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AN
ESSAY
ON THE
WRITINGS AND GENIUS
OF
SHAKESPEAR,
COMPARED WITH THE
GREEK AND FRENCH Dramatic Poets.

WITH
SOME REMARKS
UPON THE MISREPRESENTATIONS OF
Mons. de VOLTAIRE.

THE FIFTH EDITION, CORRECTED.

To which are added,
THREE DIALOGUES OF THE DEAD

By Mrs. MONTAGU.

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THE
TRAGEDY
OF
MACBETH.

This piece is perhaps one of the greatest exertions of the tragic and poetic powers, that any age, or any country has produced. Here are opened new sources of terror, new creations of fancy. The agency of Witches and Spirits excites a species of terror, that cannot be effected by the

operation of human agency, or by any form or disposition of human things. For the known limits of their powers and capacities set certain bounds to our apprehensions; mysterious horrors, undefined terrors, are raised by the intervention of beings, whose nature we do not understand, whose actions we cannot control, and whose



influence we know not how to escape. Here we feel through all the faculties of the soul, and to the utmost extent of her capacity. The dread of the interposition of such agents is the most salutary of all fears. It keeps up in our minds a sense of our connection with awful and invisible spirits, to whom our most secret actions are apparent, and from whose chastisement, Innocence alone can defend us. From many dangers Power will protect; many crimes may be concealed by Art and Hypocrisy; but when supernatural Beings arise, to reveal, and to avenge, Guilt blushes through her mask, and trembles behind her bulwarks.

Shakespear has been sufficiently justified, by the best critics, for availing himself of the popular faith in witchcraft; and he is certainly as defensible in this point, as Euripides, and other Greek tragedians, for introducing Jupiter, Diana, Minerva, &c. whose personal intervention, in the events exhibited on their stage, had not obtained more credit, with the thinking and the philosophical part of the spectators, than tales of



Witchcraft among the Wise and Learned here. Much later than the age in which Macbeth lived, even in Shakespear's own time, there were severe statutes extant against Witchcraft.

Some objections have been made to the Hecate of the Greeks being joined to the witches of our country.

Milton, a more correct writer, has often mixed the Pagan deities, even with the most

sacred characters of our religion. Our Witches power was suppos'd to be exerted only in little and low mischief: this therefore being the only example where their interposition is recorded, in the revolutions of a kingdom, the Poet thought, perhaps, that the story would pass off better, with the Learned at least, if he added the celebrated Hecate to the weird sisters; and she is introduced, chiding their presumption, for trading in prophecies and affairs of death. The dexterity is admirable, with which the predictions of the witches (as Macbeth observes) prove true to the Ear, but false to the



Hope, according to the general condition of all vain oracles. And it is with great judgment the poet has given to Macbeth the very temper to be wrought upon by such suggestions. The bad man is his own Tempter. Richard III. had a heart that prompted him to do all, that the worst demon could have suggested, so that the Witches would have been only an idle wonder in his story; nor did he want such a counsellor as Lady Macbeth: a ready instrument like Buckingham, to adopt his projects, and execute his orders, was sufficient. But Macbeth, of a generous disposition, and good propensities, but with vehement passions and aspiring wishes, was a subject liable to be seduced by splendid prospects, and ambitious counsels. This appears from the following character given of him by his wife:

> Yet do I fear thy nature;
> It is too full o'th' milk of human kindness
> To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great;
> Art not without ambition; but without
> The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly



> That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
> And yet wouldst wrongly win.

So much inherent Ambition in a character, without any other vice, and full of the milk

of human kindness, though obnoxious to temptation, yet would have great struggles before it yielded, and as violent fits of subsequent remorse.

