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## SHAKESPEARE AND VOLTAIRE

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## **Shakespearean Wars**

I

**SHAKESPEARE AS A DRAMATIC ARTIST**

*Already Published*

II

**SHAKESPEARE AND VOLTAIRE**

# SHAKESPEARE

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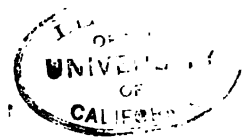
AND

# VOLTAIRE

BY

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## PREFACE

IN the opening volume of this series I sought to show, among other things, that the controversy between what we now commonly call the classical and romantic dramas was carried on as vigorously during the Elizabethan era as it has been at any period since. The present names did not exist, it is true; but the realities were just as active and as potent. The lines were drawn as rigidly then as they have been at any time; and according to their preferences and beliefs men allied themselves with the one or the other party.

Evidence of this was furnished from the mouths of various witnesses. But had not their testimony been handed down, the existence of such a condition of things could have been inferred, not merely from the acts of Shakespeare, but from his very words. From them it is clear that he not only recognized the distinction between the two kinds of drama, but that he advisedly ranged himself upon the side of the romanticists. His rejection of the unities, for illustration, was not accidental but deliberate. He made this evident not only by his marked conformity to them in at least one instance; in two or three others he practically proclaimed his dissent from them in the references he made to the arguments by which they were supported. This single fact is sufficient of itself to dispose of the

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theory, widely accepted during the eighteenth century and not altogether discarded even now, that his was a genius which worked independently of rule and acted merely under the impulse of a blind inspiration.

Shakespeare's choice of his side could hardly have failed to exert a distinct influence during the age in which he flourished, as it certainly exerted a decisive influence later. At any rate, as the result of the conflict which went on, the romantic drama remained at the end of the Elizabethan period master of the field. There were those who denounced it violently before it had achieved its victory. There were dissenters from it after its triumph had been assured. Not unfrequently there was on the part of some a theoretical recognition of the justice of the doctrines of the classicists, with a disregard or evasion of them in practice. Still, it is safe to say that up to the period of the civil war the form of the drama which is best exemplified by the plays of Shakespeare prevailed generally over that form of it which sought to be in accord with the slow-endavoring art — to use Milton's phrase — of Ben Jonson.

This condition of things was reversed after the Restoration. French ideas became not merely prevalent but prevailing. Classicism took possession of the English stage. The hold it gained was still further confirmed during the eighteenth century. One thing only stood in the way of its triumph being made absolutely complete. This was the continuous and increasing popularity of Shakespeare. As time went on, piece after piece of his was revived and became a permanent addition to the collection of plays which the theatres

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held in stock. The indifference he had displayed to the canons of the so-called classical drama sometimes called forth derision, sometimes regret; but far more than either it tended to excite doubt as to the validity of the laws disregarded. The feeling strengthened with the progress of the century. By its end respect for the conventions insisted upon by the classicists had largely disappeared. In a few years more the sway of its grand central doctrine, that of the unities, had been utterly overthrown in practice. Men who wrote for the stage might henceforth regard it or not, as it suited their pleasure or their whim. But the belief in the necessity of its observance was gone. This is to say that in the early part of the nineteenth century the practice of playwrights had swung back to that generally adopted by their predecessors in the latter part of the sixteenth.

Then arose a body of critical teachers — of whom Schlegel in Germany and Coleridge in England are the great exemplars — who came forward to defend the methods which had come once more to prevail; to affirm that they were in conformity to art, and not in violation of it; and that in consequence, not Corneille and Racine, but Shakespeare was what Lessing had long before proclaimed him to be, the true successor of the Greek tragedians. But these writers did not create the revolution, as it has often been asserted. They justified it, they gave men a reason for the course they followed or the faith they held. But the revolution itself had been already accomplished. That was the work of Shakespeare, and of Shakespeare alone.

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So much contained in the previous work it has been necessary to premise before entering upon the subject of the present one. For the victory which was gained was gained very slowly. There was one man in particular who did more than any other, or rather more than all others, to delay in every country of Europe the revolt against classicism, and in some to arrest it for more than a generation. This man was Voltaire. It is the story of the relations he held to Shakespeare, of the influence originally exerted upon him by the English dramatist, of the war he waged against the latter's growing reputation on the Continent, of the hostility evoked in turn towards himself in England, which I have sought to relate in the following pages. It is a story which has never been told save in part. Certain portions of it—especially that dealing with the history of Shakespeare in France and Germany—have been made the subject of excellent treatises in the languages of those two countries. These works have necessarily devoted more or less space to Voltaire's words and acts. But in none of them has there been any attempt to portray his attitude throughout with the fulness found here; still further, in none of them has there been anything but the most meagre references to the attitude taken towards him in turn by the English.

To give this side of Shakespearean controversy is one of the main objects of the present work. Having said so much, I may be permitted to state in addition what is not one of its objects. No one will dispute the right of the critic, as it is usually regarded by him as his duty, to insist that certain things ought to have been discussed which the author has not chosen to discuss. But I wish



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to guard against the impression that there was any design to give here any account of the growth of Shakespeare's reputation on the Continent, especially in France. Certain general statements had to be made in regard to it. Certain aspects of it therefore are given, certain incidents connected with it are told, in two or three instances, with great fulness of detail. But these are incidental to the main purpose. They are brought in to throw light upon Voltaire's feelings and to explain his acts and utterances; they are never told for themselves.

One great difficulty has frequently presented itself in the investigation of this subject. Voltaire was constantly engaged in revising and altering his works. While complete editions containing the final text are abundant, early editions of single works are to a great extent inaccessible in this country. They may possibly be found in private libraries; they do not seem to exist in public ones. Perhaps the same difficulty would be met everywhere outside of France. It is certainly noticeable that the printed catalogue of the vast collections of the British Museum shows only a very limited number of these early authorities. One cannot always be sure in consequence that the form in which any statement of Voltaire's is finally found is the one which it possessed originally. Here the invaluable bibliography of Bengesco cannot help us, or helps us only at intervals. In some instances I have accordingly been prevented from making a positive statement where positive statement would have been most desirable. If in these instances I have been unable to tell all the truth, I can only hope that I have been successful in the effort to

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refrain from conveying wrong impressions by that part of the truth which has been told.

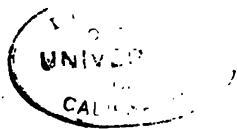
As was the course pursued in the preceding volume of this series, I have endeavored to give the reader some conception of the less-known men of letters who became involved in the controversies which went on in regard to Shakespeare as well as an account of the part they played. Furthermore, the plan indicated in the general introduction has been followed. This is to treat each subject so as to constitute it of itself an independent work, thereby rendering it unnecessary for the reader to make himself familiar with what has preceded. In the case of the present volume the result has been accomplished by the slight summary, supplied in this preface, of certain conclusions reached in the previous treatise. The adoption of this course has likewise rendered it necessary to recount again a few facts which were contained in that volume. In one instance indeed a short quotation has been given for the second time. But even in repetitions necessary to render the work complete in itself, an effort has been made to present from a different point of view the details of the incidents which were related and the portrayal of the personages who were described. Nor can the whole amount of repetition be considered as being of much consequence. At most it does not occupy the space of more than two or three pages.

The next volume of this series will deal with the difficulties which exist in ascertaining definitely the text of Shakespeare, and the controversies which early sprang up in regard to the proper method of its settlement.

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# SHAKESPEARE AND VOLTAIRE

## CHAPTER I

### VOLTAIRE IN ENGLAND

ON the second of May, 1726, Voltaire was released from the Bastille on the condition that he should repair at once to England. On the following morning he set out for Calais. Either from fear that he would miss the road, or to guard against a momentary lapse of memory which might lead him to wander in another direction, a government official was commissioned to accompany him on the journey to that port. The instructions given to the attendant were, to remain with the released prisoner until he saw him safely on board of the vessel and on his way to England. At Calais Voltaire remained a few days, much irritated at the surveillance to which he was subjected. At last he embarked. In a short time he found himself in a land separated from his own by a few leagues of water, but in opinions, in feelings, in tastes, divided by immeasurable distances.

The country to which he was exiled welcomed him cordially. To both the great Whig and Tory houses he had access. He came into personal contact with no small number of the men most renowned in literature

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and politics. The new edition of his epic, published at London in the second year after his arrival, had on the list of its subscribers many of the most noted names of the English aristocracy, and was dedicated to the Queen of England herself. For him the barriers did not exist which divided the people into classes hostile to each other where they were not indifferent. His insatiable curiosity led him to seek the society of men of all creeds, of all ranks, of all parties. Much of his time was spent at Wandsworth, a now outlying suburb of the great city, in the home of Everard Falkener, an English merchant trading with the East. He dined at the house of the prime minister, Walpole; he lived in familiar intercourse with Walpole's bitter enemy, Bolingbroke, whom he had come to know long before in France. He made the acquaintance of patrons of literature like Lyttelton and Bubb Dodington, of philosophers like Clarke and Berkeley, of men of letters like Pope, Swift, Gay, Congreve, Thomson, and Young. Nearly three years he remained. It was long enough for him to learn to read English with ease, to speak it with a tolerable degree of fluency, and to write it with what his enemies chose to consider suspicious accuracy. It was long enough, furthermore, for him to become an ardent admirer of English philosophy and science as embodied in the works of Locke and Newton, and to form a limited acquaintance with English literature. To the immense majority of his countrymen this last was then not only an unknown, but an unheard-of land.

It was while in England that Voltaire became acquainted with the works of Shakespeare. It is more

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correct to say he became acquainted with some of them. Of many of the plays of the great dramatist he pretty certainly lived and died in profoundest ignorance. He unquestionably had them in his library; he never had them in his mind. From the various criticisms which, from time to time during the rest of his life, he poured forth upon the English stage, no one would get the slightest inkling of the fact that Shakespeare ever wrote a single comedy. It was not entirely Voltaire's fault. His knowledge of plays was derived largely from seeing them acted. During the time he was in England, it was mainly the tragedies of Shakespeare that were brought upon the stage. The two or three of his comedies which were performed at all were not only vilely altered, but even in their mutilated state were then performed but rarely. The English works of this sort which Voltaire heard of were the composition of men who belonged to the period following the Restoration. The principal writers of them whom he knew about were Congreve, Wycherley, and Vanbrugh; it is of them alone he speaks with any fulness.

Ignorant as he was of Shakespeare's comedies, his knowledge of many of the other works of the dramatist was none too remarkable. The way in which he subsequently referred to some of them will clear him from the charge of any undue familiarity with their contents. 'Hamlet,' 'Lear,' 'Othello,' 'Macbeth,' 'Julius Cæsar,' 'Antony and Cleopatra,' 'Romeo and Juliet,' 'Richard II.,' 'Richard III.,' 'Henry IV.,' 'Henry V.,' and 'Troilus and Cressida,' comprise the plays which he at various times mentioned. The list would be a suffi-

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ciently satisfactory one, were it not that his remarks upon some of the number tend to establish his ignorance of them instead of indicating his knowledge. Of certain of these he really knew little more than the names. The blunders he made in discussing them amply acquit him of intentional perversion of the meaning he misunderstood. The two pieces with which he was best acquainted were 'Hamlet' and 'Julius Cæsar.' The latter, excellent as it is, is ranked by no one among the greatest of Shakespeare's productions; but for some reason it made upon Voltaire a particularly vivid impression. It may be that he had seen it acted with peculiar power. It may be that the absence from it of a love intrigue, which he hated in tragedy, reconciled him in a measure to its total disregard of the dramatic laws which he held so precious. But to whatever cause his interest in it was due, it is the one of Shakespeare's works which on the whole plays the most prominent part in both his critical and creative writings, so far as his relations with its author are concerned. It is the one to which he most frequently refers for the sake of conveying either praise or blame. Even when it did not inspire direct imitation, it suggested scenes and plots and portrayals of character to pieces of his own.

There was one recommendation which these two plays possessed. Both of them had been saved from the hands of the spoiler. Both continued to be presented in their original purity, or, as Voltaire would have considered it, in their original impurity. In them consequently Shakespeare was seen at his best or at his worst, according to the way one was disposed to regard



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his art. There was, furthermore, no question as to the favor with which these plays, as well as others of the dramatist, were received. To the popularity of the great Elizabethan, Voltaire himself bore frequent witness. For the period of his residence in England it is conclusive. Excellent translations of the best French tragedies, excellent productions of native writers, exemplars in both cases of chastened and refined art, were never able, he observed, to draw to their representation audiences such as thronged the theatre whenever it was announced that one of Shakespeare's plays was to be performed.

One reason, outside of the character of the works themselves, ought to be added here for the steady hold which Shakespeare continued to retain over the men of the eighteenth century. To the excellence of the matter was generally added a well-sustained excellence of performance. All dramatic writings are in danger of suffering from having one part acted finely, and the others inadequately or meanly. This too common condition of things has frequently wrought havoc with the pieces of Shakespeare, crowded as they usually are with several characters of first importance. The London which Voltaire saw possessed but two playhouses. In them was largely concentrated all the theatrical talent to which the British isles had given birth. In the hands of a capable manager an opportunity was thus afforded for the adequate performance of great productions, which can hardly be said to exist now, when those who would give most effective representation to its various parts are scattered over the entire land,

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or dispersed in the dozen different houses of a single city. This opportunity was not always improved, to be sure ; but during the whole century it existed. Garrick, for instance, was a host in himself. The English stage has never witnessed any one so amply endowed as he to fulfil all parts of a star, either in comedy or tragedy. Yet when in 1747 he undertook the management of Drury Lane, his avowed aim was to secure for it all the best performers that could be found. For his first season he assuredly succeeded. What should we think now of a single playhouse which should contain on its rolls, as his did then, about forty performers of greater or less distinction, with Garrick at their head, and including among them such actresses as Mrs. Cibber, Mrs. Clive, Mrs. Pritchard, and Peg Woffington ?

The remark of Voltaire, which has just been cited, shows that not even the later works, which he regarded as representatives of refined art, were able then to hold their own against the overwhelming popularity of Shakespeare. This is not the only contribution he makes to the sentiment of that age in regard to the dramatist. His visit to England furnishes additional confirmation of the truth of a view which, however well-known, is not sufficiently well-known to keep it from being occasionally controverted. This is the general concession of Shakespeare's superiority not only to the playwrights of later times, but to the playwrights of his own time. Both the popular and the critical estimate agreed in recognizing his supremacy. How completely he had come at this period to outrank all his contemporaries in public opinion is made conspicu-

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ous by the fact that he is the only one of the Elizabethans whom Voltaire knows. Of the dramatists of that earlier period, Fletcher had been for a while the favorite with theatre-goers after the Restoration. Jonson also had then stood side by side with Shakespeare, at least among the critics. But with neither of these two had Voltaire any real acquaintance. Of one of them he had probably never heard; he certainly never spoke of him. Of the other it would have been just as well had he never spoken; for what he said establishes not his knowledge but his ignorance.

By Shakespeare Voltaire was both attracted and repelled. As a Frenchman, trained in the strictest rules of the classicists, and disposed to render those rules even more rigid, he was shocked beyond measure by the irregularities, the gross improprieties, or rather indecencies, as he looked upon them, in which the greatest English dramatist had indulged with no apparent consciousness that his course was anything but perfectly proper. A man who could in all sincerity assert, as did Voltaire, that in the three unities, all other laws, that is to say, all other beauties of the drama, are comprised, was not likely to be impressed favorably by the persistent disregard of them which Shakespeare had manifested. He shuddered furthermore at the mixture of the comic and the tragic in the same production; at the low characters which were brought upon the stage, and the low language in which they indulged; at the scenes of violence, of horror, and of carnage which were enacted in full view of the audience. Such practices ran counter to all his personal

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tastes and prejudices, as well as to the traditions of the one theatre which he believed, or tried to believe, surpassed not only that of all modern nations, but that of the Greeks themselves.

With these views of his he found plenty of sympathizers in the land to which he came. Had he himself been disposed to hesitate about the justice of his conclusions, the men he met would have stood ready to assure him of their correctness. There existed then a large number of Englishmen who continued to feel deeply pained at the failure of Shakespeare to conform to the canons of art pure and undefiled. Their admiration of particular passages did not blind their eyes to his defects, or hinder their perception of his failure to reach their own exalted standard of taste. The attitude of condescension was invariably maintained by the professed arbiters of public opinion. Besides the common ruck of critics, who always make it a point to re-echo the prevalent cant of the day, there were men possessing abilities of no mean order who entertained and expressed sentiments of this sort. Some of them too had occupied or were still occupying high station in society. Earlier in the century Shaftesbury had given utterance to the then not uncommon opinion that the British muses were as yet in their mere infant state. They lisp in their cradles, he told us. They had scarcely arrived at anything of shapeliness of person. This was true of Shakespeare, Jonson, Fletcher, and Milton. Yet upon the great dramatist he was willing to bestow a good deal of praise for the justness of his moral and for his skill in characterization, which caused

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him to be relished in spite of "his natural rudeness, his unpolished style, his antiquated phrase and wit, his want of method and coherence, and his deficiency in almost all the graces and ornaments of this kind of writing."<sup>1</sup>

With this estimate Chesterfield, for a long time the arbiter of taste in the fashionable world, did not differ materially. To his son he wrote that a gentleman should make it a point to know the classics of every language. In the list he gave of English authors entitled to that distinction Shakespeare did not appear; though in the corresponding one in French, Corneille, Racine, and Molière were to be found.<sup>2</sup> He had no disposition, however, to proscribe the dramatist. To a female friend in France he sent as a present the works of four writers as ambassadors from his own country. In the number Shakespeare was included. But with the announcement of the gift he felt it incumbent to put in a qualifying statement, lest it should be supposed that he condoned the irregularities of the playwright, or failed to recognize his errors. He told his correspondent that she should give to Shakespeare the precise sort of reception which she deemed fitting, inasmuch as he sometimes merited the best and sometimes the worst.<sup>3</sup> This guarded approbation was the utmost which the thoroughly superior people of that time felt that they could properly give. From Bolingbroke, with whom Voltaire spent much of his time, he learned that the English stage did

<sup>1</sup> Advice to an Author, Part II. sec. 1 and sec. 3 (1710).

<sup>2</sup> Letter to his son, March 2, 1752.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Madame du Boccage, March 4, 1752.

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not possess a single good tragedy. Let us be just. By this was meant one good tragedy as a whole. The existence of admirable scenes was conceded; it was as a complete work of art that every play failed.

But besides being a Frenchman, Voltaire was a man of genius. As a man of genius he could not help being impressed by certain qualities which the English dramatist exhibited. They affected him, they influenced him to an extent of which he was hardly conscious, and which at a later period he was little disposed to acknowledge. He was willing, at least at first, to pardon much that Shakespeare did, on account of that assumed rude and unpolished age in which he flourished. If as you say, he wrote to Bolingbroke, you do not possess a single good tragedy, there are nevertheless some most admirable scenes in those wild pieces which go under that name. While, therefore, Voltaire could not approve the barbarous irregularities with which the play of 'Julius Cæsar,' for illustration, abounds, he told the man he was addressing that he was only astounded that there were not more irregularities in pieces produced in an age of ignorance by a writer who did not understand Latin, and who had no instructor but his own genius. These pieces lacked indeed the correctness, the purity, the elegance, for which the French stage was distinguished. But however deficient in taste, they unmistakably possessed power. They held the attention, they stirred the heart. This was what Voltaire said then. Long afterward, when his criticism of Shakespeare had begun to assume a peculiarly depreciatory tone, he did not refuse to acknowledge the strength

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that lay in these dramas, bizarre and savage as he both deemed and termed them. "I have seen 'Julius Cæsar' played," he wrote in 1764, "and I confess that from the first scene, when I heard the tribunes reproaching the Roman populace for its ingratitude to Pompey and its attachment to Pompey's conqueror, I began to be interested, to be excited. I did not see afterwards any conspirators upon the stage who did not arouse my curiosity; and in spite of the large number of its absurd improprieties, I felt that the piece impressed me."<sup>1</sup>

No student of Voltaire's life needs to be told of the profound influence which his residence in England exercised over his later activities, both literary and political. The account he gives of his experiences there is not indeed to be always received with the trusting faith we exhibit towards a divine revelation. He was never a man to spoil a good story by insisting upon a slavish adherence to inconvenient details merely because they happened to be true. Accuracy, if it conflicted with an effect he was aiming to produce, was treated by him with more than indifference; he had for it what may be termed a fine scorn. Doubtless he would always have preferred to have his facts just as he said they were; but if they were not, it was their misfortune, not his. It was his business to be interesting; and if interest was lacking in the events he narrated, he was ready to supply it from his own inexhaustible invention. The danger under which we all lie is to accept Voltaire's account of a given occasion, or of anything in a given

<sup>1</sup> *Observations sur le Jules Césâr de Shakespeare in Commentaires sur Corneille.*

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work, as an exact relation of what was then done or there said. [www.libtool.com.cn](http://www.libtool.com.cn)

In the edition of Voltaire's complete writings which was brought out a few years after his death — the one published at Kehl — there appeared among the miscellanies a short piece in the form of a letter.<sup>1</sup> It purported to give an account of his first experiences in England. It was assigned by the editors to 1727, the year after his arrival in that country. As it opens with an account of some views which he had been reading in a work of Dennis's, it must have been written some time after he had become reasonably familiar with the language. It is an interesting and brilliant description of the scenes he saw, or said he saw, upon his first landing, which, according to the account here given, was at Greenwich. Everything was bright and animated. The weather was delightful; the sky was without a cloud; a gentle west wind added to the happiness of every one; for it appears from his description to have been the day of the fair. He met in the crowd some men of business to whom he had letters of introduction. They were exceedingly cordial; they put themselves out in every way to contribute to his enjoyment. He was transported with pleasure at everything which he saw and in which he took part. So passed the first day.

