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LIFE
OF
MRS. SIDDONS.

BY THOMAS CAMPBELL.

"Pity it is that the momentary beauties flowing from a harmonious elocution cannot, like those of poetry, be their own record; -- that the animated graces of the Player can live no longer than the instant breath and motion that represent them; or at least can but faintly glimmer through the memory and imperfect attestation of a few surviving spectators."

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LIFE
OF
MRS. SIDDONS.

CHAPTER I.

NO performer was destined oftener than Mrs. Siddons to expend superlative genius on the acting of indifferent dramas. It is true that

she sometimes turned this misfortune into the means of creating additional astonishment. Where there was little or no poetry, she made it for herself; and might be said to have become at once both the dramatist and the actress. Where but a hint of a fine situation was given, she caught up the vague conception, and produced it in a shape that was at once ample and defined; and, with the sorriest text to justify the outpouring of her own

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radiant and fervid spirit, she turned into a glowing picture what she had found but a comparative blank.

Much, however, as we may wonder at this high degree of theatrical art, I doubt if its practice would be desirable, as a general advantage either to the actor's profession or to dramatic poetry. Actors, in parts beneath their powers, are, after all, only like musicians performing on instruments unworthy of their skill. They overcome us, it is true, with wonder and delight. I have heard the inspired Neukomme draw magical sounds from a common parish-church organ, which, under any other touch than his own, was about as musical as the bell overhead that summoned the parishioners. But this did not prevent me from devoutly wishing that I had heard him perform on the Haarlem organ.

The stage-artist's inspiration ought never to

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depend on shining by its own light: for it never can be perfect, unless it meets and kindles with the correspondent inspiration of poetry. The temporary triumph which this marvellous acting affords to indifferent plays is unjust to the truly poetical drama, and perplexing to popular taste. Mrs. Siddons's *Margaret of Anjou*, for instance, I dare say, persuaded half her spectators that Franklin's "Earl of Warwick" was a noble poem. The reading man, who had seen the piece at night adorned by her acting, would, no doubt, next morning, on perusal, find that her per-

formance alone had given splendour to the meteor: but the unreading spectator would probably for ever consider "The Earl of Warwick" a tragedy as good as any of Shakespeare's.

The most pleasing points, therefore, in Mrs. Siddons's history, are her returns to the plays of Shakespeare. She chose the part of *Lady*

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Macbeth for her second benefit this season, February 2, 1785./*

I regard the tragedy of "Macbeth," upon the whole, as the greatest treasure of our dramatic literature. We may look as Britons at Greek sculpture and Italian paintings, with a humble consciousness that our native art has never reached their perfection; but, in the drama, we can confront Æschylus himself with Shakespeare: and, of all modern theatres, *ours* alone can compete with the Greek in the unborrowed nativeness and sublimity of its superstition. In the grandeur of tragedy "Macbeth" has no parallel, till we go back to the "Prometheus, and the Furies," of the Attic stage. I could even produce, if it were not digressing too far from my subject, innumer-

/* Cast of the other parts in the performance of "Macbeth," Feb. 2, 1785. *Macbeth*, Smith; *Macduff*, Brereton; *Banquo*, Bensley; *Witches*, Parsons, Moody, and Baddely.

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able instances of striking similarity between the metaphorical mintage of Shakespeare's and of Æschylus's style, -- a similarity, both in beauty and in the fault of excess, that, unless the contrary had been proved, would lead me to suspect our great dramatist to have been a studious Greek scholar. But their resemblance arose only from the consanguinity of nature.

In one respect, the tragedy of "Macbeth" always reminds me of Æschylus's poetry. It has scenes and conceptions absolutely too bold for representation. What stage could do justice to Æschylus, when the Titan Prometheus

makes his appeal to the elements; and when the hammer is heard in the Scythian Desert that rivets his chains? Or when the Ghost of Clytemnestra rushes into Apollo's temple, and rouses the sleeping Furies? I wish to imagine these scenes: I should be sorry to see the acting of them attempted.

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In like manner, there are parts of "Macbeth" which I delight to read much more than to see in the theatre. When the drum of the Scottish army is heard on the wild heath, and when I fancy it advancing, with its bowmen in front, and its spears and banners in the distance, I am always disappointed with *Macbeth's* entrance, at the head of a few kilted actors. Perhaps more effect might be given to this scene by stage preparation; though with the science of stage-effect I can pretend to little acquaintance. But, be that as it may, I strongly suspect that the appearance of the *Weird Sisters* is too wild and poetical for the possibility of its being ever duly acted in a theatre. Even with the exquisite music of Lock, the orgies of the *Witches* at their boiling cauldron is a burlesque and revolting exhibition. Could any stage contrivance make it seem sublime? No! I think it defies theatrical art to render it half so welcome as when we read it by the mere light of our own imaginations.

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Nevertheless, I feel no inconsistency in reverting from these remarks to my first assertion, that, all in all, "Macbeth" is our greatest possession in dramatic poetry. With the exception of the *Weird Sisters*, it is not only admirably suited for stage representation, but it has given the widest scope to the greatest powers of British acting. It was restored to our Theatre by Garrick, with much fewer alterations than have generally mutilated the plays of Shakespeare. For two thirds of a century, before Garrick's time, "Macbeth" had been worse than banished from the stage: for it had been acted with D'Avenant's alterations, produced in 1672, in

which every original beauty was either awkwardly disguised, or arbitrarily omitted. Yet, so ignorant were Englishmen, that "The Tatler" quotes Shakespeare's "Macbeth" from D'Avenant's alteration of it; and when Quin heard of Garrick's intention to restore the original, he asked with astonishment, "Have I not all this time been acting Shakespeare's play?"