If the mind is to be medicated by the operations of pity and terror, surely no means are so well adapted to that end, as a strong and lively representation of the agonizing struggles that precede, and the terrible horrors that follow wicked actions. Other poets thought they had sufficiently attended to the moral purpose of the drama, by making the Furies pursue the perpetrated crime. Our author waves their bloody daggers in the Road to guilt, and demonstrates, that so soon as a man begins to hearken to ill suggestions, Terrors environ, and Fears distract him. Tenderness and conjugal love combat in the breasts of a Medea and a Herod, in their purposed vengeance. Per-



sonal affection often weeps on the theatre, while Jealousy or Revenge whet the bloody knife: but Macbeth's emotions are the struggles of Conscience; his agonies are the agonies of Remorse. They are lessons of justice, and warnings to innocence. I do not know that any dramatic writer, except Shakespear, has set forth the pangs of Guilt separate from the fear of Punishment. Clytemnestra is represented by Euripides, as under great terrors, on account of the murder of Agamemnon; but they arise from Fear of Punishment, not Repentance. It is not the memory of the assassinated husband, which haunts and terrifies her, but an apprehension of vengeance from his surviving son: when she is told Orestes is dead, her mind is again at ease. It must be allowed, that on the Grecian stage, it is the office of the Chorus to moralize, and to point out, on every occasion, the advantages of virtue over vice. But how much less affecting are their animadversions than the testimony of the person concerned! Whatever belongs to the part of the chorus, has hardly the force of dramatic imitation. The chorus is in a

manner without personal character, or interest, and no way an agent in the drama. We cannot sympathize with the cool reflections of these idle spectators, as we do with the sentiments of the persons, in whose circumstances and situation we are interested.

The heart of man, like iron and other metal, is hard, and of firm resistance, when cold, but, warmed, it becomes malleable and ductile. It is by touching the Passions, and exciting sympathetic Emotions, not by Sentences, that the tragedian must make his impressions on the spectator. I will appeal to any person of taste, whether the following speeches of Wolsey, in another play of Shakespear, the first a soliloquy, the second addressed to his servant Cromwell, in which he gives the testimony of his experience, and the result of his own feelings, would make the same impression, if uttered by a set of speculative sages in the episode of a chorus.

**Wolsey.**
So farewell to the little good you bear me!
Farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness!



This is the state of man; to-day he puts forth
The tender leaves of hopes, to-morrow blossoms,
And bears his blushing honours thick upon him,
The third day comes a frost, a killing frost,
And when he thinks, good easy man, full surely
His greatness is a ripening, nips his root;
And then he falls, as I do. I have ventur'd,
Like little wanton boys, that swim on bladders,
These many summers in a sea of glory,
But far beyond my depth; my high blown pride
At length broke under me, and now has left me,
Weary and old with service, to the mercy
Of a rude stream, that must for ever hide me.
Vain pomp and glory of this world, I hate ye;
I feel my heart new open'd. Oh, how wretched
Is that poor man, that hangs on princes' favours!
There is, betwixt that smile we would aspire to,
That sweet aspect of princes, and our ruin,
More pangs and fears than war or women have:
And when he falls, he falls like Lucifer,

Never to hope again.

And in another place,

Let's dry our eyes, and thus far hear me, Cromwell,
And when I am forgotten, as I shall be,



And sleep in dull cold marble, where no mention
Of me must more be heard, say then, I taught thee;
Say, Wolsey, that once trod the ways of glory,
And sounded all the depths and shoals of honour,
Found thee a way, out of his wreck, to rise in;
A sure and safe one, though thy master miss'd it.
Mark but my fall, and that which ruin'd me;
Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition,
By that sin fell the angels; how can man then,
The image of his maker, hope to win by't?
Love thyself last; cherish those hearts, that hate thee;
Corruption wins not more than honesty.
Still in thy right-hand carry gentle peace,
To silence envious tongues; be just, and fear not.
Let all the ends, thou aim'st at, be thy country's,
Thy God's, and truth's; then, if thou fall'st, O
    Cromwell,
Thou fall'st a blessed martyr. Serve the king;
And pr'ythee, lead me in;
There take an inventory of all I have,
To the last penny, 'tis the king's. My robe,
And my integrity to heav'n, is all
I dare now call mine own. O Cromwell, Cromwell,
Had I but serv'd my God with half the zeal
I serv'd my king, he would not in mine age
Have left me naked to mine enemies.



