

ON THE CHARACTER OF HAMLET.

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(READ 10TH APRIL, 1856.)

Of all the wonderful creations of our many-sided national dramatist, none has provoked greater discussion, or occupied the attention of more learned men, than the play of Hamlet. Goethe, Coleridge, Tieck, and Schlegel—the two first, themselves poets of the very highest order—have brought kindred genius and rare talent to the examination and criticism of this inimitable production. And still we feel that the character of Hamlet is in many points yet a mystery; that the lights and shades which an enlightened criticism may throw upon it, the latent beauties of delineation which a reverential study may detect, and the different phases which a keen and far-sighted research may bring into view, are absolutely inexhaustible. The reality of Hamlet's madness, the genuineness of his love for Ophelia, his course of conduct toward the queen his mother, and the king his uncle, the curious combination of indecision of purpose in his resolutions, with a certain promptitude of action in his deeds when necessitated to act on the spur of the moment; all these, and much else in this play, are points about which the readers of Shakspeare have ever formed, and will ever form, various and conflicting opinions, and entertain a difference of idea, extending even to the notions which they form when speculating on the personal appearance of the hero.

This uncertainty of motive, and apparent fickleness of design, by no means confined to the character of Hamlet, tend to thicken the atmosphere of mystery which envelopes the whole play. In mystery it begins and in mystery it ends. The mystery of humanity in the character of Hamlet, the mystery of existence speculated upon in so many of his speeches, the mystery of the world of spirits, the mystery of death, and the mystery of destiny, are all brought before us. And this mystery it is which attracts us so strangely towards this play, just as we are excited and attracted by the mysterious and the inscrutable in a character of real life.

The supremacy of chance, and the uncertainty of human plans and

actions, reign relentless throughout the whole play, and pervade every part of it; until, in a spirit of the most sublime irony, the poet causes the final catastrophe to result from an accident, in spite of all the counsels and determinations of the several actors, setting forth to us the great truth that

“ Our wills and fates do so contrary run,
That our devices still are overthrown.”

I have already adverted to the criticisms of our great poet-philosopher Coleridge. Of these critical hints (unfortunately they are nothing more) I have largely availed myself; and I must here express my agreement with the opinion of that prince of critics, that the character of Hamlet owes itself to Shakspeare's deep and accurate acquaintance with the science of mental philosophy. Those, doubtless, who have been accustomed to hear Shakspeare spoken of as a mere “irregular genius,” or to think of him as described by Milton—

“ Fancy's child,
Warbling his native wood notes wild,”

may be astonished to hear him spoken of as a great moral and mental philosopher. Medical and other writers have indeed borne testimony to his accurate observation of the *external* world; but we are less inclined to think of him as equally a deep and correct observer of the *inward* world. He was, however, so to speak, subjective as well as objective; and thus moral and metaphysical truths, of the very deepest importance, abound in his pages.* True he might not, perhaps, have an external knowledge of other men's *systems* gathered from the study of their works; but he was a philosopher for all that. His was essentially a philosophic mind—a mind which could *pass out of itself*; and there is a great difference between having an external knowledge of philosophy, and being *inwardly* a philosopher. Likely enough Shakspeare had never read Plato; but still he was in many points an admirable Platonist: like Plato he was a philosopher of Ideas; like Plato's, his philosophy was the “interpreting of appearances,” the wish to be everywhere at home, the undressing of the soul; his pre-eminent excellence was that he could lay aside self, transplant himself into the minds of his fellow men, and be perfectly at home

* The distinction between Reason and Understanding, (so constantly forgotten by writers of the last century, and of late years revived by Coleridge,) is constantly found in Shakspeare. In this very play he distinguishes between the *capability* of the *discursive* faculty, the “large discourse, looking before and after,” and the *power* of the *intuitive* faculty, or “god-like reason;” the former being merely concerned about *conceptions*, the latter about *ideas*.

