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*Hamlet : A Psychological Study.*

All critical study of Hamlet must be psychological, and as there are few subjects which have been more closely studied, and more copiously written upon, than this magnificent drama, criticism upon it may seem to be exhausted. But human nature itself is still more trite ; yet, study it profoundly as we can, criticise and speculise upon it as we may, much will ever be left outside the largest grasp of those minds who undertake to elucidate so much of it as they can comprehend. Hamlet is human nature, or at least a wide range of it, and no amount of criticism can exhaust the wealth of this magnificent storehouse. It invites and evades criticism. Its mysterious profundity fascinates the attention ; its infinite variety and its hidden meanings deny exhaustive analysis. Some leavings of treasure will always be discoverable to those who seek for it in an earnest and reverent spirit. Probably no two minds can ever contemplate Hamlet from exactly the same point of view, as no two men can ever regard human life under exactly the same aspect. Hence all truthful criticism of this great drama is not only various as mind itself, but is apt to become reflective of the critic. The strong sense of Johnson, the subtle insight of Coleridge, the fervid eloquence of Hazlitt, the discriminating tact of Schlegel, are nowhere more evident than in their treatment of this mighty monument of human intellect. Every man who has learned to think, and has dared to question the inward monitor, has seen some part of the character of Hamlet reflected in his own bosom.

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It will form no part of the subject of this essay to criticise the dramatic construction of Hamlet. We may, however, confess ourselves to be among those who cannot see in its construction that perfect art which has been so abundantly shewn by Shakespeare in many other pieces. Of the petty anacronisms which send Hamlet to Wittenberg, which allow Ophelia to call for a coach, and the King's palace to resound with salvos of artillery, we make small account; like spots on the sun's surface, they only impress themselves upon those who look upon the great work through some medium capable of obscuring its glories. The great length appears by no means an imperfection of this drama as a composition, whatever it may be as an acting play. The analysis of the motives of human action, which is the great object of this work, could not have been effected if the action were rapid. Rapidity of action is inconsistent with philosophic self-analysing motives and modes of thought; while the slow and halting progress of the action in this drama, not only affords to the character space and verge enough to unfold its inmost peculiarities of thought and feeling, but develops in the mind of the reader a state of metaphysical receptivity scarcely less essential to its full appreciation.

Once for all, let us say, in pointing out what appear to us difficulties to a logical apprehension of this piece from that point of view which contemplates the development of character and the laws of mind, we do not urge these difficulties as objections to this great drama, which we love and prize more than any other human piece of composition. We venture to find no fault with Hamlet; we revere even its irregularities, as we prefer the various uniform beauties of forest landscape to the straight walks and trim parterres of a well-kept garden. There are more irregularities and unexpected turns of action in Hamlet than in any other of Shakespeare's plays. Our belief is, that the poet became charmed with the creature of his own imagination, as it developed itself from his fertile brain. That as he gave loose rein to poetic fancy and philosophic reverie, he more than ever spurned the narrow limits of dramatic art. The works of Shakespeare's imagination, contrasted with those of the Greek dramatists, have been said to resemble a vast cathedral, combining in one beautiful structure various forms of architecture, various towers and pinnacles,—the whole irregular, vast, and beautiful. The drama of the Greeks, on the other hand, has been said to resemble their temples, finished in one style, perfect and regular. The *simile* is true and instructive, and in no case

more so than in its application to Hamlet. If in our admiration of its whole effect,—if in our reverent examination of its parts, its pinnacles of beauty, its shrines of passion, its gorgeous oriel of many-coloured thought,—we venture to express the difficulties we experience in understanding how one part grew out of another, and the many parts grew to form the wondrous whole, let our criticism be accepted as that of one who examines only to learn and to enjoy.

It is known that Shakespeare devoted more time to it than to any other of his works, and that in its construction he altered and re-altered much. The work bears evident traces of this elaboration, both in its lengthy and slow action, in its great diversity of incident and character, and in the great perfection of its parts contrasted with some loss of uniformity as a whole. Some of his plays (as the *Merry Wives of Windsor*), Shakespeare is said to have thrown off with incredible rapidity and facility; but this certainly is not one in which he “warbled his native wood-notes wild.” It was the laboured and elaborate result of years of toil, of metaphysical introspection and observation. It was the darling child of its great author, and ran some risk of being a little spoiled. A comparison with the sonnets, and the peculiar *trempe* of the leading character, lead us also to the belief that it was to a great extent his own mental mirror.

The first scene, where the Ghost appears to the sentinels on watch, is constructed with exquisite dramatic verisimilitude, and is admirably adapted to prepare the mind for that contest between the materialism of sensation and that idealism of passion, that doubting effort to discriminate between the things which are and the things which seem, which is the mark thread in the philosophy of the piece.

The Ghost appears at cold and silent midnight. “’Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart.” “Not a mouse stirring,” says Francisco. On this Coleridge remarks, that “in all the best attested stories of ghosts and visions, the ghost-seers were in a state of cold or chilling damp from without, and of anxiety inwardly.” As far as visions are concerned, this observation might have psychological importance, as tending to indicate the conditions of the nervous system favourable to the production of hallucination; but with regard to ghosts seen by many persons at the same time, if such things have been, it could only indicate that, escaped for a while from “sulphurous and tormenting flames,” these airy existences preferred to walk on cold nights.

We cannot consent to reduce the Ghost of Hamlet to physiological laws.

“ We do it wrong, being so majestic,  
To offer it the shew of *science*.”

The Ghost in Hamlet can in no wise be included within the category of illusions or hallucinations ; it is anti-physiological, and must be simply accepted as a dramatic circumstance calculated to produce a certain state of mind in the hero of the piece. Hazlitt well says, that actors playing Macbeth have always appeared to him to have seen the weird sisters on the stage only. He never had seen a Macbeth look and act as if he had been face to face with the supernatural. We have experienced the same feeling in seeing the most approved representations of Hamlet ; and doubtless Goëthe had felt the same, since he produces upon the stage that which the tyro player Wilhelm Meister takes for a real ghost. No person to act the part had been provided, and something marvellous had been mysteriously promised ; but he had forgotten it, probably intending to dispense with the *appearance*. When it came, “ the noble figure, the low inaudible breath, the light movements in heavy armour, made such an impression on him that he stood as if transformed to stone, and could only utter in a half-voice, ‘ Angels and ministers of grace defend us.’ He glared at the form, drew a deep breathing once or twice, and pronounced his address to the Ghost in a manner so confused, so broken, so constrained, that the highest art could not have hit the mark so well.” Besides the part it takes in the development of the plot, the *rôle* of the Ghost is to account for, if not to produce, a high-wrought state of nerve in the hero ; and in the acting play to produce the same effect in lesser degree on the audience. Fielding has described this, when Tom Jones takes Partridge to see Garrick in the character of Hamlet. The life-like acting of the English Roscius, combined with the superstition of the schoolmaster, produces so thorough a conviction of the actual presence of the Ghost, that the result is one of the drollest scenes ever painted by that inimitable romancist.

Hamlet is, from the first moment represented, in that mood of melancholy which vents itself in bitter sarcasm : “ A little more than kin, and less than kind.” He is “ too much i’ the sun ;” sorry quips truly, but yet good enough for the hypocritical King, who wishes to rejoice and to lament at the same moment :

“ With one auspicious and one drooping eye,  
With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage,  
In equal scale weighing delight and dole.”

To the King’s unfeeling arguments that the son ought not to

grieve for the death of his father, because it is a common theme, and an unavailing woe, Hamlet vouchsafes no reply. But to his mother's rebuke, that the common grief "seems" particular to him, he answers with a vehemence which shews that the clouds which hang on him are surcharged with electric fire :

"Seems, madam ; nay, it is ! I know not seems.

"Tis not alone my inky cloak," &c.

He has that within which passes show ; and, when left alone, he tells us what it is in that outburst of grief :

"Oh that this too, too solid flesh would melt,

Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew !

Or that the Everlasting had not fixed

His canon 'gainst self-slaughter ! Oh God ! Oh God !

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,

Seem to me all the uses of this world :

Eye on't, oh fye ! 'tis an unweeded garden

That grows to seed ; things rank and gross in nature

Possess it merely ! That it should come to this,

But two months dead !" &c.

It is the conflict of religious belief with suicidal desire. In his pure and sensitive mind, the conduct of his mother has produced shame and keen distress. His generalising tendency leads him to extend his mother's failings to her whole sex—"Frailty, thy name is woman ;" and from thence the sense of disgust shrouds as with foul mist the beauty of the world, and all its uses seem "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable." To general dissatisfaction with men and the world, succeeds the longing desire to quit the scene of shame and woe. In the subsequent arguments which the Prince holds with himself on suicide, he acknowledges the constraining power to be the fear of future punishment ; but in this passage the higher motive of religious obedience without fear is acknowledged ; a higher and a holier motive to the duty of bearing the evils which God permits, and refusing to break His law to escape from them, whatever their pressure may be. A bold man may "jump the life to come," in the very spirit of courage ; but a true servant and soldier of God will feel that there is unfaithfulness and cowardice in throwing off by voluntary death, whatever burden of sorrows may freight the frail vessel of his life.

The concluding line equally marks profound sorrow, and the position of dependence and constraint in which Hamlet feels himself :

"But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue."

And yet what rapid recovery to the quick-witted complaisance of social intercourse, when his friends break in upon these gloomy thoughts ; and, again, mark the natural contiguity, in a mind equally sensitive and melancholic, of bantering sarcasm and profound emotion.

"Thrift ! thrift ! Horatio. The funeral-baked meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.  
Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven,  
Or ever I had seen that day."

This early passage seems to give the key-note of Hamlet's temper, namely, soul-crushing grief in close alliance with an ironical, often a broad humour, which can mock at despair. Profound life-weariness and suicidal desire indicate that from the first his emotions were morbid, and that the accusation of the King that he had

"A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,  
An understanding simple and unschooled,"

was as true of the heart as it was false of the intellect. Yet his rapid recovery from brooding thoughts, and his entire self-possession when circumstances call upon him for action trivial or important, prove that his mind was not permanently off its poise. Profoundly reflective, capable of calling up thoughts and ideas of sense at will, of seeing his father "in his mind's eye," he is equally capable of dismissing them, and throwing himself into the present. How thoroughly self-possessed is he in his interview with his friend and fellow-student and the soldiers, and the reception he gives to their account of the apparition, by which they were "distilled almost to jelly by the act of fear ;" how unhesitating his decision to see and speak to it, "though hell itself should gape !" And in the seventh scene, when actually waiting for the Ghost, what cool reflection in his comments on the wassail of the country. Yet he heard not the clock strike midnight, which the less pre-occupied sense of Marcellus had caught. His address to the Ghost,

"Angels and ministers of grace defend us :

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned ?" &c.

is marked by a bold and cool reason, at a time when the awful evidences of the future make

"us fools in nature,

So horribly to shake our disposition,

With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls."

The courage of the Prince is of the noblest temper, and is made the more obvious from its contrast with the dread of his companions, who suggest that *it*, the neutral *thing*, as it has before been called, may tempt him to the summit of the cliff,

"And there assume some other horrible form,  
Which might deprave your sov'reignty of reason,  
And draw you into madness. Think of it ;  
The very place puts toys of desperation,  
Without more motive, into every brain,  
That looks so many fathoms to the sea,  
And hears it roar beneath." \*

But Hamlet is beyond all touch of fear.

"My fate cries out,  
And makes each petty artery in this body  
As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve."

Horatio says, "He waxes desperate with imagination ;" but his state really appears to be that of high-wrought yet reasonable courage. After following the Ghost to some distance, he'll "go no further ;" but if this is said with any touch of fear, it soon becomes pity : "Alas, poor Ghost !" And this, again, changes to revengeful resolution. He demands quickly to know the author of his father's murder, that he

"May sweep to his revenge."

But when the Ghost has told his terrible tale, and has disappeared, with the solemn farewell, "Adieu, adieu, adieu ! remember me," the reaction comes. Then it is that Hamlet feels his sinews fail their function, and invokes them to bear him stiffly up ; then he recognises a feeling of distraction in the globe of his brain ; then he vows forgetfulness of all things but the motive of revenge. He becomes wild at the thoughts of the "smiling damned villain," who had wrought all this woe ; and then, passing from the terrible to the trivial, he sets down in his tables a moral platitude.

"My tables ; meet it is, I set it down,  
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain ;  
At least, I am sure, it may be so in Denmark."

We regard this climax of the terrible in the trivial, this transition of mighty emotion into lowliness of action, as one of the finest psychological touches anywhere to be found in the poet. There is something like it in Tennyson's noble poem, *Maud*. When the hero has shot the brother of his mistress in a duel, he passes from intense passion to trivial observation :

"Strange that the mind, when fraught  
With a passion so intense,

\* This danger again is remarked in *Lear* :

"I'll look no more,  
Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight  
Topple down headlong."

One would think that it well  
 Might drown all life in the eye,—  
 That it should by being so overwrought,  
 Suddenly strike on a sharper sense  
 For a shell or a flower, little things  
 Which else would have been passed by !  
 And now I remember, I,  
 When he lay dying there,  
 I noticed one of his many rings,  
 (For he had many, poor worm,) and thought,  
 It is his mother's hair."