On the day following he met at an ill-appointed, ill-managed coffee-house the same men, who were no longer the same men. They scarcely recognized his existence. He could hardly get from any one of them

<sup>1</sup> Vol. xlix. pp. 10-21 (1785). It is headed simply "A. M. . . ."



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anything more than the monosyllabic yes or no. As he could not recall a single thing he had said or done which could properly give them offence, he tried to discover the reason of this strange behavior. From one of them he wrung at last the all-sufficient reply, "The wind is in the east." Pretty soon a person came in who informed the assembled company with a good deal of indifference that a woman of their acquaintance, young, beautiful, and rich, and just on the point of being happily married, had been found dead in her chamber by her lover. She had cut her throat with a razor. Her friends who heard the news received it with the same indifference as had been exhibited by the friend who had communicated it. The single inquiry made was about the lover. What had become of him? "He has bought the razor," said coldly one of the company.

Voltaire discovered that the strange conduct of the men, the suicide of a happy girl were due to the one single fact that the wind was in the east. This account of events was supplemented by a number of similar details and observations written to harmonize with the prepossessions and beliefs existing on the Continent as to the character of the English. It requires a faith capable of removing mountains to believe that many of the incidents narrated ever took place, or could have taken place. The very fact that this epistle was not printed in Voltaire's lifetime seems to indicate that he regarded its publication as too much of a tax upon human credulity, if not upon English patience. At all events it was clearly an impression he was seeking to convey by it, not a recital of occurrences he was

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setting out to give. As a circumstantial account of what really happened, one might as well go to the 'Æneid' for an exact picture of what took place at the founding of Carthage. This portrayal of English sentiment and behavior constitutes, with its striking and in many instances impossible incidents, an entertaining story, entertainingly told. But there is about it nothing so amusing as the way in which it has been taken. It has been treated as veritable history. Its details have been carefully scrutinized; its errors have been solemnly pointed out.

As long as Voltaire was disposed to embellish his own experiences for the sake of making a good story, he in one sense had no right to complain that others would deal in extravagant fictions about him in turn. Only, his were pleasant inventions, and little calculated to deceive. Those of which he was made the subject were often malignant. After he had succeeded in shocking the religious sentiment of his time, more especially after he had cowed the persecuting rage of religious bigotry, there was little limit to the fabrications that went on of false statements about his life and actions. There is no mendacity more unscrupulous than that which sets out to calumniate those whom its utterers choose to deem the enemies of God. France furnished many baseless stories about Voltaire's conduct and career; but in meanness they were fully equalled by the smaller crop which sprang up in England. There too they were fathered by dignitaries of the church, and were spread far and wide by the agency of professed moralists. The most widely circulated of

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them is the story that Voltaire, the cultivated and polished man of the world, indulged in conversation so gross, when dining with Pope, that the poet's mother was obliged to leave the room. For the origin of this absurdest of stories Warburton seems to have been remotely responsible, but its extensive currency has been due to Dr. Johnson. Another is that he, the intimate personal friend of Bolingbroke, played the part of a spy upon that nobleman in the interests of the English ministry. Long after all the parties were in their graves, another peculiarly ridiculous falsehood was evolved by an anonymous slanderer. It represented Voltaire as having defrauded deliberately and in a specially mean way his friend, the Earl of Peterborough; and in order to escape the wrath of the justly incensed nobleman, eager to kill him, as having fled precipitately to his own country.<sup>1</sup>

These lies correspond closely to Prince Hal's description of Falstaff's: they are gross as a mountain, open, palpable. Voltaire had plenty of faults. Many of them will be constantly displayed in the course of this volume. In trickiness he was in certain ways unrivalled. In the war which he waged in behalf of freedom of thought he was forced to resort to crafty devices of all kinds to foil the efforts of those determined to prevent the circulation of his writings. When it came to the denial of the authorship of his own works, rarely has there been found a more versatile and intrepid liar. No criminal ever appeared under more aliases. But

<sup>1</sup> For a full account of these stories, see Ballantyne's valuable "Voltaire's Visit to England" (1893), pp. 74-86, and pp. 231-234.

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stories such as those just mentioned, lack that decent degree of probability which belongs to the most extravagant fiction. The acts recorded are senseless and motiveless. We are asked to believe that the most brilliant man of letters of his time, who associated during his whole life with the highest and most refined society of all lands, was not only guilty of violating the decencies of ordinary behavior, but in addition could descend to the practices of a common cheat. This of itself is hard enough to accept; it may be granted that it is not actually impossible. We are further asked to believe that in so doing he acted the part of an unconscionable fool. There is a point at which credulity stops.

## CHAPTER II

### VOLTAIRE'S KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

ACCURACY is a very useful quality in a writer, but it never tends of itself to make him interesting. In the equipment of a man of genius, it is at best but a virtue of secondary importance. In works of imagination who but a pedant cares whether facts have been misstated, whether chronology has been defied, whether the manners of one age have been transferred to those of another? It is the truth of life at which the great artist aims, not at the truth of detail. Furthermore, if the man of genius be a very prolific author, accuracy is for him a simple impossibility. That demands leisure and vigilance and painstaking on matters of minor importance. The time and toil necessary to secure it are wasted in the case of him who aims at results which are independent of any consonance with the actual course of events. What he gains on one side he loses on the other. If the mistakes of the man of genius are of importance in themselves, it becomes the duty of the humble gleaner who follows in his footsteps to point out things as they were, and not as in the glowing imagination of the writer they were supposed to be; to correct the errors arising from carelessness or ignorance, or to indicate the artistic skill which can overleap the

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restraints of fact in order to produce thereby a profounder impression.

It has been intimated in the preceding chapter that Voltaire never concerned himself about exactness in the details of any story which he sought to make interesting. This is not brought against him as a reproach. Like all men of genius, he had many qualities far higher than accuracy. How indeed could he have been accurate? How could a writer who treated of almost every topic in which the human race is interested expect to be correct in every little detail? Here was a man whose life was spent in bringing beliefs of all sorts to the bar of reason; who was fighting continuously against time-honored abuses in church and state; who was constantly engaged in promulgating new views on every subject, or new ways of looking at old views; who, further, in the midst of these occupations, was throwing off year after year poems, plays, tales, treatises without number, besides carrying on an immense correspondence with persons in every grade of society, ranging from crowned heads to the humble friends of his youth. How could such a person find the leisure to master the petty details which are necessary to make his statements accord with precise fact? What time had he at his command to spend in verifying dates, establishing exactness of quotation, justifying correctness of assertion? This may not have been the view he took of himself and of his statements: but it must be the view of his advocates. For his vindication they must rely upon the truth of his generalities, not upon the truth of his details.

Not only did Voltaire, in the multifarious activities

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of his life, have no leisure to attain accuracy, he may almost be said to have felt, if not a contempt for it, a contempt for its importance. It would be unjust to say that he looked upon it with detestation whenever regard for it interfered with any impression he was trying to produce; but he certainly did with indifference. He assuredly never considered how much it costs to tell the truth. As he had not the leisure, so he had not the disposition to spend much time in securing a product which struck him as in many respects of comparatively little value. He could never have been made a convert to the modern doctrine, sometimes taught as a theory, more often exemplified in practice, that in order to have history accurate, it must be rendered stupid. Strive for such a result as best he might, Voltaire could never have been dull. But along with dulness he neglected certain other things. Without doubt he honestly believed at times that he was engaged in making laborious researches; but nothing could have been less to his taste than the Dryasdust method which painfully perplexes itself about exactness of dates and faithful representation of events. This he would have characterized as belonging to the letter which killeth, and not to the spirit which maketh alive.

It is not unjust to impute to him this feeling, for he avowed it himself. In the article on Dante in his 'Philosophical Dictionary,' he observed that Bayle had made a mistake of five years in the date of the poet's birth. He had put it down as 1260; he should have said 1265. The correction was made, not as one might naturally suppose, in order to guard the reader against

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error, or to censure the biographer for carelessness. On the contrary, he referred to it to point out how utterly unimportant the error was, and to convey an implied censure upon those who looked upon it as of any consequence and found fault with the writer for committing it. A little variation of five years in the date of a man's birth is the merest bagatelle, so long as one's eyes are fixed on higher objects. "The great thing," was Voltaire's comment, "is not to mistake either in point of taste or in point of argument." This disposition to look on the anxiety to be accurate as a low and grovelling ambition which tended to fasten the eyes of the spirit upon the earth, was shared by his followers and admirers in all countries. We are told with approval by an English reviewer of the contemptuous smile which Voltaire bestowed upon an informant who pointed out to him that he had transferred the date of a battle to another year from that in which it actually took place. "These minute details," remarked the critic, "these labors of little minds, are only important when magnified by dulness."<sup>1</sup>

In a large share of the matters which engaged Voltaire's attention, and upon which his reputation still rests, correctness of statement was of little account. He is not to be blamed for his unwillingness to sacrifice to it results far greater. A man whose ideas were sapping creeds, disintegrating ancient beliefs, undermining the tyranny of political dogmas, could not be expected to subject himself to the tyranny of fact. But though in works of the imagination, accuracy is the

<sup>1</sup> Critical Review, vol. lx. p. 239.



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least of virtues, and if higher things are subordinated to it, tends to become a positive vice, it plays, after all, a part of some importance in those humbler efforts of the mind which deal with the relation of events. In certain fields of investigation there has been and always will remain a prejudice in its favor. It is felt to be desirable in historical investigation. It imparts also an element of fairness, and sometimes of conclusiveness, to controversial discussion. The indifference which Voltaire frequently displayed to it justifies us in taking a further step. We can say that he never made himself a slavish adherent to fact, when not simply higher ends, but also his own ends, could be better subserved by a liberal intermingling of fiction. There were in his mind two predominant feelings. One was to be entertaining; and rarely has man succeeded better. The other was to enforce the triumph of his own views; and it seemed at times to have been to him a matter of indifference how he did it, provided he did it. Misrepresentation, misquotation, perversion of meaning were perfectly justifiable, if more satisfactory agencies failed to accomplish what he wished. This is true at all events in the case of Shakespeare. In regard to him there is scarcely a method of conveying a wrong impression, from suppression of the truth to intentional falsification, to which Voltaire did not occasionally resort. Unquestionably his misstatements arose sometimes from carelessness, sometimes from ignorance, sometimes from that recklessness of assertion which prefers to hazard any misrepresentation, however gross, to undergoing any toil of verification, however slight. But there are in-

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stances in which no investigator can escape the conviction that Voltaire deliberately determined to deceive readers who were utterly ignorant, or at least more ignorant than himself.

To many this view of Voltaire may be a surprise, and to some it will seem unwarranted. It is certainly a serious imputation upon the character of a man of genius, and the reader has a right to demand something besides assertion. Yet we need not limit this charge of untrustworthiness to what is said by him about Shakespeare. To some extent it pervades numerous statements of his about English history and English literature. It is not meant to imply by this that he did not say many true things; only, in no case can we accept a thing as true solely because Voltaire said it. His unsupported testimony is never to be relied upon implicitly. Of matters he knew little or nothing about he talked with a confidence so assured that it frequently staggers belief to find how absolutely without foundation his assertions are. In a few cases the blunders committed are apparently so without cause or provocation that they seem the outcome of a perversity which was determined to be wrong when it might just as well have been right. As a sort of preliminary study for testing the trustworthiness of his statements about Shakespeare and his writings, let us turn to what he says of other persons and other works in the departments of English history and literature. Take in the first place, the account of Cromwell, which, previously printed, was embodied at last in his 'Philosophical Dictionary.' It is an article which can be

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studied with peculiar satisfaction, for its perusal imparts to the reader that peace of mind which arises from the certainty of conviction that the author is invariably and unqualifiedly wrong, wherever the slightest opportunity is furnished to be wrong.

From the veracious account Voltaire gives us we learn that Cromwell was originally in doubt whether he should become a churchman or a soldier; that in 1622 he made a campaign with Frederick Henry, Prince of Orange; that on returning to England he entered as chaplain into the service of Bishop Williams, who in turn was thought to be too intimate with Cromwell's wife; and that finally he was banished from the bishop's family on account of his extreme puritanical opinions. So much for the earlier period of his life. Later, after the English parliament had declared war against royalty and episcopacy, we are informed that he was chosen for a borough through the agency of some of his friends; that he began his military career as a soldier of fortune in the city of Hull, then besieged by the king; that there he so distinguished himself that he was rewarded by parliament with a donation which was equivalent in value to six thousand francs; that he was then made colonel, and in consequence of his ability and success rose rapidly to the highest rank; but that while in the midst of this cruel war he was also engaged in making love to the wife of Major-general Lambert, and having captured the Earl of Holland, who was more acceptable to that lady than he was himself, he had the supreme satisfaction of cutting off his rival's head.

Such an account as this of one of the greatest soldiers

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and statesmen of his time ought to prevent the least feeling of surprise at any remark made by Voltaire which may turn up in the course of the following pages. The mine of misinformation in which he delved, in order to produce this essay, furnished him still more ore of a similar character; but on the whole, the nuggets here given are the choicest that can be readily exposed to view. A puzzling question presents itself to the reader who is familiar with merely the ordinary facts in the life of Cromwell. From what possible quarter could this dreadful trash have been derived? It is the source of it which excites curiosity; there can hardly be any other feeling than that of amusement at the malice which engendered it, and at the credulity which could ever have accepted it as truth. No penny-a-liner ever concocted from stories floating about ale-houses a more ridiculous lot of rubbish than was here picked up and handed down to posterity by the most brilliant writer of his time, who was celebrated far and wide as a great historian. The gossip of stable-boys sitting about cavalier camp-fires would be authority entitled to respect compared with this precious farrago of lies which Voltaire raked up from forgotten dungheaps of calumny and palmed off upon his confiding contemporaries as a veritable account of the life of one of the greatest men of the preceding century. Upon his contemporaries of the Continent; not upon Englishmen. Even in those days, when Cromwell's character and motives were most misunderstood and maligned, these statements were too much for his English translator, who avowed his inability to point out the source from which

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they came. Voltaire never troubled himself to correct them, even if he ever entertained a suspicion of their groundlessness. In truth, the worst thing to be said about this essay is that he undoubtedly believed himself what he put in it.

So much for English history. More germane to this particular investigation is the accuracy of Voltaire's reports about English literature. In regard to his knowledge of that subject many extravagant assertions have been made and still continue to be made. The mention by him of an English book seems to some to presuppose his familiarity with its contents. As a matter of fact, it not unfrequently implies little knowledge of it and sometimes none at all. He was not averse to talking in a confident way about works upon which, it can be proved almost to a demonstration, he had never set his eyes. This at least is the charitable way of looking at it; for if he saw them, what he said about them, instead of being imputed to ignorance, must be ascribed to deliberate misrepresentation to suit his own ends. It is not derogatory to Voltaire's genius to insist that his acquaintance with English literature has been vastly overrated. He is great enough in his own right without being credited with attainments he did not and could not possess. On the other hand, care must be taken not to underrate his actual acquirements from the gross errors he occasionally made. We can therefore say generally that, during the limited period he remained in England, he accomplished far more than exceedingly able men, equally diligent, would have done in twice or thrice the length of time; for his curiosity

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was omnivorous and his powers of application and retention wonderful. It was while in exile that he naturally learned most that he knew of the English literature of the past; and to that our observations shall mainly be confined.

It is literature pure and simple of which we are here speaking. There are productions outside of its domain which Voltaire knew or knew about, such as the scientific and philosophical works of Newton, Locke, Clarke, and Berkeley; the sermons of Tillotson; and, further, the writings of deistical authors like Woolston, Toland, Collins, and many others. With these last his acquaintance could be assumed, even had he never mentioned their names. Their sentiments were his sentiments; and he always professed envy at the freedom of utterance — looking to us very little like freedom — which was accorded to such writers in England and denied them in France. At a later period it gave him a malicious pleasure to reckon in this class Bishop Warburton, on account of his effort to establish the divinity of the mission of Moses not because that law-giver taught, but because he did not teach the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. But in the case of literature, strictly so called, his acquaintance lay mainly with the writings which were most in vogue in England at the time he was there resident — especially with those which were read and talked about in the circles in which he mainly moved. Consequently it was with the authors who followed the era of the Restoration that he was really familiar.

The writers strictly dramatic will be mentioned else-

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where. Throwing such out of view, more or less frequent references appear in his pages to Dryden, Butler, Rochester, Roscommon, Dorset, Buckingham, Addison, Garth, and Prior. In the case of four of these — Dryden, Rochester, Butler, and Addison — he gave translations of certain passages. But his highest praise was reserved for his immediate contemporaries with whom he came in personal contact. Of Thomson indeed he thought none too well; but of the two greatest English authors then living he expressed strong and unquestionably sincere admiration. He preferred Swift to Rabelais, and found, what few have done, that his poetical numbers are of a singular and almost inimitable taste. But for Pope he reserved his warmest eulogiums. In his opinion he was the most elegant, the most correct, and the most harmonious poet to whom England had ever given birth. At a later period he asserted that the 'Essay on Man' was the finest, the most useful, and the most sublime didactic poem that had ever been written in any language.

Foreign opinion is frequently spoken of as giving something of the view of a contemporary which will be taken by posterity. If Voltaire is to be regarded as a representative of the spirit which foresees the future, never has prophetic announcement of this sort had more inadequate fulfilment. We may ascribe it to better or to worse taste on our own part, as we choose; but a good deal that he admired has long been reckoned by most men as being at best simply enduring. His critical appreciation gave high praise to productions which have not only dropped now out of sight of almost

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everybody save the special student of literature, but even at the time were rarely reckoned equal to works which he either undervalued or praised half-heartedly. Out of deference to contemporary opinion he conceded a somewhat reluctant tribute of commendation to that belated Elizabethan, Milton, who had just then entered upon the fulness of his fame. But whatever was his real opinion of 'Paradise Lost,' he expressed little respect for 'Paradise Regained' or for 'Samson Agonistes.' On the other hand he spoke with genuine enthusiasm of 'Hudibras,' which to most of even well-educated men is at present little more than a name. With the same feelings he read 'The Dispensary' of Garth, which is now hardly so much as a name. He found the Earl of Rochester to be a man of genius and a great poet. He declared that Addison's 'Campaign,' now preserved only by two of its lines, was a more durable monument to the victory of Blenheim than the castle which bears that name. All these and others such as Prior's 'Alma' and Philips' 'Splendid Shilling' were a good deal talked about, while he was in England, whether read little or much. It was natural that he should become interested in them, though loss of critical insight on his part seems unnecessary. Still, if the admiration which he expressed for certain of them strikes us as disproportionate, we must remember that they were written in the taste of the time, and that taste had been largely formed under the influence of French models. They suited Voltaire, because they belonged to the kind of literature which he had been brought up to admire.



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But the moment we go back of the era of the Restoration English literature was to Voltaire largely a sealed book. Of the earliest authors he naturally knew nothing; it was an ignorance he shared with nearly all the inhabitants of the country. With Denham and Waller, who had lasted over from the Civil War into the era of the Restoration, he had the customary familiarity of the period. Certain of their poems, or certain passages of them, still retained a feeble literary vitality: and from the latter, for whom he professed great respect, he translated a passage. Cowley was historically in the same situation; but it is one of the proofs of the decline which had now overtaken his once widespread fame that Voltaire, who knew his name, did not find it really necessary to know his works. In fact there is nothing more striking about the comments of the French writer on many English authors than their thoroughly conventional character. Nearly all of them, great or small, flit through his pages. Their names occur; but in many, perhaps most instances, there is no display of that independent judgment which denotes actual acquaintance. He said of them just what every one was then saying. He made no pretence that he was familiar with Spenser. His own countrymen, he told us, esteemed him; but no one was able to read him. The only two of the Elizabethans whom he knew were Bacon and Shakespeare. Not that he himself made any such assertion of ignorance or gave any such impression. On the contrary, he assumed at times a familiarity with writers and writings of this period and did it with so much assurance, that it not only

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imposed upon his contemporaries, but has largely imposed upon men who came long after. That this statement is not too strongly put, let us consider two instances in which he made excursions into the Elizabethan period.

In 1752 Voltaire published his tragedy of *Rome Sauvée*. To it he furnished a preface in which he remarked that while the learned would not meet with a faithful narrative of Catiline's conspiracy — since a tragedy is not a history, — they would see a true picture of the manners of the times, and an accurate representation of the genius and character of the leading personages of the drama. That in the play he had an eye on Shakespeare is noticeable, though it has possibly not been noticed. In 'Julius Cæsar' the wife of Brutus, though occupying but a subordinate part, plays a somewhat striking rôle. It attracted Voltaire's attention, and against her and her relations to her husband he sought to raise a rival. He found one in Aurelia Orestilla, the wife of Catiline. But in his tragedy she is no beautiful but disreputable character, such as she has been handed down in history; on the contrary, she is the daughter of a noble and high-minded Roman, and is herself a woman of lofty spirit, devoted to her father, to her country, and to her husband. So far she is like Brutus's Portia. With her, Catiline is represented as being deeply in love. Her influence, however, is not sufficient to deter him from continuing his career of crime and treason. It does not even keep him from murdering her own father, Nonnius, when he finds that deed essential to the success of his plans. Yet this desperate and remorseless reprobate is completely over-

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come when she indignantly turns upon him in the senate-house, and before proceeding to take her own life, denounces him for the murder of her father and for his treason to his country. Voltaire was certainly faithful to his idea of not making his work a transcript of any real history. We may further be permitted to doubt the accuracy of his representation of the characters he portrayed.