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Lady Macbeth, though not so intensely impassioned as *Constance*, is a more important character in the tragedy to which she belongs. She is a larger occupant of our interest on the stage, and a more full and finished poetical creation. The part accordingly proved, as might have been expected, Mrs. Siddons's masterpiece. It was an era in one's life to have seen her in it. She was Tragedy personified.

Mrs. Siddons has left, in her Memoranda, the following

"Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth.

"In this astonishing creature one sees a woman in whose bosom the passion of ambition has almost obliterated all the characteristics of human nature; in whose composition are associated all the subjugating powers of intellect and all the charms and graces of personal beauty. You will probably not agree with me as to the character of that beauty; yet, perhaps, this difference of opinion will be entirely

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attributable to the difficulty of your imagination disengaging itself from that idea of the person of her representative which you have been so long accustomed to contemplate. According to my notion, it is of that character which I believe is generally allowed to be most captivating to the other sex, -- fair, feminine, nay, perhaps, even fragile --

'Fair as the forms that, wove in Fancy's loom,
Float in light visions round the poet's head.'

Such a combination only, respectable in energy

and strength of mind, and captivating in feminine loveliness, could have composed a charm of such potency as to fascinate the mind of a hero so dauntless, a character so amiable, so honourable as *Macbeth*, -- to seduce him to brave all the dangers of the present and all the terrors of a future world; and we are constrained, even whilst we abhor his crimes, to pity the infatuated victim of such a thralldom. His letters, which have informed her of the predictions of those preternatural beings who accosted him

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on the heath, have lighted up into daring and desperate determinations all those pernicious slumbering fires which the enemy of man is ever watchful to awaken in the bosoms of his unwary victims. To his direful suggestions she is so far from offering the least opposition, as not only to yield up her soul to them, but moreover to invoke the sightless ministers of remorseless cruelty to extinguish in her breast all those compunctious visitings of nature which otherwise might have been mercifully interposed to counteract, and perhaps eventually to overcome, their unholy instigations. But having impiously delivered herself up to the excitements of hell, the pitifulness of heaven itself is withdrawn from her, and she is abandoned to the guidance of the demons whom she has invoked.

"Here I cannot resist a little digression, to observe how sweetly contrasted with the conduct of this splendid fiend is that of the noble single-minded *Banquo*. He, when under the same species of temptation, having been alarmed,

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as it appears, by some wicked suggestions of the *Weird Sisters*, in his last night's dream, puts up an earnest prayer to heaven to have these cursed thoughts restrained in him, '*which nature gives way to in repose.*' Yes, even as to that time when he is not accountable either for their access or continuance, he remembers the precept, 'Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.'

"To return to the subject. *Lady Macbeth*,

thus adorned with every fascination of mind and person, enters for the first time, reading a part of one of those portentous letters from her husband. 'They met me in the day of success; and I have learnt by the perfectest report they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burnt with desire to question them further, they made themselves <>into thin air, into which they vanished. Whilst I stood wrapt in the wonder of it, came missives from the King, who all hailed me 'Thane of Cawdor,' by which title before these Sisters

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had saluted me, and referred me to the coming on of time with '*Hail, King that shall be!*' This I have thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is <>promised. Lay it to thy heart, and farewell.' Now vaulting ambition and intrepid daring rekindle in a moment all the splendours of her dark blue eyes. She fatally resolves that *Glamis* and *Cawdor* shall be also that which the mysterious agents of the Evil One have promised. She then proceeds to the investigation of her husband's character:

'Yet <>I do fear thy nature,
It is too full of the 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 thou wouldst holily. Wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou 'dst have great
Glamis,
That which cries, *Thus thou must do if thou have it!*
And that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishest should be undone.'

"In this development, we find that, though

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ambitious, he is yet amiable, conscientious, nay pious; and yet of a temper so irresolute and fluctuating, as to require all the efforts, all the excitement, which her uncontrollable spirit, and her unbounded influence over him, can perform. She continues --

'Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crown'd withal.'

"Shortly *Macbeth* appears. He announces the King's approach; and she, insensible it should seem to all the perils which he has encountered in battle, and to all the happiness of his safe return to her, -- for not one kind word of greeting or congratulation does she offer, -- is so entirely swallowed up by the horrible design, which has probably been suggested to her by his letters, as to have entirely forgotten both the one and the other. It is very remarkable that *Macbeth* is frequent in expressions of ten-

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derness to his wife, while she never betrays one symptom of affection towards him, till, in the fiery furnace of affliction, her iron heart is melted down to softness. For the present she flies to welcome the venerable gracious *Duncan*, with such a shew of eagerness, as if allegiance in her bosom sat crowned with devotion and gratitude.

"The Second Act.