When the mind is wrought to an excessive pitch of emotion, the instinct of self-preservation indicates some lower mode of mental activity as the one thing needful. When Lear's passions are wrought to the utmost, he says, "I'll *do!* I'll *do!* I'll *do!*" But he does nothing. Had he been able, like Hamlet, to have taken out his note-book, it would have been good for his mental health. Mark the effect of the restraint which Hamlet is thus able to put upon the tornado of his emotion. When the friends rejoin him, he is self-possessed enough swiftly to turn their curiosity aside. Horatio, indeed, remarks on his manner of doing so, and on his expression of the intention, for his own poor part, to go pray :

"These are but wild and hurling words, my lord."

Doubtless the excitement of manner would make them appear to be more deserving of this comment than they do in reading. Yet Hamlet knows thoroughly well what he is about, and proceeds to swear his friends to secrecy on his sword. The flippant comments on the awful underground voice of the Ghost "the fellow in the cellarage," "old mole," "truepenny," are another meeting point of the sublime and the ridiculous, or rather a voluntary refuge in the trivial from the awful presence of the terrible. They are thoroughly true to the laws of our mental being. How often have men gone out of life upon the scaffold with a jest upon their lips. Even the just and cool-tempered Horatio, who takes fortune's buffets and rewards with equal thanks, is astounded and terrified at the underground voice, which provokes but mocking retorts from the Prince.

"Oh, day and night, but this is wondrous strange !"

That Hamlet's mockery was the unreal opposite to this true feeling, like the hysteric laughter of acute grief, is evident from his last earnest adjuration :

"Rest, rest, perturbed spirit !"

How it is that the resolution of Hamlet to put on the guise



of madness follows so quick upon the appearance of the Ghost to him, (indeed, while the spirit is yet present, though unseen, for the resolution is expressed before the final unearthly adjuration to swear,) we are unable to explain. His resolutions are not usually taken with such quick speed ; and indeed the wings of his meditation, which he refers to as swift, commonly beat the air with long and slow strokes, the very reverse of Macbeth's vehement action, framed upon the principle, "that the flighty purpose never is o'ertook, except the act goes with it." It may, however, be said that the word *perchance* shews that Hamlet has not yet decided to act the madman, when he swears his friends to secrecy.

"Never, so help you mercy !

How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself,  
As I, *perchance*, hereafter shall think meet  
To put an antic disposition on."

And yet the intention must have substance in it, even at this time, or he would not swear his friends in so solemn a manner to maintain inviolate the secret of his craft. The purport of Hamlet's feigned madness is not very obvious. It does not appear to have been needful to protect him, like that of the elder Brutus. It may be that under this disguise he hopes better to obtain proof of his uncle's guilt, and to conceal his real state of suspicion and vengeful gloom. Still more probable is it that Shakespeare adopted the feigned madness as an essential part of the old story on which the drama is founded.

The old history of Hamleth relates how he counterfeited the madman to escape the tyranny of his uncle Fengon, and the expedients resembling those in the drama, which were resorted to by the King to ascertain whether his madness was counterfeited or not. The feigned madness, therefore, of the Prince was so leading a feature in the original history, that Shakespeare could by no means have omitted it, even if by doing so he would not have deprived himself of a magnificent canvass on which to display his psychological knowledge. As it stands in the drama, the counterfeit madness would seem to bring Hamlet into more danger than security. What if the King had accepted his madness from the first, and shut him up, as he might have justified himself in doing, in some strong castle. After the death of Polonious, the King says :

"His liberty is full of threats to all ;  
To you yourself, to us, to every one.  
Alas ! how shall this bloody deed be answer'd ?  
It will be laid to us, whose providence

Should have kept short, restrain'd, and out of haunt,  
This mad young man."

And again—

"How dangerous is it that this young man goes loose."  
He puts not the strong law upon him indeed, as he says, because "he's loved of the distracted multitude," and because "the Queen lives but in his eyes." These motives may explain the King's conduct, but they do not shew that, in assuming the guise of madness, Hamlet was not incurring the probable limitation of his own freedom.

The first demonstration of the antic disposition he actually does put on, is made before his mistress, the fair Ophelia.

*Pol.* Farewell !—How now, Ophelia ? what's the matter !

*Oph.* O, my lord, my lord, I have been so affrighted !

*Pol.* With what, in the name of heaven ?

*Oph.* My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,  
Lord Hamlet,—with his doublet all unbrac'd ;  
No hat upon his head ; his stockings foul'd,  
Ungarter'd, and down-gyved to his ancle ;  
Pale as his shirt ; his knees knocking each other ;  
And with a look so piteous in purport,  
As if he had been loosed out of hell,  
To speak of horrors,—he comes before me.

*Pol.* Mad for thy love ?

*Oph.* My lord, I do not know ;  
But, truly, I do fear it.

*Pol.* What said he ?

*Oph.* He took me by the wrist, and held me hard ;  
Then goes he to the length of all his arm ;  
And, with his other hand thus o'er his brow,  
He falls to such perusal of my face,  
As he would draw it. Long stay'd he so ;  
At last,—a little shaking of mine arm,  
And thrice his head thus waving up and down,—  
He rais'd a sigh so piteous and profound,  
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk,  
And end his being : That done, he lets me go :  
And, with his head over his shoulder turn'd,  
He seem'd to find his way without his eyes ;  
For out o'doors he went without their help,  
And, to the last, bended their light on me.

*Pol.* Come, go with me ; I will go seek the king.  
This is the very ecstasy of love ;  
Whose violent property foredoes itself,  
And leads the will to desperate undertakings,

As oft as any passion under heaven,  
That does afflict our natures. I am sorry,—  
What, have you given him any hard words of late ?  
*Oph.* No, my good lord ; but, as you did command,  
I did repel his letters, and denied  
His access to me."

We are at a loss to explain this part of Hamlet's conduct towards his sweet mistress, unless as the said pantomime of separation ; love's mute farewell. That his noble and sensitive mind entertained a sincere love to the beautiful and virtuous girl, there can be no doubt. Surely it must have been this love which he refers to in that paroxysm of feeling at the close of the ghost scene :

"Yea, from the table of my memory,  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records."

Indeed, love is an autocratic passion not disposed to share the throne of the soul with other emotions of an absorbing nature. Hamlet, however, might feel his resolution, to wipe from his memory the trivial fond records of his love, strengthened into action by the conduct of Ophelia herself, who repelled his letters, and denied his access, thus taking upon herself the pain and responsibility of breaking off the relationship in which she had stood to him, and in which with so keen a zest of pleasure she had sucked in the honey-music of his vows, and the reaction from which cost her so dear. In his interview with Ophelia, arranged by Polonius and the King, he speaks to her of his love as a thing of the past. That that love was ardent and sincere we learn from his passionate grief at the grave of his dead mistress ; a grief which, on his own acknowledgment to his friend, we know to have been no acting ; but that he had forgot himself to Laertes, the bravery of whose grief had put him "into a towering passion." It is at this time, when he had forgot himself, that he explains with passionate vehemence :

"I loved Ophelia ; forty thousand brothers  
Could not, with all their quantity of love,  
Make up my sum."

That Hamlet's conduct to Ophelia was unfeeling, in thus forcing upon her the painful evidence of the insanity he had assumed, can scarcely be denied. Hamlet, however, was no perfect character, and in the matter of his love there is no doubt he partook of the selfishness which is the common attribute of the passion wherever its glow is the warmest. His love was not of that delicate sentimental kind which would, above all things, fear to disturb the beatitude of its

object, and feel its highest pleasure in acts of self-denial. It was rather of that kind which women best appreciate—an ardent passion, not a sentimental devotion ; and hence its tinge of selfishness. Yet, having put on his antic disposition with the trappings and suits of madness, he might feel that the kindest act he could perform towards Ophelia would be to concur with her in breaking off their courtship. He might, indeed, have allowed others to tell her that he had gone mad, and have saved her a great fright and agitation of mind ; but, under the circumstances, it cannot be considered unnatural that he should selfishly enough have rushed into her presence to take leave of her in the mad pantomime which she describes. His conduct to Ophelia is a mixture of feigned madness, of the selfishness of passion blasted by the cursed blight of fate, of harshness which he assumes to protect himself from an affection which he feels hostile to the present purpose of his life, and of that degree of real unsoundness, his unfeigned “weakness and melancholy,” which is the subsoil of his mind.

In the following scene the King explains to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the condition of the Prince in a manner which implies that at that time he entertained no doubt of the reality of his madness.

“Something have you heard  
Of Hamlet’s transformation ; so I call it,  
Since not the exterior nor the inward man  
Resembles what it was. What it should be  
More than his father’s death, that thus hath put him  
So much from the understanding of himself,  
I cannot dream of.”

The King’s anxiety to ascertain “if ought to us unknown afflicts him thus,” indicates the unrest of his conscience, and the fear that some knowledge of his own great crime may lie at the bottom of his nephew’s inward and outward transformation. The same fearful anxiety shews itself immediately afterwards, when the vain half-doting Polonius at the same time assuring him that the Ambassadors from Norway are joyfully returned, and that he has found “the very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy,” the King exclaims, “Oh ! speak of that, that I do long to hear ;” thus bringing upon himself the retort courteous of the old man, that the news respecting Hamlet should be kept to follow the pressing business of the moment, as dessert fruit follows a feast.

From Polonius’s exposition of Hamlet’s madness, which in a manner so contrary to his own axiom, “that brevity is the soul of wit,” he dilates with such tediousness and outward

flourishes of speech as to draw upon himself the rebuke of the Queen, "more matter with less art," one would almost think that Shakespeare had heard some lawyer full of his quiddets, quilllets, and cases, endeavouring by the sophistry of abstract definitions, to damage the evidence of some medical man to whose experience the actual concrete facts of insanity were matters of familiar observation, but whose verbal expression had more pedantry than power.

"I will be brief : Your noble son is mad :

Mad call I it ; for, to define true madness,

What is't but to be nothing else but mad ?"

In the following lines, the old man recognises madness to be a phenomenon, for which, like every other phenomenon, some cause or other must exist ; and, moreover, that madness is not in itself a distinct entity, something apart from the mind, but a *defect* in the mind.

"Mad let us grant him then ; and now remains

That we find out the cause of this effect ;

Or, rather say, the cause of this defect ;

For this effect, defective, comes by cause."

Hamlet's letter to Ophelia is a silly-enough rhapsody ; of which, indeed, the writer appears conscious. It reads like an old letter antecedent to the events of the drama. The spirit it breathes is scarcely consistent with the intense life-weariness under which its author is first introduced to notice. The signature, however, is odd. "Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this *machine* is to him," and agrees with the spirit of Hamlet's materialist philosophy, which is so strongly expressed in various parts of the play, and which forms so strange a contrast with the revelations from the spirit-world, of which he is made the recipient. The description which Polonius gives of the course of Hamlet's madness, after his daughter has locked herself from his resort, refused his messages and tokens, is vain and pedantic in its expression, but pregnant in meaning :

"And he, repulsed, (a short tale to make,)

Fell into a sadness ; then into a fast ;

Thence to a watch ; thence into a weakness ;

Thence to a lightness ; and, by this declension,

Into the madness wherein now he raves."

Translated into the dullness of medical prose, the psychological opinion of the old courtier may be thus expressed. Disappointed and rejected in his ardent addresses to Ophelia, Hamlet became melancholy, and neglected to take food ; the result of fasting was the loss of sleep ; loss of sleep and loss of food

were followed by general weakness. This produced a lightness or instability of the mental functions, which passed into insanity. The suggestion made by Polonius to test the soundness of his view, that the Prince loved his daughter, and had fallen from his reason thereon, was sound and practical, namely, to arrange and to watch in ambuscade interviews between him and the persons most likely to excite his emotion. Moreover, Shakespeare was in some sort bound to introduce these interviews, inasmuch as they formed an important part of the old history.

The Queen did not partake of the King's anxiety to ascertain the cause of her son's madness. When he tells her that Polonius

"Hath found

The head and source of all your son's distemper,"

she replies—

"I doubt it is no other but the main—

His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage,"

Hamlet now for the first time appears in his feigned character. The feint is so close to nature, and there is underlying it withal so undeniable a substratum of morbid feeling, that in spite of ourselves, in opposition to our full knowledge, that in his antic disposition Hamlet is putting on a part, we cannot from the first dispossess ourselves of the idea, that a mind fallen, if not from the sovereignty of reason, at least from the balance of its faculties, is presented to us; so much is undirection of mind blended with pregnant sense and apprehension, both however perverted from the obvious line of sane thought; so much is the universal and caustic irony tinged with melancholic self-depreciation, and that longing for death which in itself alone constitutes a form of mental disease. In the various forms of partial insanity, it is a question of intricate science to distinguish between the portions of a man's conduct which result from the sound operations of mind, and those which result from disease. Hamlet's own assertion, "I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a hand-saw," is pregnant with a psychological truth which has often engaged the most skilful and laborious investigation, both of medical men and of lawyers. It has often been a question of life or death, of wealth or poverty, whether a criminal act was done, or a civil one performed, by a half-madman, when the mental wind was in the north-west of disease, or blowing from the sanatory south.