there, laying bare their very souls, and not only seeing, but expressing their thoughts in language, every word of which is itself a thought and a picture. He could pass out of his own into their position; originate, think, and express the thoughts and reflections natural to them in that position. Shakspeare, in fact, differed from other men, principally in having more *humanity* than they had. He had, as it were, a family likeness to every other man, and thus he deserves the epithet of *myrionous*,* the "myriad-minded one," which Coleridge has transferred to him; and the title of "the many-sided," which Carlyle has applied to Goethe, might, with much more truth and fitness, be attached to the name of Shakspeare. But Shakspeare was not only an observer of other men's characters, he was a close and deep observer of the law of his own mind; and it is to this habit of deep self-observation that we owe the character of Hamlet. Coleridge has truly remarked that one of Shakspeare's modes of creating character is to conceive any one intellectual faculty in a morbid excess, and then mentally to place himself with the same tendencies in the same position. And this he has done in his creation of Hamlet. In Hamlet he has embodied his idea of one in whom the Reason predominates in an inordinate and unhealthy degree over the Will, or acting principle; and this character he has placed in a situation of overwhelming exigencies—a situation in which promptitude, decision, and self-reliance, are absolutely indispensable. It is not, however, the incapability of action which Shakspeare portrays in Hamlet, for when the latter does act, he acts with energy, decision, skill, and success—ever equal to the call of the moment. But in him the abstract intellect is too strong for the active impulse. Ever theorizing and generalizing on the things and circumstances around him, looking into, dissecting, and anatomizing his own thoughts, and pursuing, so to speak, the somewhat unprofitable luxury of "thinking upon thinking," he remodels and renews his resolutions, and the more he does so, the longer he defers the execution of those resolutions, until, in the anguish of doubt and indecision, he breaks out into the passionate exclamation,

"O what a rogue and peasant slave am I."

And yet how far is Shakspeare's Hamlet from exciting in us any of those feelings of pity and contempt with which we usually regard the indecisive and inactive. On the contrary we cannot but agree with Ophelia's

* See Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria," vol. ii., page 18.

beautiful but melancholy eulogium of him. His is indeed a "noble mind"; he is a prince with the feeling of the good and the beautiful, dignified by the consciousness of high birth; he is a gentleman, pleasing, pliant, and courteous;* he is a man of genius, and as such he possesses that craving after the unseen, the indefinite, and the unknown, which most easily besets men of genius, and that aversion to action which constantly prevails among such as have a world in themselves. But Hamlet is not only a prince, a scholar, and a gentleman—he is more than this; he is a philosopher—not one indeed of the very highest class, but still a philosopher—accustomed to raise his mind from the things of sense around him, to the grand ideas *within* him and *above* him; one who "could be bounded in a nut shell, and count himself king of infinite space"; so unworldly that to him

"Weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,
Seem all the uses of this world;"

ever (and herein he is most of all a philosopher †) contemplating and reflecting on the law of his own mind, seeing "into the *life* of things," constantly generalizing, till even when making a resolution

"To wipe away all trivial fond records,"

he sets down "on his tables" a general observation; and thus his

"Native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale east of thought,"

and in spite of all his reasoning, all his plans and purposes, the consummation takes place just the same as it would have done without these. Into the Philosophy of Hamlet we have not now time to enquire; it only needs a careful examination, however, to perceive that this is quite as wonderful as his character.

In contradistinction to the glorious *imagination* and mysteriously deep philosophy of Hamlet, stands the sober common sense of Horatio, by its very contrast giving greater prominence to, and heightening the effect of the character of Hamlet. Horatio was peculiarly a healthy-minded man. If Hamlet's mind was cast in the Platonic mould, Horatio was eminently an Aristotelian, or rather, perhaps, as he says of himself,

"More an antique Roman than a Dane."

* In the scene with Osric, (Act v. Sc. 2.) Hamlet's gentlemanly manners, as well as the superior grandeur of his philosophy, shine conspicuous, the lofty condescension of his conscious superiority, and his good natured playfulness forming a fine contrast to Horatio's impatient and almost pettish remarks to that courtier.

† Novalis says well on this point, "Die Philosophie ist eine ideale-selbster-fundere methode das innere zu beobachten."