In this play too we find strikingly exemplified his treatment of rules he professed to regard as sacred. There was never a louder asserter of the inviolability of the doctrine of the unities than Voltaire. The disregard of it by Shakespeare was one of the chief indictments he brought against his art as a dramatist. For it he was constantly held up to reprobation as the barbarous author of a barbarous age. Nothing was dearer to Voltaire in theory than these fundamental laws of the drama, as he termed them. Yet no one ever violated their spirit more ruthlessly while paying allegiance to them in words. Of the numerous fraudulent evasions of them which he perpetrated, one of the worst examples is this very play of *Rome Sauvée*. Twenty-four hours constitute the theoretical limits of the action. As usual, not a word is found to indicate their passage; but the number of events that occur in this one day is astounding. In these twenty-four hours we have, taking place at various times, several meetings of the conspirators; several interviews between Aurelia and Catiline; an interview between Cicero and Catiline; an interview between Cæsar and Catiline; the planning and the carrying into effect of the assassination

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of Nonnius; a meeting of the senate, with the violent debate which goes on in that body; the self-destruction of Aurelia; the enforced departure of Catiline from the city with the intent of making war; the detection and execution of his confederates; the charge of complicity in the plot brought against Cæsar; the departure of that leader to the scene of conflict; and finally the play closes with his return from the field of battle with the announcement of the defeat and death of Catiline, and with it the crushing of the conspiracy. We are not concerned with the numerous violations of historic fact here found. Rome may have been saved in the manner Voltaire described; but the unities certainly were not.

Furthermore, in the preface to this play Voltaire made remarks which manifested to his countrymen his possession of a knowledge that has been denied him here. He told us that the English, who hazard everything without knowing what they hazard, had given us a play on the subject of Catiline's conspiracy. It was the work of Ben Jonson. This observation would seem to indicate Voltaire's acquaintance with other of the Elizabethan dramatists than Shakespeare. It certainly suggests the existence of such knowledge; as a matter of fact it proves its non-existence. He went on to tell us that Jonson had made no scruple of translating seven or eight pages of Cicero's oration against Catiline. He had in addition translated them in prose, not imagining it possible to make Cicero speak in verse. This shocking procedure was perhaps no more than could reasonably be expected from such a man in such a period. "To

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say the truth," he continued, "the consul's prose, mingled with the verse of the other characters, forms a contrast worthy of the barbarous age of Ben Jonson."

The first comment that it is incumbent to make upon this very positive statement is that in Ben Jonson's play of 'Catiline' Cicero never once speaks in prose. Throughout the whole play he does the most talking of any of the characters, but he talks invariably in blank verse, save in two or three places where for a few lines he uses ryme instead. Jonson's version of the passages he took from the Catiline oration extends to about three hundred lines. It is a most elaborate piece of work. He prided himself upon it—a feeling in which few since have been found to share. Both the audiences of his own day and readers of later times have usually derived as little enjoyment from his version of Cicero's speech, as Catiline himself probably did from the original. So much for the accuracy of Voltaire's comment upon this particular portion of the play. But this is not the only display of ignorance. There is not to be found anywhere in it that mingling of prose and verse which had been censured as denoting the barbarous age in which it was produced. Such a proceeding in tragedy would have been as distasteful to Ben Jonson himself as to Voltaire. It never occurred to the latter that the former had preceded him in many of his views as much as he did in time. From beginning to end of his play of 'Catiline' there is not a single sentence in prose. With the exception of the lyric choruses and the few lines of ryme just mentioned, the whole of the piece is in blank verse.

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As in the previous case of Cromwell, the puzzling question arises as to the quarter from which Voltaire derived these statements. The acquaintance he professed with the tragedy was clearly not based upon any examination of the original. The only source from which he appears to have got his knowledge of it was from the version of La Place. This was contained in his work upon the English theatre which had been published a few years before the production of *Rome Sauvée*. By him 'Catiline' had been pretty fully translated.<sup>1</sup> But the perplexing thing is that it had been translated entirely in prose. Even the lyric portions had been so rendered. Not a line of it uttered by a single one of the characters had been given in verse. Where, then, did Voltaire get his notion that Cicero spoke in prose in this piece, and the other characters in verse? The only plausible explanation seems to be that he evolved it from his own imagination or invention. One is led the more readily to accept this view of its origin from the way he dealt with the further work that comes here under consideration. In the remarks on Ben Jonson we have the sort of knowledge of Shakespeare's contemporaries which Voltaire exhibited in middle life. Later he was able to extend to Shakespeare's predecessors this peculiar kind of information which he possessed. The growth of his familiarity with early English literature has been pointed to with pride by his admirers. Striking evidence of his continued interest in the subject was evinced, we are told, in the course of the war he carried on against Le Tourneur's translation

<sup>1</sup> Le Théâtre Anglois, vol. v. pp. 1-188 (1747).

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of Shakespeare. During it Voltaire sought to emphasize the representations of scenes of violence and bloodshed which characterized the English drama, especially that of the Elizabethan age. For this purpose he gave an account of the tragedy of 'Gorboduc.'

It was not altogether a happy selection. There were far worse plays than 'Gorboduc' which would have served his purposes far better. If it be said that while this may be true, Voltaire did not know of them and could hardly be expected to know of them, the answer is easy, that he knew as much of them as he did of the piece he criticised. Its unsatisfactoriness for his purpose consists in the fact that while a good deal of bloodshedding goes on in 'Gorboduc,' never once does it occur upon the stage. The horror which, according to French critics, exists in it, belongs to the narration; it is never once brought to the observation. There is an ample amount of slaughter indicated; but the spectator never witnesses it. He invariably hears of it from some messenger. Voltaire unquestionably assumed that the various deaths recounted took place upon the stage, and that the audience were regaled by the dying agonies of the victims. On the contrary, it was its careful abstention from the actual representation of deeds of violence, its preference of declamation to action, which had recommended this tragedy to the adherents of the school which looked with disdain upon the productions of the irregular and lawless contemporary drama, and desired to substitute for them plays that should be in accord with the practice of the ancients.

'Gorboduc,' like many other works of the early



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English stage, will be read with pleasure mainly by those whose tastes are antiquarian rather than literary. It is formed upon the Senecan model, though the unities of time and place are disregarded. There are lyric choruses between the acts, and very protracted speeches during the course of them. The work will always have, however, a certain importance in the history of English literature, as both its first tragedy and its first drama in blank verse. The contemporary interest attaching to it, the contemporary success, whatever it was, that attended it, was largely due to the fact that it was a political pamphlet in the guise of a play.<sup>1</sup> The distresses, commotions, civil wars, and deaths depicted in it were introduced for the sake of pointing out the dangers and miseries awaiting a land where the succession to the throne is unsettled. It was for this that details of massacre and murder were brought to the attention, though not to the sight. Voltaire is not to be blamed for knowing nothing of this. What is objectionable is the attempt on his part to impose upon an uninformed audience an untrue account of a play with which he was himself unacquainted. Readers of 'Gorboduc' were not then and are not found by the million among the men who use the speech in which it is written. In France at any time, and more especially at that time, there were hardly any at all. Voltaire could rely upon a general ignorance among his countrymen as dense as his own. It is accordingly a matter of some interest to contrast his account of the incidents of the play with

<sup>1</sup> See L. H. Courtney's article in 'Notes and Queries,' Series II. vol. x. pp. 261-263.



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what is represented in it as actually happening. His successive sentences will be quoted exactly: the facts as they are will follow.

“There was,” he said, “a good king, husband of a good queen. In the first act they divided their realm between two children who quarrelled about this division.” The use of the plural pronoun is here objectionable. They did not divide; it was the king who divided, much to the grief and indignation of the queen, who wished the elder to be sole ruler of the realm. Nor did the brothers quarrel in the first act; Porrex, the younger, did not appear in it at all. They never in fact met on the stage during the course of the play. “The younger son,” continues Voltaire, “gave the elder a box on the ear in the second act.” This is an event which — as is evident from their never meeting — did not happen in the representation; nor is there the slightest suggestion in the tragedy that anything of the kind had ever happened. In this second act they were both in their respective kingdoms, and preparing to wage war upon each other. “In the third act,” says the critic, “the elder killed the younger.” This is reasonably accurate for Voltaire; the only correction needed is that it was the younger brother who killed the elder. The news of the deed was brought to the court by a messenger. “The mother in the fourth act killed the elder son,” goes on this faithful report. Necessarily he could not have been killed twice; it was the younger son that met that fate at the hands of the queen. “In the fifth act,” says Voltaire, “the king killed the queen Gorboduc, and the people, having risen in rebellion, killed the king

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Gorboduc. As a result there was no one left at the conclusion." In his report of the play Voltaire gave the same name to husband and wife. In the play itself the queen's name is Videna. She was not killed by her husband. Along with him she was slain by the populace. The fact and the manner of the double death were announced in the half-dozen opening lines of the fifth act. Necessarily the murder of the king and queen did not form the conclusion of the tragedy, as Voltaire's words imply. So far from there being no one left to carry on the play, there were half a dozen characters who appeared in the final act and were alive at the end. One of them indeed was very much alive. He concluded the piece with a discourse going well on towards two hundred lines.

The question arises, Where did Voltaire get this account of the play? He could never have seen a copy of it, though it had been reprinted in 1736, and again in Dodsley's collection of 1744. At least, if he saw one, he never improved the opportunity to make its further acquaintance. He could never even have read the argument prefixed to the tragedy, for this gave an outline of the plot. The slightest perusal of it would have saved him from committing the blunders of which he was guilty, even had he not troubled himself to read the piece. In this instance we can trace the origin of the ridiculous description which he gave. He was in the habit of sneering at Dennis, of whom he knew little but what Pope and his friends told him. He was well acquainted, however, with the attack upon Shakespeare which had been made by Dennis's contemporary, Rymer,

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about whom men are now unable to decide whether he succeeded in making his criticism wretchered than his poetry, or his poetry wretchered than his criticism. More than once he referred with ill-concealed glee to the passage in which that writer had declared that there was not a monkey but understood nature better than Shakespeare, not a pug in Barbary that had not a truer taste of things. Rymer was as ignorant of 'Gorboduc' as Voltaire, without Voltaire's excuse. He, however, professed to regard its plot as better adapted to tragedy than any which Jonson or Shakespeare had had the luck to follow. The following is the way it appears in his account: "Here is a king, the queen, and their two sons. The king divides his realm, and gives it betwixt his two sons. They quarrel. The elder brother kills the younger. Which provokes the mother to kill the elder. Thereupon the king kills the mother. And then, to make a clear stage, the people rise and despatch old Gorboduc."<sup>1</sup> It is to this collection of blunders that Voltaire was mainly indebted for his own errors. He was a man of genius, however, and could not content himself with simply reproducing what some one else had said. He felt the need of filling up the bare outlines of Rymer's account, and enriching it with some additional details. The box on the ear is, however, the principal contribution which his imagination made to the incidents of the play, as reported by the authority he followed.

After what has just been related, no one will be likely to assert that Voltaire's acquaintance with a work can

<sup>1</sup> Rymer's 'Short View of Tragedy' (1693), p. 124.

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be assumed, merely because he chanced to mention it or even professed to give an account of it. The caution is all the more needed because many of his misstatements were not only repeated at the time by others, but even at this day are occasionally reproduced by writers who naturally cannot be expected to believe that a man of his intellectual rank and genius should speak ignorantly when he spoke so positively. This is true in particular of what he said of 'Gorboduc.' His utterly false report of a book which he had never seen has been accepted as true not only by men who have never read it themselves, but by men who profess to have read it, and very likely have done so. The influence of a man of genius upon a man of talent is perhaps best exemplified in the case of Villemain. That distinguished French scholar and critic told us that he did not know of any work more declamatory and insipid in the midst of its horrors than this tragedy of 'Gorboduc.' To this he added that Voltaire had given of it "a pleasant and *veracious* analysis."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres de M. Villemain. Études de littérature ancienne et étrangère*, page 214. *Véridique* is Villemain's word, the translation of which I have italicized.

## CHAPTER III

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IN making the acquaintance of Shakespeare Voltaire felt that in certain ways he had stumbled upon a treasure. He had no disposition to keep to himself what he had found. He became animated indeed with something of the feelings of the explorer. He had lighted upon an unknown land, and he showed all the zeal of a discoverer to communicate to the world what he had there seen and heard. He said—and at a later period he kept repeating it on every pretext—that it was he who had first made Shakespeare known to France. In one sense it was perfectly true. Others before him had announced the existence of this great constellation in the northern sky; but their words had attracted no attention and aroused no interest.

He could have said more. It was Voltaire who first really introduced Shakespeare to the knowledge of the Continent. To bring about such a result circumstances came to the aid of his abilities. For all literary as well as diplomatic purposes French was at that time the language of the European mainland. Everywhere cultivated men read it, everywhere they conversed in it. The greatest monarch of his time spoke it better than he did his native tongue. In it his own royal academy

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published its proceedings. Indeed as late as 1783 it gave a prize for a treatise—it was published in 1784—which should furnish the most satisfactory answer to these questions: How came the French language to be universal? By what title does it merit that prerogative? Is it likely to maintain it always? It is somewhat significant that only a very few years after the appearance of this essay the proceedings of the academy which awarded it the prize were published in German as well as in French; and only a few years later still that they were published in German alone.

The universal acceptance which the French language had won with all the cultivated classes of the continent, it continued to retain during the whole life of Voltaire. To no one of his compatriots was the fact more a source of gratification than it was to himself. He dwelt upon it with pardonable pride in published treatises and in private letters. In his discourse to the French Academy in 1746, on the occasion of his reception into that body, he made it a subject of congratulation that the French author was read everywhere, not through the imperfect and inadequate agency of translation, but in the words of his own vernacular. The Holy Father was as familiar with the tongue as with the learned language in which he taught all Christendom. The great Frederick had not only made the speech his own, he had made it that of his court and country. In the capital of the mighty empire, which extended over a large share of Europe and Asia, French dramas were regularly played to delighted audiences which perfectly understood and appreciated their beauties. The desire of justifying the general favor

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which the tongue had gained, and of increasing its spread, was one of the principal motives which led Voltaire to advocate constantly the rectification of its orthography, and the preparation of a great lexicon which should contain all its authorized words with their authorized uses. The irregularity of the speech irritated him. He constantly deplored the lack of a satisfactory dictionary. Both these were with him standing grievances. "Our language," he said in a private letter of 1767, "is spoken at Vienna, at Berlin, at Stockholm, at Copenhagen, at Moscow. It is the language of Europe. But for it we must thank the goodness of our books, and not the regularity of our speech. Our excellent artists have caused our stone to be taken for alabaster."<sup>1</sup>

Universality such as this was sure to give French ideas headway everywhere. It helped the reputation of comparatively feeble writers. We can accordingly understand how much it must have done for him who was the most celebrated author of his time. During all the latter half of his long life Voltaire had for his audience the whole of Europe. In this respect no other writer has rivalled him before or since. There have been greater authors than he; but few indeed are those who have possessed so great a variety of powers. There has never been any one, with a reputation purely literary, who has filled so large a space in the eyes of his contemporaries. Byron had something of the same universal acceptance. But Byron died young; besides, his vogue was only that of a poet. Voltaire's mere length

<sup>1</sup> Letter of August 7, 1767, to M. Guyot.

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of life, coupled with constancy of production, gave him that compound interest of reputation which comes from being for a long period before the public. But besides being a poet, he was novelist, philosopher, historian, essayist, controversialist, critic. There was hardly a field of intellectual activity into which he had not ventured; and even where he had not gained great success, he had acquitted himself with credit.

The extension of his native speech was therefore to Voltaire something more than a subject of patriotic congratulation. It was a distinct personal advantage, and he enjoyed it to the uttermost. Not alone France, but all the countries of Europe furnished him with a body of enthusiastic admirers and disciples. If there was any exception to this general rule, it was England. There his influence was less than elsewhere; but even there it was great. French, for obvious reasons, was not so familiar to so many of its inhabitants as it was to the dwellers on the Continent; yet it is probable that the number of those acquainted with the speech was at that time proportionately larger than now. Be that as it may, for those who could not read it, translations of his more important works were provided. These brought the knowledge of his opinions to a race which looked upon the land to which he belonged with jealous, when it did not with hostile eyes. Yet the members of it were frequently influenced by what he said far more than they would have been willing to confess. But if with the English his words carried weight, to the rest of Europe they carried conviction. By many they were accepted as incontrovertible gospel. Even



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those who most bitterly resented the views he expressed on matters of religion deferred largely to his judgment on matters of literature. Friend and foe alike recognized the prevalence and potency of this influence. "But what does it avail," said Lessing with some bitterness, "to raise objections against M. de Voltaire? He speaks, and the world believes."<sup>1</sup>

Voltaire, it has just been said, was he who introduced Shakespeare to the knowledge of the Continent. Here a distinction must be made. The verb just employed describes all that he really did. He introduced Shakespeare to the European mainland; he did not make it acquainted with Shakespeare. It is not easy to overrate the influence he exerted in exciting the curiosity of the Continent about the English dramatist. It is very easy to get a perfectly unwarranted and exaggerated impression of the value of the information in regard to that dramatist's writings which he condescended to impart to its inhabitants. They learned from him of the existence of Shakespeare. They learned that his countrymen regarded him as another Sophocles, that they called him the divine. They learned that his plays, though monstrosities taken as wholes, contained some most admirable passages. But of Shakespeare himself they scarcely learned anything. The specimens of his work which Voltaire communicated, at first with praise, were very meagre. Even then they gave in nearly every instance an inadequate and sometimes a perverted idea of the original. His later and fuller versions were little more than travesties. It is a question, indeed, whether the

<sup>1</sup> *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, No. 10, June 2, 1767.

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appreciation of Shakespeare, which was sure to come to the Continent sooner or later, was not retarded rather than advanced by the knowledge Voltaire imparted, coupled with the views he expressed. He was responsible for the critical estimate of the dramatist which continued to prevail in Europe during a good share of the eighteenth century. There is little need to cite the opinions of other men. They usually knew nothing of the English dramatist save what Voltaire told them; and he told them very little. They consequently do hardly more in most instances than echo his words.

There are three public references which Voltaire made to Shakespeare during the years that immediately followed his first acquaintance with the poet. One is contained in the discourse upon tragedy which was prefixed to the printed play of *Brutus*, originally brought out on the stage in December, 1730. Another is in his essay on epic poetry, and the third in his *Lettres Philosophiques*. The first published of these — the discourse upon tragedy — was in the form of a dedicatory epistle to Lord Bolingbroke. It was largely devoted to a comparison between the stages of France and England. It has an interest of its own because in it we see Voltaire wavering between the larger dramatic liberty prevailing in the latter country, even though it degenerated, as he believed, into license, and the strict conventions, often assuming a character purely arbitrary, which held in restraint the freedom of the playwright in his own land. In Bolingbroke he found a man who took a view of Shakespeare not essentially different from his own. He had no need therefore to combat any undue and unjusti-

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fiable admiration. He conducted himself accordingly. He assumed what he felt to be a generous attitude toward this culprit of genius, who, though guilty of the grossest theatrical crimes, had to a certain extent atoned for his offences by performing some most dazzling dramatic exploits.

In the course of this prefatory letter Voltaire gave a translation of the address of Brutus to the people contained in the third act of 'Julius Cæsar.' It is both the earliest and the most faithful of any attempt on his part to reproduce a passage of Shakespeare. In fact, it is the only adequate one he ever made. It is short; but though short, it is sufficient as far as it goes. His next reference to the dramatist was incidental, and naturally dealt in criticism alone, and not in citation. Voltaire had been in England about a year and a half when a little volume containing two essays of his in the language of the country, was brought out at London. The work was so well done that his enemies were henceforth disposed to attribute its correctness, not to his own unaided efforts, but to the labors, or at any rate to the supervision, of friends whom he had made in the land of his exile. His correspondence shows that from the beginning he had been impressed by the energy of the English tongue,<sup>1</sup> and the ambition to compose in it was stimulated by his desire to contribute still further to the success of an undertaking in which he had the deepest personal interest. Both of these essays were designed to call attention to the *Henriade*, the new edition of which was on the point of appearing at London. One

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Nov. 22, 1733, to M. Brossetti.

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of them was devoted to the subject of epic poetry. It was mainly given up to brief notices of certain writers of various countries who had produced work of this nature. Here consequently it was not Shakespeare who came under consideration, but Milton.