"There can be no doubt that *Macbeth*, in the first instance, suggested his design of assassinating the king, and it is probable that he has invited his gracious sovereign to his castle, in order the more speedily and expeditiously to realize those thoughts, '*whose murder, though but yet fantastical, so shook his single state of man.*' Yet, on the arrival of the amiable monarch who had so honoured him of late, his naturally benevolent and good feelings resume their wonted power. He then solemnly communicates with his heart, and after much powerful reasoning upon the danger of the undertaking, calling to mind that *Duncan* his king, of the

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mildest virtues, and his kinsman, lay as his guest.

All those accumulated deterrents, with the violated rights of sacred hospitality bringing up the rear, rising all at once in terrible array to his awakened conscience, he relinquishes the atrocious purpose, and wisely determines to proceed no further in the business. But, now, behold his evil genius, his grave-charm, appears, and by the force of her revilings, her contemptuous taunts, and, above all, by her opprobrious aspersion of cowardice, chases the gathering drops of humanity from his eyes, and drives before her impetuous and destructive career all those kindly charities, those impressions of loyalty, and pity, and gratitude, which, but the moment before, had taken full possession of his mind. She says,

'I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from <>its boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, -- had I but so sworn
As you have done to this.'

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"Even here, horrific as she is, she shews herself made by ambition, but not by nature, a perfectly savage creature. The very use of such a tender allusion in the midst of her dreadful language, persuades one unequivocally that she has really felt the maternal yearnings of a mother towards her babe, and that she considered this action the most enormous that ever required the strength of human nerves for its perpetration. Her language to *Macbeth* is the most potently eloquent that guilt could use. It is only in soliloquy that she invokes the powers of hell to unsex her. To her husband she avows, and the naturalness of her language makes us believe her, that she had felt the instinct of filial as well as maternal love. But she makes her very virtues the means of a taunt to her lord: -- 'You have the milk of human kindness in your heart,' she says (in substance) to him, 'but ambition, which is my ruling passion, would be also yours if you had courage. With a hankering desire to

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suppress, if you could, all your weaknesses of sympathy, you are too cowardly to will the deed, and can only dare to wish it. You speak of sympathies and feelings. I too have felt with a tenderness which your sex cannot know; but I am resolute in my ambition to trample on all that obstructs my way to a crown. Look to me, and be ashamed of your weakness.' Abashed, perhaps, to find his own courage humbled before this unimaginable instance of female fortitude, he at last screws up his courage to the sticking-place, and binds up each corporal agent to this terrible feat. It is the dead of night. The gracious *Duncan*, now shut up in measureless content, reposes sweetly, while the restless spirit of wickedness resolves that he shall wake no more. The daring fiend, whose pernicious potions have stupified his attendants, and who even laid their daggers ready, -- her own spirit, as it seems, exalted by the power of wine, -- proceeds, 'That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold,' now

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enters the gallery, in eager expectation of the results of her diabolical diligence. In the tremendous suspense of these moments, while she recollects her habitual humanity, one trait of tender feeling is expressed, 'Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done it.' Her humanity vanishes, however, in the same instant; for when she observes that *Macbeth*, in the terror and confusion of his faculties, has brought the daggers from the place where they had agreed they should remain for the crimination of the grooms, she exhorts him to return with them to that place, and to smear those attendants of the sovereign with blood. He, shuddering, exclaims, 'I'll go no more! I am affear'd to think <>of what I have done. Look on't again I dare not.'

"Then instantaneously the solitary particle of her human feeling is swallowed up in her remorseless ambition, and, wrenching the daggers from the feeble grasp of her husband, she finishes

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the act which the infirm of purpose had not courage to complete, and calmly and steadily returns to her accomplice with the fiend-like boast,

'My hands are of your colour;
But I <>would scorn to wear a heart so white.'

"A knocking at the gate interrupts this terrific dialogue; and all that now occupies her mind is urging him to wash his hands and put on his nightgown, '*lest occasion call,*' says she, '*and shew us to be the watchers.*' In a deplorable depravation of all rational knowledge, and lost to every recollection except that of his enormous guilt, she hurries him away to their own chamber.

"The Third Act.

"The golden round of royalty now crowns her brow, and royal robes enfold her form; but the peace that passeth all understanding is lost

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to her for ever, and the worm that never dies already gnaws her heart.

'Nought's had -- all's spent,
Where our desire is had without content.
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.'

"Under the impression of her present wretchedness, I, from this moment, have always assumed the dejection of countenance and manners which I thought accordant to such a state of mind; and, though the author of this sublime composition has not, it must be acknowledged, given any direction whatever to authorize this assumption, yet I venture to hope that he would not have disapproved of it. It is evident, indeed, by her conduct in the scene which succeeds the mournful soliloquy, that she is no longer the presumptuous, the determined creature, that she was before the assassination of the King: for instance, on the approach of her husband, we behold for the

first time striking indications of sensibility,

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may, tenderness and sympathy; and I think this conduct is nobly followed up by her during the whole of their subsequent eventful intercourse. It is evident, I think, that the sad and new experience of affliction has subdued the insolence of her pride, and the violence of her will; for she comes now to seek him out, that she may, at least, participate his misery. She knows, by her own woful experience, the torment which he undergoes, and endeavours to alleviate his sufferings by the following inefficient reasonings:

'How now, my lord -- why do you keep alone?
Of sorriest fancies your companions making?
Using those thoughts which should indeed have died
With them they think on. Things without all remedy
Should be without regard. What's done, is done.'