His philosophy, such as it is, begins and ends in *doubt*. Its materialistic and sensualistic character is brought forward in the very first scene of the play, where he calls that mysterious appearance, which at the midnight hour is occupying the thoughts and attention of the officers on the platform, "this thing"; and says of it, "tush, tush, 't will not appear." In fact the coldness and the oppressive stillness of the night—"not a mouse stirring"—the glimpses of the moon above, the time-worn towers behind, the hollow murmur of the sea beneath, the mixed feeling of awe and alarm in the officers on the watch, and the strongly contrasted contempt of Horatio for the supernatural, are the most remarkable points in this opening scene, so artistically introduced, and so well fitted to prepare us for the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's father, and the mysterious character of the whole play. Marcellus remarks of him,

"Horatio says, 't is but our fantasy;
And will not let belief take hold of him,
Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us;"

and he himself afterwards says,

"I might not this believe
Without the *sensible* and true avouch
Of *mine own eyes*."

And when this unbelief of his has proved to be foolishness, he is full of the philosophy of the schools, and sets to work to resolve the phenomenon into an historical prodigy,

"A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye."

In the midst of his theorizing the ghost re-enters, when he fancies it must either be an illusion, or else have flesh and blood;

"Stay *illusion!*
If thou hast any sound, or use of voice,
Speak to me:"

and when it answers not, he is for assuring himself, by means of his hands, of the reality of the prodigy, bidding Marcellus stop it, and strike at it, not seeing that he does it,

"Wrong being so majestic,
To offer it the show of violence."

That which is beyond the comprehension of the sensuous Understanding, Horatio is for rejecting as "wondrous strange," so that Hamlet takes occasion to tell him,

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in *your* philosophy."

The contrast between the imaginative spirit of Hamlet and the practical

understanding of Horatio, runs through the whole play. For imagination to revel in philosophizing on the littleness to which all the sensible greatness of man may be reduced, and to trace "to what base uses we may return," Horatio thinks "were to consider too curiously." Some of Hamlet's sublime speculations he reduces to

"Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness ;"

others he takes no interest in, merely answering with "It might, my lord," "Ay, my lord." In the church-yard he obviously dislikes the whole scene by which he is surrounded. To Hamlet's question "Is not parchment made of sheep-skins," he replies, with the most technical gravity, "Ay, my lord, and of calves-skins too." This question he can resolve, but it is plain that Hamlet's beautiful address to the skull of Yorick makes little or no impression on his mind. And yet, though in Horatio the Understanding does predominate over the Reason, still it has not wholly extinguished the latter. Nay, it would seem that his sensualistic philosophy was in a great measure learnt in the schools, and was, perhaps, rather the *external result* of his education, than the *internal law* of his own mind ; as it is, every now and then he gives utterance to a note-worthy truth, of a nature not to be expected from him. We may also observe that Bernardo's opening salutation to him,

"Welcome, Horatio ; welcome, good Marcellus,"

shew him to have been held in some degree of respect ; and most true to nature (as when is he not?) is Shakspeare, when he makes Hamlet love, value, and respect Horatio, ever appealing to his judgment, as one of the

"blessed are those

Whose blood and judgment are so well comingled,
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she pleases."

The more in keeping with real life is it that Hamlet should thus lean on his friend, since that friend is so different from himself ; his fine, imaginative, metaphysical, but unpractical spirit naturally clings to the strong, coarse, but sober and practical understanding of Horatio. Many points, too, they have in common : Hamlet is a "noble heart," a good lover, ready to wear his friend "In my heart's core, yea, in my heart of hearts ;" "Most generous and free from all contriving," he "will not" "peruse the foils," ready to acknowledge ungrudgingly and openly, as he does in the case of Laertes,

"I have done you wrong."

Horatio, too, is a good friend, honest, and sincere, as well as sensible and

judicious, and moreover, like Hamlet, a scholar and a gentleman.