Of Milton Voltaire spoke as well as he could of an author with whom he had the least possible sympathy. It was undoubtedly his interest just then to do so. He was writing for an English audience, and with the intent to secure their support for a work of his own soon to be published. Naturally he would be careful to refrain from saying anything to offend the susceptibilities of those he was addressing. His real opinion of Milton found later much more accurate expression in the words put in the mouth of Pocourante in his *Candide*; and later still in the article entitled *Épopée* in the 'Philosophical Dictionary.' This last abounds in blunders so peculiarly preposterous that momentary indignation speedily subsides into positive enjoyment. More entertaining even than the misstatements of fact is the critical outlook. After speaking of Milton's reply to Salmasius he tells us how little likely was such an atrabilious pedant to please the polished and delicate court of Charles II., and such members of the nobility as Rochester and Buckingham. All these lofty characters held in detestation the man and his poem. With their feelings Voltaire fully sympathized a hundred years later. Yet it is not unreasonable to believe that at the time of his stay in England he honestly made a strenuous effort to admire a good deal which in his heart he thought abominable. It was a sort of courtesy that he owed to

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the opinion of the country which had received him hospitably. The spirit is to be approved, even if the attempt met with but scant success.

Of course in the account of Milton contained in the 'Essay on Epic Poetry,' Voltaire contrived to introduce as facts a number of fictitious statements. One or two of them may be worth mentioning here, not for any importance they have in themselves, but as furnishing still further illustration of the unflinching consistency with which on every possible occasion he exhibited himself as the great enemy of exactitude. Samuel Simmons is pretty well known to us as the original publisher of 'Paradise Lost.' The contract he made for the payment of it has conferred upon him a sort of quasi-immortality. But in this essay of Voltaire's a man named Tompson, appears in that capacity. Under that disguise we are enabled to detect Tonson, the later purchaser of the copyright. At the time the poem appeared the future publisher was not even in his teens. A special contribution of his own Voltaire also made to the swelling mass of misstatement about the favor or rather disfavor with which the great epic had been received at the time of its appearance. He assures us that Milton never lived to see a second edition of his principal work.

In the essay as it appeared in English at the end of 1727, Voltaire had no comment to make on Shakespeare. But a few years after his return from exile he published in French an enlarged edition of the treatise. In it he inserted a passage about the dramatist. It occurs only incidentally in the course of his remarks upon Homer. Of that poet he thought none too highly. He distinctly

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preferred Vergil. Likes and dislikes of this sort are within limits matters of personal taste with which no one but the individual himself has any concern. But to some it will seem a suggestive fact that the three greatest authors of their respective countries, Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare never found much favor in Voltaire's eyes. Of them all he expressed at times peculiarly disparaging opinions.

In the course of his remarks upon Homer he was seeking to explain the great vogue which that poet had with his countrymen in spite of his manifest faults. The matter was one, he said, which had long puzzled him. At last he found its parallel in Shakespeare. By him the paradox of Homer's reputation was explained. Then he went on to give the following account of the attitude exhibited by the English toward their favorite author. To them he was their greatest tragic poet. With his name the epithet of "divine" was almost invariably coupled. The announcement that one of his plays was to be acted was sufficient to fill the theatre, as could not be done by the 'Cato' of Addison or the *Andromaque* of Racine, excellently translated as was, in his opinion, that masterpiece of the French stage. Yet these plays of Shakespeare, he tells us, are really monstrosities. The action of some of them lasts a good many years. The hero baptized in the first act dies of old age in the fifth. No examples of such a nature can indeed be found in the editions of Shakespeare to which English readers have access; but a stern solicitude about the exact truth was never permitted by Voltaire to blunt the point of an effective statement. He further depicted a

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number of things which, as a man brought up in the traditions of the French stage, naturally struck him as improper where they were not actually offensive. In these plays are seen, he said, sorcerers, peasants, drunkards, buffoons, grave-diggers in the act of making a grave, and singing drinking-songs as they play with the skulls of the dead. Even in the simple report of what he had before his eyes Voltaire was enabled to free himself from the tyranny of exactness. The grave-diggers sing songs; but they are not drinking-songs. In the exercise of their calling they throw up skulls; but they do not play with them.

Nothing, continued Voltaire, can be imagined more monstrous and absurd than what will be found in Shakespeare. Yet in spite of these things, most offensive to what he deemed true taste, he recognized the privilege of genius in striking out a path for itself and leaving behind excellence that can only plead in its favor that it has followed the beaten path. "When I began to learn the English language," he added, "I could not understand how so enlightened a people could admire an author so extravagant. But when I gained a fuller acquaintance with the speech, I perceived that the English were right, and that it is impossible for a whole nation to be deceived in a matter of sentiment, and to be wrong in being pleased. They saw, as I did, the gross faults of their favorite author, but they felt better than I his beauties, all the more remarkable because they are lightning flashes which have sent forth their gleams in profoundest night." It is the old story of the barbarism of the Elizabethan age which crops out in these last

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words. For repeating it Voltaire can hardly be blamed. It expressed the view not uncommonly held in the eighteenth century by the English themselves.

It is in the closing words of this passage that Voltaire took the most advanced ground he ever occupied, so far as his appreciation of Shakespeare was concerned. It is the only suggestion to be found in his numerous remarks upon the English dramatist that there might be depths of creative art which no critical plummet had yet sounded. He did not commit himself too boldly in his concession; he hedged it in with limitations: but still the concession exists. He was led to make the reflection he did by the contemplation of the continuous hold which Shakespeare had kept over the hearts of his countrymen. For a hundred and fifty years, he said, that dramatist had enjoyed his reputation. The writers who had come after him had served to increase rather than diminish it. The great judgment of the author of 'Cato,' the talents which had made him secretary of state, had never been able to place him by the side of Shakespeare. "Such," concluded Voltaire, "is the privilege of creative genius. It strikes out for itself a path which no one has travelled before. It moves forward without guide, without art, without rule. It loses its way in its progress; but it leaves far behind it everything which can boast only of reason and correctness." Here the critical outlook is much broader than any which the author indulged in at a later period, and the tone more kindly and generous. It evinces a much deeper insight into the nature of Shakespeare's art than the far more widely known passage likening the poetic



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genius of the English to a leafy tree sending out its branches irregularly and at random, though always with vigor, but dying if clipped and pruned after the manner of the trees in the gardens of Marly.

It was, however, by what he said in the third of these works — the 'Philosophical Letters' — that Voltaire more particularly awakened the curiosity of the Continent about Shakespeare. These were first published in London in 1733, and appeared there under the title of 'Letters Concerning the English Nation.' They came out under the supervision of his friend Thieriot, who was then staying in that city. Of course this edition was a translation. The original, which appeared in France the following year, was there designated as *Lettres Philosophiques*. Voltaire encountered many trials and tribulations in his efforts to bring his work before the public, and the deed was accomplished at last in a surreptitious way. To the modern reader, accustomed to much bolder speculation and far more bitter satire, the hostility which these essays met with, both before and after their appearance in France, may excite a certain measure of surprise. Professedly the work was innocent enough. It purported to be made up of letters written by Voltaire to his old comrade Thieriot, on the various things which had attracted his attention and aroused his interest during his exile. It was merely to gratify the thirst for useful information on the part of this friend that he had jotted down the impressions which he had received of the island and the islanders. Now they were to be given to a larger circle.

So we are told in the preface to the English volume.

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An impression to the same effect is conveyed in Voltaire's correspondence. It hardly needs to be said that this account of their origin is largely mythical. Some things in them there are which had doubtless been communicated by him to his friend; but no such carefully wrought and brilliant sketches of men and manners ever constituted the matter of private letters. The work consists of a series of rambling but delightful essays upon the government, the philosophy, the poetry of the English, and more than all upon their religion, or rather their religions. To the abundance of these latter Voltaire attributed the fact that they lived in peace with one another. There was a subsidiary motive in the composition of the 'Letters', which has almost a right to be termed the leading one. Under cover of describing what he saw in England he took occasion to put in a light rendered odious by comparison whatever he found objectionable in France.

From the point of view of the upholders of political and spiritual despotism the work could never have been regarded as innocent. No one was likely to be deceived by the bland profession that it was merely a picture of the manners and customs of the English. The advocates of all repression of thought, save of their own way of thinking, were in no danger of being misled by the apparent artlessness with which Voltaire betrayed their cause while professing to stand up for it. They were not imposed upon—he could hardly have had the expectation that they would be—by his pretence of being shocked at the impiety of views which he heard with horror, but was careful to bring out with peculiar

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vigor and effectiveness. The 'Letters' opened with an account of the Quakers. The interview between Voltaire and the eminent and benevolent member of that sect whom he visited, and who came to take him to one of their meetings, reads very much like a myth; but the man unquestionably had a being, even if the conversation did not. Whether as portrayed he existed in the flesh, or purely in the spirit, he served the writer a most useful purpose in enabling him to express views about church and church government which, though aimed ostensibly at the members of the Anglican body, bore down even more heavily upon the clergy of his own land. The sentiments, though put in the mouth of a Quaker, were expressed with a wit and keenness which no Quaker up to this time had succeeded in exhibiting.

The English edition of the work came out in August, 1733. It consisted of three thousand copies. Of the feeling entertained about it in Great Britain it is not easy to give a satisfactory account. In none of the periodicals, so far as I can discover, was there any notice taken of it whatever. This, however, means little, if anything; for those productions, besides being few in number, were not apt then to take notice of anything literary worth noting. But the private correspondence of the period seems also to be fully as barren of allusion. Still, whatever opinion was held about it there is hardly any doubt as to its success so far as that was indicated by its sale. Voltaire certainly was well satisfied with the reception of his work in the land of which it treated. "The letters philosophical, political, critical, poetical, heretical, and diabolical," he wrote in April, 1734, "have

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met with great success." That was because, he added, "the English are damnable heretics,<sup>1</sup> accursed of God, and are all so constituted as to approve of the works of the devil."<sup>2</sup> His report of the favor with which the work was received by them can be accepted with scarcely any qualification. The subject would naturally be of interest to the men of that nation. There was comparatively little in the 'Letters' to offend their susceptibilities, and a good deal to flatter their self-love. Unquestionably some hostility was aroused by his comments upon Shakespeare and the English drama generally. This we shall see manifested later; but at the time there was no public exhibition of it.

Nor could the Anglican clergy have been much pleased with the mocking tone which pervades Voltaire's utterances about them, though in almost every instance there was a designed reflection, either by implication or by contrast, upon the corresponding members of the French church. Still, men are never disposed to enjoy the vicarious punishment inflicted upon themselves for the benefit of other offenders. Neither the matter nor the manner of Voltaire's comments upon the English ecclesiastics could have furnished them pleasant reading; and there was certainly little limit to its impudent drollery. The established church, we are assured, had retained a great number of the Romish ceremonies, but especially that of receiving with most scrupulous attention the tithes. Those who made up the convocation, in the days when that body was allowed to meet, had the

<sup>1</sup> The Rabelaisian word *papefigues* is the one used here by Voltaire.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to M. de Formont, April, 1734.

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power of sentencing to the flames books that were impious—that is to say, books written against themselves. Unlike what was often found in France, the dignitaries of the church were old men. They were generally stiff and awkward in their manners, never having been able to shake off the rusticity of their university training. Hence, lacking the power to please, they were obliged to rest content with their own wives. The vice to which they were specially addicted was the gentlemanly, or rather old-gentlemanly, one of avarice. Certain liberties too were allowed to the inferior clergy, which to their credit they never abused. They were permitted to drink in taverns; but if they ever got fuddled, they did so in a serious way and thereby occasioned no scandal. There was no real persecution or proselytizing; but no one could hold an office without being ranked among the faithful. By this expedient such numbers of dissenters had been converted that not a twentieth part of the nation was outside of the established church. In business, however, they met on common ground. Anglican and non-conformist, Jew, Gentile, and Mohammedan had in that but one creed. They dealt with one another, they confided in one another fully. It was only to a bankrupt they applied the name of infidel.

Voltaire's observations were very apt to be of the nature of a two-edged sword. Satirical strokes of the kind just mentioned cut both ways. They could not be expected to gratify the members of the Anglican communion; but they were as little calculated to add to the complacency of the French clergy. Furthermore,

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no occasion was neglected to suggest, if not to emphasize, the contrast between the religious and the political freedom enjoyed in the one country, and the restraint placed upon both in the other. It was an unfortunate fact that a just tribute could not be paid to the manners and customs of the English without seeming to satirize the French. The work was therefore destined by its very nature to provoke hostility. For some time before it appeared in France Voltaire was conscious that he was standing upon a mine. Imprisonment, exile loomed up before him as possibilities. At a little later period he remarked that the only replies to his 'Letters' which he feared — there were several of them — were *lettres de cachet*.<sup>1</sup> There was some reason for the dread. In fact his words imply that he felt that a certain justification existed for Englishmen in speaking of the French government very much as Frenchmen spoke of the Turkish. If his report can be trusted, it was in the following way that they expressed themselves: "The English think," he wrote, half humorously, half seriously, "that half of France is confined in the Bastille; the rest are reduced to beggary; and all the too daring authors are put in the pillory."<sup>2</sup> It was not entirely true, he added. There was, however, enough of truth in it to make him feel that it was desirable to take precautions.

Accordingly in April, 1734, at the time copies of the French edition of the 'Letters' were thrown upon the market — published of course without his consent and

<sup>1</sup> Letter of July 24, 1734, to M. de Cideville.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Feb. 24, 1733, to Thieriot.

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much to his vociferous indignation — he had found it convenient to be at a goodly distance from Paris. He was attending the marriage of the Duc de Richelieu at Monjou near Autun. Warned in time of what was impending he slipped away from the place some days before the official sent to arrest him arrived. Two visits to the Bastille had not impressed him with its attractions as a place of even temporary sojourn. Nor did any other of the royal fortresses appeal to him as a desirable abode for one who sought relief from the burdens of life. He had conceived, he wrote to one of his friends, a mortal aversion to a prison.<sup>1</sup> He was ill; and the close and musty air did not agree with his health. Serious as it assuredly was in some ways, there is a certain suggestion of opera bouffe about the whole business. The officer despatched to take him into custody made no unbecoming haste in the effort to reach him before his departure; and the journey he was about to undertake for that purpose has the appearance of having been proclaimed as with the sound of a trumpet. Ample warning of his coming was furnished. Voltaire found no difficulty in disappearing as soon as the news of the explosion reached him. After some wanderings he retired to Cirey in Champagne, close to Lorraine, which was not then under French jurisdiction. There he was in a position to cross the border any moment that it became necessary.

Meanwhile the men, whose feelings his book had outraged, proceeded to do everything that lay in their power to attract attention to it and excite the curiosity

<sup>1</sup> Letter of April, 1734, to the Comte d'Argental.

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of the world about it. The most devoted friends of the author could not have labored more zealously in its behalf than did its enemies. It was condemned by the parliament of Paris as scandalous, as contrary to religion, to good morals, and to the respect due to the powers that be. It was ordered to be torn in pieces and cast into the fire by the executioner. The sentence was carried into effect on the 10th of June. Provincial parliaments were disposed to follow the example of that of the capital. "If this holy zeal continues," wrote Voltaire to a friend, "the process of burning will make the tour of the realm. I shall be burned a dozen times," he added. "Between us, it is something very much to one's honor; but one really must have some modesty."<sup>1</sup> Never indeed did a work have a more magnificent advertisement. Doubtless its author would have preferred the personal comfort and more limited sale which would have attended its authorized publication, to the delays and obstructions which preceded its issue and the condemnations which followed it. Under any circumstances it would have been sure of success; nor is it necessary to agree with a single one of its views to maintain that it would have deserved all the success it received. Still, he had the consolation of knowing that his opponents were doing everything they could to advance the circulation of the volume. The results speedily made themselves manifest. It was no short time before his book had more than travelled into every corner of France. It had traversed the whole length and breadth of Europe.

<sup>1</sup> Letter of July 24, 1734, to M. de Cideville.



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The part of the work which concerns us here are the letters that treat of the English drama. To this subject two of them were devoted. One was on its comedy, the other on its tragedy. In the remarks upon the former not so much even as the name of Shakespeare appeared. That he had ever written a play of that character was something that Voltaire either did not know or did not think worthy of mention. The only authors of this kind whom he recognized and wrote about were Wycherley, Vanbrugh, and Congreve. He referred indeed to Sir Richard Steele and Colley Cibber as good comic writers still living—in the case of one of them a singular oversight; for Steele had died the year of his own return from exile.

Voltaire was disposed to think highly of English comedy, especially as represented by the three men first mentioned. Their work has come to be looked at askance in modern times, even where it is not actually neglected. This, however, has never been due to its lack of wit, but to the abundance of its immorality. He himself incidentally gave a picture of its character and of the state of society which generated it, in the comments he made upon Congreve's plays. This author, he tells us, had raised the glory of English comedy to a greater height than any one before or since. The criticism is very much in the spirit of that delightful ignorance of his which constantly spoke of the time of Charles II. as the reign of politeness and the era of the fine arts. But Voltaire's lack of acquaintance with even the existence of the better literature of a better period did not prevent him from noting with keen

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insight the peculiar nature of the one with which he had become familiar. The language of the characters in these plays, he remarked, is always that of men of honor; their actions are those of knaves. This shows, he added, that Congreve was perfectly well acquainted with human nature, and frequented what is called polite society.

It is the views he expressed about Shakespeare in the letter on tragedy which dominated for half a century the opinion of the Continent; which did not give way indeed until the great dramatist took the field, it may be said, in person. In it further was displayed that extravagant admiration for the 'Cato' of Addison which was to find constant expression during the rest of his life. Here, in his opinion, was a play written in perfect taste. If it had not in every respect reached the highest ideal, it had furnished the model for all succeeding writers. What the merits were which entitled it to this lofty position it is easy to discover from the views about the drama to which Voltaire never ceased to cling with almost passionate fervor. It conformed in every particular to the rules. It observed the unities. It had no comic scenes intermixed with its tragic. No one appeared in it below the rank of a patrician or of a foreign monarch. It shed no blood before the eyes of the spectators. Cato, though exhibited to the audience in his dying moments in order to make a few closing remarks, had been considerate enough to fall on his sword behind the scenes. Everybody throughout had conducted himself with the most conspicuous propriety. There was, to be sure, an insipid

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love story, against the constant introduction of which into tragedy Voltaire steadily protested in print, though he usually gave way to it in practice. Certain other deficiencies there were. But while the existence of these prevented the play from being considered perfect, it did not prevent it from being a beautiful as well as a rational piece.

Besides these negative merits Voltaire credited this tragedy with certain positive ones. As regards its diction and the beauty and harmony of its numbers he deemed it a masterpiece. Cato himself he declared to be the greatest character that had ever been brought upon the stage. But Voltaire knew also perfectly well the wide gulf that lies between taste and genius. No more than Addison's countrymen did he venture to set Addison's tragedy beside the plays of Shakespeare as an exhibition of power. He began his observations upon the latter poet with the remark that the English spoke of him as the Corneille of their nation. This was the way the comparison appeared originally. No one but a Frenchman would have thought of applying to Shakespeare a description which almost every Englishman, even at that time, would have regarded as distinctly derogatory. Later the remark appeared, with much more fidelity to fact, that his countrymen considered him another Sophocles. Voltaire naturally took no such extravagant view of his greatness. "His genius," he observed, "was at once strong and abundant, natural and sublime, but without the smallest spark of taste, and devoid of the remotest idea of the rules." In these words he set the tune which was played with slight

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variations by countless critics on the Continent, and somewhat in England itself, all through the eighteenth century. He further observed that these plays of Shakespeare which are christened tragedies are in reality nothing but monstrous farces. Yet they contain scenes so beautiful and passages so full of the grand and the terrible that they have always been played with prodigious success. Later writers had accordingly been tempted to imitate him; but they had succeeded only in reproducing his absurdities without ever exhibiting his power. The natural consequence had followed. The merit of Shakespeare had been the ruin of the English stage.

Voltaire told us that the world — by which in this instance he meant the Continent — had heard only of the faults of Shakespeare. It would have been nearer the truth to say that it had never heard of him at all. It became now his pleasing duty to inform it of the beauties which atoned for these faults. To convey an idea of them he selected the famous soliloquy of Hamlet. This he translated into French. It was not rendered literally, he was careful to remark, but in such a way as to give a conception of its spirit. "Woe be to those translators," he exclaimed, "who by seeking to give the meaning of every word, enfeeble the sense." He certainly had no intention of laying himself open to any of the penalties involved in this denunciation. It seems only fair indeed to re-translate his version into English with tolerable literalness, not indeed to give an idea of its spirit, but to get from it the sort of impression which Frenchmen would receive of the thoughts and feelings



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which Shakespeare was seeking to convey. Here accordingly is the soliloquy as it reaches us after having passed through the medium of two translations :

“ Pause, it is incumbent to choose and pass in an instant  
From life to death, or from existence to nothingness.  
Cruel gods, if there be any gods, enlighten my heart.  
Must I grow old, bowed under the hand that insults me,  
Endure, or end my ill-fortune and my fate ?  
Who am I ? What holds me back ? And what is death ?  
It is the end of our ills, it is my sole refuge :  
After long delirium it is a tranquil slumber.  
One falls asleep and all dies ; but a frightful awakening  
May perhaps succeed to the pleasures of sleep.  
We are threatened, we are told, that this short life  
Is by eternal torments immediately followed.  
O death ! fatal moment ! dreadful eternity !  
Every heart, at thy name merely, is congealed with terror.  
Ah ! were it not for thee, who could endure this life ?  
Who would bless the hypocrisy of our lying priests ?  
Flatter the faults of an unworthy mistress ?  
Grovel under a minister of state, pay court to his pride ?  
And show the weakness of his downcast soul  
To ingrate friends, who turn away their eyes ?  
Death would be too sweet in extremities like these,  
But doubt speaks, and cries out to us, Stop.  
It forbids our hands indulging in that happy homicide,  
And of a warlike hero makes a timid Christian.”<sup>1</sup>

This is a fairly literal reproduction in English of Voltaire's representation in French of Hamlet's soliloquy. It would be unjust to base upon the re-translation any

<sup>1</sup> At a later period Voltaire added to this translation another literal one, line for line. The inability to consult early editions of his works renders it impossible for me to say where and when this second version appeared. From some contemporary English comments I am inclined to put its production about 1760 : but this is purely conjectural, and may be far out of the way.