"Far from her former habits of reproach and contemptuous taunting, you perceive that she now listens to his complaints with sympathizing feelings; and, so far from adding to the weight of his affliction the burthen of her own, she

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endeavours to conceal it from him with the most delicate and unremitting attention. But it is in vain; as we may observe in his beautiful and mournful dialogue with the physician on the subject of his cureless malady: 'Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased?' &c. You now hear no more of her chidings and reproaches. No; all her thoughts are now directed to divert his from those sorriest fancies, by turning them to the approaching banquet, in exhorting him to conciliate the goodwill and good thoughts of his guests, by receiving them with a disengaged air, and cordial, bright, and jovial demeanour. Yes; smothering her sufferings in the deepest recesses of her own wretched bosom, we cannot but perceive that she devotes herself entirely to the effort of supporting him.

"Let it be here recollected, as some pal-

liation of her former very different deportment, she had, probably, from childhood

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commanded all around her with a high hand; had uninterruptedly, perhaps, in that splendid station, enjoyed all that wealth, all that nature had to bestow; that she had, possibly, no directors, no controllers, and that in womanhood her fascinated lord had never once opposed her inclinations. But now her new-born relentings, under the rod of chastisement, prompt her to make palpable efforts in order to support the spirits of her weaker, and, I must say, more selfish husband. Yes; in gratitude for his unbounded affection, and in commiseration of his sufferings, she suppresses the anguish of her heart, even while that anguish is precipitating her into the grave which at this moment is yawning to receive her.

"The Banquet.

"Surrounded by their court, in all the apparent ease and self-complacency of which their wretched souls are destitute, they are now seated at the royal banquet; and although,

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through the greater part of this scene, *Lady Macbeth* affects to resume her wonted domination over her husband, yet, notwithstanding all this self-control, her mind must even then be agonized by the complicated pangs of terror and remorse. For, what imagination can conceive her tremors, lest at every succeeding moment *Macbeth*, in his distraction, may confirm those suspicions, but ill concealed, under the loyal looks and cordial manners of their facile courtiers, when, with smothered terror, yet domineering indignation, she exclaims, upon his agitation at the ghost of *Banquo*, 'Are you a man?' *Macbeth* answers,

'Aye, a bold one -- that dare look on that
Which might appal the devil.'

Lady Macbeth.

'Oh, proper stuff!

This is the very painting of your fear;
This is the air-drawn dagger which, ye said,
Led you to Duncan: -- Oh, these flaws and starts,

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Impostors to true fear, would well become
A woman's story at a winter's fire,
Authorized by her grandam -- Shame itself.
Why do you make such faces? when all's done,
You look but on a stool.'

"Dying with fear, yet assuming the utmost
composure, she returns to her stately canopy;
and, with trembling nerves, having tottered up
the steps to her throne, that bad eminence, she
entertains her wondering guests with frightful
smiles, with over-acted attention, and with fitful
graciousness; painfully, yet incessantly, labour-
ing to divert their attention from her husband.
Whilst writhing thus under her internal agonies,
her restless and terrifying glances towards
Macbeth, in spite of all her efforts to suppress
them, have thrown the whole table into amaze-
ment; and the murderer then suddenly breaks
up the assembly, by the following confession of
his horrors:

'Can such things be,
And overcome us like a summer cloud,

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Without our special wonder? You make <>me
Even to the disposition that I <>am,
When now I think you can behold such sights
And keep the natural ruby of your cheeks,
When mine is blanched with fear.'

Rosse.

'What <>sight, my lord?'

"What imitation, in such circumstances as
these, would ever satisfy the demands of expec-
tation? The terror, the remorse, the hypocrisy
of this astonishing being, flitting in frightful
succession over her countenance, and actuating
her agitated gestures with her varying emo-
tions, present, perhaps, one of the greatest

difficulties of the scenic art, and cause her representative no less to tremble for the suffrage of her private study, than for its public effect.

"It is now the time to inform you of an idea which I have conceived of *Lady Macbeth's* character, which perhaps will appear as fanciful

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as that which I have adopted respecting the style of her beauty; and, in order to justify this idea, I must carry you back to the scene immediately preceding the banquet, in which you will recollect the following dialogue:

'Oh, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife;
Thou knowest that Banquo and his Fleance live.'

Lady Macbeth.

'But in them Nature's copy 's not eterne.'

Macbeth.

'There 's comfort yet -- they are assailable.
Then be thou jocund; ere the bat has flown
His cloistered flight -- ere to black Hecate's summons
The shard-born beetle with his drowsy hums
Hath rung night's yawning peal -- there shall be done
A deed of dreadful note.'

Lady Macbeth.

'What's to be done?'

Macbeth.

'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed. Come, <>unfeeling night,
Scarf up the tender, <>pitiful eye of day,

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And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale. Light thickens, and the crow
Makes way to the rooky wood. --
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
While night's black agents to their prey do rouse.
Thou marvellest at my words -- but hold thee still;
Things bad begun, make strong themselves by ill.'