A great deal lower than these two comes Polonius. Some critics (Tieck among the number) have fancied Polonius to be Shakspeare's representation of an able and experienced statesman; others, on the contrary, suppose him to be one in whom the body has outlived the mind, or perhaps, to speak more accurately, the memory has outlived the reason. And in this latter view there is doubtless a considerable degree of truth. The sentiments to which Polonius gives utterance are, indeed, but the rags and shreds of his former wisdom: still even from these we may judge what was the tone of thought and feeling of his better days. From these we may well conceive Polonius to be, in part, Shakspeare's anticipative embodiment of the petty philosopher of a later age. He is a philosopher of the Understanding, and of the Understanding only. If Hamlet be a Platonist, and Horatio an Aristotelian, then Polonius is (of course I speak anticipatively) a disciple of Locke; his wisdom, such as it is, is founded wholly on "observation and experience"; he is "full of wise saws and modern instances"; he is one of those whom Coleridge* has well described as being like "a Cyclops, with one eye only, and that in the back of his head." Polonius is a maxim-monger, and the universal character of his maxims is selfishness—selfishness and a mere seeming knowledge of the *outward* part of the world—a knowledge of the superficialities of man, acquired by worldly experience, combined with a total ignorance of all that lies beneath this surface, of every thing good, noble, and beautiful. Thus his precepts are exactly those of Lord Chesterfield and of Rochefoucault; † characterised by a morbid distrust of his fellow-men, arising from that incredulity which is, after all, but credulity, saying 'No' instead of 'Yes,' and nodding from behind instead of from before, and is generally allied to extreme credulousness of aught which helps forward the favourite theory. These traits, as well as an enlightened selfishness in the reasons on which he founds his maxims, run through his precepts, all of which relate to mere external matters. ‡ Their author is one of those who begins from

* See Coleridge, "Table Talk," page 37.

† To many of Polonius' precepts, such as "Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment," "Neither a borrower nor a lender be," "Give thy thoughts no tongue," we may find exact parallels in Rochefoucault's "Maxims."

‡ We must make one exception, namely, that noble piece of advice which closes the address to Laertes,

"To thine own self be true;
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."

without, but never proceeds inward; his soul is a slave to the outward, and he knows not that "he who would ascend upward must retire inward." Polonius, moreover, is one of those modern philosophers who believe in the omnipotence of accomplishments, and thus sends his son, at an early age, into loose and exciting society, to become initiated in those dissipations which a certain class of moralists, or rather anti-moralists, have asserted to be a natural preparative for entering upon an active life—a kind of mud bath into which the youth is, as it were, necessitated to plunge before he is privileged to put on the toga of manhood; and he not only sends his son abroad to shew

"How much a fool that has been sent to roam
Excels a fool that has been kept at home,"

but he institutes a notable system of espionage over him, and even instructs his servant to speak of him as a "perfect gentleman," a dashing young fellow, an adept in swearing, gaming, drinking, and every species of vice at all tolerated by society, vices which that servant himself considers to imply dishonour. Mark, too, his metaphors, all taken from money-matters, his words with nothing in them, his circuitous craftiness, his inflated self-importance, his ignorance of his own ignorance, and of everything at all above himself, his positiveness, and his repeated assertions that all opinions but his own are *ipse dixitisms*; his perpetual and ill-timed boastings of his own superior acuteness and knowledge of the world,

"As I perceived it, I must tell you that,
Before my daughter told me."

"Hath there been such a time, (I'd fain know that,)
That I have positively said, 'T is so,
When it proved otherwise.

Besides these there are several other noticeable points in the character of Polonius: his suspicious disposition; his fondness for petty intrigue, without which he can do nothing, and with which he goes blundering on, until he is killed in a closet intrigue at last; the *arrangement* of *talent* in his speeches, as contradistinguished from the *method* of *genius** which (as Coleridge has well shewn in the concluding Essays of the "Friend") uniformly pervades every speech of Hamlet.

While Horatio commands *respect* and esteem even from one so differently constituted as Hamlet, the old expediency statesman almost moves the latter to

"That scorn which wisdom holds unlawful ever."

* Compare Coleridge's "Friend," vol. iii. Essay iv. p. 113, and Essay i. p. 71, with Novalis' remarks, "In der *Methode*, der Regularisation des Genius."

Polonius, on the other hand, with admirable self-complacency—Polonius, the philosopher of maxims—consoles himself with the notion that Hamlet, the philosopher of ideas, is mad. Shakspeare thus agrees with Cervantes in making the philosopher of the *Pure Reason* misunderstood, or rather not understood at all, by the man of the Understanding. Sancho Panza can no more appreciate or understand Don Quixote's motives and character, than Polonius can Hamlet's.* One proof that this view of the character of Polonius is in the main correct, we have in the fact that his maxims, disjointed from the character itself, are so often quoted with approbation, as the veritable wisdom which Shakspeare was commissioned to preach to his fellow-men, as if Shakspeare had been a mere precept menti-facturer, teaching no higher philosophy than the way to be "healthy, wealthy, and wise," and to pass through the world with some five or six "golden rules," suitable to all occasions, and sufficient for all purposes.