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opinion whatever of the poetic merit of his version. But one can get from it a correct conception of its fidelity to the original. We hardly need his asseveration that there was no attempt to render the latter word for word. Are we any better off as regards its sense and spirit? What idea could his countrymen have got from it of what Hamlet said? Its composition reminds one of the proportion which sack bore to bread in Falstaff's tavern-account. There is but a half-pennyworth of Shakespeare to an intolerable deal of Voltaire.

## CHAPTER IV

### VOLTAIRE'S BRUTUS AND ZAÏRE

VOLTAIRE, as a Frenchman, had been profoundly struck with the freedom of thought and speech which he found prevalent in England. To us at this time the political and religious liberty then enjoyed there deserves anything but unqualified praise. To the man, however, who had been twice imprisoned in the Bastille, it seemed almost ideal. He was never weary of contrasting the freedom of utterance which prevailed in the one country with the shameful oppression under which it languished in the other. It was his own bitter personal experience that led him to declare that the highest right of humanity consisted in dependence upon law, and not upon the caprices of men. The French theologians, according to him, were so enamoured of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, that they sought, whenever possible, to furnish speedy and convincing evidence of its truth to those who presumed to doubt it, by burning their bodies. "Why is it necessary," he exclaimed with some bitterness, "to endure the rigors of slavery in the most beautiful country of the universe, which one cannot leave, and yet in which it is dangerous to live?"

But the freedom of the English stage, especially as represented by Shakespeare, was to him full as much of

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a revelation. It broadened, at least for a time, his conception of the privileges of the dramatist. It led him at first to question the justice of the rules prescribed and the methods followed in his own country. It forced upon his attention the limitations of the French drama. They were not limitations existing in nature, they were frequently not imposed by the authority of the ancients. They were in fact nothing but conventions accepted by it, which time and custom had at last made sacred. Why was it always necessary to go back for characters to the everlasting Greeks and Romans? Why should not subjects be taken from modern history, and if from modern history, why should not modern names be used? These things had been done, it is true, though Voltaire did not say it; but they had been few, they had been far between, they had made but little impression. He felt further the tyranny of the restrictions which these conventions imposed, not only upon the subject of the play, but also upon its conduct. It occurred to him that it might work no harm if there was a little less talk and a little more action. Furthermore, while the indiscriminate slaughter found in Shakespeare could not of course be tolerated, why should not more latitude be conceded to the dramatist in the disposal of inconvenient characters? It was hard, in particular, for him to see why the hero should be permitted to kill himself in the sight of the audience, and yet have the privilege denied him of killing somebody else. These and similar questions presented themselves to his ever active mind as he studied with attention the English stage.



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He began to feel that the delicacy upon which his countrymen had prided themselves was somewhat too delicate. Was it not therefore desirable to transplant some of the features of this foreign drama into that of his own land? Of course it had gone much too far; but had the French gone far enough? It struck him that here was the point where they had been at fault. There was nothing at which the English stage stopped. In consequence they overstepped constantly the bounds of dramatic decorum. But on the other hand the French failed because they did not venture at all. They did not reach the tragic because they were afraid of going beyond it. But wherever the English had actually succeeded, was it not worth while to follow in their footsteps? The dead body of Cato's son, brought in and shown to his father, had been admired both in England and Italy. No one was shocked by it; all indeed had been impressed by it. Why could not similar representations be tolerated in France? Nature is the same everywhere, and if such scenes be not inherently objectionable, why cannot the French bring themselves to accept them also? Strokes of a majestic and terrible nature should be rare; for if often repeated, they lose their effect. But if the manner be in accordance with the matter, that which might seem commonplace and childish would become in the hands of a great master something to awe and to fascinate. No one but Shakespeare, the English themselves admitted, could call up the spirits of the dead; but as they obeyed his call, the more striking was his success.

To views like these Voltaire gave frequent utterance

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after his return from exile. Furthermore he set out seriously to introduce upon the French stage certain things which had impressed him when seen upon the English. He did not go far; pretty certainly not so far as he was at first disposed to go. He came to recognize that a good deal which he was inclined to regard with approval would not be allowed; for with a nation wedded to the belief that its art had already reached perfection, innovation of almost any sort was likely to partake in its eyes of the nature of profanation. At a later period he said of the scene just mentioned, that if the dead body of Marcus were brought upon the stage, as in the 'Cato' of Addison, with his father shedding tears, the parterre at Paris would roar at such a spectacle, and the ladies would turn away their heads. Yet it was clear to him that such proceedings were not merely legitimate from the point of view of art, but they constituted a powerful addition to the effectiveness of the representation. "With what rapture," said he, "have I seen Brutus holding in his hand the dagger, still wet with the blood of Cæsar, and haranguing from the rostrum the Roman populace." But no assemblage of artisans and plebeians would have been tolerated for a moment upon the French stage. Voltaire did not say even then that this refusal was a mistake. In the reactionary mood which came over him later, he would have been still less disposed to make any such admission; but it is pretty evident that he so regarded it at the time.

Accordingly his attempts to introduce into the drama of his own land those features of the English stage

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which he favored were in large measure tentative. The only one in which any boldness was displayed — *La Mort de César* — was accompanied with apologetic utterances. He professed that its principal aim was to bring to the knowledge of his countrymen that there were other methods and other rules of dramatic representation than those of their own stage; and to lead them in consequence to consider whether the boundaries of their theatre might not be profitably enlarged. "France is not the only country," he wrote to one of his critics, "where tragedies are written; and our taste, or rather our practice, of putting upon the stage nothing but love-dialogues does not please other nations. Our theatre is ordinarily devoid of action and of great interests. . . . If you had seen an entire scene of Shakespeare played as I have seen it, and such as I have pretty closely translated it, our declarations of love and our confidants would appear pretty poor stuff in comparison."<sup>1</sup> It mattered therefore little to the public whether *La Mort de César* were a good or bad piece in itself. Its aim was to give his countrymen a correct idea of the English taste.<sup>2</sup> This play was therefore avowedly an imitation. But there were other scenes taken from Shakespeare in which it did not occur to him to say anything whatever about his original. In five of the plays which he wrote during the score of years that followed his return from France, the obligations, not indirect but direct, which he was under to the English dramatist, are plainly perceptible. By some a sixth has been added. These will be

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Nov. 14, 1735, to Desfontaines.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Oct. 14, 1735, to the Abbé Asselin.

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considered in the order of their publication. For most of them this is the same as the order of their production on the stage. [www.libtool.com.cn](http://www.libtool.com.cn)

The first of these six was the tragedy of *Brutus*. It was the earliest one which he brought out after his return from exile. It was first acted on the 11th of December, 1730, but gained then only a moderate success. The play, as printed in 1731, was preceded by the discourse already mentioned, upon tragedy, which embodied many of the views that Voltaire's residence in England had led him to entertain. It is commonly said that he was inspired to write this piece by having witnessed a representation of 'Julius Cæsar.' Yet it would be hard to detect in it any specific obligation to Shakespeare, though the existence of such, men have occasionally professed to find. It is the general influence of the whole English stage upon the action and movement of the play, upon the outspokenness also of its political utterance, that we recognize, rather than the special influence of any particular author. Much more frequently, however, has it been charged that the hint of the whole piece and much of its treatment have come from an entirely different quarter. The letter to Bolingbroke prefixed to the play contained, almost at its beginning, an error of fact. This is not very astonishing for Voltaire; the wonder is that it contained but one. He reminded his friend that they had both been equally surprised that no Englishman had selected as a subject the first Roman consul condemning to death his son for having been concerned in a conspiracy to restore the Tarquins. The stern virtue which had preferred one's

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country to one's child had seemed to both of them peculiarly fitted to attract the attention of English playwrights. These, in Voltaire's opinion, were not gifted with the power of depicting love between the sexes. Their success lay in the representation of love of country.

It does not convey a high opinion of the knowledge of human nature, possessed by either Bolingbroke or Voltaire, to believe that the spectacle of a father putting his own son to death, for any cause, could of itself ever be agreeable to the audience of any nation, unless under very exceptional conditions of public sentiment or popular excitement. We may respect the judicial attitude of mind which does not hesitate to inflict upon one closely allied in blood the penalty which would fall remorselessly upon some one far removed. We may admire the devotion to duty which sacrifices an erring child to the cause of the country he has sought to betray. But it is useless to try to pretend that the sight of such a spectacle contributes to enjoyment. To fancy that it would appeal particularly to the English was part of that mistaken impression about them which prevailed largely at that time upon the Continent. The truth is that Voltaire's choice of a subject was largely influenced by a fondness on his part, which was almost morbid, for those which involved the taking of life by the one who stood in the closest sort of relationship to the victim. The killing of a parent by a child enters into the plot of a number of his tragedies. In the ancient legends he adopted for treatment he seemed to select by preference those in which this incident belongs

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to the story. In *Œdipe* the father has died at the hand of his son. In *Eriphyle*, in *Sémiramis*, in *Oreste*, it is the mother who meets the like fate. The situation is sometimes reversed. In *Mérope* it is the mother who deliberately determines to slay the youth who turns out to be her own child.

If any fault can be found with Voltaire in these instances, it is in the selection of a story of which such a feature forms an integral part. But there are other cases in which he dragged in the motive with little, if any, justification from history or legend. In *La Mort de César* the idle gossip, preserved by Plutarch, which made Brutus a natural son of the dictator — who was but fifteen years older — is not merely accepted as true, but upon it the development of the plot is made to turn. In *Mahomet* the case is even worse. The murder of a father by a son is brought into the story with the admission that for it there is nowhere the slightest authority in history. To an author with this natural bent for the introduction of parricide into his dramas, filicide would have seemed a not unsatisfactory variation of the same theme. This stone, therefore, which, according to him, the English had rejected, became in *Brutus* the corner-stone upon which he built his tragedy.

He was soon informed that his assertion was unwarranted ; that the stone had actually not been rejected. As early as the summer of 1732 an adaptation of his *Brutus* had been prepared for the English stage by William Duncombe, a writer of that time. A series of unfavorable accidents prevented it from being brought out for two years ; according to its author it was a series

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of accidents that prevented it from being successful when it was brought out. First acted on November 25, 1734, it had had a run of but six nights. The following year it was published. In the preface to the printed play Duncombe pointed out Voltaire's error. A tragedy on this very subject had been written by Nathaniel Lee, and had been produced in 1681. After having been played three days, its representation had been stopped on the ground that it reflected on the king. The original statement, however, in the discourse on tragedy was never modified at all by Voltaire in the body of the epistle. In later editions, a note was appended to the effect that there was such a piece by an author named Lee, but it was entirely unknown and never played. This was adding another error to the one previously committed. Not only had Lee's tragedy been printed the year of its original representation, but several editions of his dramatic works, in which this particular one was contained, had appeared since his death.

In England the translation, and along with it the French original, were speedily made the subject of unfavorable criticism. This was the work of Aaron Hill, who was at that time concerned in a periodical publication called 'The Prompter.' In it a great deal of attention was paid to matters connected with the theatre. In a review, which appeared in February, 1735, of the plays produced up to that time during the season, Duncombe's adaptation was noticed, and incidentally plagiarism was imputed to Voltaire. "The first piece brought on," said he, "was the tragedy of 'Brutus,' . . . Everybody knew it was (and the author

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himself gave it for no more than) a translation from M. de Voltaire, who has not only taken the hint from our own countryman, Lee's 'Brutus,' but coldly imitated his finest scenes. The ill-success that this play met with gave me as much satisfaction as I had already conceived indignation against the poet for having been so servile as to stoop to translate a Frenchman's plagiarism, and to bring it on a stage which our own Brutus might have trod once more with true Roman dignity. The fate it met seemed to me a sort of poetical punishment inflicted by the town on an author who wanted to invigorate the Roman eagle's wings with French instead of British fire." <sup>1</sup> Hill, who was almost certainly responsible for these words had been long laboring zealously to have his own translation of *Zaire* brought out at Drury Lane. It is not unlikely that the manager's delay gave additional zest to his enjoyment of the failure of the piece which had been put on before his own.

Borrowing from Lee under the circumstances would, if true, have implied peculiar baseness upon the part of Voltaire. He would appear in the light of having first stolen his work from an author far inferior; then, besides making no acknowledgment of the obligation, denying even the existence of his original. It must be said that there was much in his conduct toward Shakespeare that renders such action on his part possible if not probable; yet in this case, there is little justifiable ground for the charge of plagiarism. It is not infrequently safe to rely upon Voltaire's slight acquaintance

<sup>1</sup> The Prompter, No. xxix., February 18, 1785.



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with English authors and works that he takes the pains to mention. This confidence can be increased a hundred-fold in the case of those that he fails to mention. The weight of evidence is all in favor of his total ignorance of Lee's work, at the time he made the assertion which is found in his discourse upon tragedy. The plots of the two plays are in most respects as far apart as they well can be in two pieces based upon the same subject. Certain resemblances there are; but besides being superficial, they have almost the nature of the inevitable. In both dramas the cause of the ruin of Titus is a fatal passion which seduces him from allegiance to his country. In Lee's play he is in love with Teraminta, a natural daughter of the exiled king. In Voltaire's it is with his legitimate daughter, Tullia, who has been detained in the house of Brutus. But a story of this sort was then a necessity of the situation. No drama could be expected to have much hope of success on the English stage without love as a leading motive. On the French it could have none at all. If once that passion were introduced into the play, love for a daughter of Tarquin would naturally be selected to account for the defection of the son of Brutus from the patriot cause. The further resemblances are incidental and of slight importance; the differences both in details and in the general conduct of the plot are extreme.

Accordingly in his *Brutus* Voltaire — so it seems to me at least — cannot be fairly charged with unacknowledged obligations to an English author. In this instance injustice has been done him even by the writers of his own land. But so much cannot be said in the case

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of several tragedies which followed. He has told us himself how profoundly he had been impressed with the appearance of the ghost in Hamlet. A scene of this sort he attempted to reproduce in his tragedy of *Eriphyle*, which was brought out in March, 1732. Neither the play itself nor the reception it met altogether pleased him, and after it had been withdrawn from representation he did not even suffer it to be printed. As later he introduced this same feature into *Sémiramis*, it will be well here to follow his example and defer all consideration of his course in imitating the ghost scene until that piece is reached. *Eriphyle* was followed by *Zaire*, one of Voltaire's greatest dramatic successes. It was produced in August of this same year. In it there can be no question of the influence of Shakespeare. The imitation of 'Othello' is distinctly perceptible, in spite of the particular variations which taste or necessity compelled. It extends alike to the general outline of the plot and to its details.

A close comparison makes this point very plain. In both these plays the action turns upon a disproportioned match. In both there is the same all-absorbing love on the part of hero and of heroine. In both there is the same unfounded jealousy on the part of the hero. For furnishing it a pretext for its display, in place of the handkerchief in 'Othello' is substituted in *Zaire* an intercepted letter, whose purport is mistaken. In both the hero has a confidant to whom he reveals his inmost heart. He it is who sympathizes, or pretends to sympathize, with his superior, and assists him in carrying his wishes into effect. In the French

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play he is represented as being influenced by much higher motives than in the English; but as a dramatic character he is immeasurably inferior to the intellectual villain whom Shakespeare depicted. In both the hero murders the woman he loves, though in *Zaïre* he does it decorously behind the scenes. The audience do not witness the act, they hear only the words attending its commission. In both the hero is made to wake suddenly to the consciousness of his crime, of the causelessness of his jealousy, of the irreparable wrong he has inflicted upon the woman who loves him passionately. In both he kills himself by way of atonement.

In the closing scenes indeed of both plays the resemblances culminate. Like Othello, Orosmane before plunging the dagger into his own heart bids the hearers, when reporting on their return to their own land the story of these sad events, to record the misery which has befallen him, as well as the hapless fortunes of the woman, most precious, most worthy to be loved, but whose truth and devotion he has come to know too late. Nor does it seem straining the evidence to assert that in this play there are also reminiscences of 'Lear.' As Gloucester, after the terrible experiences he has gone through, dies between the extremes of joy and grief, when he comes to know Edgar, so Guy de Lusignan, released from his long imprisonment, dies as a result of the unexpected happiness of seeing once again his long lost, but at last recovered children. In both instances the death is related by the son in language not essentially different. Again, the same thought comes to the dying Edmund and to the sultan purpos-

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ing to die. To each, life has turned out a failure; but to its last moments has been granted one signal consolation. To the lips of Edmund, as he hears of the fate of Goneril and Regan, whose passion for him has brought death to them both, come the words, "Yet Edmund was beloved." So when the truth of *Zaïre* is revealed to Orosmane in a way not to be mistaken, his overcharged heart finds relief in the simple words, "I was beloved."<sup>1</sup>

Voltaire dedicated this work to his friend Everard Falkener in an epistle of mingled prose and verse. In his 'Philosophic Letters' he had called attention to the strangling of Desdemona by Othello in full sight of the audience. In the dedicatory epistle prefixed

<sup>1</sup> The reader can judge for himself of the likeness of these passages. In the last act of 'Lear' Edgar relates to Albany the death of his father, on his revealing to him who he was and what had been his fortunes. He concludes with these words:

But his flaw'd heart, —  
Alack, too weak the conflict to support! —  
'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,  
Burst smilingly.

The corresponding passage in *Zaïre* reads as follows:

Sa joie, en nous voyant, par de trop grand efforts,  
De ses sens affaiblis a rompu les ressorts;  
Et cette émotion dont son âme est remplie,  
A bientôt épuisé les sources de sa vie.

Edmund's later speech

Yet Edmund was beloved!

corresponds to that of Orosmane

O ciel! j'étais aimé.

It is not even so much the resemblance of the words which is of most account, as the resemblance of the situations in which they are uttered.

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to *Zaïre*, he had something further to say upon the same general theme when contrasting the French and English stages. He rebuked the latter for its addiction to scenes of violence and bloodshed, and recommended the writers for it to imitate Addison, who, in spite of the insipid love-passages which he had introduced into his 'Cato,' still remained the poet of the judicious. But if he felt that the barbarousness of the English drama ought justly to receive censure, he professed himself glad to acknowledge the debt due to it for better methods in which it had led the way. From it he had derived the hardihood which had prompted him to bring into his play the name of French kings and of men belonging to the ancient families of the realm. This he declared to be a novelty. He trusted it would be the beginning of a new species of tragedy which France did not know, but of which she stood in need. It strikes the modern reader as a peculiarly bold proceeding to venture upon such a statement about a kind of drama in which, not to speak of others, he had been anticipated by the great Corneille. Yet his assertion seems to have passed unchallenged at the time. But though he remembered to acknowledge an undeserved obligation to the English stage, he remembered to forget the obligation which he owed to its greatest representative. Not a word was there about Shakespeare in this dedicatory epistle; not an intimation that such a play as 'Othello' had ever been present to his thoughts when he wrote *Zaïre*. Nor in a later edition, containing a second epistle to Falkener, who had become the English ambassador at Constantinople, was there the

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remotest allusion to the man from whom he had derived much which had given direction, if not distinction, to his own play.

It is impossible to acquit Voltaire of disingenuousness in this omission. He had done no more than what he had a right to do in borrowing from Shakespeare the incidents he did. Speaking for myself at least, it does not seem to me that he exceeded the just privilege of an author who finds something admirable to imitate in the works of another author writing in a strange tongue. It is of the slightest possible consequence from what quarter a great writer gets his material; what he does with it after he has gotten it is the all-important consideration. Voltaire's avowed aim was to enrich French literature with whatever was good in foreign tongues, and especially to enlarge the boundaries of the French drama. He recognized in Shakespeare certain methods worth following, certain motives worth adopting, certain scenes worth imitating. What fault can be found for his seeking to introduce them into the drama of his own land? It is his attempted concealment of the act which exposes him to censure, and as much so for its irrationality as for its futility. For in this case while many of the incidents were suggested by Shakespeare, the treatment he gave them was entirely his own. The play was a thoroughly French play, and in the French taste. All the more inexcusable, therefore was the sedulous care manifested to refrain from making the slightest allusion to the source from which so much had been taken. The obligations he was under were not indeed likely to be recognized by his countrymen, in the almost universal

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ignorance of Shakespeare which then prevailed. But an author of the standing and genius of Voltaire is expected to act from a sense of right, and not from a fear of detection.

But if the French did not observe his indebtedness, it did not escape the attention of the English. With them it was at the outset a matter of patriotic congratulation rather than of censure. It was first made subject of public remark when the adaptation of *Zaïre* was brought out on the London stage. This was the work of Aaron Hill, who had made the previous imputation of plagiarism against its author in the case of *Brutus*. Aaron Hill is not a writer of whom any one talks now. To the mass of educated men not even is his name known; and if to know it involves the reading of his works, they are not to be condoled with for their ignorance, but to be congratulated. Yet among the illustrious obscure who occupy, if they do not adorn, a place in the literary annals of the first half of the eighteenth century, he looms up with a good deal of prominence. In his own day he had no small repute. There is no question that with many of his contemporaries he had the reputation of being a man of ability, and with some of being a man of genius. A writer, to impress himself thus upon his time, must have, it would seem, certain positive qualities. Yet after the diligent perusal of hundreds of his pages it is hard to find anything whatever to justify the high opinion entertained by many of his merits.