"Now, it is not possible that she should hear all these ambiguous hints about *Banquo* without

being too well aware that a sudden, lamentable fate awaits him. Yet, so far from offering any opposition to *Macbeth's* murderous designs, she even hints, I think, at the facility, if not the expediency, of destroying both *Banquo* and his equally unoffending child, when she observes that, '*in them Nature's copy is not eterne.*' Having, therefore, now filled the measure of her crimes, I have imagined that the last appearance of *Banquo's* ghost became no less visible to her eyes than it became to those of her husband. Yes. the spirit of the noble *Banquo* has smilingly filled up, even to over-

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flowing, and now commends to her own lips the ingredients of her poisoned chalice.

"The Fifth Act.

"Behold her now, with wasted form, with wan and haggard countenance, her starry eyes glazed with the ever-burning fever of remorse, and on their lids the shadows of death. Her ever-restless spirit wanders in troubled dreams about her dismal apartment; and, whether waking or asleep, the smell of innocent blood incessantly haunts her imagination:

'Here's the smell of the blood still.
All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten
This little hand.'

"How beautifully contrasted is this exclamation with the bolder image of *Macbeth*, in expressing the same feeling!

'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash the blood
Clean from this hand?'

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And how appropriately either sex illustrates the same idea !

"During this appalling scene, which, to my sense, is the most so of them all, the wretched creature, in imagination, acts over again the accumulated horrors of her whole conduct. These dreadful images, accompanied with the

agitations they have induced, have obviously accelerated her untimely end; for in a few moments the tidings of her death are brought to her unhappy husband. It is conjectured that she died by her own hand. Too certain it is, that she dies, and makes no sign. I have now to account to you for the weakness which I have, a few lines back, ascribed to *Macbeth*; and I am not quite without hope that the following observations will bear me out in my opinion. Please to observe, that he (I must think pusillanimously, when I compare his conduct to her forbearance,) has been continually pouring out his miseries to his wife. His heart has therefore been eased, from time to time, by

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unloading its weight of woe; while she, on the contrary, has perseveringly endured in silence the uttermost anguish of a wounded spirit.

'The grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'erfraught heart, and bids it break.'

"Her feminine nature, her delicate structure, it is too evident, are soon overwhelmed by the enormous pressure of her crimes. Yet it will be granted, that she gives proofs of a naturally higher toned mind than that of *Macbeth*. The different physical powers of the two sexes are finely delineated, in the different effects which their mutual crimes produce. Her frailer frame, and keener feelings, have now sunk under the struggle -- his robust and less sensitive constitution has not only resisted it, but bears him on to deeper wickedness, and to experience the fatal fecundity of crime.

'For mine own good -- All causes shall give way.
I am in blood <>so far stepp'd in, that should I wade
no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.'

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Henceforth, accordingly, he perpetrates horrors to the day of his doom.

"In one point of view, at least, this guilty pair extort from us, in spite of ourselves, a certain

respect and approbation. Their grandeur of character sustains them both above recrimination (the despicable accustomed resort of vulgar minds,) in adversity; for the wretched husband, though almost impelled into this gulph of destruction by the instigations of his wife, feels no abatement of his love for her, while she, on her part, appears to have known no tenderness for him, till, with a heart bleeding at every pore, she beholds in him the miserable victim of their mutual ambition. Unlike the first frail pair in Paradise, they spent not the fruitless hours in mutual accusation."

Mrs. Siddons had played *Lady Macbeth* in the provincial theatres many years before she attempted the character in London. Adverting

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to the first time this part was allotted to her, she says, "It was my custom to study my characters at night, when all the domestic cares and business of the day were over. On the night preceding that in which I was to appear in this part for the first time, I shut myself up, as usual, when all the family were retired, and commenced my study of *Lady Macbeth*. As the character is very short, I thought I should soon accomplish it. Being then only twenty years of age, I believed, as many others do believe, that little more was necessary than to get the words into my head; for the necessity of discrimination, and the development of character, at that time of my life, had scarcely entered into my imagination. But, to proceed. I went on with tolerable composure, in the silence of the night, (a night I never can forget,) till I came to the assassination scene, when the horrors of the scene rose to a degree that made it impossible for me to get farther. I snatched up my candle, and hurried out of the room, in a paroxysm of

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terror. My dress was of silk, and the rustling of it, as I ascended the stairs to go to bed, seemed to my panic-struck fancy like the movement of a spectre pursuing me. At last I reached my chamber, where I found my

husband fast asleep. I clapt my candlestick down upon the table, without the power of putting the candle out; and I threw myself on my bed, without daring to stay even to take off my clothes. At peep of day I rose to resume my task; but so little did I know of my part when I appeared in it, at night, that my shame and confusion cured me of procrastinating my business for the remainder of my life.

"About six years afterwards I was called upon to act the same character in London. By this time I had perceived the difficulty of assuming a personage with whom no one feeling of common general nature was congenial or assistant. One's own heart could prompt one to express, with some degree of truth, the sen-

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timents of a mother, a daughter, a wife, a lover, a sister, &c., but, to adopt this character, must be an effort of the judgment alone.

