thought"; sometimes in outpourings of statesman-like wisdom, such as would add to the fame of a Burke or a Webster; sometimes in profound moralizings on life and death, on duty and immortality, such as would give a richer bloom to the laurels of a Cicero, a Marcus Aurelius, a Jeremy Taylor, or a Sir Thomas Browne; sometimes in well-seasoned discourse on the player's art and on the right virtues of literary style, such as "shames the schools"; now in flashes of wit more than Attic; now in jets of humour the freshest, the raciest, the mellowest, the most suggestive, ever delivered.

All this, to be sure, Hamlet does not himself say; no! nor does the Poet say it for him in words; but the Poet says it through the ineffable dramatic logic of the play,—says it by a speaking silence, a mute eloquence, far more powerful and penetrating than words. It is the "austere and solid sweetness" of a great, strong, delicate soul perfectly self-contained.

General Remarks on Hamlet.

Intellectually, and morally too, Hamlet is represented as, in the language of our time, much in advance of his age; his mind casting far onwards to an era of purer, richer, brighter civilization. He conceives a mould of statesmanship, a style of public order, and a tone of social converse, such as the time affords him no examples of. The coarse and brutal manners of his nation, infecting even the Court, he both scorns and deplores, and this on grounds of taste, of policy, of honour, and of right. And the effects which such things have on national character and well-being are discoursed by him with rare discernment and reach of thought. His mind is indeed penetrated with the best efficacies of Christian morality and refinement.

In Shakespeare's time the Drama was an intense national passion, all grades of the English people, from the throne downwards, taking a lively interest in it, and some of the finest gentlemen and choicest spirits of the age lending it their hearty support, apparently regarding it as a powerful engine of public enlightenment and progress: all which was in fact one cause why the Drama came to such a glorious efflorescence in that age. It was therefore in strict keeping with the best thoughts of the time that the Poet made his favorite intellectual hero, prince though he be, deeply versed in the theory of the dramatic art, and much concerned to have the representatives of it well used; as when he tells Polonius, "After your death you were better have a bad epitaph, than their ill report while you live." Hamlet's idea seems to be, "Let me have the making of a nation's plays, and I care little who makes its laws." His mind was indeed meant to be large enough, and his taste catholic enough, to include all generous disciplines and liberal preparations in its scope; and Shakespeare evidently thought no scorn to endow such a man with his own exquisite science in the walk which his "sweet and cunning hand" was to render so illustrious.

Laertes.

Laertes makes a very peculiar and most emphatic contrast to Hamlet. We cannot exactly call Laertes a noble character, yet he has noble streaks in him. The respect in which he holds his father, and the entire and unreserved affection he bears his sister, set him well in our esteem as a son and a brother: beyond these he can hardly be said to show any sentiments or principles worthy of regard. He takes as ardently to the gayeties of the French capital as Hamlet does to the studious walks and shades of Wittenberg

Though incapable of any thing so serious as friendship, he is nevertheless a highly companionable fellow, at least among those of like resort. He is never pestered at all with moral scruples: life has no dark and difficult problems to him: he has no philosophy at all, does not even know what the word means: truth, as such, is neither beautiful nor venerable in his sight: in his heat and stress of destructive impulse, he does not see far enough to apprehend any causes for deliberation or delay. In regard to the death of his father, he snatches eagerly at the conclusion shaped for him by the King, without pausing to consider the grounds of it, or to weigh the merits of the case, because it offers a speedy chance of discharging his revenge; and he is reckless alike of means and of consequences, in fact cares nothing for others or even for himself, here or hereafter, so he may quickly ease his breast of the mad rapture with which it is panting. He has a burning resentment of personal wrongs, real or supposed, but no proper sense of justice; indeed, he can nowise enter into any question of so grave a nature as that: hence in the exigency that overtakes him, "wild sword-law" becomes at once his religion.

The blame of the treacherous plot for assassinating Hamlet, on the express ground of his "being remiss, most generous, and free from all contriving," properly belongs to the King: but the further infamy of anointing his sword in order to clinch the nail of his purpose would go hard with Laertes, but that his trance of passion at Ophelia's madness and death in a great measure, if not entirely, takes away his responsibility. In his transport of grief and rage he is as much beside himself as Hamlet is in his wildest paroxysms of disorder; and the most suggestive point of contrast between them is in reference to the opposite manner in which the

moral character of each transpires under the eclipse of reason. Observe, also, how the two men differ in their ends: Laertes dies repenting of the base and hateful wrong he has done to Hamlet, and begging his forgiveness; Hamlet dies pitying Laertes, and — forgiving him!

The King.