I select these two passages as containing reflections of such a general kind, as might be with least impropriety transferred to the chorus; but if even these would lose much of their force and pathos, if not spoken by the fallen statesman, how much more would those do, which are the expressions of some instantaneous emotion, occasioned by the peculiar situation of the person by whom they are uttered! The self-condemnation of a murderer makes a very deep impression upon us, when we are told by Macbeth himself, that hearing, while he was killing Duncan, one of the grooms cry God bless us, and Amen the other, he durst not say Amen. Had a formal chorus observed, that a man in

such a guilty moment, durst not implore that mercy of which he stood so much in need, it would have had but a slight effect. All know the detestation, with which virtuous men behold a bad action. A much more salutary admonition is given, when we are shewn the terrors that are combined with guilt in the breast of the offender.

Our author has so tempered the consti-

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tutional character of Macbeth, by infusing into it the milk of human kindness, and a strong tincture of honour, as to make the most violent perturbation, and pungent remorse, naturally attend on those steps to which he is led by the force of Temptation. Here we must commend the Poet's judgment, and his invariable attention to consistency of character; but more amazing still is the art with which he exhibits the movement of the human mind, and renders audible the silent march of thought: traces its modes of operation in the course of Deliberating, the pauses of Hesitation, and the final act of Decision; shews how Reason checks, and how the Passions impel; and displays to us the trepidations that precede, and the horrors that pursue acts of blood. No species of dialogue, but that which a man holds with himself, could effect this. The Soliloquy has been permitted to all dramatic writers; but its true use seems to be understood only by our author, who alone has attained to a just imitation of nature, in this kind of self-conference.

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It is certain, that men do not tell themselves who they are, and whence they came, they neither narrate nor declaim in the solitude of the closet, as Greek and French writers represent. Here then is added to the drama an imitation of the most difficult and delicate kind, that of representing the internal process of the mind in reasoning and reflecting; and it is not only a difficult, but a

very useful art, as it best assists the Poet to expose the anguish of Remorse, to repeat every whisper of the internal monitor, Conscience, and, upon occasion, to lend her a voice *to amaze the guilty and appal the free*. As a man is averse to expose his crimes, and discover the turpitude of his actions, even to the faithful Friend, and trusty Confident, it is more natural for him to breathe in Soliloquy the dark and heavy secrets of the soul, than to utter them to the most intimate associate. The conflicts in the bosom of Macbeth, before he commits the murder, could not, by any other means, have been so well exposed. He entertains the prophecy of his future greatness with complacency, but the very idea of the means by



which he is to attain it shocks him to the highest degree.

> This supernatural soliciting
> Cannot be ill; cannot be good. If ill,
> Why hath it giv'n me the earnest of success,
> Commencing in a truth? I'm Thane of Cawdor.
> If good, why do I yield to that suggestion,
> Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
> And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
> Against the use of nature?

There is an obscurity and stiffness in part of these soliloquies, which I wish could be charged entirely to the confusion of Macbeth's mind from the horror he feels, at the thought of the murder; but our author is too much addicted to the obscure bombast, much affected by all sorts of writers in that age. The abhorrence Macbeth feels at the suggestion of assassinating his king, brings him back to this determination,

> If chance will have me king, why, chance may
> crown me,
> Without my stir.



After a pause, in which we may suppose the ambitious desire of a crown to return, so far

as to make him undetermined what he shall do, and leave the decision to future time and unborn events, he concludes,

> Come what come may,
> Time and the hour runs thro' the roughest day.

By which, I confess, I do not, with his two last commentators, imagine <>it meant either the tautology of time and the hour, or an Allusion to time painted with an hour-glass, or an exhortation to time to hasten forward; but I rather apprehend the meaning to be, *tempus & hora*, time and occasion, will carry the thing through, and bring it to some determined point and end, let its nature be what it will. In the next soliloquy, he agitates this great question concerning the proposed murder. One argument against it, is, that such deeds must be supported by others of like nature.

> But, in these cases,
> We still have judgment here; that we but teach



> Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
> To plague th' inventor; this even-handed justice
> Commends th' ingredients of our poison'd chalice
> To our own lips.

He proceeds next to consider the peculiar relations, in which he stands to Duncan.