One characteristic he possessed which may account in part for the estimate in which he was held. If he said nothing worth saying, never had any man a more

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impressive way of saying it. The assumption of superior knowledge and wisdom is so complete that the mind is disposed to reject the belief which forces itself upon it constantly, that all this lofty tone and talk clothes remarks which either have no discoverable meaning, or if they have a meaning have none of any importance, when unrolled at last from the turgid verbiage in which they are enveloped. His prose is in truth indescribable. To use one of his own phrases, he treated every subject he touched with a florid leafiness. Furthermore, while never vigorous, he was always vehement; and to obtain the effect of the former, he betook himself to the feminine resource of italicized words. These are so abundant in some of his writings that one of his pages frequently gives the impression that a contest must have gone on in the printing-house between the two kinds of type, in which the roman got distinctly the worst of it.

But however seriously Hill was taken by many of his contemporaries, he took himself far more seriously. No man possessed of moderate abilities ever had a more immoderate opinion of them. It was impossible for any person to have as much wisdom on any subject as he fancied himself to have on a large number. In particular, no one could be so great a critic, poet, or dramatist as he in fullest sincerity thought he was all three. The reputation of Shakespeare won from him the tribute of conventional respect and conceded inimitableness; but the inferiority of that author to himself in art was as manifest to him as a similar inferiority was to Voltaire. As he wrote to Fielding, the men who injure Shakespeare "are his implicit admirers, who make no



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distinction between his errors and his excellence."<sup>1</sup> Into this pit Hill took care not to fall. Accordingly, he pointed out his defects with a gentle but unsparing hand. "What obstruction of bold unprepar'd, yet, sparkling *life*," he wrote to Mallet in 1741, "do we see *lost* for want of being artfully made *necessary*, among the *passions*, which start up, in Shakespeare."<sup>2</sup> This sentence is given as a specimen of his style, when he did not abandon himself altogether to italics. No one need trouble himself to ascertain its meaning. Hill's language did not really conceal thought, as he himself and perhaps some of his contemporary readers fancied; it merely concealed what he thought he thought.

Hill's self-conceit was indeed so colossal that it inspires something of that sort of respect which we all cannot help feeling for magnitude of any sort. His facility of writing he mistook for felicity. There was in him a little rivulet of poetry of the kind then in vogue. In his effort to render it a river, he broadened it into a very shallow and muddy marsh. With a profound belief in his knowledge of dramatic art, he brought out in 1723 a play entitled 'King Henry V.' It was partly taken from Shakespeare's, but besides the alterations, it contained some peculiarly preposterous additions of his own. That dramatist, he tells us in the prologue, had,

"Blind with the dust of war, o'erlooked the fair."

So he introduced several love-scenes, and a new character, a woman whom Henry V. had seduced while

<sup>1</sup> Works of Aaron Hill, vol. ii. p. 134.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. vol. ii. p. 215.

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Prince of Wales, and deserted as king. There is no question that Hill considered his play a great improvement upon his predecessor's. His feelings were re-echoed in the account of his life prefixed after his death to his dramatic works. In it we are told, of this piece, that "where the characters have similitude, those parts may be said to be an improvement of the great Shakespeare."

But Shakespeare was far from being the only one who benefited from his labors. The living were the objects of his solicitude much more than the dead. No one escaped his mania for giving advice. No station in life, no position in the public service, no eminence in any profession led him to hesitate about bestowing upon the occupant or possessor the result of his reflections upon matters to which they might reasonably be assumed to have themselves devoted the attention of years. To Walpole he wrote, giving hints about politics; to Pope, about poetry; to Garrick, about acting. Nor to these limited fields did he confine his restless and many-sided activity. He had ideas upon all sorts of subjects; it is not improbable that some of them were of value. He indulged in schemes for extracting oil from beechnuts; for the colonization of the present state of Georgia; for the improvement of the art of war by sea and land; for new modelling, arming, and increasing the swiftness of vessels, so as to revolutionize the whole sea-service of the world. To Chesterfield he wrote that he would with his consent send him occasionally reflections "out of the too trodden road, sometimes *commercial*, sometimes *military*, and sometimes,

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too, not excluding mix'd amusements of a less severe attention." <sup>1</sup> He proposed himself as a correspondent to Bolingbroke, and that political leader was obliged to resort to the intervention of Pope to save himself from the infliction.

But his interest lay most of all in the drama. There was no player of either sex whom he did not feel competent to instruct; and many there were upon whom, after the manner of Dogberry, he bestowed his tediousness. To Garrick he gave advice how to improve his acting in Shakespeare. It was not vanity, he assured him, that led him to venture upon this step. "A poet can best understand a poet," was the all-sufficing reason he supplied. To the really intelligent men among his contemporaries he must have seemed the most persistent and colossal bore of the century. With all this, there appears to be no doubt that he was as generous of nature as he was vain of opinion and verbose of speech. He belongs to a class of authors who are a source of peculiar annoyance to the critic, because while being intellectually feeble, they will not be so morally; but along with the commonplaceness of their writings, and the ridiculousness of their pretensions, they will persist in being kind-hearted, self-sacrificing, not too bitter to their enemies, and ready to do everything that lies in their power for their friends.

Hill tells us that he had formed a poor opinion of Voltaire's poetical powers from reading some of his works, especially the *Henriade*. But *Zaïre* captivated him. He at once set to work to translate it and prepare it for

<sup>1</sup> Works of Aaron Hill, vol. ii. p. 327.

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the English stage. He had completed it as early as the summer of 1733. In May of that year his version of one of its most effective scenes was published in a London magazine, with the statement at its head that the French play from which it was taken had had a run of thirty-six nights at Paris.<sup>1</sup> His adaptation he offered to the theatre for the benefit of his old friend, William Bond, who had been a coadjutor of his some years before in a periodical work called 'The Plain-dealer.' The managers seem to have accepted it. Certainly during the latter half of the year he was all the while expecting to have his play—which he had entitled 'Zara'—speedily brought out. He put forth strenuous exertions to pave the way for its success. He wrote to Bolingbroke, to Pope, to engage their help; to Thomson to secure the support of his friends, Dodington in particular.<sup>2</sup> The play was always to appear a few weeks later. But the time kept receding. Months, years passed without its being put on the stage; and in the meantime Duncombe's adaptation of *Brutus* had been produced and had met with but little favor.

Bond, to whom 'Zara' had been consigned, tried for two years to have it acted at one of the theatres. It was all to no purpose. At last he learned, not from the managers themselves but from others, that they were not disposed to bring out any tragedies at all. They intimated as their reason for this course that the taste of the town did not lie in that direction—which gives a

<sup>1</sup> Gentleman's Magazine, May, 1733, vol. iii. p. 261.

<sup>2</sup> Letters of Nov. 7 and Nov. 10, 1733. Works of Aaron Hill, vol. i. pp. 175, 177, 187.

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rather good opinion of the taste of the town to him who is now compelled to wade through the pieces of this kind which were then produced. No other resource accordingly was left him but to accept the generous offer of a young gentleman — it was Hill's nephew<sup>1</sup> — to procure a sufficient number of persons and act with him this tragedy "at Sir Richard Steele's Great Musick Room in Villars-street, York Buildings." So it was brought out in June, 1735, and played for three nights. The first performance of the tragedy was itself attended by a tragedy. Bond, for whose benefit it was produced, took the part of Guy de Lusignan. But advanced in years and feeble, like the character he represented, he fainted on the stage, was carried home, and died the next day. Still the play, as performed by the amateurs, met with marked acceptance, according to the report found in 'The Prompter.'<sup>2</sup> Testimony from that quarter must, under the circumstances, be taken with a great deal of allowance. But there seems to be so much justification for the assertion that all difficulties in the way of its public representation were smoothed over, and a little more than half a year later it was produced at Drury Lane.

It repeated in London the success it had met with in Paris. It was brought out on the 12th of January, 1736, and had the somewhat unusual experience for those days of an uninterrupted run of fourteen nights. X  
It is generally reckoned the best of the pieces, amount-

<sup>1</sup> Victor's History of the Theatres of London and Dublin, vol. i. p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> The Prompter, No. LX., June 16, 1735. This contains a letter written by Bond a few days before his death.

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X  
ing in all to nearly a score, which Hill wrote. One other feature signalized its production, and for it he seems himself to have been directly responsible. The title-rôle was taken by Mrs. Cibber, who, previously noted as a singer, made in this tragedy her first appearance as an actress, and at once achieved reputation. Nowhere in the preface to the printed play, nor in the dedication of it to the Prince of Wales, did Hill make any reference to the obligation which Voltaire lay under to Shakespeare. But the fact was stated almost bluntly by Colley Cibber in the prologue written by him for it and recited by his son. It began with the then usual remarks that the French extinguished largely their fire by their conformity to critical rules; while the English, following the freedom of nature, had let the flame rage to an ungoverned extent. In this play, however, they would have a chance to taste the excellences of both theatres; and the reason given for it is found in the following lines:

“From English plays, Zara’s French author fired,  
Confessed his muse, beyond herself, inspired;  
From rack’d Othello’s rage he raised his style,  
And snatched the brand that lights his tragic pile.”

Voltaire was unquestionably pleased with this adaptation. “I have read the English *Zaïre*,” he wrote to Thieriot, “and it has delighted me more than it has flattered my self-esteem.” In his second dedicatory epistle to Falkener prefixed to the edition which appeared this year, he spoke of it very favorably, though he could not refrain from indulging in a satirical stroke,

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assuredly well deserved, at a stage-direction in the translation. Nor could he save himself from falling into one of those blunders which were sure to drop from his pen the moment he set out to make any but the most superficial comment upon English literature. In this instance it was used to convey a compliment to Hill. He it was who had started a reform in the dramatic art of his country. According to Voltaire the English had a custom of ending each act with verses in a different style from the rest of the piece. These verses furthermore were compelled to include a comparison. Even Addison, the most judicious of their writers, had resorted to this practice—so much, said Voltaire, does usage take the place of reason and law. The translator of *Zaïre*, however, had been the first to maintain the rights of nature against a taste so far removed from it. He had discarded the practice. He had felt that passion speaks always the language of truth, and that the poet should let his own personality disappear in order to have that of the hero alone impress itself upon the audience.

Voltaire is here referring to the practice of ending the last speeches of acts with a rymed couplet instead of the regular blank verse. The style is in no way affected by so doing; it is only the measure. It consists merely in the use of rymed lines instead of unrymed ones. But Voltaire's remarks on this point have just enough of resemblance to truth to impose upon those who had no more knowledge of the matter than he had himself, or rather had less. If he had said that the practice of ending acts—and he might have added scenes



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— with rymed couplets, and sometimes with two or three pair of them; was not very uncommon on the English stage; if he had said further that these rymed couplets occasionally contain a simile, — to these two statements no objection could have been made. Had he also remarked that the sage Addison in his ‘Cato’ had carried the practice to an extreme, he would have shown still more familiarity with the actual facts. Unfortunately two or three examples frequently furnished a basis satisfactory enough for Voltaire to found upon it a sweeping generalization. So a not infrequent custom of having a couplet or couplets at the end of an act — which couplets on rare occasions contained a comparison — was transformed by him into a regularly established usage to which all conformed. Furthermore, in so doing, figures of speech were invariably employed. This custom Hill, in translating *Zaire*, had been the first to break through. The assertion was a particularly absurd one under the circumstances. He had only to look at this English adaptation of his play, upon which he was commenting, to see for himself that every one of its acts ended with a rymed couplet. But it was a still absurder assertion to come from a man who pretended to have read Shakespeare. With this author’s ‘Julius Cæsar,’ Voltaire was certainly familiar. Had he taken the pains to examine that play in regard to this particular point, he would have found that the only act which terminates with a rymed couplet is the last; and that couplet contains no comparison. Further, of the eighteen scenes of this same drama but four end in such a way, including the one just specified; and in none of



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the four is there anything of the character of a rhetorical figure. [www.libtool.com.cn](http://www.libtool.com.cn)

Before this dedicatory epistle appeared, Voltaire's appreciative estimate of the adaptation had been conveyed to Hill, either accidentally or designedly, through the agency of Thieriot. It produced from the translator a letter to the original author full of the most flattering avowals of admiration. They form so marked a contrast to some of his later utterances that they are worth citing for the sake of comparison. Hill observed that since he had now come to know Voltaire in spirit, he had a most melancholy sense of how much he had lost by being absent from London at a time when so many of his friends had enjoyed there the personal intimacy of the author of *Zaïre*. "But," he continued, "I know you in your noblest self, as millions now know Homer and Euripides; and as future millions will Voltaire, when envy shall be choked in dust, or France deserve it for producing you."<sup>1</sup> There was a good deal more in the letter, written in the same flamboyant style; but this will serve to show something of the feeling which was at that time entertained in England towards the great Frenchman. There can be no question of the general friendliness then prevailing. X

Hill's letter, however, was more than one of acknowledgement; it contained an item of news which showed how indefatigable he was in advancing the interests of his correspondent. Voltaire's *Alzire* had been brought out in Paris in January of this same year. There it had met with the most unqualified success. Hill hurriedly

<sup>1</sup> Letter of June 3, 1736, Hill's Works, vol. i. p. 241.

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prepared an adaptation of it for a company of actors who had opened for the summer the large theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields. He distinctly implied that the motives which had induced him to set about the undertaking were of the noblest kind. He had written to Garrick that a poet could best understand a poet; necessarily much more true was it that only a poet should translate a poet. But there were presumptuous beings who deemed themselves as capable of preparing an adaptation of *Alzire* as Hill himself. They were looking forward to the regular theatrical season as furnishing a fit opportunity to reproduce it upon the English stage. To forestall such a calamity Hill threw himself manfully into the breach. He urged the actors to reopen the theatre just mentioned in order to perform his adaptation, which he had made from the original in three weeks. "I own," he wrote, "I have encouraged them to this attempt, in summer, to protect you from a winter storm of mercenary pens, that, tempted by your *Zaire's* success, were threatening to disjoint *Alzire*; but to prevent her from being blotted by defacing pencils, I chose rather to produce her hastily, than permit her to be robbed more slowly of her spirit, air, and likeness." Accordingly the translation of *Alzire* was brought out on the 18th of June of this year,<sup>1</sup> just about two weeks after this letter was written. It met with a fair degree of success, and was played at least nine times.

<sup>1</sup> Genest's *English Stage*, vol. iii. p. 483.

## CHAPTER V

### 'THE DEATH OF CÆSAR.'

IF Voltaire had been careful to refrain from expressing obligation to Shakespeare in the case of *Zaire*, he was at first eager to avow it in the next of his plays that comes here under consideration. This was the one entitled *La Mort de César*. It professed to be written in the English style. That was the defence set up for its deviation from the character of the plays to which his countrymen were accustomed. One innovation there was which would hardly recommend it to the fastidious critics of that nation, who conceived that the limits of theatrical progress had been reached by the time Horace had laid down rules for the government of the stage. It consisted of but three acts instead of the conventional five. But if this was certain to dissatisfy the French critic, there was one thing it lacked that was still less calculated to please a French audience. In it there was not the slightest trace of a love-story. So far indeed was the repression of this element carried that there was not even a female character.

Such a treatment of his subject was supposed by Voltaire to represent the sort of feeling which prevailed among the people with whom for nearly three years he had made his home. He had constructed in his own

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mind an imaginary Englishman, who was delighted with sentiments and scenes which would repel the men of other races. In him the passions that influence the lives of most of us were swallowed up in the love of liberty and the love of country. Voltaire honestly considered that this play of his, dealing with the death of Cæsar, was written in what he called the English taste. It was a remark he repeated again and again. Yet the only real reason he had for taking this view was that it was not written in the French taste, or indeed, in the taste of any civilized nation. Still, the assumption served him, as we have already seen, as a quasi-apology for the character of the plot he had adopted. He accordingly professed at the outset that his design was to give his countrymen a conception of the sort of tragedy which pleased the people on the other side of the channel. It was to illustrate the severe style they affected; to give a life-like portrayal of the stern and even ferocious virtues which characterized their nature. Here was a son so eaten up with love of country that family ties and the sacredness of the parental relation availed nothing in comparison. The austerity that marked the whole conduct of the piece was consequently to be cheapened nowhere by the puling sentiments and tender motives which belong to the representation of the passion of love.

Two things had been impressed upon Voltaire's mind by his visits to the London theatre. One was that the early English stage, as represented by Shakespeare, still held sway over the hearts of the English people; the other was that in it female characters play often an

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inconspicuous part. He attributed the latter fact to design. He did not perceive that it was a mere accident of the situation. The main reason why female characters were hardly found in some Elizabethan plays, or had attached to them a subordinate interest, was the very natural one that there were then no female actors. The author in consequence did not feel himself compelled to provide places in the scene for such personages, where, if they did not appear, their absence would not be missed. Shakespeare was not only a great dramatic genius, but also a practical playwright. Along with the desire to produce an effective work he had also the very natural motive of fitting certain parts to the capacity of the members of the company whom he knew best qualified to sustain them. Had there been great actresses in his day, he would have been eager to provide for them speeches and situations most suited to display their peculiar powers. No necessity of the sort existed in his time. Accordingly in introducing female characters, he simply followed the plain requirements of the plot. In one case it might demand much of their presence; in another very little.

There was at first no pretence on Voltaire's part that *La Mort de César* was not inspired by the ‘Julius Cæsar’ of Shakespeare. During his stay in England he had been struck by the impression invariably produced on the spectators by the performance of that tragedy. But him it had likewise impressed as much as it had Shakespeare's countrymen. Long after, when his attitude towards the great dramatist had become distinctly hostile, he bore testimony, as we have had

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occasion to observe, to its effectiveness.<sup>1</sup> Much as he had been shocked by its extravagance, he had been equally struck by its power. There was the undeniable fact that the interest inspired by the play had been sufficient to overcome in his own case, the repugnance he felt to what he called its absurd improprieties. For Shakespeare's tragedy violated every canon of art which he held sacred. A tumultuous crowd of the lowest class appeared more than once upon the stage. Questions, answers, retorts were exchanged between them and the higher personages of the play. In his eyes, one of these higher personages was himself little more than a buffoon. There was throughout a mixture of prose and verse. Men were slain in full sight of the audience. Worse than all, time and place were scandalously violated. The scene opened at Rome in 42 B.C., and ended at Philippi more than two years later.

With all these violations of the eternal principles of art, the play was unmistakably one which affected the feelings profoundly. It fulfilled the one requirement beside which all other requirements are as naught. It did not bore. It kept audiences interested and excited. Why could there not be a treatment of the same theme which, while conforming to the rules, would at the same time preserve the effectiveness of the action? This was the thought which occurred to Voltaire. He accordingly set out to produce a drama which should combine French correctness and elegance with English force and fire. As the time of the action was to be

<sup>1</sup> See page 11.

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brought into one day, his piece was accordingly made to correspond to the three acts of 'Julius Cæsar' which end with the circumstances attending and immediately following the death of the dictator. Here it was that great innovations were made upon the practice of the French stage. It was indeed only these last incidents that gave Voltaire's piece the slightest claim to be spoken of as having been written in the English taste. The rest of the play had as much title to the distinction as in the previous one of *Brutus* had been the execution of his son by the first Roman consul. In the two concluding scenes of *La Mort de César* there was a professed imitation of the scene in the third act of 'Julius Cæsar' in which speeches were made by Brutus and Antony to the Roman populace. As in the original, the dead body of the dictator was brought upon the stage. As in the original, a crowd of the common people formed the audience which was addressed by the two orators. In Voltaire's piece, however, the necessity of the plot he had adopted required Cassius to take the place of Brutus. It would have been too much for even his conception of the English taste to introduce a parricide delivering a speech in which he justified his murder of his father on the ground of love of country.

Both for what it lacked and for what it contained Voltaire's tragedy was foredoomed to failure on the stage, even if it succeeded in making any appearance there at all. It was written as early as 1731. But it was impossible for him to get it played at the regular theatre. It was first presented in public in August, 1735,

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by the students of the college of Harcourt. Such persons, it was felt, were its proper actors; a piece which had no female characters could be best performed by boys. Some years later — towards the end of August, 1743 — it was brought out at last on the Parisian stage. The enthusiasm which a few months before had been evoked by *Mérope*, in spite of its containing no love-scenes, had emboldened the managers to take this step. But the experiment was a failure. It was clear that whatever success the drama might gain would be rather a tribute of admiration and good-will paid to the actors than a proof of the interest inspired by the piece itself. Voltaire came himself to recognize that a play of this character had in it few elements to please a popular audience, constituted as was human nature, or as he was inclined to view it, Parisian nature. Yet he never lost faith in the tragedy, nor in the theory upon which it had been constructed. To have a play without love was an end to be kept in view; to have it without a female character was consequently a still nearer approach to the ideal. "I love more, in truth," he wrote to his niece, "one scene of *César* or *Catiline* than all *Zaïre*; but *Zaïre* makes pious and sensitive souls weep. Of them there are many; and at Paris there are very few Romans." <sup>1</sup>

Long before *La Mort de César* had been acted upon the Parisian stage, it had been several times printed. Voltaire's indignation had been excited by the appearance of the spurious and incorrect edition of 1735. To his friends he sent at once corrected copies of the con-

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Nov. 17, 1750, to Madame Denis.