We must next examine the result of Polonius' teaching, and see what he to whom his maxims were given, and who endeavoured to practise them, really was. Laertes became what his father wished and intended him to be, a finished gentleman, a perfect man of the world; in the poet's own words—

"An absolute gentleman, full of most excellent differences,
of very soft society, and great showing: indeed, to speak
feelingly of him, he is the card or calendar of *gentry*."

While Hamlet is at once ready to forgive and forget, nay, to make the first advance towards reconciliation, with

"I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself,"

Laertes stands on minute points of honour, and

"Will no reconciliation,
'Till by some elder masters of known honour
I have a voice and precedent of peace."

Bishop Warburton and others speak of Laertes as a "good character." What these gentlemen's notions of 'goodness' were they have not explained; unless they were peculiarly eccentric, it is somewhat difficult to conceive that they could have read the play with sufficient attention to

* Of course I do not mean to institute any comparison between the character of Don Quixote and that of Hamlet, further than that in each the Imagination has grown in such an undue proportion as to overbalance all the other mental faculties. Hamlet is an example of a fine Reason and a weak Will; Don Quixote of a fine Reason and a strong Will, but in consequence of a deficiency of the Understanding, or substantiative power, the Will almost always obeys the Reason wrongly; both are wanting in sense—the conservative power, so to speak—in the intellectual republic.

observe, that before the fatal encounter between Hamlet and himself, while the unsuspecting Hamlet presumes at once

“These foils have all a length,”

Laertes not only arranges beforehand, in compliance with the king's suggestion, to have an “unbated sword,” but of himself proposes to steep the point of that weapon in a deadly poison ;

“*For the purpose I'll anoint my sword,*”

is his own proposal.

Thus, then, in this one play we have three grand species of the philosophic character* most ably and minutely drawn, “sounded from the lowest note to the top of the compass,” and there is “much music, excellent voice,” in the Memnon-like frame of at least one of these. It does not lie in our way minutely to examine the other characters of the play, less directly contrasted to that of Hamlet ; but we may observe much that is beautiful and wonderful in most of them—the gentle and unselfish Ophelia ; the admirable delineation of the fawning courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the marvellous judgment with which, as Goethe† has well remarked, Shakspeare has introduced two of these ; the grand struggle between the Reason and the Will in the king's attempt to pray ; his dignity in the scene with Laertes ; ‡ and above all, the sublime moral which teaches us how weak are all our purposes and resolves, how futile our plans and designs, how uncertain our hopes and objects ; how all these must yield, and become as nothing, before that superior and mysterious power which works its will in spite of our impotent struggles ;

“There is a Divinity that shapes our ends,

Rough-hew them how we will.” “*That is most certain.*”

Before I close, it may be as well to say a few words about two obscure and much disputed points, (1) the real or pretended madness of Hamlet, and (2) his love for and treatment of Ophelia. And the two we shall find

* In Hamlet we have genius, with its allies reason, imagination, and humour : in Horatio, talent, accompanied by understanding and sense : in Polonius mere cleverness, with the talent of adapting and retailing, though not of originating, ideas.

† “What these two persons are and do it is impossible to represent by one. In such small matters we discover Shakspeare's greatness. These soft approaches, this smirking and bowing, this assenting, wheedling, flattering, this whisking agility, this wagging of the tail, this allness and emptiness, this ineptitude and insipidity—how can they be expressed by a single man ? There ought to be at least a dozen of these people, if they could be had, for it is only in society that they are anything ; they are society itself : and Shakspeare showed no little wisdom and discernment in bringing in a pair of them.”
Goethe's 'Wilhelm Meister.'