That in his actual unfeigned mental condition, Hamlet is far from being in a healthy state of mind, he is himself

keenly conscious, and acknowledges it to himself in his soliloquy upon the players :

“The spirit that I have seen  
May be a devil ; and the devil hath power  
To assume a pleasing shape ; yea, and perhaps,  
*Out of my weakness and my melancholy,*  
(As he is very potent with such spirits,)  
Abuses me to damn me.”

Upon this actual weakness of mind, and suicidal melancholy, combined with native humour and the biting irony into which his view of the world has sharpened it, is added the feigned form of insanity, the antic disposition wilfully put on, the dishevelled habiliments of person and conversation. The characteristics of this feigned form are those of mania, not indeed violent, acute, and demonstrative, but mischievous, reckless, and wayward, and so mingled with flashes of native wit, and disguised by the ground colour of real melancholy, shewing through the transparency of the feigned state, that Hamlet's character becomes one of the most interesting and complicated subjects of psychological study anywhere to be met with.

He is first introduced to us in his feigning condition with a fine touch to excite pity.

“*Queen.* But look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading.

*Pol.* Do you know me, my lord ?

*Hamlet.* Excellent well ; you are a fishmonger.”

Coleridge, and others remark upon this, that Hamlet's meaning is, you are sent to fish out this secret. But we are not aware that fishmongers are in the habit of catching their fish. May it not rather be that a fishmonger was referred to as a dealer in perishable goods, and notoriously dishonest ; and thus to give point to the wish :

“Then I would you were so honest a man.”

The writers who insist upon a profound meaning, even in Hamlet's most hurling words, have been mightily puzzled with the lines :

“For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god [or, a good], kissing carrion,” &c.

Coleridge refers to “some thought in Hamlet's mind, contrasting the daughter with the tedious old fool, her father.” Is it not rather a wild taunt upon the old man's jealous suspicion of his daughter, as if he had said, since the sun causes conception in such vile bodies, “let not your precious daughter walk in the sun.”

Perhaps he only intended to convey to Polonius, by a contemptuous simile, the intimation that he cared not for the daughter, and thus to throw him off the scent of his quest. The intention to offend the tedious old fool, and thus to dis-embarrass himself of his presence, becomes still more obvious in the description of old age which immediately follows : "Slanders, sir," &c.

The point of the satire, and the absence of unreason, strikes Polonius.

*Pol.* Though this be madness, yet there's method in it. Will you walk out o'the air, my lord ?

*Ham.* Into my grave ?

*Pol.* Indeed, that is out o'the air. How pregnant sometimes his replies are ! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of."

In this, again, the old man shews that though his wits may be somewhat superannuated, yet, either from reading or observation, he has no slight knowledge of mental disease.

What depth of melancholy and life weariness is there not apparent in the conclusion of the interview.

*Pol.* I will most humbly take my leave of you.

*Ham.* You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal ; except my life ! except my life ! except my life !"

But when his old school-fellows arrive, how frank and hearty his greeting ; how entirely is all disguise for the moment thrown aside ! The noble and generous native nature is nowhere made more manifest than in his reception of these friends of his youth, men to whom he once adhered, neighbours to his youth and humour. Until his keen eye discovers that they have been sent for, and are mean instruments, if not spies, in the hands of the king, he throws off all dissimulation with them, greeting them with right hearty and cheerful welcome. Yet, how soon his melancholy peers through the real but transient cheerfulness. The world is a prison, "in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons ; Denmark being one of the worst." If 'tis not so to his friend, yet is it so to him, from thinking it so, for "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so : to him it is a prison." The real prison, then, is his own mind, as, in the contrary mental state, a prison is no prison, for

"Stone walls do not a prison make,  
Nor iron bars a cage,"



Hamlet feels that he could possess perfect independence of circumstance, if the mind were free.

"*Ros.* Why, then your ambition makes it one ; 'tis too narrow for your mind.

*Ham.* Oh God ! I could be bounded in a nut-shell, and count myself a king of infinite space ; were it not that I have bad dreams."

The spies sound him further on the subject of ambition, thinking that disappointment at losing the succession to the crown may be the true cause of his morbid state. In this intention they decry ambition : 'tis but "a shadow's shadow." Hamlet replies logically enough, that if ambition is but a shadow, something beyond ambition must be the substance from which it is thrown. If ambition represented by a King is a shadow, the antitype of ambition represented by a beggar must be the opposite of the shadow, that is the substance. "Then are our beggars, bodies ; and our monarchs, and outstretch'd heroes, the beggars' shadows." He reduces the sophistry of his false friends to an absurdity, and closes the argument by declining to carry it further : "By my fay, I cannot reason." But Mr. Coleridge declares the passage to be unintelligible, and perhaps this interpretation may be too simple.

So far from being able to examine and recover the wind of Hamlet, his old schoolfellows are put by him to a course of questioning as to the motives of their presence, as to whether it is a free visitation of their own inclining, or whether they have been sent for. Their want of skill in dissemblance, and their weaker natures, submit the secret that they had been sent for to him, and the old "rights of fellowship," "the obligations of ever-preserved love," are immediately clouded by distrust : "Nay, then, I'll have an eye of you," he says. Yet notwithstanding he freely discloses to them the morbid state of his mind ; and, be it remarked, that in this exquisite picture of life-weariness, in which no image could be altered, no word omitted or changed, without obvious damage to its grand effect, he does not describe the maniacal state, the semblance of which he has put on before Ophelia and Polonius, but that morbid state of weakness and melancholy which he really suffers, of which he is thoroughly self-conscious, and which he avows in his first speech, before he has seen the Ghost :

"I have of late (but wherefore, I know not), lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of exercise : and, indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition, that this goodly frame, the

earth, seems to me a steril promontory ; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me, than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man ! how noble in reason ! how infinite in faculties ! in form, and moving, how express and admirable ! in action, how like an angel ! in apprehension, how like a god ! the beauty of the world ! the paragon of animals ! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust ? man delights not me, nor woman neither ; though, by your smiling, you seem to say so."

How exquisitely is here conveyed the state of the reasoning melancholiac, (melancholia without delusion,) who sees all things as they are, but feels them as they are not. All cheerfulness fled, all motive for action lost, he becomes listless and inert. He still recognises the beauty of the earth and the magnificence of the heavens, but the one is a tomb, and the other a funereal pall. His reason still shews him the place of man, a little lower than the angels, but the sources of sentiment are dried up, and, although no man-hater, he no longer derives pleasure from kindly affections. The waters of emotion are stagnant ; the pleasant places of the soul are sterile and desert.

Hamlet is not slow to confess his melancholy, and indeed it is the peculiarity of this mental state, that those suffering from it, seldom or never attempt to conceal it. A man will conceal his delusions, will deny and veil the excitement of mania, but the melancholiac is almost always readily confidential on the subject of his feelings. In this he resembles the hypochondriac, though not perhaps from exactly the same motive. The hypochondriac seeks for sympathy and pity ; the melancholiac frequently admits others to the sight of his mental wretchedness, from mere despair of relief and contempt of pity.

Although Hamlet is ready to shew to his friends the mirror of his mind, observe how jealously he hides the cause of its distortion. "But wherefore I know not," is scarcely consistent with the truth. In his first soliloquy, which we take as the key-note of his real mental state, he clearly enough indicates the source of his wretchedness, which the Queen also, with a mother's insight, has not been slow to perceive :

"His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage."

Again, how jealous he is that his friends should not refer his melancholy to love-sickness. With his acute insight into character, the opinion propounded by Polonius, that he was mad for

love, could not have escaped him ; a theory, moreover, which would be likely to wound his pride severely. Polonius had already made, in his presence, sundry aside observations on this point ; and the significant smile of Rosencrantz at his observation, "Man delights not me," would be likely to stimulate the sleeping suspicion that he was set down as a brain-sick, rejected lover, and some annoyance at an attempt to explain his madness as the result of his rejection by Ophelia, may combine with the suspicion that he is watched, to explain his harshness towards her in his subsequent interview with her.

How are we to understand his confession to the men he already distrusts, that in the appearance of his madness the King and Queen are deceived, except by his contempt for their discrimination, and his dislike to wear the antic disposition before all company.

When Polonius returns, he immediately puts on the full disguise, playing upon the old man's infirmities with the ironical nonsense about Jephtha, king of Israel, who had a daughter, &c., and skilfully leading Polonius by the nose on the scent of his own theory, "Still on my daughter."

When the players enter, however, he thoroughly throws off not only the antic counterfeit, but the melancholy reality of his disposition ; he shakes his faculties together, and becomes perfectly master of himself in courtesy, scholarship, and solid sense. His retort to Polonius, who objects to the speech of the player as too long, seems a valuable hint of Shakespeare's own opinion respecting the bad necessity he felt to introduce ribald scenes into his plays : "It shall to the barber's, with your beard. Prythee, say on : he's for a jig, or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps." What a noble sentiment in homely phrase, is that in which he marks the right motive of behaviour towards inferiors, and indeed towards all men. To Polonius's assurance that he will use the players according to their desert, the princely thought, in homely garb, is, "Odd's bodikin, man, much better : use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping ? Use them after your own honour and dignity : the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty."

Although he freely mocks the old lord chamberlain himself, he will not permit others to do so. His injunction to the player, "Follow that lord, and look you mock him not," not only indicates that the absurdities of Polonius are glaring, but that there is less real malice in Hamlet's heart towards the old man than he assumes the appearance of.

Hamlet decides upon the use he will make of the players with a promptitude that shews that his resolve, "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," is but the inactivity of an over-reflective melancholic mind, and that there is energy enough in him to seize any real occasion.

Hamlet's soliloquy, "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" resembles with a difference the one following his interview with the Captain: "How all occasions do inform against me." The latter one, after he has obtained satisfactory proof of his uncle's guilt, is far the least passionate and vehement, justifying in some degree the remark of Schlegel, that "in the last scene the main action either stands still or appears to retrograde." There is, however, an important distinction between these two soliloquies. The passionate outburst of the first has been stimulated by emotional imitation. The feigned passion of the player has touched the most sensitive chord of feeling, and given occasion to the vehemence of his angry self-rebuke. The account of the soldier's temper, "greatly to find quarrel in a straw, when honour's at the stake," sets him calmly to reflect and philosophize upon the motives of action. In these two soliloquies, we have to some extent Shakespeare's own exposition of Hamlet's natural character, and the motives of his conduct.

"The whole," says Schlegel, "was intended to shew that a consideration which would exhaust all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, to the very limits of human foresight, cripples the power of acting." In this tragedy of thought, we have a highly sensitive, reflecting, self-introspective mind, weak and melancholic, sorrow-stricken and life-weary. In a manner so awful that it might shake the soundest mind, this man is called upon to take away the life of a king and a relative, for a crime of which there exists no actual proof. Surely Hamlet is justified in pausing to weigh his motives and his evidence, in concluding not to act upon the sole dictation of a shadowy appearance, who may be the devil tempting his "weakness and his melancholy;" of deciding to "have grounds more relative than this," before he deliberately commits himself to an act of revenge which, even had the proof of his uncle's crime been conclusive and irrefragable, would have been repulsive to his inmost nature. Hamlet's indecision to act, and his over-readiness to reflect, are placed beyond the reach of critical discovery by his own analytical motive hunting, so eloquently expressed in the abstruse thinking in which he indulges. Anger and hatred against his uncle, self-contempt for his own irresolution, inconsistent as he feels

it with the courage of which he is conscious, disgust at his own angry excitement, and doubts of the testimony, upon which he is yet dissatisfied that he has not acted, present a state of intellectual and emotional conflict perfectly consistent with the character and the circumstances. If Hamlet had had as much faith in the Ghost as Macbeth had in the Witches, he would have struck without needing further evidence. If he had been a man of action, whose firstlings of the heart are those of the hand, he would have struck in the earliest heat of his revenge. He feels while he questions, that it is not true that he is "pigeon liver'd, and lacks gall to make oppression bitter;" but he does lack that resolution which "makes mouths at the invisible event;" he does make, "I would, wait upon, I will:" he does hesitate and procrastinate, and examine his motives, and make sure to his own mind of his justification, and allow us to see the painful labour of a noble and sensitive being, struggling to gain an unquestionable conviction of the right thing to do, in circumstances most awry and difficult; he does feel balancing motives, and painfully hear the ring of the yes and no in his head.

"Che sì, e nò nel capo mi tenziona."

Shall we think the less nobly of him because his hand is not ready to shed kindred blood; because, gifted with God-like discourse of reason, he does look before and after; because he does not take the law in his own hands upon his oppressor, until he has obtained conclusive evidence of his guilt; that he sought to make sure he was the natural justiciar of his murdered father, and not an assassin instigated by hatred and selfish revenge!

The report given to the King and Queen by the young courtiers was conceived to hide their failure in the mission of inquiry. The Prince, they say, "does confess he feels himself distracted," while he refuses to yield to them the cause:

"But, with a crafty madness, keeps aloof,  
When we would bring him on to some confession  
Of his true state.