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cluding scenes. For the play in general, and for these scenes in particular, he assumed then a somewhat apologetic attitude. The piece, he observed, had no other merit than that of revealing the character of the Romans and the characteristics of the English stage. The acts depicted in it were not in accordance with French manners, nor did the conduct of the play fall within French rules. But to make known the taste of our neighbors was to enrich the republic of letters.<sup>1</sup> This was the justification he put forth for violating the proprieties of the French theatre by bringing on the stage the corpse of a murdered man and a miscellaneous body of the populace. These two scenes he represented at that time as a reasonably accurate translation of the original of Shakespeare. At a later period he was rather anxious not to make this fact too prominent. He had become proud of what he had done; he did not care to give too much credit to the source of his inspiration. There was some justification for the stand he then took. His version of the speeches of Brutus and Antony was about as clearly entitled to the character of a translation as had been his previous version of the soliloquy of Hamlet.

As his play had been printed as it was not, he determined to bring it out as it really was. Accordingly appeared in 1736 the first authorized edition. Voltaire, when publishing his works, had always a lot of dummies to sign their names to introductions in various forms which he himself wrote or inspired. Sometimes it was the publisher, sometimes an editor, sometimes a personal friend. Frequently it was an unreal being whom he had

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Oct. 24, 1735, to the Abbé Asselin.

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created and endowed with a literary existence to father opinions for which he himself did not choose to be held directly responsible. He kept in stock, one might say, a number of imaginary abbés who stood ready to do him service whenever service was needed. They sprang up at once if it was desirable to make an attack upon his enemies or to produce a defence or eulogy of himself. Names which had never been heard of before wrote him public letters in a style clearly modelled upon his own. They expressed themselves with such felicity and force that it was a wonder to their contemporaries that men who were capable of writing so well should be content to fall back into obscurity and write no more. It was rather a matter of pretended wonder; for these practices rarely imposed upon any one, and in some instances were never designed to impose upon any one.

This last was not always the case, however. In fairness ample allowance must often be made for the almost absolute necessity of such a course of proceeding. There was a holy inquisition presiding over literature in France, and the most innocent as well as the most harmful of books might be kept from publication by the interposition of fools and bigots. Furthermore the avowal of authorship brought with it not infrequently personal danger. Voluntary or involuntary exile was the least of the penalties to which the too daring writer subjected himself. A man brought up under such a system would inevitably acquire habits of evasion, subterfuge, and denial. Especially would this be the case if he treated of political or religious subjects. Unless he made up his mind to forgo writing at all, he had to resort for his

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safety to expedients of this nature. But habits of such a kind, once acquired, never limit their action to cases of necessity. Voltaire extended them constantly to literary matters where no further risk was run than that of criticism; and he frequently did so, not so much even to further the spread of his own opinions as to minister to his personal vanity.

In the case of *La Mort de César* the man selected as sponsor for his views was his friend, the Italian author, Count Algarotti. He was staying at the time with Voltaire at Cirey. He wrote a criticism of the play or rather a eulogy of it, with a defence of some of its peculiarities, in the form of a letter to another Italian. A French translation of this epistle was prefixed to the first authorized edition of 1736. In its original Italian form — which was not published till the edition of 1763 — it reproduced a large number of Voltaire's ideas; in the French version their resemblance to their source was even more striking. The translation indeed bore about the same relation to what Algarotti wrote in Italian, as the speech of Antony in the play did to the corresponding speech in Shakespeare. To use the terminology of music, while the motive was the same, the variations were so numerous and important as to give the composition in places almost the character of a new piece. Algarotti must have had some difficulty in recognizing what he had said in his letter, as it appeared in the French translation. As, however, he himself made no protest, it is not for others to take exception on his account to sentiments that were put in his mouth.

Speaking through his friend, Voltaire was enabled

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to give an account of the play which could not have come with propriety from himself. It was intimated that in this piece the boundaries of the French drama had been enlarged beyond the point to which its previous assumed perfections had been carried by Corneille and Racine. There was furthermore a reference to the scenes borrowed from Shakespeare. In the account given of this adaptation the language employed in the two letters is worthy of comparison. Though the views in each case came from the same source, the expression of them is marked by noticeable variations. In the Italian letter Algarotti observed that Voltaire had undertaken to imitate the severity of the English theatre, especially Shakespeare, one of their poets, in whom, it had been said not unjustly, there are innumerable errors and inimitable thoughts. He further added that his adapter had made the same use of him as Vergil did of Ennius. He had put into French the last two scenes of the English tragedy, in order to portray the two kinds of eloquence which succeed in persuading men to do most contrary things by employing the same arguments. It is in the following way that Algarotti expressed himself in his French letter under the skilful manipulation of the inspired translator. "M. de Voltaire," he is made to say, "has imitated in some places an English poet, who has united in the same piece the most ridiculous puerilities and the most sublime passages. He has made the same use of him that Vergil did of the works of Ennius. Of the English author he has imitated the last two scenes, which are the most beautiful models of eloquence to be found in the drama." There is an almost

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diabolical ingenuity in the way in which this concluding sentence is expressed. It could be supposed to refer to the original scenes — or rather the single scene — as found in Shakespeare; it was meant to be understood as referring to the two which are found in Voltaire’s tragedy.

To the play there was also a preface. This purported to come from the publishers. It has been imputed to the Abbé de La Mare, to whom the preparation of the first edition was confided. It requires an innocence which verges closely on imbecility not to recognize in it the hand of Voltaire himself. Its ideas are his ideas; his in some places are its very words. He took, however, the fullest advantage of the fact that the preface appeared to come from outside sources. The ascription of it to the publishers gave him the opportunity, in which he always took delight, to speak of himself. The preface began with the assertion that it was Voltaire who had first imparted to his countrymen the knowledge of English literature. If any reader of his ever remained ignorant of that fact, it was due to no neglect on the author’s part to keep him fully informed of it. Henceforth it was something which he can fairly be said to have dinned into the ears of his countrymen. “We are able,” declared Voltaire, as publisher, “to say that he is the first who has made the English poets known in France. He translated in verse, a few years ago, several fragments of the best English poets for the information of his friends, and by this means induced many persons to learn English. As a consequence that language has become familiar

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to people of education. . . . Among the most remarkable pieces of the English poets which our friend has translated for us, he gave us the scene of Antony and the Roman people, written a hundred and fifty years ago by the famous Shakespeare, and played still at the present day before crowded audiences upon the London stage. We have begged him to give us the rest of the piece, but it was impossible to translate it."

Voltaire in the character of critic now proceeded to inform Voltaire as publisher why the whole piece could not be translated. "Shakespeare was a great genius," ran the account, "but he lived in a rude age. In his pieces is found the coarseness of his time much more than the genius of the author. M. de Voltaire, instead of translating the monstrous work of Shakespeare, composed in the English taste the 'Julius Cæsar' which he has given to the public." Then followed a few sentences which reveal his conception of what constituted the English taste. It requires a somewhat peculiar nature to find it attractive. Voltaire meant nothing offensive by what was really an offensive picture; on the contrary, he fancied that he was saying something complimentary. English taste, in his portrayal, found its chief pleasure in the admiration of what may be called the disagreeable virtues. To be outspoken and rough under the pretence of frankness; to be repellent in behavior under the guise of sincerity; to be inaccessible to all the gentler motives by which men are actuated, under the sway of feelings which clothe themselves with the title of love of liberty and love of country, — these were the characteristics which in his opinion, appealed to the

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taste of the English. In accordance with this view he had avoided the introduction of the passion of love. While so doing he felt that he had perhaps gone to the other extreme. In the eyes of many, Brutus, he said, would seem possessed of too much ferocity. Still, it was necessary to paint men as they were; and such as he actually was, he was here represented. In this tragedy, therefore, would be found depicted the genius and character of the Roman people as well as that of the English nation. In it would be discovered the dominant love of liberty which prevailed in both, as well as the audacities of representation which French authors rarely ventured to take.

By writing this play Voltaire had put himself in direct competition with the great master. He was not in the least anxious to avoid the comparison. He was fully satisfied with the work he had accomplished. Of its general superiority to the corresponding tragedy of the English dramatist, he had no doubt. It is implied in the preface; it is almost directly asserted in the advertisement to the reader prefixed to the pretended word-for-word version of the three acts of ‘Julius Cæsar’ which he published in 1764. This advertisement purports to come from the publisher: it is hardly necessary to say that it is Voltaire who is responsible for its every line. The reader is told in it that he will now be able to make a comparison between the works of Shakespeare and Voltaire, dealing with the death of Cæsar. Then he can decide for himself whether the tragic art has made any progress since the days of Elizabeth. Yet this version of the English play is really an exhibition

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on Voltaire's part of practices which in an inferior man would be called fraud. This so-called literal translation, as we shall see later more fully, stops designedly with the death of the dictator. The passages of the original in which Brutus and Antony address the populace are carefully omitted.

Voltaire was certainly wise in withholding from his readers any version of the scenes following the death of Cæsar. He had good reason to shun the comparison, even if Shakespeare's words were given in a translation as bald and inadequate as that which he made of the rest of the three acts. In this instance it does not require national prepossession or the partisanship of race to recognize the hopeless inferiority of his imitation to the original. The attempt in particular to reproduce the speech of Antony might well have deterred a bolder spirit than his own. His adaptation of it — which he at first called a translation — showed how little understanding he possessed of the arts by which popular assemblies are swayed. These the all-comprehending mind of Shakespeare had either conceived of itself or had developed with peculiar effectiveness out of the scattered hints furnished by Appian. The baldest translation of this speech compared with Voltaire's imitation of it will reveal the difference — not æsthetic but intellectual — in the skill with which the orator in each case is represented as playing upon the passions of the people. The contrast drawn by Antony between the charge of ambition brought against Cæsar and the acts which implied the opposite; the pretended deference to his assassins as honorable men; the constant ringing of



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the changes upon the same words and ideas till they had wrought fully the effect they were intended to bring about, — this conduct was all lost upon Voltaire because he had little comprehension of the methods most successful in appealing to the feelings of a popular assembly.

On the contrary, he sought to produce the result at which he aimed by making Antony resort to the cheap device of springing a surprise upon his hearers by announcing that the murderer of Cæsar is his son. It was an expedient as false in art as the asserted relationship was false in fact. It would have been spurned by the higher skill of the more commanding genius, who would have recognized at once that such a declaration by the orator at such a time would have defeated the very end he had in view. To the hearer, whether intelligent or unintelligent, it would have seemed, whatever its actual truth, to be nothing more than a falsehood concocted for his immediate purpose by a liar and a slanderer, and not a secret wrung from the speaker in the excitement of the moment. Either it would have had no effect, or it would have had an effect exactly opposite to that sought to be produced. There are other and as great faults in this speech as found in the French play. Not only was it impossible for Voltaire to approach the spirit and fire of the original, but even more did he fail to convey a remote apprehension of the subtle insinuation which suggests what it does not say, the appeals which inflame the passions they pretend to calm, the thousand delicate touches defying analysis which make the speech of Antony the most effective of oratorical masterpieces.

Equally inferior was his whole play upon the side of

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dramatic art. A motive false in fact, but falser still for theatrical effect, was made the central point upon which the interest of the play hinged. Voltaire could hardly have done anything better calculated to exhibit the superiority to himself of the assumed rude and irregular dramatist who according to his account was infected by the barbarism of an uncultured age. Furthermore, he was hampered throughout by the rules of time and place to which he professed unswerving devotion, but which as usual he obeyed in appearance while breaking in reality. In spite of the long period of labor he had spent upon the production of the piece, he had not taken the trouble to make those preliminary preparations for the dénouement which would give to the events described an air of probability. In consequence everything is hurried beyond reason and belief. In the one day to which the action is limited two meetings of the senate are held for the purpose of carrying into effect Cæsar's long-meditated plan of making himself king. In this one day the plot to murder the foremost man of the world is conceived; in this one day it is carried into execution. The conspiracy is, what no such conspiracy has ever been, the work of a moment. As on the one side the unity of time is discredited by crowding into it events which would have required and actually did require weeks for preparation, so on the other side the unity of place is made ridiculous by transactions which could never have happened on the same spot. The scheme of assassination is concocted in open day, in the crowded capitol. In that same edifice Cæsar holds the all-important interview with Brutus, in which he announces the long-deferred and astounding

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news that he is his son. It is here too that later Brutus makes an appeal to his father to desist from his project of destroying the liberties of Rome.

Upon the complications arising from this relationship between the two leading personages of the play Voltaire prided himself. Not content with portraying Cæsar as the benefactor of Brutus, he had made him his father. This contrivance for exciting interest he regarded as a master-stroke. Such a belief shows how inferior was his conception of his art to that of the man he unqualifiedly blamed or patronizingly commended. That in real life the murder of a parent by a child, or of a brother by a brother, has been perpetrated under the pressure of supposed duty, was no excuse for obtruding into a drama a motive for action which could not fail to make its hero repellent. Nor was Brutus portrayed in any way as an attractive character. He is not exactly detestable; but he approaches as near it as the unavoidable limitations of human nature will permit. His very virtues are repulsive. Moreover, the relationship represented as existing between him and the man he has agreed to assassinate causes the action of the piece to assume a still more crowded and unnatural character. In it Cæsar, who for no apparent reason has kept secret for more than a quarter of a century the tie between himself and Brutus, informs the latter that he is his son, though for no more urgent reason at this particular time than must have existed at a hundred others. He confirms the statement by showing him the dying letter of his mother Servilia. Naturally the son is torn by conflicting emotions at the unexpected and startling news.

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Still he is not diverted from the purpose to which he had pledged himself an hour or two before. As his father cannot be persuaded to conform to his political views, to give up the design of enslaving his country, the son feels that he cannot honorably withdraw from practising the "cruel virtue," as it is termed, of killing his parent, a deed to which he had previously engaged himself, while in ignorance of their relationship. So out of pure love of country he commits parricide in the afternoon, though in the morning he had contemplated nothing worse than mere murder.

Personal hatred, dislike, envy, and the hostility of faction were pretty certainly reasons why several of Voltaire's pieces were not successful on their first representation. There was nothing in their character to cause failure. They were suited to the taste that then prevailed; they were conformed to the dramatic beliefs that were then accepted. On later revivals they were not unfrequently received with the highest applause. But no genuine success could ever be expected at any time for a play like *La Mort de César*. Voltaire had indeed his own reason for its failure. The noble and austere taste which alone could enjoy it no longer existed in the effeminate time which had followed the great age of Louis XIV. "Cæsar without women," he wrote to Le Kain in 1760, "can never be played, save among the Jesuits." There was some truth in this view, but it was far from being the whole truth. That it was not ought to have been clear to him from the fortunes of the corresponding English play. The uninterrupted success of that had never been due at all to its female characters.

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These are but two in the large number which crowd its scenes. Of these two, one plays a wholly and the other a comparatively insignificant part. Voltaire missed the real reason for the lack of favor his drama met with. It was one which, had he suspected, he would have refused to acknowledge. Its failure was not due to the absence of female characters. This enhanced the difficulty of pleasing, but did not render it insuperable. Nor was it the effeminate taste of the spectators that was at fault. It was his own deficiency in that supreme dramatic art of adapting means to ends in which he complacently fancied himself immensely superior to the great Elizabethan.

That a play with a hero so disagreeable, pursuing a course of conduct so repulsive, should be represented as being in the English taste was offensive at the time to Englishmen themselves. Aaron Hill made himself a mouthpiece of their feelings. After the success of his versions of *Zaïre* and *Alzire* he had begun to fancy that he possessed a sort of proprietary interest in all of Voltaire's plays. It is apparent that he had it in mind at first to make an adaptation of *La Mort de César* for the London stage. But he was revolted by the portrayal in it of the character and conduct of Brutus; he was indignant that such a portrayal should be spoken of as being in accordance with the taste of the English. It was a charge against his countrymen which he resented. To accept an inhuman and bloody enthusiast as an example of national virtue would justly subject them to the imputation of brutality. He declared, and probably with justice, that a play like Voltaire's would not be tolerated

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upon the English stage; that a scene which made war upon human nature and violated the fundamental obligations of being in behalf of a collateral virtue, would be looked upon with horror and hatred.<sup>1</sup> He was equally dissatisfied with Shakespeare's treatment of the same theme. The deficiency of that dramatist in what he called art was as objectionable to him as to Voltaire himself. The gross violation of the unities in 'Julius Cæsar' was a fault that could not be condoned. But Hill's feelings were outraged above all by the fact that the man who gave to the play its title should perish when its performance was only about half over. "What!" he wrote indignantly, "is Shakespeare's 'Cæsar,' then, come at last to be urged as a pattern? — a play wherein he (the greatest and most renowned of mankind) sustains not so much as a third-rate figure, and yet gives his name to the tragedy! But such always were, and forever will be, the effects of an implicit idolatry."<sup>2</sup>

The feeling which Hill here expressed has been by no means confined to him. It has troubled many. Much elaborate justification of the propriety of the present title, much elaborate explanation of how it came to exist, would have been rendered unnecessary, had Shakespeare only chosen to call his play 'Brutus' instead of 'Julius Cæsar.' The reasons which have been advanced for his doing as he did belong to the class of explanations which do not explain. The real reason is not far to seek. There is everything to indicate that Shakespeare was largely indifferent to the names his plays should

<sup>1</sup> Hill's Works, vol. i. p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. vol. ii. p. 9.

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bear. If a satisfactory one did not present itself at the moment, he was little disposed to spend time and thought in devising one merely to have it specially appropriate. In the tragedies it is usually suggested by the leading character. But the comedies rarely admit of this easy solution of the difficulty of designation. As a consequence it is in but few instances — such as 'Measure for Measure' and 'The Taming of the Shrew' — that we find a title which answers accurately to the leading motive of the play. Of the fact itself notice was early taken. On January 6, 1663, Pepys went to see 'Twelfth Night' acted. He found it but a silly piece; and more than that, it was not related at all to the name and the day.

Pepys could easily have extended his strictures on this account to others of Shakespeare's works. 'As You Like It' is a title which will serve for any piece that was ever written. 'All's Well that Ends Well' is a phrase which would fittingly designate the larger numbers of existing comedies. 'The Winter's Tale' 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' 'Love's Labor's Lost' could be applied to scores of dramas with as much propriety as to the ones so-called. 'Much Ado about Nothing,' again, is so far from being appropriate, that in any natural sense of the words, the title is a misnomer. The much ado that was made was so far from being about nothing that it was an ado about something of prime importance in the lives of the principal characters. There is hardly any escape from the view that Shakespeare was either indisposed to trouble himself about finding a specially suitable name for his plays, or was unwilling to give

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them such as would in any way indicate clearly their character. It is more in accordance with the evidence to accept the former supposition, — to believe that if the title did not suggest itself at once, he adopted any that would serve the purpose, however indifferently. Indeed the second title to 'Twelfth Night' — that is, 'What You Will' — indicates a certain impatience with the necessity of bothering himself about a matter which he regarded as of extremely little importance. He practically says to reader or spectator, "If you don't like the name I have given this piece, have it any name you please." A like feeling of indifference existed in all probability when he had completed the play now under discussion. He called it after the greatest of the historical characters who appear in it, without pausing to consider that the real hero of the tragedy is an altogether different person.

Dissatisfied with Shakespeare, more dissatisfied with Voltaire, Hill set out to produce a play on the same subject, which, while following to a certain extent the latter's plot, should develop it in accordance with English good-nature — that quality which, it was boasted, other nations were so far from possessing that they lacked for it the name. He adopted the same relationship of father and son between Cæsar and Brutus. He introduced several other incidents of Voltaire's play. He worked long and assiduously at the production of his piece, which was styled 'Roman Revenge.' He bored Pope with it. He purposed to dedicate it to Bolingbroke, who professed himself much honored by the proposed compliment as well as impressed by the



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perusal of the piece itself. But the theatrical managers of the day were not impressed. Hill could not succeed in getting his play acted on the London stage, nor was it ever published till some years after his death. Its perusal gives one respect for the judgment which refused to accept it for representation. It has about every fault which can be found in Voltaire's play without any of its merits. The incidents which Hill added to the plot contributed to its absurdity, but not to its interest. But its most distinguishing characteristic is its unrelieved prosiness. The steady stream of platitudes, which pours through it without restraint and without cessation, makes this play one of the most wearisome to be found in that unrivalled collection of the dramatically tedious which we call eighteenth-century tragedy. Even he who has, in a measure, been prepared for its perusal by frequent previous struggles with pieces of a similar character, will find it difficult not to be overcome by its deadly dulness. The fact of its non-appearance during its author's lifetime prevented the publication of a letter addressed to Voltaire which Hill had contemplated prefixing to the work when printed. In it he had purposed to vindicate the character of his countrymen from the French author's representation of it; to protest against the assumption that a model of the taste of the English could be found in a wretch who persists in the murder of his father, after being convinced that he stood toward him in the relation of a son.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hill's Works, vol. ii. p. 10.

