

news of me ; who suffered myself to be so governed by that unlawful and unnatural son, that, ere I was aware, I had left myself nothing but the name of a king. He, soon growing weary even of this, threw me out of my seat, and put out my eyes ; and then let me go, neither imprisoning nor killing me, but rather delighting to make me feel my misery. And as he came to the crown by unjust means, so he kept it as unjustly ; disarming all his own countrymen, so that no man durst show so much charity as to lend me a hand to guide my dark steps ; till this son, forgetting my abominable wrongs, and neglecting the way he was in of doing himself good, came hither to do this kind office which you see him performing towards me, to my unspeakable grief. Above all, it grieves me that he should desperately adventure the loss of his life for mine, as if he would carry mud in a chest of crystal : for well I know, he that now reigneth will not let slip any advantage to make him away, whose just title may one day shake the seat of a never-secure tyranny. For this cause I craved of him to lead me to the top of this rock, meaning to free him from so serpentine a companion as I am. But he, finding what I purposed, only therein since he was born showed himself disobedient to me. And now, gentlemen, you have the true story ; which I pray you publish to the world, that my mischievous proceedings may be the glory of his filial piety, the only reward now left for so great merit."

What afterwards happened to the persons of the tale need not be given here, as the Poet made no use of it. Suffice it to say that the Prince finally recovered the throne, and the brothers were reconciled, so that all came to a happy conclusion.

General Characteristics of the Play.

A good deal of irrelevant criticism has been spent upon the circumstance that in the details and costume of this play the Poet did not hold himself to the date of the forecited legend. That date was some nine hundred years before Christ ; yet the play abounds in the manners, sentiments, and allusions of modern England. Malone is scandalized that Edgar in the play should speak of Nero, while the old chroniclers place Lear's reign upwards of eight hundred years before the birth of that gentleman. The painstaking Mr. Douce, also, is in dire distress at the Poet's blunder in substituting the manners of England under the Tudors for those of the ancient Britons.

Now to make these points, or such as these, any ground of impeachment, is to mistake totally the nature and design of the work. For the drama is not, nor was meant to be, in any sense of the term a history : it is a tragedy, and nothing else ; and as such is as free of chronological circumscriptions as human nature itself. The historical or legendary matter, be it more or less, neither shapes nor guides the structure of the piece, but is used in entire subservience to the general ends of tragic representation. The play, therefore, does not fall within the lines of any jurisdiction for settling dates ; it is amenable to no laws but those of Art, any more than if it were entirely of the Poet's own creation : its true whereabouts is in the reader's mind ; and the only proper question is, whether it keeps to the laws of this whereabouts ; in which reference it will probably stand the severest inquisitions that criticism has strength to prosecute.

This I take to be an ample vindication of the play not only from the aforesaid criticisms, but from any others of like

sort that may be urged. And it seems to me to put the whole matter upon just the right ground; leaving to the Drama all the freedom and variety that belong to the Gothic Architecture, where the only absolute law is, that the parts shall all stand in mutual intelligence: and the more the structure is diversified in form, aspect, purpose, and expression, the grander and more elevating is the harmony resulting from the combination. It is clearly in the scope and spirit of this great principle of Gothic Art that *King Lear* was conceived and worked out.

Herein, to be sure, it is like other of the Poet's dramas, only, it seems to me, more so than any of the rest. There is almost no end to the riches here drawn together: on attempting to reckon over the parts and particulars severally, one is amazed to find what varied wealth of character, passion, pathos, poetry, and high philosophy is accumulated in the work. Yet there is a place for every thing, and every thing is in its place: we find nothing but what makes good its right to be where and as it is; so that the accumulation is not more vast and varied in form and matter than it is united and harmonious in itself. I have spoken of a main and a subordinate plot in the drama; and I may add that either of these might suffice for a great tragedy by itself: yet the two plots are so woven together as to be hardly distinguishable, and not at all separable; we can scarce perceive when one goes out and the other comes in.

Accordingly, of all Shakespeare's dramas, this, on the whole, is the one which, considering both the qualities of the work and the difficulties of the subject, best illustrates the measure of his genius;—his masterpiece in that style or order of composition which he, I will not say created, but certainly carried so much higher than any one else as to

make it peculiarly his own. The work is indeed, to my mind, the highest specimen we have of what is aptly called the Gothic Drama.