He behaves

"Most like a gentleman.

But with much forcing of his disposition,"  
and he is falsely stated to have been "niggard of question,"  
but "most free of his reply."

They must, however, have been surprised to hear the condition in which they found their friend described by the King, as "turbulent and dangerous lunacy," since, up to this time, this is an untrue description of Hamlet's state, whatever

cause the King may subsequently have to apply it, when the death of Polonius makes him feel that Hamlet's "liberty is full of threats to all." The expression used by the King, that Hamlet "puts on this confusion," would seem to point to a suspicion, even at this early time, that his madness is but counterfeit. The Queen, however, appears to accept its reality, and, notwithstanding all the arguments of Polonius, she adheres to her first opinion of its cause. She doth *wish*, indeed, that Ophelia's "good beauties be the happy cause of Hamlet's wildness;" since, if so, she entertains the hope that her virtues may bring the remedy. It seems here implied that the King and Queen have been made aware of Ophelia's love for Hamlet; and both in this speech of the Queen, and in the one she makes over Ophelia's grave,

"I hop'd thou should'st have been my Hamlet's wife,"

it appears that the remedy by which the Queen at this time hopes to attain his recovery to "his wonted way again," is by his marriage. This understanding, however, or arrangement, is nowhere expressed, and indeed, although the Queen may desire to think with Polonius respecting the cause and nature of her son's malady, her mother's knowledge and woman's tact lead her conviction nearer to the truth, when she avows the real cause to be "His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage."

The soliloquy which follows, "To be, or not to be," is one of the most exquisite pieces of poetic self-communing ever conceived. Imbued with a profoundly melancholy view of human life, which is relieved by no gleam of cheerfulness, illumined by no ray of hope, the mind of the unhappy Prince dwells with longing desire, not on a future and happier state of existence, but on annihilation. He wishes to end the troubles of life in a sleep without a dream, and is restrained alone from seeking it by the apprehension of

"What dreams may come,

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil ;"

by the fear, in fact, of a future state, in which the calamities of this life may be exchanged for others more enduring, in the undiscovered country of the future. This "dread of something after death" scarcely deserves the name of conscience, which he applies to it. The fear of punishment is the lowest motive for virtuous action, and is far removed in its nature from the inward principle of doing right for its own sake. The word, however, does not seem to be here applied in its higher sense, as the arbiter of right, but rather in that of reflective meditation. It is this that makes "cowards of us all." It is this that prevents Hamlet seeking his own rest

in the annihilation he longs for. It is by this also, that his hand is withheld from the act of wild justice and revenge upon which his mind sits on brood. It is thus that he accurately describes the *timbre* of his own mind, so active to think, so inert to act, so keen to appreciate the evils of life, so averse to take any active part against them.

"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all ;  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought ;  
And enterprises of great pith and moment,  
With this regard, their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action."

The motive against suicide here adduced is undoubtedly a mean and fallacious one. It is mean, because it is cowardly ; the coward want of patience manfully to endure the evils of this mortal life being kept in check by the coward fear of future punishment. It is fallacious, because it balances the evils of this life against the apprehended ones of the future ; therefore when, in the judgment of the sorely afflicted, the weight of present evils more than counterpoises those which the amount of religious faith may point to in the threatening future, the argument here advanced would justify suicide. There is nothing in which men differ more than in their various endowments with the courage of fortitude and the courage of enterprise ; and it is certain that of two men equally groaning and sweating under a weary life, oppressed by the same weight of calamity, if solely actuated by the reasoning here employed by Hamlet in the contemplation of suicide, one would have the courage to endure the present, and the other would have the courage to face the perils of the future. Courage has been described as the power to select the least of two evils ; the evil of pain and death, for instance, rather than that of shame. If this be so, it must yet be admitted that either one of two given evils may be the greatest to different men ; and courage may urge one man to fight, and another to flee, either in the vulgar wars of Kings and Kaisars, or in the more earnest trials of the battle of life. The converse of the proposition will also be true, and cowardice will either make us stand by our arms or basely desert. The terrible question of suicide, therefore, is not to be thus resolved ; indeed the only motive against suicide which will stand the test, is that which Hamlet in his first speech indicates, namely, obedience to the law of God ; that obedience which, in the heaviest calamities, enables the Christian to "be patient and endure;" that obedience

which, in the most frantic desire to put off this mortal coil, can withhold the hand by this one consideration, that

"The Eternal hath set His canon 'gainst self-slaughter."

The motives made use of by Hamlet in his earlier and later contemplation of suicide, indicate his religious and his philosophic phase of character. Faith in the existence of a God, and of a future state of existence, is so ingrained in his mind that it powerfully influences his conduct, and constantly turns up to invalidate, if not to refute, that materialist philosophy with which he is indoctrinated, and which leads him so constantly to trace the changes of matter, as in

"Imperial Cæsar, dead and turned to clay,  
Might stop a hole, to keep the wind away."

This, perhaps, was the philosophy which Horatio and he had learned at Wittenburg, the fallacy of which the Ghost had seemed at first to prove. Yet it is strange how entirely Hamlet appears at times to have forgotten the Ghost and its revelations. The soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," is that of a man to whom any future state of existence is a matter of sincere doubt. He appears as one of those who would not be persuaded, "though one rose from the dead."

After the soul-harrowing recital made to him by the perturbed spirit of his father, in which the secrets of his purgatorial prison-house are not indeed unfolded, but in which they are so broadly indicated that no man who had seen so much of the "eternal blazon" of the spirit-world, could find a corner in his soul for the concealment of a sceptical doubt, after this, the soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," presumes either an entire forgetfulness of the awful revelation which had been made to him, or the existence of a state of mind so overwhelmed with suicidal melancholy as to be incapable of estimating testimony. Now it is well enough known that the most complete sensational and intellectual proofs go for nothing, when opposed to the stubborn strength of a morbid emotion, and if Hamlet reasons upon the future life, and hunts matter through its transmigrations like a sceptical physiologist, it must be accepted as the result of mental disease which has perverted the instinct of self-preservation, and made him desire nothing so much as simple unconditional annihilation.

In his interview with the much enduring Ophelia which follows the soliloquy, Hamlet has been accused of unworthy harshness. Two considerations will tend to modify, though not altogether to remove this judgment. The reader is aware that Ophelia entertains the fondest love towards Hamlet; but he, ignorant of this, only knows that, after accepting the tender



of his affections, she has repulsed him with every appearance of heartless cruelty. He feels her to be, the cause in himself, of "the pangs of despised love;" yet he at first addresses her in a manner indicating his own faithfulness and fond appreciation of all her goodness and virtue, as if he could best approach Heaven through her gracious intercession.

"The fair Ophelia : Nymph, in thy orisons  
Be all my sins remember'd."

What follows is so opposed to the tenderness of this greeting, that we are compelled to assume that he sees through the snare set for him ; and that in resisting it he works himself up into one of those ebullitions of temper to which he is prone. He sees that Ophelia is under the constraint of other presence, as what keen-sighted lover would not immediately distinguish whether his mistress, in whatever mood she may be, feels herself alone with him, or under the observation of others. He has before shewn his repugnance to the idea that he is love-sick mad. He knows that Polonius thus explains his conduct ; and his harshness to Ophelia is addressed to Polonius, and any others who may be in hiding, more than to Ophelia herself. Yet the harshest words, and those most unfit to be used to any woman, are the true reflex of the morbid side of his mind, which passion and suspicion have cast into the bitterest forms of expression. The true melancholy and the counterfeit madness are strangely commingled in this scene. The latter is shewn by disjointed exclamations and half-reasonings. "Ha, ha ! are you honest?" "Are you fair?" "I did love you once." "I loved you not," &c. And by the wild form in which the melancholy is here cast. "Get thee to a nunnery : why would'st thou be a breeder of sinners?" "What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth!" "Where's your father?" Ophelia tells a white lie. "At home, my lord." Hamlet knows better, and sends a random shaft into his ambuscade. "Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in his own house."

"*Ham.* Get thee to a nunnery : why would'st thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest ; but yet I could accuse me of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me : I am very proud, revengeful, and ambitious ; with more offences at my beck, than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven ! We are arrant knaves, all ; believe none of us : go thy ways to a nunnery. Where's your father?"

"*Ham.* If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry : Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery ; farewell : or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool ; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go ; and quickly too. Farewell.

*Oph.* Heavenly powers, restore him !

*Ham.* I have heard of your paintings too, well enough : God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another ; you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nick-name God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance : Go to, I'll no more of't ; it hath made me mad. I say, we will have no more marriages : those that are married already, all but one, shall live ; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go."

Partly dictated by jealous fear that Ophelia may solace her pain with some other lover, it is yet an attempt to wean from himself any fondness which may remain. The burthen is, Grieve not for me, but do not marry another. The latter speech is directed to the Queen in ambush.

What exquisite pathos ! what wail of despairing love in Ophelia's lament over the ruin of her lover's mind ! What fine discrimination of the excellencies marred ! What forgetfulness of self in the grief she feels for him ! Not for her own loss, but for his fall, is she "of ladies most deject and wretched," although it is the dying swan-song of her own sanity.

"O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown !

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword :

The expectancy and rose of the fair state,

The glass of fashion, and the mould of form,

The observed of all observers : quite, quite down !

And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,

That suck'd the honey of his musick vows,

Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,

Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh ;

That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth

Blasted with ecstasy : O, woe is me !

To have seen what I have seen, see what I see !"

The King, in the meanwhile, whose keenness of vision had not been dimmed by the mists of affection, like that of Ophelia, nor by self-conceit, like that of Polonius, has detected the prevalence of melancholy and sorrow in the assumed wildness of the Prince :

"Love ! his affections do not that way tend ;

Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,

Was not like madness. There's something in his soul  
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood ;  
And, I do doubt, the hatch, and the disclose,  
Will be some danger."

Polonius thinks well of the King's scheme to get Hamlet out of the way by pretext of benefiting his health by change of scene ; though with senile obstinacy he still holds to his opinion that the commencement of his grief sprung in neglected love. To test this further, he proposes the interview with the Queen, who is to be round with her son, and whose conference Polonius will hear. If this scheme fails, let him be sent to England without delay, or be put into confinement.

In his speech to the players, Hamlet's attention, abstracted for a moment from external sorrows, leaves his mind perfectly free from the clouds of melancholy, and permits him to display his powerful and sarcastic intelligence without let or hindrance. His innate nobleness of mind is not less clearly portrayed in the conversation with Horatio which immediately follows. The character of this judicious and faithful friend, as it is manifested throughout the piece, and especially as it is here portrayed by Hamlet himself, forms a pleasing contrast to that of his princely friend. The one passionate in emotion, inert in action ; the other cool in temper, prompt in conduct. The maxim *noscitur a sociis*, may be narrowed to the closer and truer one, "Shew me your friend, and I'll tell your mind ;" and in a true and deep friendship, there will always be found much uniformity of sentiment, though it may be, and indeed often is combined with great diversity of temperament. Deep friendship rarely exists between persons whose emotional tendencies closely resemble. A true friend is generally chosen in some contrast of disposition, as if the basis of this rare and noble affection were the longing to remedy the imperfection of one's nature by complementing ourselves with those good qualities of another, in which we are deficient.

Before this time, Hamlet has confided to his friend the terrible secret of the Ghost's message, the truth of which he proposes to test by the scheme of the play, and thus to sting the conscience and unkennel the occult guilt of his uncle.

When the court enter, Hamlet puts on his antics in his ironical half-reasonings with the King and Polonius, and his banter with Ophelia. The manners and playhouse licence of the time explain the broad indelicacy of the latter ; but that he so publicly indulged it may be accepted as proof of his

desire to mark his indifference to the woman who had, as he thought, heartlessly jilted him, and whose love he had reason to think had been "as brief as the posy of a ring."

As the play within the play draws to its climax, Hamlet becomes so excited and reckless that it is a wonder he does not spoil his scheme by exposing it to the King, who, on the point of taking the alarm, exclaims, "Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?" He is little likely to be reassured by Hamlet's disclaimer, "They poison in jest; no offence i'the world."

When the crisis has come, and the King's guilt has been unkenneled, and Hamlet is again left alone with Horatio, before whom he would not feign, his real excitement borders so closely upon the wildest antics of the madness he has put on in craft, that there is little left to distinguish between the two. He quotes senseless doggerel, will join "a fellowship in a cry of players," will "take the ghost's word for a thousand pound," and is altogether in that state of flippant merriment which men sometimes assume to defend themselves from deep emotion; as they sometimes jest in the face of physical horrors or mental woe. It is like the hysterical laughter of intense emotion; though not quite. It is partly that levity of mind which succeeds intense strain of thought and feeling, as naturally as it is to yawn and stretch after one long-continued wearisome position. This mood of unfeigned flippancy continues after the re-entrance of his treacherous school friends, well expressing its tone in the doggerel,

"For if the king like not the comedy,

Why then, belike,—he likes it not, perdy."