> He's here in double trust:
> First as I am his kinsman and his subject,
> Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
> Who should against his murd'rer shut the door;
> Not bear the knife myself.

Then follow his arguments against the deed, from the admirable qualities of the king.

> Besides, this Duncan
> Hath borne his faculties so meekly, hath been
> So clear in his great office, that his virtues
> Will plead, like angels, trumpet-tongu'd against
> The deep damnation of his taking off.

So, says he, with many reasons to dissuade, I have none to urge me to this act, but a

vaulting ambition; which, by a daring leap,

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often procures itself a fall. And thus having determined, he tells Lady Macbeth;

> We will proceed no further in this business.
> He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought
> Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
> Which would be worn, now in their newest gloss,
> Not cast aside so soon.

Macbeth, in debating with himself, chiefly dwells upon the Guilt, yet touches something on the Danger, of assassinating the king. When he argues with Lady Macbeth, knowing her too wicked to be affected by the one, and too daring to be deterred by the other, he urges with great propriety what he thinks may have more weight with one of her disposition; the favour he is in with the king, and the esteem he has lately acquired of the people. In answer to her charge of cowardice, he finely distinguishes between manly courage and brutal ferocity.

> **Macbeth.**
> I dare do all that may become a man;
> Who dares do more is none.

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At length, overcome, rather than persuaded, he determines on the bloody deed.

> I am settled, and bend up
> Each corp'ral agent to this terrible feat.

How terrible to him, how repugnant to his nature, we plainly perceive, when, even in the moment that he summons up the resolution needful to perform it, horrid phantasms present themselves: murder <>alarmed by his sentinel the wolf stealing towards his design; witchcraft celebrating pale Hecate's offerings; the midnight ravisher invading sleeping innocence, seem his associates; and bloody daggers lead him to the very chamber of the king. At his return thence, the sense

of the crime he has committed appears suitable to his repugnance at undertaking it. He tells Lady Macbeth, that, of the grooms who slept in Duncan's chamber,

**Macbeth.**
There's one did laugh in's sleep, and one cry'd, Murder!
They wak'd each other; and I stood and heard them;
But they did say their prayers, and address them
Again to sleep.

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**Lady.**
There are two lodg'd together.
**Macbeth.**
One cry'd, God bless us! and, Amen! the other;
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.
Listening their fear, I could not say, Amen,
When they did say, God bless us!
**Lady.**
Consider it not so deeply.
**Macbeth.**
But wherefore could not I pronounce, Amen?
I had most need of blessing, and Amen
Stuck in my throat.
**Macbeth.**
Methought, I heard a voice cry, Sleep no more!
Macbeth doth murder sleep; the innocent sleep.

Then he replies, when his Lady bids him carry back the daggers;

**Macbeth.**
I'll go no more.
I am afraid to think what I have done!
Look on't again I dare not.

How natural is the exclamation of a person, who, from the fearless state of unsuspecting

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Innocence, is fallen into the suspicious condition of Guilt, when, upon hearing a knocking at the gate, he cries out;

**Macbeth.**
How is it with me, when every noise appals me?

The Poet has contrived to throw a tincture of remorse even into Macbeth's resolution to murder Banquo. ---- He does not

proceed in it like a man, who, impenitent in crimes, and wanton in success, gaily goes forward in his violent career; but seems impelled onward, and stimulated to this additional villany, by an apprehension, that, if Banquo's posterity should inherit the crown, he has sacrificed his virtue, and defiled his own soul in vain.

**Macbeth.**
If 'tis so,
For Banquo's issue have I 'fil'd my mind;
For them, the gracious Duncan have I murder'd:
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Giv'n to the common enemy of man,
To make them Kings, the seed of Banquo kings.

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His desire to keep Lady Macbeth innocent of this intended murder, and yet from the fulness of a throbbing heart, uttering what may render suspected the very thing he wishes to conceal, shews how deeply the author enters into human nature in general, and in every circumstance preserves the consistency of the character he exhibits.

How strongly is expressed the great truth, that to a man of courage, the most terrible object is the person he has injured, in the following address to Banquo's ghost!