Enough, perhaps, has already been said of Claudius; but there is one further point in his character, so suggestive of wholesome thought, that it ought to receive some passing notice. — The words "all may be well," with which he prologues his act of devotion, are very significant, as snowing that his prayer is an attempt to make religion a substitute for duty. As often happens in real life, he betakes himself to a sentimental repentance as absolving him from "doing works meet for repentance." For who has not seen men resorting to very emphatic exercises of religion, as virtually dispensing with the law of good and pious works? It is observable that the King's fit of devotion operates to ease him through his course of crime, instead of deterring him from it. Such are the subtle tricks men practise on themselves, to soothe the pangs of guilt without amendment of life. The King goes from his closet to plot further crimes! Thus his prayer is "like a spendthrift sigh that hurts by easing"; that is to say, he endeavours to satisfy or appease his conscience with a falsetto cry of penitence. Strange it should be so, but so it is!

The Ghost.

The Ghost is a powerful element in this great drama, shedding into it a peculiar and preternatural grandeur; but that power acts through the finest organs of the soul, work-

ing so deeply on the moral and imaginative forces, that the coarse arts of criticism can do but little with it. What an air of dread expectancy waits upon the coming and the motions of that awful shade! How grave and earnest, yet how calm and composed its speech! as if it came indeed from the other world, and brought the lessons of that world in its mouth. The stately walk, the solemn, slowly-measured words, the unearthly cast and temper of the discourse, are all ghost-like. The popular currency of many of the Ghost's sayings shows how profoundly they sink into our souls, and what a weight of ethical meaning attaches to them. Observe, too, how choicely Horatio hits the key-note of the part, and attempers us to its influences: —

> What art thou, that usurp'st this time of night,
> Together with that fair and warlike form
> In which the majesty of buried Denmark
> Did sometime march?

But indeed the whole matter preparatory to the Ghost's interview with Hamlet, its first appearance on the scene, its sad and silent steps, its fading at the crowing of the cock, and the subdued reflections that follow, ending with the speech,

> But look, the Morn, in russet mantle clad,
> Walks o'er the dew of yond high eastern hill;

all this is managed with consummate skill.

Horatio.

Horatio is one of the very noblest and most beautiful of Shakespeare's male characters: there is not a single loose stitch in his make-up: he is at all times superbly self-contained: he feels deeply, but never gushes nor runs over: as true as a diamond, as modest as a virgin, and utterly unselfish; a most manly soul, full alike of strength, tenderness, and solidity. But he moves so quietly in the drama, that his rare traits of character have received scant justice. Much of the best spirit and efficacy of the scenes is owing to his presence. He is the medium whereby some of the hero's finest and noblest qualities are conveyed to us; yet himself so clear and transparent, that he scarcely catches the attention. The great charm of his unselfishness is, that he seems not to be himself in the least aware of it; "as one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing." His mild scepticism "touching the dreaded sight twice seen of us," is exceedingly graceful and scholarly. And, indeed, all that comes from him marks the presence of a calm, clear head keeping touch and time perfectly with a good heart.

Polonius.

Polonius is Shakespeare's version, sharply individualized, of a politician somewhat past his faculties; shrewd, careful, conceited, meddlesome, and pedantic. Hamlet does him some injustice; partly as thinking that the old man has wantonly robbed him of his heart's best object, and not making due allowance, as indeed lovers seldom do in such cases, for the honest though perhaps erring solicitude of a father's love. Therewithal he looks upon him as a supple time-server and ducking observant, which indeed he is, of whoever chances to be in power, ever ready to "crook the pregnant hinges of the knee where thrift may follow fawning." As such he of course has the utmost contempt for him; which contempt his disease lets loose from the bands of respect, while his intellect engineers it with the greatest fluency and point.

Polonius has his mind richly stored with prudential and

politic wisdom; which however shows somewhat absurdly in him, because, to use a figure of Coleridge's, it is like a light in the stern of a ship, that illumines only that part of the course already left behind. For, as Dr. Johnson aptly remarks, he is "knowing in retrospect, and ignorant in foresight." A man of one method, political engineering; with his fingers ever itching to work the machine of policy; and with little perception of times and occasions; he is called to act where such arts and methods are peculiarly unfitting, and therefore he overreaches himself.

To such a mind the hero's character can hardly be other than an inscrutable enigma. It takes a whole man to understand Hamlet, and Polonius is but the attic storey of a man! Assuming Hamlet to be thus and so, Polonius reasons and acts just right in regard to him; but the fact is, he cannot *see* him; and so, his premises being all wrong, the very justness of his reasoning only carries the further astray. But, in the directions he gives his man Reynaldo for angling out the truth about his absent son, the old politician is perfectly at home; and his mind seems to revel in the mysteries of wire-pulling and trap-setting. He understands, no man better, "how your bait of falsehood takes the carp of truth." But to such modes of dealing Hamlet is quite impracticable. And he takes a mad pleasure in fooling and plaguing the old fox!