To the courtier's request, that he will put his "discourse into some frame," he rejoins, "I am tame, sir: pronounce." He affects a display of politeness, but the "courtesy is not of the right breed." To the entreaty to give "a wholesome answer" to the Queen's message, he affords an unconscious indication that some at least of his wildness is also not of the right breed, since he appeals to it as a reality. "Make you a wholesome answer; my wit's diseased." Of a disease, however, which leaves the wit too quick for their play. He sees through them thoroughly. To the silly-enough inquiry of Rosencrantz, "Good my lord, what is your cause of distemper? you do, surely, but bar the door of your own liberty, if you deny your griefs to your friend;"—he gives answer, laying bare the selfish motives of the other, "Sir, I lack advancement." Suppressing irony, he becomes for a moment serious with them; "Why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as

if you would drive me into a toil?" And then that lesson of sarcastic earnestness, to prove that he knew the breed of of their friendship and solicitude for him.

"Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass: and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ; yet cannot you make it speak. S'blood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me."

The veil which he deigns to put on before these mean and treacherous ephemera of the court, is of the thinnest counterfeit; but with Polonius the mental antics are more pronounced, for with him he rejoices in spiteful mischief, as when the tiresome old man "fools him to the top of his bent." "Do you see yonder cloud," &c. How thoroughly in the surface all this flippancy was, the soliloquy immediately following fully proves. The dread purpose is gathering to action, and the mind was never more sad than all this while, under the mask of intellectual buffoonery.

"'Tis now the very witching time of night," &c.

At this juncture the King re-appears, with his mind thoroughly made up on the point that Hamlet has in him something dangerous, if his doubts are not also solved on the point of his madness. The play which discovers the King to Hamlet, must also have discovered his knowledge of the murder to the King. Before this time, Claudius thinks his nephew's madness must be watched, and although he fears that the hatch and disclose of his melancholy will be some danger, it does not appear that he yet proposes to send him to England with any purpose upon his life. After the play, and before the death of Polonius, the King's apprehension is excited.

"I like him not; nor stands it safe with us  
To let his madness range."

"The terms of our estate may not endure  
Hazard so near us, as doth hourly grow  
Out of his lunes."

"We will fetters put upon this fear,  
Which now goes too free-footed."

Although the King speaks to the courtiers of dispatching their commission to England forthwith, and desires them to arm to this speedy voyage, it can scarcely be that at this

time he is guilty of that treacherous design on Hamlet's life which he unfolds after the death of Polonius. The agony of repentance for his past crime, so vehemently expressed in the soliloquy, "Oh, my offence is rank," &c., appears scarcely consistent with the project of a new murder on his mind. The King has no inconsiderable mental endowments and moral courage, though personally he is a coward, and a sottish debauchee. But notwithstanding this personal cowardice, we must accept Hamlet's abuse of him, in contrast to the manly perfection of his father, as applying rather to his appearance, and to his deficiency in those soldier-like qualities which would command respect in a nation of warriors, than to his intellect. Although the King holds fencing, that quality of Laertes which hath plucked envy from Hamlet, "as of the unworthiest siege;" yet, although a plotter, "a cut-purse of the empire and the rule," and, according to the description of his son-in-law, altogether a contemptible person, intellectually, he is by no means despicable. That burst of eloquent remorse seems too instinct with the longing for real repentance to have been uttered by this cowardly fratricide, who even in the act is juggling with heaven itself. We feel no pity for the scheming hypocrite, in spite of the anguish which wrings from him the cry :

"O wretched state ! O bosom, black as death !  
O limed soul ; that struggling to be free,  
Art more engag'd !"

If in that fine appreciation of mercy and of Heaven's justice, in which

"There is no shuffling ; there the action lies  
In his true nature ; and we ourselves compell'd,  
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,  
To give in evidence ;"

if these thoughts appear too just to be expressed by so foul a mouth, even as the polished wisdom of the precepts given to Laertes appear inconsistent with the senile capacity of Polonius, we must attribute the fact to that lavish wealth of power and beauty which we find only in Shakespeare ; who sometimes in wanton extravagance sets pearls in pinchbeck, and strews diamonds on the sanded floor ; who pours nectar into the wooden cup, and feeds us with ambrosia when we should have been satisfied with bread.

It will scarcely be denied by those who have escaped that blindness of bigotry, which the intense admiration Shakespeare naturally excites in those who study him closely accounts for and excuses, that he sometimes gives to one

of his personages an important speech, somewhat out of harmony with the general delineation of the character ; his characters being in other parts so thoroughly natural and consistent, that he is able to do this without injury to the general effect. But when he does so, what breadth of wisdom and beauty of morality does not the discursive caprice afford !

The soliloquy of the King, a homily in thirty lines, on the mercy and justice of God, and the utter folly of hypocrisy in prayer, is followed by the speech of Hamlet, "Now might I do it pat," &c., containing sentiments which Johnson designates as atrocious.

We are inclined to think that in writing both this speech and the King's soliloquy, Skakespeare had in mind the intention of conveying instruction on the nature and office of prayer, rather than that of developing his plot. From the King's speech, we learn that the mercy of the sweet Heavens is absolutely unlimited, the two-fold force of prayer to bring aid and pardon, the condition of forgiveness, namely a true repentance which does not shame justice by retaining the offence, and the worthlessness of word prayers. We know that the prayers of the King are hollow and unavailing, but so does not Hamlet, who is made to bear testimony to the all-sufficient efficacy of prayer, since it can save so damnable a villain as his uncle. His father had been

"Cut off even in the blossom of his sin,  
Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd."

"He took my father grossly, full of bread ;  
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May."

so that his audit with Heaven was likely to stand heavy with him. Villain as his uncle was,

"Bloody bawdy villain !

Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain !"

still there was that in prayer which would fit and season him for his passage to the future life, and, if taken "in the purging of his soul," why, "so he goes to Heaven."

Both of these speeches seem to have been written to impress most forcibly the efficacy of sincere and prayerful repentance. It was to the religious sentiment that the revival of play acting was due, but when Shakespeare wrote this had already ceased to be a common subject of theatrical representation, and (*Measure for Measure* perhaps excepted,) in no other of his Dramas has it been very prominently brought forward. The motive for delay, assigned in this speech, was certainly neither Christian or merciful. Yet the act itself was merciful, and the more horrid bent for which

Hamlet excused his inaction, was but speculative. A conscience yet unsatisfied that his purposed deed was a just and righteous one, rather than a cruel thirst for the full measure of revenge, appears to have been Hamlet's real motive for delay at this period. His opportunities for assassinating the King, had he so desired, were certainly not limited to this moment, yet he forbore to use them, until his uncle's murderous treachery towards himself at length resolved him to quit accounts with his own arm. Moreover, it is the Romanist theology which is represented in this play, and its doctrines must be taken into consideration in judging of the excuse which Hamlet makes for delaying to kill the King, until "about some act what has no relish of salvation in't." The future state of punishment is represented as a terminable purgatory; Hamlet's father is doomed "for a certain time" to fast in fires, until his crimes are burnt and purged away. Hamlet swears by the rood, and he lays the stress of a catholic upon the incest of the Queen becoming her husband's brother's wife. At the funeral of Ophelia it is the catholic ritual which is in abeyance. Great command has over-swayed *the order* of priory or abbey, where the funeral is taking place. The priest says, "her death was doubtful;" and,

"We should profane the service of the dead,  
To sing a *requiem*, and such rest to her,  
As to peace-parted souls."

In this passage, the Romanist idea is for the third time produced that the soul's future depends upon the mode of leaving this life, rather than upon the manner in which this life has been spent.

In the interview with his mother, the idea of Hamlet's profound affection for her has been most skilfully conveyed in the painful effort with which he endeavours to make her conscious of her position, to set before her a glass where she may see her inmost part, to speak daggers to her, to be cruel, but not unnatural. From the speech,

"A bloody deed, almost as bad, good mother,  
As kill a King, and marry with his brother."

it would appear that he entertained some suspicions of his mother's complicity in the murder of his father, and that these words were tentative to ascertain whether her conscience was sore on that side. From what follows we must suppose this suspicion allayed. The readiness with which Hamlet seizes the opportunity to strike the blow which killed Polonius, under the belief that he struck the King, is of a piece with a character too meditative to frame and follow a course of action,



yet sudden and rash in action when the opportunity presents itself. The rapid action with which he utilizes the players, with which he circumvents his treacherous schoolfellows, with which he at last kills the King, resembles the quick blow which sends to his account "the wretched, rash, intruding fool," whom he mistakes for his betters. So long as resolution can be "sickled o'er with the pale cast of thought," so long as time is allowed for any scruple to be listened to, he thinks too precisely on the event, and lives to say the thing's to do. But let the opportunity of action present itself, and he is quick to seize it, as he would have been dilatory in seeking it. It is the meditative, inactive man, who often seizes opportunities for action, or what he takes for such, with the greatest eagerness. Unable to form and follow a deliberate course of action, he is too ready to lend his hand to circumstances, as they arise without his intervention. Sometimes he fails miserably, as in the death of Polonius; sometimes he succeeds, as when he finds occasion to praise that rashness, which too often stands him in the place of steady purpose.

"Rashly,

And praised be rashness for it,—let us know,  
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,  
When our dear plots do pall; and that should teach us,  
There's a Divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will."

The comments of Hamlet upon the death of Polonius, if they had been calmly spoken by a man holding the even tenour of his way through life, would have deserved the moralist's reprobation quite as much as his speech over the praying King. To us they tell of that groundwork of unsound emotion upon which the almost superhuman intellectual activity of the character is founded. In Hamlet's life-weary, melancholy state, with his attention fixed elsewhere, such an event as the death of Polonius would have a very different effect to that which it would have had upon so sensitive and noble a mind, if its condition were healthy. His attention at the time is concentrated upon one train of ideas, his feelings are pre-occupied, his sympathies somewhat indurated to the sufferings of others, and his comments upon them are likely, therefore, to appear unfeeling.

The Queen indeed, with affectionate invention, represents to the King the very opposite view. She says "he weeps for what he's done;" his natural grief shewing itself pure in his very madness, like a precious ore in a base mineral, silver in lead ore. It is, however, not thus that Hamlet is repre-

sented "to draw toward an end" with the father of his mistress, and to deposit the carrion.

The ideas which almost excluded the wrong he had done Polonius from Hamlet's thoughts, now become expressed with a vehemence inconsistent with sound mind. The manner in which he dallies with the idea of his mother's incest, using images of the grossest kind—the blighting comparison of that mildewed ear, his uncle, with his warrior father—the vehement denunciation of his uncle—"a murderer and a villain, a slave," "a vice of kings, a cutpurse of the empire and the rule," "a king of shreds and patches," "a toad," "a bat, a gib,"—all this verifies his own sneer on himself, that while he cannot act he can curse "like a very drab." Although he succeeds in his purpose of turning the Queen's eyes into her very soul, and shewing black and grained spots there, it must be admitted that this excessive vehemence is not merely so much out of the belt of rule as might be justified by the circumstances, but that it indicates a mind unhinged; and never does Hamlet appear less sane than when he is declaring

"That I essentially am not in madness,  
But mad in craft."

Hamlet's behaviour in the second ghost scene is more excited and terrified than in the former one. The apparition comes upon him when in a less firm and prepared mood. The first interview is expected, and each petty artery is knit to hardihood. The second is wholly unexpected, and comes upon him at a time when his mind is wrought to passionate excitement; and it is far easier for the mind to pass from one state of emotional excitement to the opposite, than from a state of self-possessed tranquillity to one of excitement. It is thus with Hamlet's rapid transition from passionate vehemence, with which he is describing his uncle's crimes and qualities, to the ecstasy of fear, which seizes him when his father's shade once more stands before him. The sting of conscience also adds force to the emotion of awe. He has neglected the dread command, the sacred behest, of the buried majesty of Denmark. With unworthy doubts and cowardly procrastination, his purpose has become almost blunted. His doubts, however, have now vanished; he no longer entertains the thought that "the spirit he has seen may be the devil;" he no longer questions whether it is "a spirit of health, or goblin damned;" but accepts the appearance implicitly as the gracious figure of his father. Since the first appearance of the unearthly visitant, he has caught the conscience of the fratricide King, and unkenneled the dark secret of his guilt;

therefore it is that at this second visitation the feeling of awe is unmixed with doubt and that touch of defiance which is so perceptible on the former one. Since that, moreover, his nerves have been rudely shaken ; he has lived in the torture of extreme anxiety and profound grief, and the same cause would produce upon him a greater effect. Even while he is vehemently railing at the criminal whom he had been called upon to punish, the Ghost appears.

*Ham.* How is it with you, lady ?

*Queen.* Alas ! how is't with you ?

That you do bend your eye on vacancy,  
And with the incorporeal air do hold discourse ?  
Forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep ;  
And as the sleeping soldiers in the alarm,  
Your bedded hair, like life in excrements,  
Starts up, and stands on end. O gentle son,  
Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper  
Sprinkle cool patience."

*Queen.* This is the very coinage of your brain :  
This bodiless creation ecstasy  
Is very cunning in.

*Ham.* Ecstasy !