**Macbeth.**
What man dare, I dare.
Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
The arm'd rhinoceros, or Hyrcan tyger:
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble; or, be alive again,
And dare me to the desart with thy sword;
If trembling I evade it, then protest me
The baby of a girl. Hence, terrible shadow!
Unreal mock'ry, hence!

It is impossible not to sympathize with the

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terrors Macbeth expresses in his disordered speech:

**Macbeth.**

It will have blood. -- They say, blood will have blood.
Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak;
Augurs, that understand relations, have,
By magpies, and by choughs, and rooks, brought forth
The secret'st man of blood.

The perturbation, with which Macbeth again resorts to the Witches, and the tone of resentment and abhorrence with which he addresses them, rather expresses his sense of the crimes, to which their promises excited him, than any satisfaction in the regal condition, those crimes had procured.

**Macbeth.**
How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!
What is't you do?

The unhappy and disconsolate state of the most triumphant villany, from a consciousness of mens internal detestation of that flagitious greatness, to which they are forced to pay external homage, is finely expressed in the following words:



**Macbeth.**
I have liv'd long enough: my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf:
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses not loud but deep, numth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

Toward the conclusion of the piece, his mind seems to sink under its load of guilt! Despair and melancholy hang on his words! By his address to the physician, we perceive he has griefs that press harder on him than his enemies:

**Macbeth.**
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd;
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow;
Raze out the written troubles of the brain;
And, with some sweet oblivious antidote,
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

The alacrity with which he attacks young Siward, and his reluctance to engage with

Macduff, of whose blood he says he has al-

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ready had too much, compleat a character uniformly preserved from the opening of the fable, to its conclusion. -- We find him ever answering to the first idea we were made to conceive of him.

The Man of Honour pierces through the Traitor and the Assassin. His mind loses its Tranquillity by guilt, but never its Fortitude in danger. His Crimes presented to him, even in the unreal mockery of a vision, or the harmless form of sleeping innocence, terrify him more than all his foes in arms. ---- It has been very justly observed by a late commentator, that this piece does not abound with those nice discriminations of character, usual in the plays of our Author, the events being too great to admit the influence of particular dispositions. It appears to me, that the character of Macbeth is also represented less particular and special, that his example may be of more universal utility. He has therefore placed him on that line, on which the major part of mankind may be ranked, just between the extremes of good and bad; a station assailable by various

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temptations, and standing in need of the guard of cautionary admonition. The supernatural agents, in some measure, take off our attention from the other characters, especially as they are, throughout the piece, what they have a right to be, predominant in the events. They should not interfere, but to weave the fatal web, or to unravel it; they ought ever to be the regents of the Fable and artificers of the Catastrophe, as the Witches are in this piece. To preserve in Macbeth a just consistency of character; to make that character naturally susceptible of those desires, that were to be communicated to it; to render it interesting to the spectator, by some amiable qualities; to make it exemplify the dangers of ambition,

and the terrors of remorse; was all that could be required of the Tragedian and the Moralist. With all the powers of Poetry he elevates a legendary tale, without carrying it beyond the limits of vulgar faith and tradition. The solemn character of the infernal rites would be very striking, if the scene was not made ludicrous by a mob of old women, which the Players have added to

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the three weird Sisters. ---- The Incantation is so consonant with the doctrine of enchantments, and receives such power by the help of those potent ministers of direful Superstition, the Terrible and the Mysterious, that it has not the air of poetical fiction so much as of a discovery of magical secrets; and thus it seizes the heart of the ignorant, and communicates an irresistible horror to the imagination even of the more informed spectator.

Shakespear was too well read in human nature, not to know, that, though Reason may expel the superstitions of the nursery, the Imagination does not so entirely free itself from their dominion, as not to re-admit them, if occasion presents them, in the very shape in which they were once revered. The first scene in which the Witches appear, is not so happily executed as the others. He has too exactly followed the vulgar reports of the Lapland witches, of whom our sailors used to imagine they could purchase a fair wind.