"Therefore it was with the utmost diffidence, nay terror, that I undertook it, and with the additional fear of Mrs. Pritchard's reputation in it before my eyes. The dreaded first night at length arrived, when, just as I had finished my toilette, and was pondering with fearfulness my first appearance in the grand fiendish part, comes Mr. Sheridan, knocking at my door, and insisting, in spite of all my entreaties not to be interrupted at this to me tremendous moment, to be admitted. He would not be denied admittance; for he protested he must speak to me on a circumstance which so deeply concerned my own interest, that it was of the most serious nature. Well, after much squabbling, I was compelled to admit him, that I might dismiss him the sooner, and compose myself before the play began. But, what was my

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distress and astonishment, when I found that he wanted me, even at this moment of anxiety and terror, to adopt another mode of acting the sleeping scene. He told me he had heard with the greatest surprise and concern that I meant to act it without holding the candle in my

hand; and, when I urged the impracticability of washing out that 'damned spot,' with the vehemence that was certainly implied by both her own words, and by those of her gentleman, he insisted, that if I did put the candle out of my hand, it would be thought a presumptuous innovation, as Mrs. Pritchard had always retained it in hers. My mind, however, was made up, and it was then too late to make me alter it; for I was too agitated to adopt another method. My deference for Mr. Sheridan's taste and judgment was, however, so great, that, had he proposed the alteration whilst it was possible for me to change my own plan, I should have yielded to his suggestion; though, even then, it would have been against

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my own opinion, and my observation of the accuracy with which somnambulists perform all the acts of waking persons. The scene, of course, was acted as I had myself conceived it; and the innovation, as Mr. Sheridan called it, was received with approbation. Mr. Sheridan himself came to me, after the play, and most ingenuously congratulated me on my obstinacy. When he was gone out of the room I began to undress; and, while standing up before my glass, and taking off my mantle, a diverting circumstance occurred, to chase away the feelings of this anxious night; for, while I was repeating, and endeavouring to call to mind the appropriate tone and action to the following words, 'Here's the smell of blood still!' my dresser innocently exclaimed, 'Dear me, ma'am, how very hysterical you are to-night; I protest and vow, ma'am, it was not blood, but rose-pink and water; for I saw the property-man mix it up with my own eyes.'"

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CHAPTER II.

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Observations on Mrs. Siddons's Estimate of *Lady Macbeth's* Character, and on that given by Mrs. Jameson, in her "Characteristics of Women."

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CHAPTER II.

THOSE who have read Mrs. Jameson's admirable "Characteristics of Women," must have remarked the general similarity of her opinions respecting *Lady Macbeth's* character, to those delivered by Mrs. Siddons, in the foregoing critique. If there be any difference, it is that the former goes a shade farther than Mrs. Siddons, in her advocacy of Shakespeare's heroine.

Whether Mrs. Jameson heard of Mrs. Siddons's ideas on the subject, which she might by possibility, as the great actress made no secret of them, I have never been in the least

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anxious to ascertain, because it is plain, from her writings, that Mrs. Jameson has a mind too original, to require or to borrow suggestions from any one. But, in deprecating all suspicion of obligation on the one side, I have an equal right to exclude the possibility of its being suspected on the other. Mrs. Siddons shewed me these Remarks on the character of *Lady Macbeth* some nineteen years ago, so that there can be little doubt of their having been earlier written than those of the authoress of "The Characteristics."

In a general view, I agree with both of the fair advocates of *Lady Macbeth*, that the language of preceding critics was rather unmeasured, when they described her as "*thoroughly hateful, invariably savage, and purely demoniac.*" It is true, that the ungentlemanly epithet, fiend-like, is applied to her by Shakespeare himself, but then he puts it into the mouth of *King Malcolm*, who might naturally be incensed.

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Lady Macbeth is not thoroughly hateful, for she is not a virago, not an adultress, not impelled by revenge. On the contrary, she expresses no feeling of personal malignity towards any human being in the whole course of her part. Shakespeare could have easily displayed her crimes in a more commonplace and accountable light, by assigning some feudal grudge as a mixed motive of her cruelty to *Duncan*; but he makes her a murderess in cold blood, and from the sole motive of ambition, well knowing, that if he had broken up the inhuman serenity of her remorselessness by the ruffling of anger, he would have vulgarized the features of the splendid Titaness.

By this entire absence of petty vice and personal virulence, and by concentrating all the springs of her conduct into the one determined feeling of ambition, the mighty poet has given her character a statue-like simplicity, which, though cold, is spirit-stirring, from the wonder

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it excites, and which is imposing, although its respectability consists, as far as the heart is concerned, in merely negative decencies. How many villains walk the world in credit to their graves, from the mere fulfilment of those negative decencies. Had *Lady Macbeth* been able to smother her husband's babblings, she might have been one of them.

Shakespeare makes her a great character, by calming down all the pettiness of vice, and by giving her only one ruling passion, which, though criminal, has at least a lofty object, corresponding with the firmness of her will and the force of her intellect. The object of her ambition was a crown, which, in the days in which we suppose her to have lived, was a miniature symbol of divinity. Under the full impression of her intellectual powers, and with a certain allowance which we make for the illusion of sorcery, the imagination suggests to us something like a half-apology for her

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ambition. Though I can vaguely imagine the

supernatural agency of the spiritual world, yet I know so little precisely about fiends or demons, that I cannot pretend to estimate the relation of their natures to that of Shakespeare's heroine. But, as a human being, *Lady Macbeth* is too intellectual to be thoroughly hateful. Moreover, I hold it no paradox to say, that the strong idea which Shakespeare conveys to us of her intelligence, is heightened by its contrast with that partial shade which is thrown over it, by her sinful will giving way to superstitious influences. At times she is deceived, we should say, prosaically speaking, by the infatuation of her own wickedness, or, poetically speaking, by the agency of infernal tempters; otherwise she could not have imagined for a moment that she could palm upon the world the chamberlains of *Duncan* for his real murderers. Yet her mind, under the approach of this portentous and unnatural eclipse, in spite of its black illusions, has light enough remaining to shew us a

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reading of *Macbeth's* character, such as Lord Bacon could not have given to us more philosophically, or in fewer words.