My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,  
And makes as healthful music : It is not madness,  
That I have utter'd : bring me to the test,  
And I the matter will re-word ; which madness  
Would gambol from. Mother, for love of grace,  
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,  
That not your trespass, but my madness, speaks :  
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place ;  
While rank corruption, mining all within,  
Infects unseen."

It is in this agony of awe that he calls upon the heavenly guards to save and protect him, that his eyes wildly indicate alarm, that his bedded hairs stand on end, that the heat and flame of his distemper appears to lack all patience. It is in this agony of awe that he feels himself so unnerved, that he entreats his father not to look upon him, lest he should be thus rendered incapable of all action, and only live to weep. During the brief space of the Ghost's second appearance, Hamlet's extremity of fear can scarcely be overrated. Still it is the fear of awe, not of that horror which petrifies Macbeth in the banquet scene. Moreover, in Hamlet the reaction tends to tears, in Macbeth it was to rage.

There is something exquisitely touching in the regard which

the poor Ghost shews towards the frail partner of his earthly state. The former injunction

"Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught."

had scarcely been obeyed ; and now the entreaty

"O, step between her and her fighting soul,"

is a fine touch of the warrior's heart, whose rough and simple silhouette is thrown upon the page in those two lines of unsurpassable descriptive terseness.

"So frowned he once, when in an angry parle,  
He smote the sleded Polack on the ice."

The Ghost, indeed, is a character as never ghost was before, So far from being a neutral *it*, a *thing*, the buried majesty of Denmark is highly personal in his simple Slavonic majesty. Though he instigates revenge in the old viking, rather than in that of the Christian spirit, though he protests against the luxury and damned incest which defiled his royal bed, yet is he nobly pitiful to the wretched woman, through whose frailty the transgression arises. After the intercession of the Ghost, Hamlet's manner to his mother entirely changes. In his former reference to the incest, he makes her a full partner of the crime. In his subsequent one he represents the King as the tempter, and supposes her future conduct as that of "a queen fair, sober, wise;" and to the end of the piece he gives her his affection and confidence.

That the apparition was not an hallucination, as accounted by the Queen, a bodiless creation caused by the diseased brain, is known to Hamlet and the reader of the play by its previous appearance, and by its reference to the disclosure then made. Its speech distinguishes it from the supposed ghost of Banquo. It is a stupid error to put the Ghost on the stage clad in armour on this second occasion.

"My father, in his *habit* as he lived !"

indicates that this time the design of the poet was to represent him in the weeds of peace. The quarto edition, indeed, gives as a stage direction, "Enter the Ghost, in his night-gown." The appearance was suited to the place, even as the cap-a-pie armament to the place of warlike guard. Unlike the appearance on the battery, which was seen by all who were present, on this occasion it was only visible to Hamlet, and invisible to his mother. Ghosts were supposed to have the power to make themselves visible and invisible to whom they chose ; and the dramatic effect of the Queen's surprise at Hamlet's behaviour was well worth the poetic exercise of the privilege. The Queen, indeed, must have been thoroughly

convinced of her son's madness, in despite of his own disclaimer, and of the remorseless energy with which he wrung her own remorseful heart. Her exclamation, "Alas, he's mad!" is thoroughly sincere; and though her assurance that she has "no life to breathe" the secret that he is "but mad in craft," seems to apply her assent to the fact, Hamlet's language and demeanour were certainly not such as were calculated to convince her of the truth of this avowal. She is therefore likely to have spoken not falsely, but according to her convictions, when she immediately afterwards says that her son is

"Mad as the sea, and wind, when both contend  
Which is the mightier."

The Queen in this ghost scene, and Lady Macbeth in the banquet scene, are placed in very similar circumstances: they both refer those appearances to a morbid state of the brain, by which the son of the one and the husband of the other are so terribly moved; they both, but in very different degrees, are endeavouring to conceal remorse. But the Danish Queen is affrighted at the behaviour of her son; the Scottish Queen, incapable of fear, is mainly anxious about the effect which her husband's conduct will have upon the bystanders. The one gives free expression to her alarm,—she allows amazement to sit visible on her expression and attitude; the other, firm and self-possessed, is the ruling spirit of the hour. The one is a middle-aged voluptuary who, incestuously married to a drunkard of degraded appearance, has feelings so little refined that, until her son holds up the mirror to her soul, she is barely sensible of her own shameless position; the other, a great criminal, is as conscious as she is outwardly confident. The one is animated with the spirit of Belial; the other with that of Satan.

Hamlet finds that his assumed madness, which he puts on and off rather capriciously, is likely to become an impediment to a right understanding with his mother. He sees her ready to deny the reality of her own trespass, because it is mirrored with the demeanour, and, in some sort, with the words of ecstasy. He therefore offers as tests of his sanity, that his pulse is temperate, that his attention is under command, and his memory faithful; tests which we are bound to pronounce about as fallacious as could well be offered, and which could only apply to febrile delirium and mania. The pulse in mania averages about fifteen beats above that of health; that of the insane generally, including maniacs, only averages nine beats above the healthy standard: the pulse of melancholia

and monomania is not above the average. That a maniac would gambol from reproducing in the same words any statement he had made, is true enough in the acute forms of the disease ; but it is not so in numberless instances of chronic mania, nor in melancholia or partial insanity. The dramatic representations which are in vogue in some asylums prove the power of attention and memory preserved by many patients ; indeed, the possessor of the most brilliant memory we ever met with was a violent and mischievous maniac. He would quote page after page from the Greek, Latin, and French classics. The *Iliad*, and the best plays of Molière in particular, he seemed to have at his fingers' ends. In raving madness, however, the two symptoms referred to by Hamlet are as a rule present. The pulse is accelerated, and the attention is so distracted by thick-flowing fancies that an account can scarcely be given of the same matter in the same words. It is, therefore, to this form alone that the test of verbal memory applies.

The death of "the unseen good old man" Polonius, which Hamlet in his "lawless fit" and "brainish apprehension" had effected, adds to the alarm of the King, already excited by the "pranks too broad to bear with" of the play. The courtiers and the Queen do not seem to have inquired how it was that the King was so marvellously distempered with choler, wherefore he became so much offended with the catastrophe of the play. Like good courtiers, they accept his humour unquestioning. Now, however, the King has a good presentable excuse for alarm.

"O heavy deed !

It had been so with us, had we been there :

His liberty is full of threats to all ;

To you yourself, to us to every one.

Alas ! how shall this bloody deed be answer'd ?

It will be laid to us, whose providence

Should have kept short, restrain'd, and out of haunt,

This mad young man : but, so much was our love,

We would not understand what was most fit ;

But, like the owner of a foul disease,

To keep it from divulging, let it feed

Even on the pith of life."

From which it appears that the all-observing eye of the poet had noted the custom of the world to conceal the occurrence of insanity within the family circle, a custom which still prevails, and from which much evil is wrought. To keep secret the existence of this dreaded malady, the relatives of an insane person oftentimes postpone all effectual treat-

ment until the time of its usefulness is past ; and they forego measures of security until some terrible calamity results. Accepting the ignorant and wicked opinion that disease of the brain is disgraceful, they give grounds to others for holding this opinion, by the sacrifices they are willing to make, that the existence of insanity in the family may be concealed. They not only sacrifice to this the safety of the public, but that of the patient himself with his present comfort and the probable means of restoration. From motives variously compounded of selfishness and ignorance, they ignore the two great facts in the treatment of insanity that it must be early, and that it must be conducted in scenes remote from those influences in which it has its origin. Under a real or assumed regard for the feelings of the unhappy patients they retain them at homes which may once have been happy, but which now have become places of moral torture, where every look inflicts a wound, every word probes a sore. When the patient is removed to fresh scenes, and to that skilfully arranged repose of the excited mental functions, which is provided by judicious treatment, the misery inflicted by the disease abates, even as the anguish of a broken limb is allayed by simple rest and well-arranged position. If all asylums for the educated and the wealthy were what they ought to be, or even what asylums for the poor actually are, the detention of the insane, amidst the moral miseries of home, would be utterly inexcusable. At present it has the excuse of prejudice, and of fear that the family interest may be injured.

In the following scene with Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the King, Hamlet is again in his most antic disposition of mind. His sarcastic irony to his two old school-fellows, whom he now trusts as he would adders fanged, is more directly insulting than before. They are sponges that soak up the King's countenance, the ape's first morsel, first mouthed, last swallowed. Still he throws a thicker cloak of counterfeit unreason over his sarcasm than he has done before. His replies,

"The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body. The king is nothing."

"A thing or nothing ; bring me to him. Hide fox, and all after ;"

his answers to the King, "Farewell, dear mother," "My mother : Father and mother is man and wife ; man and wife is one flesh ; and so, my mother"—are fairly on a par in unreasoning suggestiveness with his reply to Polonius. "For if the sun breed maggots," &c. These mad absurdities are never altogether meaningless, and never altogether foreign to

the natural train of his own thoughts. The description of Polonius at supper, "not where he eats, but where he is eaten," is the foreshadowing idea of the serious and earnest meditations on the mutability of matter in which he indulges over the church-yard skulls. "A man may fish with a worm that hath eat of a king; and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm." And thus, "A king may go a progress," &c. 'Tis the very same speculation as that so seriously expressed to his friend.

"To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till he find it stopping a bung-hole?"

This is the philosophy he had learnt at Wittenburg, and which he toyed with to the last. He had learnt, indeed, its inadequacy to explain all things by sights which make  
"us fools of nature,

So horribly to shake our disposition,

With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls."

He had been compelled to acknowledge that there "are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of" in this philosophy. Still this form of speculation was the habit of the mind, and whether in antic disposition of madness, or in earnest converse with his friend it is found his frequent topic. Might not this habit of dwelling upon the material laws to which our flesh is subject, have been resorted to as a kind of antidote to those "thoughts beyond the reaches of the soul," to which his father's apparition had given rise,—his father, whose "bones had burst their cerements," whose sepulchre had ope'd its ponderous jaws to cast him up again. Was not this materialist speculation a struggle against these thoughts, and akin to the unconscious protest against the Ghost, that beyond the grave is

"The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn

No traveller returns."

Alas for Hamlet! What with his material philosophy and his spiritual experiences, there was contention enough in that region of the intellect which abuts upon veneration to unhinge the soundest judgment; let alone the grief, and shame, and just anger, of which his uncle's crimes and his mother's frailty were the more than sufficient cause, in so sensitive a mind.

In the following scene with the captain of the army of Fortinbras, we have a comment upon the folly of useless war, and an occasion for another fine motive-weighting soliloquy; like the prayer scene, useless indeed to the progress of the



piece, but exquisite in itself. Never does Shakespeare seem to have found a character so suited to give noble utterance to his own most profound meditations as in Hamlet. It is on this account that we unconsciously personify Shakespeare in this character, as we personify Byron in Childe Harold, or Sterne in Yorick, and, may we not add, Goëthe in Faust.

The soliloquy, "How all things do inform against me," marks a state of inclination to act, in advance of that manifested in the soliloquy beginning, "Oh, what a peasant slave am I!" but still not screwed up to the sticking point of resolve. The gross example of soldiers, who "for a fantasy, and trick of fame," are so lavish of life and limb, places before Hamlet, in the strongest light, his own craven scruples, and, as he chuses to say, his apprehension of results. But on this point he does not do himself justice. His personal courage is of the most undaunted temper. In his first interview with the Ghost, he does not set his "life at a pin's fee;" and the independent evidence of Fortinbras testifies to his high promise as a soldier. It is not the lack of courage, but the inability to carry the excitements of his reason and his blood, into an act so repugnant to his nature as the assassination of his uncle, that yet withholds his hand; and although he concludes,

"O, from this time forth,

My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!"

he leaves his purpose unfulfilled, and allows himself to be sent out of the country; a proceeding likely to postpone his revenge indefinitely, or to defeat it altogether; and it is not until he discovers the King's villainous plot against his own life, that he determines to "quit him with this arm."

There is an inconsistency in the reasoning of the first part of this soliloquy, which leads us to surmise that after the words "to rust in us unused," a sentence has been lost. Hamlet is fully aware that his meditative tendency is excessive; that his reason is so far from being unused that it is overstrong for his active powers, and turns aside the current of his enterprise. He is therefore not likely to censure himself for allowing his reason to rust in him unused; especially as he immediately afterwards objects to the impediment to action he finds in a too vigilant forethought. The train of argument appears to have been, that memory and forethought, the godlike qualities of reason, were not given man to rust in him unused, neither were they given to abuse, or one to be used to the exclusion of the other; yet either through too slight an appreciation of his wrongs and duties, or through

dwelling with too much forethought upon the probable results of action, he still delays to do that which is to be done. As the text stands, the sentence "Since he that made us," &c., is inapplicable to Hamlet, and contradictory to his own expressed opinion of his mental state, and opposed to all we know of it ; since the only inference which can be drawn from it is, that he condemns himself for allowing his reason to rust in him unused, which of all men he did not do. The sentence must rather have been a justification of the use of his reason in forethought ; but to make this apparent, and to connect the sense with the fault he immediately finds with himself on the very point of excessive use of forethought, requires an additional sentence, which may have been omitted or lost.

