Upton 1748 John Upton, Critical observations on Shakespeare, 2nd ed. (London, 1748).

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CRITICAL
OBSERVATIONS
ON
SHAKESPEARE.

By JOHN UPTON
Prebendary of Rochester.

Ne forte pudori
Sit tibi Musa lyrae solers, & cantor Apollo.
Hor.

The SECOND EDITION,
With Alterations and Additions.

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SECT. V.

BUT perhaps our poet's art will appear to greater advantage, if we enter into a detail, and a minuter examination of his plays. There are many who, never having red one word of Aristotle, gravely cite his rules, and talk of the unities of time and place, at the very mentioning Shakespeare's name; they don't seem ever to have given themselves the trouble of considering, whether or no his story does not hang together, and the incidents follow each other naturally and in order; in short whether or no he has not a beginning, middle and end. If you will not allow that he wrote strictly tragedies; yet it may be granted that he wrote dramatic heroic poems; in which, is there not an imitation of one action, serious, entire, and of a just length, and which, without the help of nar-

ration, excites pity and terror in the beholders breast, and by the means of these refines such-

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like passions? So that he fully answers " /1 that
" end, which both at the first and now, was
" and is, to hold as 'twere the mirrour up to
" nature; to shew virtue her own feature,
" scorn her own image, and the very age and
" body of the time, his form and pressure."
Let us suppose Shakespeare has a mind to paint the fatal effects of ambition. For this purpose he makes choice of a hero, well known from the British chronicles, and as the story had a particular relation to the king then reigning, 'twas an interesting story; and though full of machinery, yet /2 probable, because the wonderful tales there related were not only mention'd in history, but vulgarly believed. This hero had conduct and courage, and was universally

/1 Hamlet, Act III. he seems to have had in his mind what Donatus in his life of Terence cites from Cicero, *Comoedia est imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis.*
/2 For 'tis probable sometimes that things should happen contrary to probability. .....

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courted and caress'd; but his master-passion was ambition. What pity, that such a one should fall off from the ways of virtue! It happened that he and his friend, (from whom descended the Stewart family) one day, travelling thro' a forest, met /3 three witches, who foretold his future royalty. This struck his ambitious fancy, crowns, sceptres and titles danced before his dazled eyes, and all his visionary dreams of happiness are to be compleated in the possession of a kingdom. The prediction of the witches

/3 .....

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he makes known by letter to his /4 wife, who, ten times prouder than himself, knew there was one speedy and certain way to the crown, by

treason and murder. This pitch of /5 cruelty a

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  /4 .....
  /5 .....

human creature may be work'd up to, who is prompted by self-love, (that narrow circle of love, beginning and ending in itself,) and by ambitious views. Beside cruelty is most notorious in weak and womanish natures. As 'twas /6 customary for the king to visit his nobles, he came one day to our hero's castle at Inverness; where time and place conspiring, he is murdered; and thus the so much desired crown is obtained.

Who does not see that had Shakespeare broken off the story here, it would have been incomplete? For his design being to shew the effects of ambition, and having made choice of *one* passion, of *one* hero, he is to carry it throughout in all its consequences. I mentioned above that the story was interesting, as a British story; and 'tis equally so, as Macbeth, the hero of the tragedy, is drawn a man, not a monster; a man of virtue, 'till he hearken'd to the lures

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  /6 .....

of ambition: then how is his mind agitated and convulsed, now virtue, now vice prevailing; 'till reason, as is usual, gives way to inclination. And how beautifully, from such a wavering character, does the poet let you into the knowledge of the secret springs and motives of human actions? In the soliloquy before the murder, all the aggravating circumstances attending such a horrid deed, appear in their full view before him.

> He's here in double trust:
> First as I am his kinsman and his subject,
> Strong both against the deed: then, as his /7 host,
> Who should against his murth'rer shut the door,
> Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
> Hath born his faculties so meek, &c.

/7 A stronger reason against the murder than any other. Hospitality was always sacred. ......
'Tis very fine in Shakespeare to give this cast of antiquity to his poem; whatever the inhospitable character of our island-nation happens to be.