All this, however, only proves *Lady Macbeth* to be a character of brilliant understanding, lofty determination, and negative decency. That the poet meant us to conceive her more than a piece of august atrocity, or to leave a tacit understanding of her being naturally amiable, I make bold to doubt. Mrs. Siddons, disposed by her own nature to take the most softened views of her heroine, discovers, in her conduct towards *Macbeth*, a dutiful and unselfish tenderness, which, I own, is far from striking me. "*Lady Macbeth*," she says, "seeks out *Macbeth*, that she may at least participate in his wretchedness." But is *that* her real motive? No; *Lady Macbeth*, in that scene, seems to me to have no other object than their common preservation. She finds that he is shunning society, and is giving himself up to "*his sorry*

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fancies." Her trying to snatch him from these

is a matter of policy; -- a proof of her sagacity, and not of her social sensibility. At least, insensitive as we have seen her to the slightest joy at the return of her husband, it seems unnecessary to ascribe to her any new-sprung tenderness, when self-interest sufficiently accounts for her conduct.

Both of her fair advocates lay much stress on her abstaining from vituperation towards *Macbeth*, when she exhorts him to retire to rest, after the banquet. But, here I must own, that I can see no proof of her positive tenderness. Repose was necessary to *Macbeth's* recovery. Their joint fate was hanging by a hair; and she knew that a breath of her reproach, by inflaming him to madness, would break that hair, and plunge them both into exposure and ruin. Common sense is always respectable; and here it is joined with command of temper and matrimonial faith. But still her object includes her

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own preservation; and we have no proof of her alleged tenderness and sensibility.

If *Lady Macbeth's* male critics have dismissed her with ungallant haste and harshness, I think the eloquent authoress of the "Characteristics of Women" has tried rather too elaborately to prove her positive virtues, by speculations which, to say the least of them, if they be true, are not certain. She goes beyond Mrs. Siddons's toleration of the heroine; and, getting absolutely in love with her, exclaims, "What would not the firmness, the self-command, the ardent affections of this woman have performed, if properly directed!" Why, her firmness and self-command are very evident; but, as to her ardent affections, I would ask, on what other object on earth she bestows them except the crown of Scotland? We are told, however, that her husband loves her, and that therefore she could not be naturally bad. But, in the first place, though we are not

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directly told so, we may be fairly allowed to imagine her a very beautiful woman; and,

with beauty and superior intellect, it is easy to conceive her managing and making herself necessary to *Macbeth*, a man comparatively weak, and, as we see, facile to wickedness. There are instances of atrocious women having swayed the hearts of more amiable men. What debars me from imagining that *Lady Macbeth* had obtained this conjugal ascendancy by anything amiable in her nature, is, that she elicits *Macbeth's* warmest admiration in the utterance of atrocious feelings; -- at least, such I consider those expressions to be which precede his saying to her, "Bring forth men-children only."

But here I am again at issue with the ingenious authoress of the "Characteristics," who reads in those very expressions, that strike me as proofs of atrocity, distinct evidence of *Lady Macbeth's amiable character*: since, she

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declares that she had known what it was to have loved the offspring she suckled. The majority of she-wolves, I conceive, would make the same declaration, if they could speak, though they would probably omit the addition about dashing out the suckling's brains. Again: she is amiably unable to murder the sleeping King, because, to use Mrs. Jameson's words, "he brings to her the dear and venerable image of her father." Yes: but she can send in her husband to do it for her. Did Shakespeare intend us to believe this murderess naturally compassionate?

It seems to me, also, to be far from self-evident that *Lady Macbeth* is not naturally cruel, because she calls on all the demons of human thought to unsex her; or because she dies of what her apologist calls remorse. If by that word we mean true contrition, Shakespeare gives no proof of her having shown such a feeling. Her death is mysterious; and we

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generally attribute it to despair and suicide. Even her terrible and thrice-repeated sob of agony, in the sleep-walking scene, shows a

conscience haunted indeed by terrors, but not penitent; for she still adheres to her godless old ground of comfort, that "*Banquo is in his grave.*"

She dies, -- she is swept away darkly from before us to her great account. I say, that we have a tragic satisfaction in her death: and though I grant that we do not exult over her fate, yet I find no argument, in this circumstance, against her natural enormity. To see a fellow-creature, a beautiful woman, with a bright, bold intellect, thus summoned to her destiny, creates a religious feeling too profound for exultation.

In this terribly swift succession of her punishment to her crimes, lies one of the master-traits of skill by which Shakespeare

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contrives to make us blend an awful feeling, somewhat akin to pity, with our satisfaction at her death.