‡ We may compare (*parva componere magnis*) the dignity of Charles Edward in the closing scenes of “Redgauntlet.”

are, in a great measure, connected. First, with regard to his madness. We have already seen that in Hamlet's mental constitution there is an undue predominance of the imaginative and reasoning powers. This original fault of nature is aggravated by the circumstances in which he is placed. By the awful apparition of his father's ghost, and by the discovery of his mother's guilt, his belief in the stability of the moral world is unhinged; his mind has, so to speak, got a twist, and lost whatever healthiness it might before have had. This and the half earnestness in Hamlet's character in part account for his half assumed madness. Like many another man, Hamlet partially assumes that state to which he is nearest,* and pretends to act when he is very near being what he acts. In a spirit of bitter irony, he in some degree countenances the idea of his own madness, although when about to address himself to an earnest and difficult task, he offers to expose himself to a test, which modern physicians have affirmed to be correct:

"Bring me to the test,
And I the matter will reword, which madness
Would gambol from.

The late Sir Henry Hallford, † in an interesting essay on tests of insanity, gives some curious instances and illustrations of the correctness of the proposed test. Perhaps, on the whole, while among persons by whom he was so little understood, Hamlet's feeling may have been something like that of Brothers, the prophet, who, when visited in Bedlam by a friend, and asked how he came to be there, replied—"the world and I had a slight difference of opinion; the world thought I was mad, and I thought the world was mad; the world *outvoted* me, and here I am."

With regard to Hamlet's love for Ophelia, we may observe that, except her artlessness and innocence, there was little in Ophelia to make her the engrossing object of passion to so majestic a spirit as Hamlet's. His love is doubtless sincere, but it is not an absorbing passion; ‡ and thus the moment his soul is sickened by the awful glance which he has obtained

* Insanity, i. e. unhealthiness, is perhaps a better term to apply to Hamlet's mental derangement than madness.

† See Sir Henry Hallford's Essay on "Popular and Classical Illustrations of Insanity," "Essays and Orations," p. 55.

‡ I am aware that this view of the matter is combated in "The Characteristics of Women," by Mrs. Jameson, who maintains that Hamlet uniformly regards Ophelia with all that deep delight, with which a superior nature ever contemplates the goodness which is perfect in itself, yet unconscious of itself,—that Ophelia knew that Hamlet loved her, and Hamlet knew that Ophelia knew it, and when uttering his bitter words, was well aware that no behaviour of his could make Ophelia doubt his love.

into the depths of female hollowness and iniquity, love falls into the back ground, and is at once ranked among those "trivial fond records" which he has sworn to erase from his heart and brain, and when he perceives that Ophelia is being used as a decoy, and is acting a part not her own, he can address her in that wild ironic bitterness of tone, which excites our wonder and astonishment.

Much of what has been said may appear somewhat extravagant and far fetched, especially to those who have been taught to look upon Shakspeare as a mere beautiful "*lusus naturæ*"—a wild and extravagant genius, deficient in learning and culture, who neither meant nor understood a tithe of the deep and beautiful ideas which critics fancy that they can discover in his wondrous soul-creations. When studied as he ought to be studied, in a humble and loving spirit, Shakspeare can only appear such to ordinary and infra-ordinary minds. And as for his not meaning all the beautiful things that are to be found in his words, it is one of the surest marks of a true poet that the outpourings of his genius contain many hidden beauties, variously unfolding themselves to different orders of character; the greater the poet, the more living and expansive are his words, and the more truths they contain for the larger number of men of every variety of age, and every mould of mind,—truths always rising up like the waters of a spring, ever fresh and ever inexhaustible. Thus the words of a true poet, like Shakspeare, will rarely, if ever, be comprehended in their full significance, by any one single individual.

But apart from this, somewhat of the mystery in the play of Hamlet may arise from the circumstance, that in common with the highest painters and sculptors,* even Shakspeare has not wholly expressed his idea. Like the Gothic architecture, his works must remain in a great measure ideal, pointing even higher than they reach, since any one of his dramas, taken in its *oneness* and *entirety*, conveys to the mind far more than lies on the surface of the mere words themselves.

* Compare Thorwaldsen's remark: "My genius is decaying. Till now my idea has always been far beyond what I could execute. But it is no longer so. I shall never have a great idea again." Quoted by Hare, "Guesses at Truth," first series, p. 83.