When his wife enters, he tells her he is resolved to proceed no further in this fatal affair; and upon her calling him coward, he makes this fine reflection,

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

But what is will and resolution, when people's opinions are what the philosopher calls /8 <KE:RINAI YPOLE:PSEIS>? How does every honest suggestion vanish, and resolution melt like wax before the sun, coming in competition with his ambition? For her sake (powerful phantom!) honour, honesty, all is sacrificed.

Macbeth is now king, and his wife a queen, in enjoyment of their utmost wishes. How dear the purchase, will soon appear. When he murders his royal host, he comes out with the bloody daggers. This circumstance, little as it seems, paints the hurry and agitation of his mind, stronger than a thousand verses. But Shakespeare is full of these true touches of nature.

Methought I heard a voice cry, /9 Sleep no more,
Macbeth doth murder sleep the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, &c.

/8 Epict. L. III. c. XVI.

/9 The repetition here -- *sleep no more, Macbeth doth murder sleep, the innocent sleep*, &c. -- has something in it elegantly pathetic. -- *sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care*. The allusion is to sleav'd silk ravell'd: the allusion perhaps may appear trifling, but Shakespeare knows how to give trifles a new grace and dignity.

Again, looking on his hands,

What hands are here? hah! they pluck out mine eyes.
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand /10 ?

/10 Shakespeare had this from his brother tragedians. ......

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'Tis much happier for a man never to have known what honesty is, than once knowing it, after to forsake it. Macbeth begins now to see, at a distance, that virtue which he had forsaken; he sees the beauty of it, and repines at its loss. Jealousie, mistrust, and all the tyrannic passions now wholly possess him. He grows chiefly jealous of Banquo, because his posterity had been promised the crown.

For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind:
For them, the gracious Duncan have I murther'd.
* * * *
To make them kings: /11 the seed of Banquo kings:
Rather than so, come Fate into the list,
And champion me to th' utterance /12 !

.....
/11 The place should thus be pointed,

To make them kings. The seed of Banquo kings!

to be spoken with irony and contempt, which gives a spirit to the sentence.
/12 .....

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And to have any virtue is cause sufficient of a tyrant's hatred; hence vengeance is vowed a-gainst Macduff.

I am in blood
Stept in so far, that should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as /13 go o'er.

.....
/13 i. e. as *to* go o'er. 'Tis very common for our poet and his **contemporaries** to omit [to] the sign of the infinitive mood.

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This is one of the great morals inculcated in the play, that wickedness draws on wickedness, such is it's deceitful nature. And how poetically is the whole managed, to make all the incidents produce each the other necessarily and in order; till the measure of their iniquity being full, they both miserably perish? And thus the fatal effects of ambition are described, and the story is *one*.

The episodes, or under-actions, are so interwoven with the fabric of the story, that they are really parts of it, though seemingly but adornings. Thus, for instance, it being proper to shew the terrors of Macbeth for his murder of Banquo; the poet makes him haunted with /14 his apparition. And as wicked men are often superstitious, as well as inquisitive and jealous, to draw this character in him more strongly, he sends him to enquire his destiny of the three witches. But every thing falls out to encrease his misfortunes. There is such a cast of /14 antiquity, and something so horridly solemn in this infernal ceremony of the witches, that I never

/14 The Greek rhetoricians call this, <phantasia> and <eido:lopoiia>. One of the finest instances of this kind is in the Orestes of Euripides.

/15 If the reader has a mind to compare Shakespeare with the ancients, I would refer him to Ovid's Circe: and

consider it without admiring our poet's improvement of every hint he receives from the ancients,

Medaea, Met. VII. where the boiling and bubbling of the cauldron is prettily exprest: ......

or /16 moderns. Then again those apparitions,

.....

