant prominence the conduct of the subservient Cranmer; to add poetical embellishment to the conduct of Anne Boleyn, and to have given more plausibility to the imperious Henry's reasons for placing her beside him on the throne. This method of dealing with the principal personages of his drama would have been pleasing and complimentary to Elizabeth, and would have suited the temper and spirit of the times.

Shakespeare, however, preferred to illustrate, not to distort history. For, from the reading of the play, the pivotal point of which is the divorce of the King from his lawful wife, which subsequently led to the separation of England from Rome, we are impressed with admiration and compassion for the injured Katherine and contempt for the meanness of her despotic husband.

How magnificent is her defence, when cited before the Papal Legate and assembled prelates, and how noble are the sentiments of the language of the deposed Cardinal in his fallen estate. Our deepest sympathy and commiseration go out to him in his humiliation, as we read his advice to Cromwell:

Wolseley:

"When I am forgotten, as I shall be.

And sleep in dull, cold marble, where no mention

Of me more must be heard of,—say I taught thee:
 Say, Wolseley,—that once trod the ways of glory,
 And sounded all the depths and shoals of honor,—
 Found thee a way out of this wrack to rise in;
 A sure and safe one, though my master miss'd it.
 Mark but my fall and that that ruin'd me.
 Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition;
 By that sin fell the angels; how can man then,
 The image of his Maker, hope to win by't?
 Love thyself last, cherish those hearts that hate thee.
 Corruption wins not more than honesty.
 Still in thy right hand carry gentle peace,
 To silence envious tongues. Be just and fear not.
 Let all the ends thou aim'st at be thy country's,
 Thy God's, and truth's; then, if thou fall'st,
 O Cromwell,
 Thou fall'st a blessed martyr. Serve the King.

* * * * *

O Cromwell, Cromwell,
 Had I but serv'd my God with half the zeal
 I serv'd my King, he would not in mine age
 Have left me naked to mine enemies."

Could anyone have looked from the pen of a professed Catholic for expressions of sentiments more befitting the repentant last days of an ambitious prince of the Church?

In "Romeo and Juliet" how happy is the contrast of monastic calmness and philosophy, blending with the kindly sympathies of human nature, in the person of Friar Lawrence! Who does not feel that the "Benedicite" of the venerable priest falls on the hearing of the love-stricken Romeo with a soothing and beneficent sound? The consent of the Friar to unite the lovers in wedlock is grounded on the Christian hope of putting an end to the feud of two noble families. The subsequent device for rescuing the unhappy Juliet from the misery of a forced marriage, though calamitous in its results, proceeds from the sympathy of a tender and philanthropic heart. Even

to minds darkened with prejudice against the religious orders of the Catholic Church, the noble bearing of the good Franciscan honorably commends itself.

Writing in an age when every tongue wagged against the invented abuses of the old Faith, which the Queen, her Parliament and her subjects had repudiated, and by law exterminated; when to denounce and calumniate her priests, her religious orders and institutions, was to increase his influence and popularity, it is singular and remarkable that, without any exception, Shakespeare has taken particular care to clothe his ecclesiastical personages in garments of respectability. If he could not always, with historical accuracy, secure for them admiration and reverence, he, at least, did what he could to shelter them from the storm of ridicule and contempt then enveloping his country.