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The choice of a story that at once gave countenance to King James's doctrine of dæmonology, and shewed the ancient destination of his family to the throne of Great Britain, was no less flattering to that Monarch than Virgil's to Augustus and the Roman people, in making Anchises shew to Æneas the representations of unborn heroes, that were to adorn his line, and augment the glory of their common-wealth. It

is reported, that a great French Wit often laughs at the tragedy of Macbeth, for having a legion of Ghosts in it. One would imagine he either had not learnt English, or had forgotten his Latin; for the Spirits of Banquo's line are no more Ghosts, than the representations of the Julian race in the Æneid; and there is no Ghost but Banquo's in the whole play. Euripides, in the most philosophic and polite age of the Athenians, brings the shade of Polydorus, Priam's son, upon the stage, to tell a very long and lamentable tale. Here is therefore produced, by each tragedian, the departed Spirit walking this upper world for causes admitted by popular faith. Among the



Ancients, the Unburied, and with us, the Murdered, were supposed to do so. The apparitions are therefore equally justifiable or blamable; so the laurel must be adjudged to that Poet who throws most of the Sublime and the Marvellous into the supernatural agent; best preserves the credibility of its intervention, and renders it most useful in the drama. There surely can be no dispute of the superiority of our countryman in these articles. There are many bombast speeches in the Tragedy of Macbeth; and these are the lawful prize of the Critic: but Envy, not content to nibble at faults, strikes at its true object, the prime excellencies and perfections of the thing, it would depreciate. One should not wonder if a school-boy critic, who neither knows what were the superstitions of former times, or the Poet's privileges in all times, should flourish away, with all *the rash dexterity of wit*, upon the appearance of a Ghost; but it is strange, a man of universal learning, a real and just connoisseur, and a true genius, should cite, as improper and absurd, what has been practised by the most celebrated artists in



the dramatic way, when such machinery

was authorized by the belief of the people. Is there not reason to suspect from such uncandid treatment of our Poet by this Critic, that he

> Views him with jealous, yet with scornful eyes,
> And hates for arts that caus'd himself to rise?

The difference between a mind naturally prone to evil, and a frail one warped by the violence of temptations, is delicately distinguished in Macbeth and his wife. There are also some touches of the pencil, that mark the male and female character. When they deliberate on the murder of the king, the duties of host and subject strongly plead with him against the deed. She passes over these considerations; goes to Duncan's chamber resolved to kill him, but could not do it, because, she says, he resembled her father while he slept. There is something feminine in this, and perfectly agreeable to the nature of the sex; who, even when void of Principle, are seldom entirely divested of Sentiment; and thus the Poet, who, to use



his own phrase, had overstepped the modesty of nature in the exaggerated fierceness of her character, returns back to the line and limits of humanity, and that very judiciously, by a sudden impression, which has only an instantaneous effect. Thus she may relapse into her former wickedness, and, from the same susceptibility, by the force of other impressions, be afterwards driven to distraction. As her character was not composed of those gentle elements out of which regular repentance could be formed, it was well judged to throw her mind into the chaos of madness; and, as she had exhibited Wickedness in its highest degree of ferocity and atrociousness, she should be an example of the wildest agonies of Remorse. As Shakespear could most exactly delineate the human mind, in its regular state of reason, so no one ever so happily caught its varying forms, in the wanderings of delirium.

The scene in which Macduff is informed

of the murder of his wife and children, is so celebrated, that it is not necessary to enlarge upon its merit. We feel there, how



much a just imitation of natural sentiments, on such a tender occasion, is more pathetic, than chosen terms and studied phrases. As, in the foregoing chapter, I have made some observations on our author's management of the Præternatural Beings, I forbear to enlarge further on the subject of the Witches: that he has kept closely to the traditions concerning them, is very fully set forth, in the notes of a learned commentator on his works.

This piece may certainly be deemed one of the best of Shakespear's compositions: and, though it contains some faulty speeches, and one whole scene entirely absurd and improper, which art might have corrected or lopped away; yet Genius, powerful Genius only, (*wild Nature's vigour working at the root!*) could have produced such strong and original beauties, and adapted both to the general temper and taste of the age in which it appeared.