/16 See a masque of Johnson's at Whitehall, Feb. 2. 1609. which seems to have preceded this play. For Johnson's pride would not suffer him to borrow from Shakespeare, tho' he stole from the ancients: a theft excusable enough. But these poets made this entertainment of the witches to please king James, who then had written his book of Demonology. Johnson, in the introduction of the masque says, " The part of the *scene* which first presented itself was an " ugly *Hell*, which flaming beneath, smoked unto the top " of the roofe. And in respect all *evils* are *morally* said " to come from *hell*; as also from that observation of " Torrentius upon Horace his *Canidia*, *quae tot instructa* " *venenis, ex orci faucibus profecta videri possit*: these " witches, with a hollow and infernal musick came forth

being /17 symbolical representations of what shall happen to him, are introduced paltering with him

in a double sense, and leading him on, according to the common notions of diabolical oracles, to his confusion. And when the kings appear, we have a piece of machinery, that neither the ancients or moderns can exceed. I know nothing any where can parallel it, but that most sublime passage in /18 Virgil, where the great successors of Aeneas pass in review before the hero's eyes. Our poet's closing with a compliment to James the first upon the union, equals Virgil's compliment to Augustus.

" from thence." He tells us, Jones invented the architecture of the whole scene and machine. Perhaps Shakespeare made use of the same scenes: as may be guessed from what Hecate says, Act. III.

" Get you gone,
" And at the pit of Acheron
" Meet me i' th' morning."

/17 The armed head, represents symbolically Macbeth's head cut off and brought to Malcolm by Macduff. The bloody child, is Macduff untimely ripp'd from his mother's womb. The child with a crown on his head, and a bough in his hand, is the royal Malcolme; who ordered his soldiers to hew them down a bough, and bear it before them to Dunsinane.

/18 Virg. VI, 756, &c.

The variety of characters with their different manners ought not to be passed over in silence. Banquo was as deep in the murder of the king, as some of the /19 Scotish writers inform us, as Macbeth. But Shakespeare, with great art and address, deviates from the history. By these means his characters have the greater variety; and he at the same time pays a compliment to king James, who was lineally descended from Banquo. There is a thorough honesty, and a love of his country in Macduff, that distinguishes him from all the rest. The characters of the two kings, Duncan and Macbeth, are finely contrasted; so are those of the two women, lady Macbeth and lady Macduff.

In whatever light this play is viewed, it will shew beautiful in all. The emperor /20 Marcus Antoninus speaks in commendation of tragedy, as not only exhibiting the various events of life,

/19 .....

/20 Marc. Ant. XI, 6.

but teaching us wise and moral observations. What tragedian equals Shakespeare? When news was brought to Macbeth that the queen was dead, he wishes she had not then died; *to morrow*, or any other time would have pleased him better. This is the concatenation of ideas, and hence is introduced the observation that follows.

> To morrow, and to morrow, and to morrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time:
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to /21 study death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more! It is a tale,
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing!

/21 The first folio edition reads *dusty death*: i.e. death which reduces us to dust and ashes; as Mr. Theobald explains it, an espouser of this reading. It might be further strengthened from a similar expression in the psalms, xxii. 15. *thou hast brought me to the dust of death*: the dust of death, i. e. dusty death. I don't doubt but *dusty death* was Shakespeare's own reading; but 'twas his first reading; and he afterwards altered it himself into *study death*, which the players finding in some other copy, gave it us in their

And somewhat before, when the doctor gives Macbeth an account of the troubled state of the queen, he asks,

> 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 /22 oblivious antidote,
> Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
> Which weighs upon the heart?

second edition. *Study* then seems the authentic word ---- To die is a lesson so easily learnt, that *even* fools can study it: even the motley fool, in As you like it, could reason on the time.

> 'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,
> And after one hour more 'twill be eleven;
> And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe,
> And then from hour to hour we rot and rot,

And thereby hangs a tale.

/22 Alluding to the Nepenthe: a certain mixture, of which perhaps opium was one of the ingredients. ..... i. e. the oblivious antidote, causing the forgetfulness of all the evils of life. What is remarkable, had Shakespeare understood Greek as well as Johnson, he could not more closely have expressed the meaning of the old bard.

It might be likewise deserving notice, how finely Shakespeare observes that rule of tragedy, to paint the miseries of the /23 great: almost all the persons in the play, more or less, are involved in calamity. The lesson to be learnt by the lower people is, acquiescence in the ease of a private station, not obnoxious to those disorders, which attend greatness in the stage of the world.

/23 .....