Still I am persuaded that Shakespeare never meant her for anything better than a character of superb depravity, and a being, with all her decorum and force of mind, naturally cold and remorseless. When Mrs. Jameson asks us, what might not religion have made of such a character? she puts a question that will equally apply to every other enormous criminal; for, the worst heart that ever beat in a human breast would be at once rectified, if you could impress it with a genuine religious faith. But if Shakespeare intended us to believe *Lady Macbeth's* nature a soil peculiarly adapted for the growth of religion, he has chosen a way very unlike his own wisdom in portraying her, for he exhibits her as a practical infidel in a simple age: and he makes her words sum up all the essence of that unnatural irreligion,

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which cannot spring up to the head without having its root in a callous heart. She holds that

"The sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures."

And that

"Things without remedy,
Should be without regard."

There is something hideous in the very strength of her mind, that can dive down, like a wounded monster, to such depths of consolation.

She is a splendid picture of evil, nevertheless, -- a sort of sister of Milton's *Lucifer*; and, like him, we surely imagine her externally majestic and beautiful. Mrs. Siddons's idea of her having been a delicate and blonde beauty, seems to me to be a pure caprice. The public would have ill exchanged such a representative of *Lady Macbeth*, for the dark locks and the eagle eyes of Mrs. Siddons.

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In some other characters which Mrs. Siddons performed, the memory of the old, or the imagination of the young, might possibly conceive her to have had a substitute; but not in *Lady Macbeth*. The moment she seized the part, she identified her image with it in the minds of the living generation.

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CHAPTER VIII.

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Mrs. Siddons's Letter to Mr. Taylor, on his Offer to write her Biography -- Re-opening of Drury Lane -- An Innovation in the acting of "Macbeth" -- She acts the *Countess Orsina*, in Lessing's Tragedy of "Emilia Galotti" -- *Horatia*, in Whitehead's "Roman Father" -- *Elvira*, in Miss Burney's unfortunate Drama -- *Palmira*, in "Mahomet" -- *Emmeline*, in "Edgar and Evelina" -- *Roxana*, in "Alexander the Great" -- *Julia*, in "Prince Hoare's Tragedy of "Such Things

Were" -- *Almeyda*, in the "Queen of Granada" -- Escapes acting in "Vortigern" -- She is disappointed in Money Matters by Sheridan; but returns to Drury Lane, in September, 1796 -- Takes a new Character, in Thomson's "Edward and Eleanora" -- Acts *Vitellia*, in Jephson's "Conspiracy" -- *Milwood*, in "George Barnwell" -- *Athenais*, in "Theodosius; or, the Force of Love" -- *Agnes*, in "Fatal Curiosity."

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In the following spring she writes thus to her friend Lady Harcourt:

"April 11, 1794.

"* * * * Our new theatre is the most beautiful that imagination can paint. We open it with "Macbeth," on Easter Monday. I am told that the banquet is a thing to go and see of itself. The scenes and dresses all new, and

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as superb and characteristic as it is possible to make them. You cannot conceive what I feel at the prospect of playing there. I dare say I shall be so nervous as scarcely to be able to make myself heard in the first scene.

"S. Siddons."

In point of fact, the new House at Drury Lane had been opened, with a Concert of sacred music, on the 12th of March, though there was no regular dramatic performance till the 21st of April, when "Macbeth" was played./*

An occasional prologue and epilogue were spoken by John Kemble and Miss Farren; a lake of real water was exhibited in the scenery;

/* The parts were cast as follows: *Macbeth*, John Kemble; *Banquo*, Wroughton; *Macduff*, Palmer; *Malcolm*, Charles Kemble (his first appearance); *Duncan*, Bensley; *Rosse*, Barrymore: *Lady Macbeth*, Mrs. Siddons; *Hecate*, Bannister; *Witches*, Moody, Dodd, and Suett.

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and the audience were told that an iron curtain was in preparation. Thus far matters were judiciously accommodated to the public love of water, and dread of fire. But an innovation was made in the performance of "Macbeth," about the absurdity of which I am surprised that there should ever have been two opinions. The ghost of *Banquo* was omitted in the banquet-scene; and thus the audience, like the guests of *Macbeth*, seeing only an empty chair, were forced to conjure up the form of the spectral intruder by the force of their own imaginations. This idea was suggested to Kemble by some verses of the poet Edward Lloyd. It was a mere crotchet, and a pernicious departure from the ancient custom.

There was no rationality in depriving the spectator of a sight of *Banquo's* ghost, merely because the company at *Macbeth's* table are not supposed to see it. But we are not *Macbeth's* guests? We are no more a part

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of their company than we are a part of the scenes or the scene-shifters. We are the poet's guests, invited to see "Macbeth:" to see what he sees, and to feel what he feels, caring comparatively nothing about the guests. I may be told, perhaps, that, according to this reasoning, we ought to see the dagger in the air that floats before *Macbeth*. But the visionary appearance of an inanimate object and of a human being are by no means parallel cases. The stage-spectre of a dagger would be ludicrous; but not so is the stage-spectre of a man appearing to his murderer. Superstition sanctions the latter representation: and as to the alleged inconsistency of *Banquo's* ghost being visible to us whilst it is unseen by the guests at the banquet, the argument amounts to nothing. If we judge by sheer reason, no doubt we must banish ghosts from the stage altogether; but, if we regulate our fancy by the laws of superstition, we shall find that spectres are privileged to be visible to whom they will: so that the

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exclusion of *Banquo*, on this occasion, was a violation of the spiritual peerage of the drama, an outrage on the rights of ghosts, -- and a worthier spectre than *Banquo's* never trode the stage.

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