

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

Regan, but by supposing them possessed with a strong original impulse of malignity. The main points of their action were taken from the old story. Character, in the proper sense of the term, they have none in the legend; and the Poet invested them with characters suitable to the part they were believed to have acted.

Whatever of soul these beings possess is all in the head: they have no heart to guide or inspire their understanding, and but enough of understanding to seize occasions and frame excuses for their heartlessness. Without affection, they are also without shame; there being barely so much of human blood in their veins as may suffice for quickening the brain without sending a blush to the cheek. With a sort of hell-inspired tact, they feel their way to a fitting occasion, but drop the mask as soon as their ends are reached; caring little or nothing for appearances after their falsehood has done its work. There is a smooth, glib rhetoric in their professions of love, unwarmed with the least grace of real feeling, and a certain wiry virulence and intrepidity of mind in their after-speaking, that is fairly terrific. No touch or nature finds a response in their bosoms; no atmosphere of comfort can abide their presence: we feel that they have somewhat within that turns the milk of humanity to venom, which all the wounds they can inflict are but opportunities for casting.

The subordinate plot of the drama serves the purpose of relieving the improbability of their behaviour. Some have indeed censured this plot as an embarrassment to the main one; forgetting, perhaps, that to raise and sustain the feelings at any great height there needs some breadth of basis. A degree of evil which, if seen altogether alone, would strike us as superhuman, makes a very different impression

when it has the support of proper sympathies and associations. This effect is in a good measure secured by Edmund's independent concurrence with Goneril and Regan in wickedness. It looks as if some malignant planet had set the elements of evil a-stir in many hearts at the same time; so that "unnaturalness between the child and the parent" were become, sure enough, the order of the day.

Besides, the agreement of the sister-fiends in filial ingratitude might seem, of itself, to argue some sisterly attachment between them. So that, to bring out their characters truly, it had to be shown that the same principle which unites them against their father will, on the turning of occasion, divide them against each other. Hence the necessity of setting them forth in relations of such a kind as may breed strife between them. In Edmund, accordingly, they find a character wicked enough, and energetic enough in his wickedness, to interest their feelings; and because they are both alike taken with him, therefore they will cut their way to him through each other's life. And it is considerable that their passion for him proceeds mainly upon his treachery to his father, as though from such similarity of action they inferred a congeniality of mind. For even to have hated each other from love of any one but a villain, and because of his villainy, had seemed a degree of virtue in beings such as they are.

There is so much sameness of temper and behaviour in these two she-tigers, that we find it somewhat difficult to distinguish them as individuals; their characteristic traits being, as it were, fused and run together in the heat of a common malice. Both are actuated by an extreme ferocity; which, however, up to the time of receiving their portions, we must suppose to have been held in check by a most art-

ful and vigilant selfishness. And the malice of Goneril, the eldest, appears still to be under some restraint, from feeling that her husband is not in sympathy with her. For Albany, though rather timid and tardy in showing it, remains true to the old King; his tardiness probably springing, at least in part, from a reluctance to make a square issue with his wife, who, owing to her superiority of rank and position, had somewhat the advantage of him in their marriage. Regan, on the other hand, has in Cornwall a husband whose heart beats in perfect unison with her own against her father; and the confidence of his sympathy appears to discharge her malice entirely from the restraints of caution, and to give it a peculiar quickness and alertness of action. Near the close of the King's last interview with these dreadful creatures, we have the following:—

Gon. Why might not you, my lord, receive attendance
From those that she calls servants or from mine?

Reg. Why not, my lord? If then they chanced to slack you,
We could control them. If you will come to me,—
For now I spy a danger,— I intreat you
To bring but five-and-twenty: to no more
Will I give place or notice.

Lear. I gave you all,—

Reg. And in good time you gave it.

Lear.— Made you my guardians, my depositaries;
But kept a reservation to be follow'd
With such a number.

I quote this passage mainly for the purpose of noting the concentrated wolfishness of heart in those few words, "And in good time you gave it," snapped out in reply to the pathetic appeal, "I gave you all." Human speech cannot be more intensely charged with fury. And this cold, sharp venom of retort is what chiefly discriminates Regan from Goneril: otherwise they seem too much like repetitions of

each other to come fairly within the circle of Nature, who never repeats herself. Yet their very agreement in temper and spirit renders them the fitter for the work they do. For the sameness of treatment thence proceeding is all the more galling and unbearable forasmuch as it appears the result of a set purpose, a conspiracy coolly formed and unrelentingly pursued. That they should lay on their father the blame of their own ingratitude, and stick their poisoned tongues into him under pretence of doing him good, is a further refinement of malice not more natural to them than tormenting to him. It is indeed difficult to conceive how creatures could be framed more apt to drive mad any one who had set his heart on receiving any comfort or kindness from them.

Of the conduct ascribed to these ladies after the death of Cornwall, what shall I say? It is true, the Poet prepares us somewhat for their final transports of mutual fierceness, by the moralizing he puts into the mouth of Albany:—

That nature which contemns its origin
Cannot be border'd certain in itself;

meaning, apparently, that where the demon of filial ingratitude reigns, there the heart is ripening for the most unnatural crimes, so that there is no telling what it will do, or where it will stop. Nevertheless I hardly know how to approve an exhibition of depravity so extreme. The action of Goneril and Regan, taken all together, seems the most improbable thing in the drama. I cannot quite shake off the feeling, that before the heart could become so thoroughly petrified the brain must cease to operate. I find it not easy, indeed, to think of them otherwise than as instruments of the plot; not so much ungrateful persons as personifications of ingratitude. Yet I have to acknowledge that their blood is of much the same colour as ours.