The style and versification of *King Lear* do not differ from those of other plays written at or about the same period, save that here they seem attracted, as by imperceptible currents of sympathy, into a freedom and variety of movement answerable to the structure of the piece. There seems, in this case, no possible tone of mind or feeling, but that the Poet has a congenial form of imagery to body it forth, and a congenial pitch of rhythm and harmony to give it voice. Certainly, in none of his plays do we more feel the presence and power of that wonderful diction, not to say language, which he gradually wrought out and built up as the fitting and necessary organ of his thought. English literature has nothing else like it; and whatsoever else it has seems tame, stiff, and mechanical in the comparison.

Nor is there any of the Poet's dramas wherein we have in larger measure the sentiments of the individual, as these are kindled by special occasions, forthwith expanding into general truth, and so lifting the whole into the clear daylight of a comprehensive philosophy. It is by this process that the Poet so plays upon the passions as, through them, to instruct the reason: I mean, that he interests us in the persons, and then so works that personal interest as to project our thoughts onward and upward into the highest regions of contemplation.

Touching the improbability, sometimes censured, of certain incidents in this tragedy, it seems needful that somewhat be said. Improbable enough, I grant, some of the incidents are. But these nowise touch the substantial truth of the drama: the Poet merely uses them as occasions for what he

has to unfold of the inner life of Nature and Man. Besides, he did not invent them. They stood dressed in many attractive shapes before him, inviting his hand. And his use of them is amply justified in that they were matters of common and familiar tradition, and as such already domesticated in the popular mind and faith. And it is specially characteristic of Shakespeare that, however improbable may be his frame-work of incident, he nevertheless makes it alive with the soul of Nature's truth; whereas other writers will frame you up a plot of commonplace incidents, and then proceed to set at nought all the weightier matters of Nature; yet their workmanship readily passes current with the criticism that has so often faulted him in this regard.

As to the alleged improbabilities of *character*, this is another and a much graver question. The play, it must be confessed, sets forth an extreme diversity of moral complexion, but especially a boldness and lustihood in crime, such as cannot but seem unnatural if tried by the rule, or even by the exceptions, of what we are used to see of Nature. Measuring, indeed, the capabilities of man by the standard of our own observations, we shall find all the higher representations of Art, and even many well-attested things of history, too much for belief. But this is not the way to deal with such things: our business is to be taught by them as they are, and not to crush them down to the measure of what we already know.

And so we should bear in mind, that the scene of this play is laid in a period of time when the innate peculiarities of men were much less subjected than in our day to the stamp of a common impression. For the influences under which we live cannot but generate more uniformity of character; which makes us apt to regard as monstrous that rank-

ness of growth, those great crimes and great virtues which are recorded of earlier times, and which furnish the material of deep tragedy. For the process of civilization, if it does not kill out the aptitudes of rampant crime, at least involves a constant discipline of prudence that keeps them in a more decorous reserve. But suppose the pressure of such motives and restraints to be wanting, and then it will not appear so very incredible that there should be just such spontaneous outcomings of wicked impulse, just such redundant transpirations of original sin, as are here displayed. Accordingly, while we are amidst the Poet's scenes, and subject to his power, he seems to enlarge our knowledge of Nature; but when we fall back and go to comparing his shows with our experiences, he seems rather to have beguiled us with illusions than edified us with truth. But this, I suspect, is more our fault than his. And that criticism is best which is rather born of what he makes us than of what we are without him. In some respects, indeed, it may be better to speak as independent of him, but yet, on the whole, I prefer to speak as he moves me.

Goneril and Regan.

In speaking of the characters of this play I hardly know where to begin. Much has been written upon them; and the best critics have been so kindled and raised by the theme as to surpass themselves. The persons are variously divisible into groups, according as we regard their domestic or their moral affinities. I prefer to consider them as grouped upon the latter. And as the main action of the drama is shaped by the energy of evil, I will begin with those in whom that energy prevails.

There is no accounting for the conduct of Goneril and