The colloquy with the grave-digger and Horatio in the church-yard affords abundant proof that the biting satire and quaintness of thought, which have been accepted as the antic garb of Hamlet's mind, are quite natural to him when he is playing no part. The opening observation on the influence of custom is a favourite theme with him. When he wishes to wring his mother's heart, he is apprehensive whether

"damned custom has not braz'd it so,

That it is proof and bulwark against sense."

And when he dissuades her from her incestuous intercourse, he says :

"That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,  
Of habit's devil, is angel yet in this ;  
That to the use of actions fair and good  
He likewise gives a frock, or livery,  
That aptly is put on."

"For use alone can change the stamp of nature,  
And either curb the devil, or throw him out,  
With wondrous potency."

Custom, therefore, brazes the heart in vice ; custom fortifies the body in habits of virtue ; it also blunts the sensibilities of the mind ; so that grave-making becomes "a property of easiness."

"*Ham.* 'Tis even so : the hand of little employment hath the daintier sense."

This, however, is but half truth. The "hand of little employment" hath not always "the daintier sense" in use. Does custom blunt the fingers of a watchmaker, the eyes of a printer, or the auditory nerve of a musician ? Did the grave-digger do his own sombre work with less skill because he had been accustomed to it for thirty years ? Custom

blunts our sensations to those impressions which we do not attend to, and sharpens them to those which we do. Custom, in Hamlet himself, had sharpened the speculative faculties which he exercised, while it had dulled the active powers, which depend upon that resolution which he never practised.

Hamlet's comments upon the skulls,—upon the politicians, who could circumvent God,—on the courtiers, who praised my lord Such-a-one's horse when he meant to beg it,—on the lawyers, whose fine of fines is to have his fine pate full of fine dirt, and whose vouchers vouch him for no more of his purchases than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures,—are the quaint prosaic expression of his melancholy, his gloomy view of the nothingness of life, combined with his peculiar speculations upon death as the mere corruption of the body. He revolts at the idea of this ignoble life, as he thinks it, ending in annihilation, and he equally recoils at the idea that it may end in bad dreams. He thinks that if death is an eternal sleep, such an end of the ills of life is a consummation devoutly to be wished, but the fear that it is an eternal dream is unendurable. His fancy is too active to permit him to rush into an eternity of unknown consciousness. Like Prince Henry, in the *Spanish Student*, he feels,

“Rest! rest! O give me rest and peace!  
The thought of life, that ne'er shall cease,  
Has something in it like despair—  
A weight I am too weak to bear.”

To return to his mother earth an unconscious clod seems his most earnest hope; yet when the offensive debris of mortality meets his eyes, such an ignoble termination of mental activity revolts both his sensibility and his reason. “Here's a fine revolution, if one had the trick to see't.” His bones ache to think on't. When he sees the skull of his old friend the jester, from whose companionship he may have derived much of his own skill in fence and play of words and poignancy of wit, his imagination is absolutely disgusted.

“Alas, poor Yorick!—I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to keep the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? quite chap-fallen? Now, get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch

thick, to this favour she must come ; make her laugh at that."

The grave-digger's jest that Hamlet's madness will not matter in England, since "'twill not be seen in him : there the men are as mad as he," is legitimate enough in the mouth of a foreigner, since for ages have the continentals jested upon the mad English, who hang themselves by scores every day, and who, in November especially, immolate themselves in hecatombs to the dun goddess of spleen. By this time the jest has somewhat lost its point. At least, it may be said that if the English furnish as many madmen as their neighbours, they are somewhat better acquainted with the means of ameliorating their sad condition. Madness, however, and suicide, are now known to be as prevalent in the great neighbour nation, whose own writers jest upon their universal diffusion.

All men are mad, writes Boileau, the grand distinction among them being the amount of skill employed in concealing the crack ; and if statistics prove anything with regard to suicides, it is that our once volatile neighbours have an unhappy advantage over us in that respect, both in numbers and variety. If it was ever a habit with us ; it has now become a fashion with them.

The funeral of Ophelia, and the bravery of her brother's grief, are the occasion of conduct in Hamlet which cannot be considered either that of a sane man or of a counterfeit madman. He acknowledges to his friend that he forgot himself, and that he was in a towering passion. The more probable explanation is, that the shock of Ophelia's death, made known to him so suddenly, strangely, and painfully, gave rise to an outburst of passionate excitement referrible to the latent unsoundness of his mind, and that the Queen's explanation of his conduct is the true one :

" This is mere madness :

And thus a while the fit will work on him ;  
Anon, as patient as the female dove,  
When that her golden couplets are disclos'd,  
His silence will sit drooping."

It is indeed mere madness ; for why should a brother's phrase of sorrow over the grave of a sister, however exaggerated its expression, excite a sane lover to such rage,—the rage of passion, not of grief. A sane man would have been struck dumb by overwhelming grief, if he had thus accidentally met at the verge of the tomb the body of a mistress whom he devotedly loved, and whose stunted ritual betokened that with desperate hand she had foredone her own life. L

Hamlet's state of mind, the occurrence gives birth to rash conduct and vehement passion ; passion, be it remarked, not caused by the struggle in the grave, but by the bravery of the brother's grief.

Although after this scene Hamlet converses with thorough calmness with his self-possessed friend, there are passages which strongly indicate the morbid state of his mind. Speaking of his condition on ship-board, he says :

"Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting,  
That would not let me sleep : methought, I lay  
Worse than the mutineers in the bilboes."

And again, referring to his present feelings, he says : "Thou would'st not think, how ill all's here about my heart ; but it's no matter." "It is but foolery ; but it is such a kind of gain-giving as would, perhaps, trouble a woman."

Above all, if his conduct in the church-yard is not the result of morbidly violent emotion, uncontrolled by reason, what can we say of his own explanation :

"Give me your pardon, sir : I have done you wrong ;  
But pardon it, as you are a gentleman.  
This presence knows, and you must needs have heard,  
How I am punish'd with a sore distraction.  
What I have done,  
That might your nature, honour, and exception,  
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.  
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes ? Never, Hamlet :  
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away :  
And, when he's not himself, does wrong Laertes,  
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.  
Who does it then ? His madness : If't be so,  
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd ;  
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.  
Sir, in this audience,  
Let my disclaiming from a purpos'd evil  
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,  
That I have shot my arrow o'er the house,  
And hurt my brother."

This reference to the random arrow shot madly o'er the house, may possibly have been taken from the play of Titus Andronicus.

Except the above brief reference to the inner wretchedness, which Horatio takes for an evil augury, Hamlet shews no disposition to melancholy after the rough incidents of his sea voyage. The practice of the King upon his own life appears

to have fixed his resolve : He'll wait till no further evil is hatched. He that hath

“Thrown out his angle for my proper life,  
And with such cozenage ; is't not perfect conscience,  
To quit him with this arm ? and is't not to be damn'd,  
To let this canker of our nature come  
In further evil ?”

Moreover, what there is to do he'll do quickly. The issue of the business in England, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, will quickly be known, but

“the interim is mine ;

And a man's life's no more than to say, one.”

In this temper it would have been frivolous in him to have accepted the challenge of Laertes, were it not that he saw in it an opportunity to right himself with his old friend, by the image of whose cause he saw the portraiture of his own. It is after a seeming reconciliation thus obtained, that he determines to accept “this brother's wager.” Might not also the challenge be accepted as likely to offer a good opportunity to meet the King, and “quit him with his arm,” an opportunity which he now resolves to seize whenever it offers ? The sentiment of coming evil lends probability to the thought.

“Not a whit, we defy augury ; there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come ; if it be not to come, it will be now : if it be not now, yet it will come : the readiness is all : since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes ?”

The final scene of indiscriminate slaughter, which, as Fortinbras thinks, would more become a battle-field than a palace, points the moral so obvious throughout the piece, that the end of action is not within the hands of the human agents. The blow which finally quits the King was fully deserved for his last act. His end has an accidental suddenness about it, which disappoints the expectation of judicial revenge. Like Laertes, he is a woodcock caught in his own springe. Retribution is left to the terrible future, whose mysteries have been partially unveiled ; and the mind, prepared by the revelations of the Ghost, accepts the death of the King but as the beginning of his quittance.

The death of Hamlet has been objected to, as cruel and needless ; but would it not rather have been cruel to have left him alive in this harsh world, drawing his breath in pain. Heart-broken, and in that half-mad state which is vastly more painful than developed insanity, what could he do here, after the one act for which he was bound to live had been accom-

plished. Had he survived, he must have sank into inert motiveless melancholy, or have struggled on in the still more painful state of contention between conscience and suicidal desire. To prevent a wounded name being left behind him, he can command his friend to "absent him from felicity awhile;" but for himself the best is the dark mantle of oblivion, the rest with hope which his friend so gracefully expresses :

"Now cracks a noble heart : Good night, sweet prince,  
And flights of angels guard thee to thy rest !"

There is no attempted poetical justice in this bloody finale to the drama. The way of the world rather is followed in the indiscriminate mischief. Sweet Ophelia and noble Hamlet meet the same fate which attends the incestuous Queen, the villainous King, the passionate Laertes, and the well meaning Polonius. The vortex of crime draws down the innocent and the guilty ; the balance of desert being left for adjustment in the dark future. The intricacy of the action, and the unexpected nature of the events, are copied from life as closely as that marvellous delineation of motive and feeling which brings Hamlet so intimately home to the consciousness of reflective men. Those dramas in which we accurately foresee the event in the first act are as little like the reality of human life as a geometric problem is like a landscape. Granted that there is nothing like accident in human affairs, that if a special providence in the fall of a sparrow may be doubted, the subjection of the most trivial circumstances to general laws is beyond question ; still, in human affairs, the multiplicity and mutual interference of these laws is such, that it is utterly beyond human foresight to trace forward the thread of events with any certainty. In Hamlet this uncertainty is peculiarly manifested. Everything is traceable to causes, which operate, however, in a manner which the most astute forecaster of events could never have anticipated ; though, after their occurrence, it is easy enough to trace and name them, as Horatio promised to do.

"So shall you hear  
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts ;  
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters ;  
Of deaths put on by cunning, and forc'd cause ;  
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook  
Fall'n on the inventor's heads ; and this can I  
Truly deliver."

Although we arrive at the conviction that Hamlet is morbidly melancholic, and that the degree to which he puts on a part

is very small ; that, by eliminating a few hurling words, and the description which Ophelia gives of the state of his stockings, there is very little, either in his speech or conduct, which is truly feigned ; let us guard ourselves from conveying the erroneous impression that he is a veritable lunatic. He is a reasoning melancholiac, morbidly changed from his former state of thought, feeling, and conduct. He has "foregone all custom of exercise," and longs to commit suicide, but dares not. Yet, like the melancholiacs described by Burton, he is "of profound judgment in some things, excellent apprehensions, judicious, wise, and witty ; for melancholy advanceth men's conceits more than any humour whatever." He is in a state which thousands pass through without becoming truly insane, but which in hundreds does pass into actual madness. It is the state of incubation of disease, "in which his melancholy sits on brood," and which, according to the turn of events, or the constitution of the brain, may hatch insanity, or restored health.

There is an apparent inconsistency between the sombre melancholy of Hamlet's solitary thoughts and the jesting levity of his conversation, even when he seeks least to put on the guise of antic behaviour, an inconsistency apparent only, for in truth this gloomy reverie, which in solitude "runs darkling down the stream of fate," is thoroughly coherent in nature with the careless mocking spirit playing in derisive contempt with the foibles of others. The weeping and the mocking philosopher are not usually divided as of old, but are united in one ; the laughing sneer being bestowed on the vanity of human wishes as observed in the world around, the earnest tear being reserved for the more deeply felt miseries of our own destiny. The historian of melancholy himself was a double philosopher of this complexion. Deeply imbued with melancholy when his mental gaze was introverted, when employed upon others it was more mocking than serious, more minute than profound. Thence came the charming and learned gossip of the *Anatomy* ; thence also the curious habit recorded of him, that for days together he would sit on a post by the river side, listening and laughing at the oaths and jeers of the boatmen, and thus finding a strange solace from his own profound melancholy.

Here is his own evidence : "Humorous they (melancholiacs) are beyond measure ; sometimes profusely laughing, extraordinary merry, and then again weeping without a cause ; groaning, sighing, pensive, sad, almost distracted, restless in their thoughts and actions, continually meditating.



Velut ægri somnia, vanæ  
Finguntur species ;

more like dreamers than men awake, they feign a company of antick fantastical conceits."

There is an intimate relationship between melancholy and humour. The fact is finely touched in the Yorick of Lawrence Sterne, and, what is more to the purpose, in the real history of many of the most celebrated humourists ; and the truth even descends to those humourists of action, theatrical clowns. Who has not heard the story of one of the most celebrated of these applying to a physician for the relief of profound melancholy, and being referred for a remedy to his own laughter-moving antics. Not that humour is always attended by any tinge or tendency to melancholy, as the plenitude of this faculty exhibited by jolly Sir John fully proves. Still there is this in common to the roystering humour of Falstaff, the melancholy humour of Jacques, and the sarcastic humour of Hamlet, that they have each a perverse ingenuity in contemplating the weakness and selfishness of human motive. Wit deals with ideas and their verbal representations ; humour with motives and emotions ; and that melancholy cast of thought which tends to exhibit our own motives in an unfavourable light, is apt to probe the motives of others with searching insight, and to represent them in those unexpected contrasts, and those true, but unusual colours which tickle the intelligence with their novelty and strangeness.