A chronic fanaticism of intrigue having blunted in Polonius the powers of special insight and discernment in what is before him, he therefore perceives not the unfitness of his old methods to the new exigency; while his long experience of success in "hunting the trail of policy" makes him feel quite sure of succeeding now. To quote Dr. Johnson again, "such a man is positive and confident, because he knows

that his mind was once strong, but knows not that it has become weak." Antiquated managers, indeed, like Polonius, seldom have much strength but as they fall back upon the resources of memory: out of these, the ashes, so to speak, of extinct faculties, they may appear wise long after the springs of real wisdom are dried up within them; as a man who *has lost his sight* may seem to distinguish colours, provided he does not speak of the particular colours before him.

Polonius has great knowledge of the world; though even here his mind has come to rest mainly in generalities. Accordingly the pithy maxims he gives Laertes, to "character in his memory," are capital in their way; nothing could be better: yet they are but the well-seasoned fruits of general experience and reflection; and there is no apparent reason why he should speak them at that time, except that they were strong in his mind. One would suppose that in such an act of paternal blessing he would try to breathe some fire of noble sentiment into his son; whereas he thinks of nothing higher than cold precepts of worldly prudence; which seem indeed to be the essence of religion with him. And he imagines that such thoughts will be a sufficient breakwater against the passions of youth!

Note, also, what a precious, characteristic specimen of unconscious grannyism he blunders out when he undertakes to explain "the very cause of Hamlet's lunacy." Here, with his hands brimfull of the most serious business, he is pleased, notwithstanding, to spend the time in dallying with artful quirks of thought and speech, — a piece of pedantry and impertinence which has often reminded me of the man who "could speak no sense in several languages." In this instance, again, he shows a good memory of what he had

learned at the university; but he manifestly has no live organs to perceive the rights of the occasion. Such is the natural effect of "dotage encroaching upon wisdom."

Ophelia.

The pathetic sweetness of Ophelia "divided from herself and her fair judgment" touches the soul with surpassing delicacy. But the touch is full of power withal. Her madness is totally different from Hamlet's; but the delineation of it, so science assures us, is no less true to nature, and evinces an insight no less profound of pathological laws. The violence her feelings suffered in the constrained repulse of her lover after she had "suck'd the honey of his music vows"; her tender grief at his subsequent condition, which is all the greater that she thinks herself the cause of it; the shock of her father's sudden and violent death, — the father whom she loves with such religious entireness, — and this by the hand of that same lover, and in consequence of the madness into which, as she believes, her own action has cast him; — all these causes join in producing her lapse of reason, and all reappear more or less in what comes from her afterwards. Her insanity is complete, unconscious, and such as, it is said, never ends but with the sufferer's death. There is no method in it: she is like one walking and talking in her sleep; her mind still busy, but its sources of activity all within; literally "incapable of her own distress." The verses she sings are fragments of old ballads which she had heard in her childhood, when she understood not the meaning of them, and which had faded from her memory, but are now revived just enough for her inward eye to catch the words. The immodesty of some of them is surpassingly touching, because it tells us, as nothing else could, that she

is utterly unconscious of what she is saying. The fine threads of association by which they are now brought to her mind may be felt, but cannot be described. And the sweet, guileless, gentle spirit of the dear girl casts a tender sanctity over the whole expression.

This delineation shows the Poet under an aspect very peculiar and well worth the noting. His genius here appears literally angelic in its steps and tones of purity and reverence and human-heartedness. He gives just enough to start our tenderest sympathies, but nothing to entertain a prurient curiosity; barely hinting the nature of the disease, and then drawing the veil of silence over it, like some protecting spirit of humanity, sent to guard its sacredest possessions from unholy eyes and irreverent hands. In all this we have what may be fitly termed the Shakespeare of Shakespeare; — I mean his ineffable delicacy and cleanness of moral perception, and his angelic awe of moral beauty.

The central idea or formal cause of Ophelia's character stands in perfect simplicity, — the pure whiteness of perfect truth. This is her wisdom, — the wisdom, not of reflection, but of instinctive reason, — a spontaneous beating of her heart in unison with the soul of Nature, and all the better for being so. And her free docility to paternal counsel and full submission to paternal command are in no sort the result of weakness; filial duty and filial affection being the native element of her young life; so that she instinctively shrinks from forsaking that element, and indeed never thinks of doing so, any more than she does of disowning the laws of gravity and respiration.

Ophelia's situation much resembles Imogen's; their characters are in marked contrast. Both appear amidst the corruptions of a wicked court, and both pass through them

unhurt; the one because she knows not of them, the other because she both knows and hates them. And the reason why Ophelia knows not of them is because her simplicity of character makes her susceptive only of that which is simple.

The space Ophelia fills in the reader's thoughts is strangely disproportionate to that which she fills in the play. Her very silence utters her; unseen, she is missed, and so thought of the more; in her absence she is virtually present in what others bring from her. Whatever grace comes from Polonius and the Queen is of her inspiring: Laertes is scarce regarded but as he loves his sister: of Hamlet's soul, too, she is the sunrise and the morning hymn. The soul of innocence and gentleness, virtue radiates from her insensibly, as fragrance is exhaled from flowers. It is in such forms that Heaven most frequently visits us.

Ophelia's insanity is one of those mysterious visitings over which we can only brood in dumb compassion; which Heaven alone has a heart adequately to pity, and a hand effectually to heal. Its pathos were too much to be borne, but for the incense that rises from her crushed spirit as she turns "thought and affliction, passion, Hell itself to favour and to prettiness." — Of her death what shall be said? The "snatches of old tunes" with which she chaunts, as it were, her own burial service, are like smiles gushing from the heart of woe. I must leave her with the words of Hazlitt: "O rose of May! O flower too soon faded! Her love, her madness, her death, are described with the truest touches of tenderness and pathos. It is a character which nobody but Shakespeare could have drawn, and to the conception of which there is not the smallest approach, except in some of the old romantic ballads."

The Queen.

The Queen's affection for this lovely being is one of those unexpected strokes of art, so frequent in Shakespeare, which surprise us into reflection by their naturalness. That Ophelia should disclose a vein of goodness in the Queen, was necessary, perhaps, to keep us both from misprising the influence of the one and from exaggerating the wickedness of the other. The love she thus inspires tells us that her helplessness springs from innocence, not from weakness, and so prevents the pity which her condition moves from lessening the respect due to her character.

Almost any other author would have depicted Gertrude without a single alleviating trait. Beaumont and Fletcher would probably have made her simply frightful or loathsome, and capable only of exciting abhorrence or disgust; if, indeed, in her monstrous depravity she had not rather failed to excite any feeling. Shakespeare, with far more effect as well as far more truth, exhibits her with such a mixture of good and bad as neither disarms censure nor precludes pity. Herself dragged along in the terrible train of consequences which her own guilt had a hand in starting, she is hurried away into the same dreadful abyss along with those whom she loves, and against whom she has sinned. In her tenderness towards Hamlet and Ophelia we recognize the virtues of the mother without in the least palliating the guilt of the wife; while the crimes in which she is a partner almost disappear in those of which she is the victim.

Conclusion.

This play has many and varied scenic excellences, of which only a few of the less obvious need be specified. — In

the platform scenes the chills of a northern winter midnight seem creeping over us as the heartsick sentinels pass in view, and, steeped in moonlight and drowsiness, exchange their meeting and parting salutations. The thoughts and images that rise up in their minds are just such as the anticipation of preternatural visions would be likely to inspire. And the sensations one has in reading these scenes are not unlike those of a child passing a graveyard by moonlight. Out of the dim and drowsy moonbeams apprehension creates its own objects; the fancies embody themselves in surrounding facts; fears giving shape to outward things, while those things give outwardness to the fears.—The heterogeneous, oddly-assorted elements that are brought together in the grave-digging scene; the strange mixture of songs and witticisms and dead-men's bones, and the still stranger transitions of the sprightly, the meditative, the solemn, the playful, the grotesque, make up such a combination as Shakespeare only could conceive. Here we have the hero's profound discourse of thought, his earnest moral reflectiveness, and his most idiomatic humour, all working out together. As illustrating his whole character, in all its depth and complexity, the scene is one of the richest and wisest in the play.

HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK.

PERSONS REPRESENTED.

CLAUDIUS, King of Denmark.
HAMLET, his Nephew, Son of the former King.
POLONIUS, Lord Chamberlain.
HORATIO, Friend to Hamlet.
LAERTES, Son of Polonius.
VOLTIMAND, CORNELIUS, ROSENCRANTZ, GUILDENSTERN, } Courtiers.
OSRIC, a Courtier.
Another Courtier.
A Priest.
MARCELLUS, BERNARDO, } Officers.
FRANCISCO, a Soldier.
REYNALDO, Servant to Polonius.
A Captain. Ambassadors.
The Ghost of Hamlet's Father.
FORTINBRAS, Prince of Norway.
Two Grave-diggers.
GERTRUDE, Mother of Hamlet, and Queen.
OPHELIA, Daughter of Polonius.

Lords, Ladies, Officers, Soldiers, Players, Sailors, Messengers, and Attendants. SCENE, Elsinore.

ACT I.

SCENE I.—*Elsinore. A Platform before the Castle.*

FRANCISCO *at his Post. Enter to him* BERNARDO.

Bern. WHO's there?
Fran. Nay, answer me:[1] stand, and unfold yourself.
Bern. Long live the King!
Fran. Bernardo?

[1] Answer *me*, as I have the right to challenge *you*. Bernardo then gives in answer the watchword, "Long live the King!"