The character of Hamlet presents another contrast, which if not more obvious than the above, has at least attracted more attention, perhaps because he himself comments upon it, and because it is a main point upon which the drama turns. It is the contrast between his vivid intellectual activity, and the inertness of his conduct. To say that this depends upon a want of the power of will to transmute thought into action, is to do no more than to change one formula of words into another. There must be some better explanation for the unquestionable fact that one man of great intellectual vigour becomes a thinker only, and another a man of vehement action ; one man a mute inglorious Milton, another a village Hampden, or even a Cæsar or Napoleon. That activity of intellect is in itself adverse to decisiveness of conduct, is abundantly contradicted by biography ; that activity of intellect may exist with the utmost powerlessness, or even perversity of conduct is equally proved by the well-known biographies of many men, "who never said a foolish thing, and never did a

wise one." The essential difference of men who are content to rest in thought, and those who transmute it into action, appears not to consist in the presence or absence of that fabulous function, that unknown quantity of the mind called *will* ; but in the presence or absence of clearly defined and strongly-felt *desire*, and in that power of movement which can only be derived from the exercise of power, that is from the habit of action. It is conceivable, as Sir James Mackintosh has well pointed out, that an intellectual being might exist examining all things, comparing all things, knowing all things, but desiring and doing nothing. It is equally conceivable that a being might exist with two strong desires, so equally poised that the result should be complete neutralization of each other, and a state of inaction as if no emotional spring to conduct whatever existed. Hence, inaction may arise, from want of desire, or from equipoise of desire.

It is, moreover, conceivable that an intellectual being might exist in whom desires were neither absent nor equipoised, but in whom the habit of putting desires into action had never been formed. We are indeed so constituted, that clearly formed desires tend naturally to transmute themselves into action, and the idea of a being at once intellectual and emotional, in whom circumstances have entirely prevented the development of the habit of action, has more the character of a metaphysical speculation than of a possible reality. Still the immense influence of habit upon the power of action is unquestionable, and the want of this habit appears to have been one chief cause of Hamlet's inert and dilatory conduct, and of the contention between that meditative cast of thought, which he in vain strove to screw up to the point of action, and the desire to discharge that repulsive duty which his uncle's villanies had laid upon him. That the time was out of joint would have been for him a subject of painful reflection only, but for the accursed spite which had laid it upon him to set it right, and which was the cause of that fierce moral strife between duty and disposition, which forms the innermost web of the piece. The rash execution of an unpremeditated action is entirely consistent with this sensitive motive-weighting inability to act upon mature resolve. The least resolute men are often the most rash ; as quick spasm in feeble muscles is substituted for healthy, regular, and prolonged exertion. Hamlet praises rashness in the instance in which it served him, but he would scarcely have been able to have done so when it led him to slay Polonius in mistake for the King ; and the incidents of the drama, no more than the incidents of real life, justify us

in rough-hewing our purposes with rashness, though the Divinity may shape the ends even of our most politic arrangements.

This reasoning melancholiac, disgusted with the world, and especially disgusted with the repulsive duty which a hard fate has laid upon him, is not less different to the Hamlet of the past, to him who had been

“The expectancy and rose of the fair state,”  
to him, who as a soldier,

“was likely, had he been put on,

To have proved most royally,”

than he is the good feeble young gentleman whom Goëthe describes, and whose “mind is too feeble for the accomplishment” of “the great action imposed as a duty.” “Here is an oak planted in a vase ; proper only to receive the most delicate flowers. The roots strike out, the vessel flies to pieces. A pure noble highly moral disposition, but without that energy of soul which constitutes a hero, sinks under a load which it can neither support nor abandon altogether.” “Observe how he shifts, hesitates, advances, and recedes!” Goëthe’s simile however, beautiful though it be, appears to halt on both feet, for the great action, which is the oak, does not strike out its roots, does not increase in magnitude or responsibility ; nor does the Prince deserve to be compared to a vase, senseless and inert, which cannot expand or “shift ;” and, moreover, it is not the greatness of the action which is above the energy of his soul, but the nature of it, which is repulsive to its nobility. If Hamlet must be compared to a vase, let it not be to a flower-pot, but to that kingly drinking cup, whose property it was to fly to pieces when poison was poured into it.

In addition to the above, there are other causes of turmoil in Hamlet’s mind less plainly stated, but traceable enough throughout the piece. One of these is the contention between his religious sentiments and his sceptical philosophy. His mind constantly wavers between belief and unbelief ; between confidence in an overruling Providence, who shapes all our ends to wise purposes, and even permits its angels and ministers of grace to attend unseen on our hours of trial ; between this reverential faith and that scepticism which sees in man but so much animated dust, and looks upon death as annihilation. The pain of this same doubt has been finely expressed by him whom future centuries will regard as the great lyric of the nation, even as Shakespeare is for aye its great dramatist :

"I trust I have not wasted breath :  
 I think we are not wholly brain,  
 Magnetic mockeries ; not in vain,  
 Like Paul with beasts, I fought with Death :  
 Not only cunning casts in clay :  
 Let Science prove we are, and then  
 What matters Science unto men—  
 At least, to me ? I would not stay."

"And he, shall he  
 Who loved, who suffered countless ills,  
 Who battled for the true and just,  
 Be blown about the desert dust,  
 Or sealed within the iron hills ?"

Indeed, the manifold points of resemblance between Hamlet and In Memoriam are remarkable. In each the great questions of eternal interest are debated by a mind to whom profound grief makes this world a sterile promontory. The unknowable future absorbs all interest. The lyric bard, however fights his way to more light than the dramatist attains. The fear of annihilation oppresses, but does not conquer him. He rebukes Lazarus for holding his peace on that which afflicts the doubting soul, but for himself he fights his way to faith.

"He fought his doubts, and gathered strength ;  
 He would not make his judgment blind ;  
 He faced the spectres of the mind,  
 And laid them."

It is not easy to estimate the amount of emotional disturbance for which Love is answerable in Hamlet's mind. Probably, if other matters had gone well with him, Ophelia's forced unkindness would easily have been seen through and overcome ; but, with a mind pre-occupied with the dread mission of his father's revenge, it is likely that he would not question the earnestness of Ophelia's rejection, and that "to the pangs of despised love," he might well attribute one of the most poignant ills that flesh is heir to. His demeanour to Ophelia, when he first puts on his antic disposition, and which she so graphically describes, not less than his own avowal at her grave, that "twenty thousand brothers could not make up his sum of love," point to the existence not of "trivial fond records," but of a passion for her, both deep and constant ; a passion thrust rudely into the background indeed, but not extinguished, or even weakened, by the more urgent emotion of revenge for his father, of shame for his mother, of scorn and hatred for his uncle. The character of Hamlet

would have been incomplete if the element of love had been forgotten in its composition. Harshly as he may seem to treat his mistress, this element adds a warm sienna tint to the portraiture, without which it would have been not only cold and hard, but less true to the nature of the melancholy sensitive being delineated.

There is little trace of ambition in his character ; for, although he makes the King's having stepped between the election and his hopes one of the list of his injuries, his comments upon the manner in which this was done savour rather of contempt for his uncle's ignoble means of success, for the manner in which he filched the crown, and was "a cutpurse of the empire and the rule," rather than of any profound disappointment that the election had not fallen upon himself. Indeed, this character has been painted in dimensions far exceeding those of the sceptred rulers of the earth. Ambition would have dwarfed him to the type of a class ; he stands forth the mighty poetical type of the race.

It is this universal humanity of the character which lies at the root of its wonderful reality and familiarity. Hamlet seems known to us like an old friend. "This is that Hamlet the Dane," says Hazlitt, "whom we read of in our youth, and whom we seem almost to remember in our after years." "Hamlet is a name : his speeches and sayings but the idle coinage of the poet's brain. What, then, are they not real ? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is *we* who are Hamlet. This play has a prophetic truth which is above that of history." Are we then wrong in treating Hamlet as a reality, and in debating the state of his mind with more care than we would choose to bestow upon the insane vagaries of an Emperor Paul, or a Frederick the First ? Have we not more sure data upon which to exercise judgment than upon the uncertain truth of history ? Buckle, in his *History of Civilization* has elaborately argued the madness of Burke ; a domestic grief, a change of temper, and, above all, a change of political opinions from those which the historian thinks true, to those which he thinks false, being held sufficient to establish the confirmed insanity of the great statesman. Those who read the ingenious argument will feel convinced, at least, of this, that history rarely or never leaves grounds relative enough to solve such a question. Nay, when we are close upon the footsteps of a man's life, when the question is not one of learned trifling, like that of the insanity of Socrates, but the practical one of whether a man just dead was competent to devise his pro-

perty, when his papers and letters are ransacked, his daily life minutely examined, when scores of men who knew him intimately, bear testimony to their knowledge, we often find the balance of probability so even, that it is impossible to say to which side it inclines, and the feelings of the jury as often as not fabricate the will. But when the great mind of mind speaks out as in Hamlet, it is not so. Then it is as in the justice of Heaven, then the "action lies in its true nature," which neither ignorance can hide nor sophistry pervert.

It is by this great faculty that Shakespeare unfolds to our view the book of the mind, and shews alike its fairest and most blotted pages, and leaves in us athirst not for more light, but for more power to read.

If familiarity and fellow-feeling compel us at one time to regard Hamlet as a reality, reflection and curious admiration compel us at others to wonder at it, as a work of man's creative power; and it has ever been to us a question of intense interest to speculate upon the manner it was worked out. There appears this great distinction between Hamlet and all other characters of Shakespeare, in which real or feigned insanity is represented, that, while they are evidently all drawn from the life, it could scarcely have been drawn from observation. Ophelia, for instance, is the very type of a class of cases by no means uncommon. Every mental physician of moderately extensive experience must have seen many Ophelias. It is a copy from nature, after the fashion of the pre-Raphaelite school, in which the veins of the leaves are painted. Hamlet however is not pre-Raphaelite, but Raphaelite; like the Transfiguration, it is a glorious reflex from the mind of the author, but not a copy of aught which may be seen by other eyes. It is drawn, indeed, in accordance with the truth of nature, just as Raphael made use of anatomical knowledge in painting the Transfiguration; but there is something beyond and above that which any external observation can supply. From whence did this come? Without doubt, from within. Shakespeare has here described a broad phase of his own mind; has reflected the *nadir* of his own great soul; has set up a glass in which the ages will read the inmost part of him; how he thought of death and suicide; how he now he doubted of the future, and felt of the present,

"That this huge state presenteth nought but shows,"

how he looked inwards until fair nature became dark, and spun

"A veil of thought, to hide him from the sun."

Hallam, the most learned and just of English critics, has

recognised this inner reflection of the soul in this and some others of the great bard's sombre characters.

"There seems to have been a period of Shakespeare's life when his heart was ill at ease, and ill-content with the world or his own conscience; the memory of hours misspent, the pang of affection misplaced or unrequited, the experience of man's worser nature, which intercourse with ill-chosen associates, by choice or circumstance, peculiarly teaches; these, as they sank down into the depths of his great mind, seem not only to have inspired into it the conception of Lear and Timon, but that of one primary character, the censurer of mankind. This type is first seen in the philosophic melancholy of Jacques, gazing with undiminished serenity, and with a gaiety of fancy, though not of manners, or the follies of the world. It assumes a graver cast in the exiled Duke of the same play, and next one rather more severe in the Duke of Measure for Measure. In all these, however, it is merely contemplative philosophy. In Hamlet this is mingled with the impulses of a perturbed heart, under the pressure of extraordinary circumstances; it shines no longer as in the former characters, with a steady light, but plays in fitful corruscations, amid feigned gaiety and extravagance. In Lear it is the flash of sudden inspiration across the incongruous imagery of madness; in Timon it is obscured by the exaggerations of misanthropy.

However true this may be in the main, we can scarcely agree to recognise any part of our own ideal of Shakespeare's individuality in any of these characters, except in Hamlet and in Jacques. Doubtless there was melancholy and cynicism enough in the great bard, but there could have been no real misanthropy, no mad fury, no stern congelation of feeling, as in Timon, Lear, and the Duke; nor is there any of these in Hamlet or Jacques, or in the real heart history as it is written in the Sonnets.

That Shakespeare should have written Hamlet and the Sonnets, that Tennyson should have written *In Memoriam*, that Goëthe should have said of himself that "Some God gave him the power to paint what he suffered," is proof that none can reach the Heaven-kissing pinnacles of poetic fame but by undergoing, not only the sweat and toil of the laborious ascent, but also by passing through dark valleys, and dismal chasms, and over the edge of sheer precipices, and by enduring many dangers and many falls.

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J. C. B.

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