## CHAPTER VI

### MACBETH AND MAHOMET, HAMLET AND SÉMIRAMIS

It was in his play dealing with the death of Cæsar that Voltaire attempted to introduce upon the French stage some of the actual characteristics of the romantic drama, as well as some which he fancied to belong to it. It was a venturesome undertaking; he speedily saw that it was so. He therefore did not commit himself too fully and too far. Two kinds of assertion he was in the habit of making about the experiment, according as he sought to disarm the hostility of critics, or to arouse the enthusiasm of partisans. If the work were attacked, he maintained that it was an honest aim on his part to enlarge the circle of knowledge by making his countrymen familiar with the taste of another people. If it were approved, he said that it was designed to extend the boundaries of the French drama by contributing to it certain features which the experience of another race had shown to be desirable and effective. These varying reasons for his action he gave as he found it expedient to apologize for his course, or to assume credit for it.

In the case of this particular play he was accordingly willing—at least at the outset—to acknowledge his indebtedness to Shakespeare. Two of the scenes he professed to have taken directly from ‘Julius Cæsar.’

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It is the only time in Voltaire's career in which he voluntarily admitted any specific obligation on his part to the English dramatist. One other was reluctantly wrung from him; but it was so introduced that he who was unacquainted with the original was little likely to suppose that what he saw was borrowed. Outside of these two instances there is not a line in his writings which indicates that a single dramatic situation in his plays had been even remotely suggested by anything he had met with in the works of the author by whom he was alternately attracted and repelled. The course of concealment which he had practised in the case of *Zaire* he persistently followed. Yet no dramatist ever owed to another a more distinctive obligation than Voltaire did to Shakespeare in the tragedy to which we now come.

In August, 1742, his play of *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète* was brought out at the French theatre. It had been written several years previously; it had, moreover been acted with success in a provincial city. It was produced at Paris a few months before *Méropé*. After running three nights it was withdrawn in consequence of the opposition of a powerful cabal which pretended that the sentiments expressed in it imperilled the safety of both church and state. A number of years after, it was revived and met with great success. Nothing shows much more clearly the wretched repression under which literature then languished in France than the banishment of this piece from the boards. All sorts of pretexts for so doing were trumped up then, and have not unfrequently been repeated since. Had the authorship come from another source, at least from an admit-

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tedly orthodox source, the work would have met with no hostility. The suspicions entertained of it, the imputations brought against it, were based upon inferences drawn from the supposed beliefs of its writer, and not from anything contained in the play itself. Over his opponents Voltaire gained, a few years after, a triumph which at the time afforded him infinite satisfaction. He received permission to dedicate the work to the pope himself. By parading this privilege at the beginning of the play when printed, with the interchange of epistolary compliments that went on between him and the head of the church, he confounded the enemies who professed to find in the piece ideas dangerous both to religion and civil government.

Not that the work was calculated to promote personal piety or to advance the interests of the church. Of any tendency of that sort it could hardly be accused, though it represented Mahomet in the most odious light. To a modern man, in truth, its most striking feature is the picture it gives of the limitations of its author. There are characteristics of human nature which Voltaire could not comprehend. There are mysteries of the spirit into which he could not penetrate. Of the weak side of faith, of its narrowness, of its intolerance, of its persecuting spirit, he had the clearest apprehension. And as he saw it distinctly, he exposed it relentlessly. On the other hand, of its strong side he had no conception whatever. He lacked not only the appreciation of it which comes from knowledge, but the deeper insight that springs from sympathy. Of the uplifting power of faith, of the enthusiasm

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and energy it arouses, of the lofty determination it inspires that what ought to be is to be, he saw nothing because he felt nothing. He could in all sincerity assume that a man could set on foot a great religious movement destined to affect the lives of hundreds of millions, without believing in himself or in his mission. But his lack of spiritual insight was purely personal. It furnished no justification for the outcry which was raised against his piece, and drove it temporarily from the stage.

In this play occurs a direct imitation of Shakespeare. It consists of the circumstances attending the death of one of its characters, Zopire, the venerable sheik of Mecca. Seide, under the influence of fanaticism, murders the aged ruler for whom he feels an instinctive veneration. After the deed has been committed, he is horrified to learn that it is his own father to whom he has given the death-stroke. Joined with him is the heroine Palmire, half dissuading her lover from the perpetration of the crime for which her hand is to be his reward, half consenting to the act which is to fulfil the great desire of her life. No one familiar with English literature, who reads the conversations preceding and following the assassination, can fail to be struck by the evident attempt to reproduce the effect of the tremendous situations in 'Macbeth' which precede and follow the assassination of Duncan. All the accessories to the scene which are found in the one play are introduced into the other, so far as the difference of plot allows them to be employed. It was the appearance of Lady Macbeth in the English tragedy,

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it was the part she played in it, which led Voltaire to make Palmire an associate in the murder. The conversation between husband and wife, just before the commission of the crime, suggested the conversation between the lovers. But whatever force exists in the scenes as depicted by Voltaire, it is felt to be attenuated and feeble the moment it is contrasted with the terrible grandeur of those in the original. In them the intensity of the excitement reaches almost to the point of pain. Even greater is the inferiority on the side of dramatic art. In the English play the presence of Lady Macbeth is essential. In the French the presence of Palmire is a necessity of the theatre, and not of nature. What is the inevitable demand of art in the one, in the other is the result of artifice.

The inferiority of Voltaire is even more noticeable in the attempt he makes to reproduce the tragic horror of the situation which follows Macbeth's return from the commission of the crime. The interview which then takes place between the husband and the wife, till it is broken off by the knocking at the gate, stands out conspicuously even among the powerful scenes of Shakespeare for the depth and painfulness of its thrilling character. It is more appalling than the murder itself. The shuddering awe it inspires is felt as profoundly, even in the mere reading of it, as if we had been very partakers in the act of which it is the outcome. Voltaire was too keenly susceptible to the influence of the tragic scene not to feel its power. He sought, as far as in him lay, to reproduce the agitation of the actors. He imitated not merely the matter but the manner. In

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his work as in the original is found the broken utterance, the abrupt inquiry, the startled comment. The attempt was indeed the same; the result was something altogether different. The effect was one, in truth, which it was only in the power of a genius as mighty as Shakespeare's own to produce; and he himself produced it but once. There was another reason beside the lack of equal genius. At least it may be permitted the members of an English-speaking race to believe that no effect of that kind could be produced in the measure employed in French tragedy. In this the restraint of rhyme, the regular recurrence of like sounds, however fitted to impart pleasure, are little calculated to cause impressions of terror. It is in scenes like these of 'Macbeth' that we, at all events, recognize the capabilities and possibilities which lie in blank verse as an instrument of expression.

It never struck Voltaire as worth while to do so much as refer to the source from which the corresponding scenes in *Mahomet* were taken. It shows the ignorance of Shakespeare in France upon which he could reckon then, that he never felt it necessary or expedient anywhere in his voluminous writings, to make even the slightest allusion to this most palpable of imitations. The English, however, recognized it and announced it at once. At a little later period when their feelings had become somewhat embittered by Voltaire's attacks upon their stage, no obligation of his to the English dramatist was flung more frequently in his face than his calm appropriation without acknowledgment of the scenes in 'Macbeth.' It seems to have made a far greater impression upon their

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minds than the more extended imitation of 'Othello' which is found in *Zaire*. Of the charges of plagiarism brought by them against Voltaire it is certainly the one much the most frequently specified. Yet though so familiar to Englishmen, so constantly made the subject of animadversion, the obligation was apparently never recognized at the time by Voltaire's countrymen. In truth they seem none too well acquainted with it now. So far as I have observed, much more attention has been called to an imputed imitation of Lillo's 'London Merchant,' in which George Barnwell murders his uncle, but sees him casting an eye of love upon him while breathing his last. The dying words of Zopire to the son by whose hand he has fallen, the blessing he gives, may have been suggested by this incident. But it could easily have originated independently. Nor as an appropriation is it of much importance in itself. As contrasted with the debt due to 'Macbeth,' it is of no importance at all.

To another imitation of Shakespeare there has already been a reference. In his play of *Eriphyle*, fired by the example of 'Hamlet,' Voltaire had ventured upon the expedient of introducing a ghost. In the state of feeling which then existed in France in regard to dramatic art, this under any circumstances would have been a hazardous experiment. But it was then made doubly hazardous by the mechanical difficulties which stood in the way of creating the illusion necessary to produce the desired effect. The French theatre still retained the barbarous practice of allowing seats upon the stage. It was in fact never done away with until 1759. A ghost,



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therefore, could hardly be expected to create much of an impression when the distinct corporeal substance of the actor taking the part, would have to be in such close proximity to the young men of fashion seated upon the stage that it was likely to brush the powder from their hair. Still Voltaire was willing to run the risk; and in 1732 the tragedy of *Eriphyle* had been brought out. In it the shade of Amphiaraus appears, forbids the approaching nuptials of his wife and his son Alcmaëon, and orders the latter to avenge his death at the hands of his mother. But the time was not ripe for a scene of such a character to succeed in France; and the play was withdrawn both from the boards and the press.

Still, the impression made upon him by the appearance of the ghost in 'Hamlet,' which he had witnessed during his stay in England, did not wear off. It haunted his memory. Not merely did the effectiveness of the scene itself appeal to him; he had been struck by the impression invariably produced by it upon the spectators. Why could he not achieve the same results upon the French stage? The first trial had not been so much of a failure that there was not a fair prospect of success in a second. He determined to renew the experiment. Accordingly, in 1748 his tragedy of *Sémiramis* was brought out. It was built upon essentially the same lines as that of *Eriphyle*. The ghost of Ninus replaced that of Amphiaraus, and the rôle of Alcmaëon was taken by Ninias. Again the experiment failed for the time being. The success achieved by the play was only tolerable. When it was revived at later periods, especially after the stage had been cleared, it took strong hold of

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the public favor, and during the eighteenth century was one of Voltaire's frequently acted pieces.

In some verses written to be delivered before the representation of *Eriphyle*, Voltaire had had something to say of the attempt to reproduce in it the terror of the ancient stage. From the grave of Æschylus, he observed, had come a new birth of daring experiment. He was trying to convey the impression that he had borrowed the idea from the shade of Darius which appears in the *Persæ*. Of Shakespeare, who was responsible for the only really daring experiment in the piece, he took care to say nothing. But when *Sémiramis* came out, this manner of proceeding was no longer possible. A translation in part of 'Hamlet' had appeared but a short time before. In it the interview between the hero of the piece and the ghost of his father had been rendered in full. No longer, therefore, could the appeal be made to Greek tragedy alone. In the prefatory discourse to the play as printed, the authority of Shakespeare was adduced for the introduction of the ghost. With it he tells us that the best judges in England had been profoundly impressed — the best judges, it is almost needless to add, being those who were most offended with the irregularities of their ancient drama.

But even here he was careful not to make his obligation to Shakespeare prominent. It was not the authority of the English dramatist which he put forward as the main defence for the course he had himself adopted. That was in fact merely incidental. He based it upon the ground that in representing the manners of the past he had also a right to represent its beliefs. Antiquity

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accepted the possibility of apparitions. In a scene which is laid in antiquity ghosts accordingly can be introduced with propriety. Furthermore he took occasion in this same preface to speak depreciatingly of the author whose action had suggested to him the particular novelty which he had introduced upon the French stage. He gave an account of the plot of 'Hamlet' which it dignifies too much to call a travesty. The contemporary English assailants of Voltaire used to insist that any obligation he was under to Shakespeare was invariably repaid on the spot by systematic misrepresentation and detraction. His thefts, they said, could always be detected by the cloud of calumnies with which they were sought to be covered. It must be confessed that his remarks upon 'Hamlet,' as we shall see later, furnished a good deal of justification for the charge.

All this elaborate argumentation in defence of his course was shattered to pieces a few years later by Lessing.<sup>1</sup> This critic, while not opposing, while even upholding the introduction of apparitions into modern plays, exposed the futility of the reasoning by which Voltaire had sought to justify it. In stage representation it is not what people believe in the past in which the scene is laid that is to be considered. It is what will affect the spectators in the present. The dramatist is not a mere painter of manners of remote generations. It is the living audience of to-day that he must have in his eye. A stage representation which makes as its main object a picture of how men once thought and felt and acted, may serve to gratify a temporary curiosity,

<sup>1</sup> *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, No. XI, June 11, 1767.

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but it will never awaken permanent interest. Not such should be the object of the playwright's ambition. His should be the poet's aim to move men. It is not his business to take the part of an antiquary for the sake of instructing them. More damaging, however, than his criticism of the reasons which Voltaire had alleged for his action were his strictures upon the circumstances attending the appearance of the shade of Ninus. His main point was the very just one that if a ghost is introduced at all, it is bound to be introduced in accordance with the existing beliefs of men about ghosts. This fundamental condition Shakespeare had fulfilled; Voltaire had not. The matter is so important that it is worth while to give expansion to the criticism and comparison which Lessing did little more than outline. For it marks with peculiar effectiveness the distinction between the art of Shakespeare and the art of Voltaire. It indicates in a way not to be gainsaid the superiority of the former to the latter in that fidelity of representation which holds the mirror up to nature.

Let us compare the two portrayals. In 'Hamlet' the appearance of the ghost is in full harmony with the beliefs which during modern times at least have gathered about visitants from the other world, and even at the present day affect men to a greater or less extent. No alien sights or scenes distract our attention from the interview that takes place between the living and the dead. The apparition comes in the silence of the night. He is clad from head to foot in the armor in which he appeared on the battle-field. He marches by the terrified sentinels with slow and stately steps. He speaks but to

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one, and to him he speaks when alone. He awes the spectators of the play, as in the play itself he awes those to whom he appears. The stillness of the hour, the loneliness of the place, the startling news imparted, the solemn injunction imposed, are all in conformity with beliefs which we have inherited about the spirit world, and with impressions which but few of us are able to shake off entirely. All this is to say that the ghost of Hamlet appears to us under recognized ghostly conditions. Furthermore, he is a being who is something more than a character necessary to the business of the play. He interests us for himself.

On the other hand, all these conditions for the proper portrayal of apparitions are violated by Voltaire. To hardly a single one even of our conceptions about them and their behavior does he make conform the spirit that he evokes. In certain ways the discrepancy between our beliefs and its conduct is extreme. Ghosts, it is to be remarked, have always been distinguished for their aversion to society. It is not in the midst of crowds that they intrude themselves. They are almost invariably in the habit of appearing to but a single person. From the point of view of the sceptic they further appear rarely to the right sort of person. The difficulty had been foreseen by the all-observant eye of Shakespeare. Horatio had been unwilling to accept the story of the sentinels. He is convinced of their truthfulness only by witnessing himself the sight which upon their mere testimony he had refused to accept as possible. The dramatist himself here strained somewhat spectral proprieties by making his ghost appear to three ; but he

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had taken care that the interview should be held with but one. It is upon these two alone that the attention of reader or hearer is concentrated. As Hamlet says of it himself, though in another sense, it is an honest ghost that is given us—honest, that is, from the side of dramatic art. But nothing of this sort can be asserted of the apparition which Voltaire presents. The proceedings of this being are in defiance of precedent, of traditional beliefs, and of decorum. No ghost who had the slightest regard for the etiquette of the spiritual world would have shown himself in the midst of a crowded assembly. Still less would he have violated spectral conventions by appearing in the daytime.

Yet these things Voltaire's ghost does without hesitation and without scruple. He selects broad daylight for the time of his appearance, and for the place a room filled with persons about to witness a marriage ceremony. The further conduct of his apparition is even more in violation of spectral good-manners. It approaches the vulgarity of spirit-rappings rather than the dignity of a messenger from the unseen world deputed to execute the justice of the gods. He is noisy. Groans emanating from the mausoleum in which lies the body of the murdered king is the method taken to announce earlier in the day that something supernatural is to happen later. When the ghost makes up his mind to appear he signalizes his intention by a clap of thunder. The tomb shakes, the door opens. Into the midst of the crowded court stalks the shade of Ninus. There he delivers his message. His mission done he does not fade away. He returns instead with slow and stately

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steps to his tomb. He re-enters it, and the door closes upon him. All this is done in the sight of the multitude present. No properly behaved apparition ever conducted himself in this manner. Not thus act the ghosts whose appearances have received the sanction of human faith or brought terror to human credulity. The effect produced by a performance of this character may be impressive; under powerful representation, it may be startling; but it is not legitimate. Voltaire's is an artificial and not a natural creation. Yet there is no question that this mechanical device, however unsuccessful at first, met later with a warm reception. Upon it eulogiums were lavished by some of the best critics of the time. They can be forgiven. They had not yet learned from Shakespeare what it was of the awe-inspiring and terrible which it lay in the power of the highest art to produce.

## CHAPTER VII

### RESENTMENT OF THE ENGLISH

FOR many years after Voltaire's departure from England there can be no question of his continuous popularity in that country. Undoubtedly from some of the opinions he expressed there was decided dissent. Errors of statement he had made were known and noticed. But there was no disposition to insist upon these things, and comment upon them was confined to private circles. Furthermore, if his observations touched at times the susceptibilities of the English, they could not fail to derive consolation from the fact that he had made the superiority of their institutions almost offensively prominent to the French. His admiration of Newton and Locke had been expressed in extravagant terms. No such ungrudging recognition had indeed been paid to Shakespeare. His references to that author always went on the assumption that while he was a man of genius, he was also a barbarian. His comments on the English stage implied that under the influence of Shakespeare's example, it likewise continued to remain barbarous. But while men might not accept these views, they recognized his right to have them, and the sincerity with which he held them. It had never once occurred to him to doubt the immense superiority of the



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French stage, as represented by Corneille and Racine, and as he thought in his secret heart, though he did not put it precisely in words, as represented by Voltaire more than either. But the expression of his depreciatory estimate of English practices was not made offensive; and as praise of some sort was constantly mingled with his blame there was little disposition to take offence.

The English, moreover, had been quick to recognize Voltaire's indebtedness to Shakespeare. They were not in the least disposed to resent it or even his failure to acknowledge it. To them it seemed a thing perfectly understood on both sides. No one then deemed it a necessity for him to specify it, any more than one would now think of putting between quotation marks a phrase or verse from the Bible. No plagiarism can be imputed where everybody is expected to recognize at once the source from which anything is drawn. The English were gratified therefore to witness the impression produced upon the most eminent Frenchman of the time by their favorite dramatist. Borrowing from him was nothing but a tribute to his greatness. The feeling is shown in Cibber's prologue to 'Zara' already quoted. There it is distinctly implied that he owed his success to Shakespeare. But while the fact is asserted, there is nothing unkindly in its presentation. In a similar way the prologue to Miller's adaptation of *Mahomet* — which was brought out in April, 1744 — conveys the same impression. It is in these lines that Voltaire is represented as drawing his inspiration from the English dramatist:

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“ Britons, these numbers to yourselves you owe ;  
Voltaire hath strength to shoot in Shakespeare's bow :  
Fame led him at his Hippocrene to drink,  
And taught to write with nature as to think :  
With English freedom English wit he knew,  
And from the inexhausted stream profusely drew.  
Cherish the noble bard yourselves have made,  
Nor let the frauds of France steal all our trade.”

It is also to be kept in mind that Voltaire himself could not at the outset have supposed that his opinions about Shakespeare were liable to run counter to the opinions generally held in England by the educated class, and certainly not to those held by the men he most admired. The views he expressed were largely the views of the literary circle with which he had come into immediate contact during his stay in London. The utterances he heard in private were pretty surely much more outspoken than those which he read in print; for, in spite of the intellectual superiority it assumed, this select class stood in a good deal of awe of that great public, whose loyalty to Shakespeare had never been shaken and could not be too defiantly outraged. Those having the poorest opinion of his works accordingly hesitated to express with too much freedom their real views. In many instances they had too little familiarity with his writings to form views worth expressing. By the accident of editorship Pope had become acquainted with all his plays. He publicly avowed and to some extent exhibited a good deal of veneration. Yet Pope was capable of saying in private that it was mighty simple in Rowe to write in his time a play professedly in Shakespeare's style, that is, professedly

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in the style of a bad age.<sup>1</sup> Such were largely the sentiments of the set with whose members Voltaire came in contact. Swift earned the distinction of a double ignorance by fancying that the *Wife of Bath* was a character in one of Shakespeare's dramas.<sup>2</sup> It was not unreasonable, therefore, for a foreigner to assume that his point of view would be that generally taken by the educated class in England; for the opinions he heard expressed were those entertained by the men of that country who were in many cases reckoned as its intellectual leaders.

On this point he was destined to be speedily undeceived. In the essay on English tragedy, contained in his 'Philosophical Letters,' he had observed that time, which alone is capable of establishing the reputation of authors, serves at length to consecrate their very defects. Of this truth Shakespeare had, in his opinion, furnished a glaring illustration. The extravagant passages and the bombast which abounded in his writings, had in the course of a hundred and fifty years acquired a title to pass for the true sublime. There was a period during which Voltaire seems to have cherished a hope that he himself could overthrow this prevailing delusion; certainly that he could bring efficient and perhaps decisive aid to those who were striving to bring about the triumph of true taste as represented by the French stage. The dedicatory epistle prefixed to *Zaire* urges upon the countrymen of Falkener the necessity of reforming their tragedy. At the close of the second dedi-

<sup>1</sup> Spence's *Anecdotes*, etc., Singer's ed. 1858, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Nov. 20, 1729, to Gay; Elwin and Courthope's *Pope*, vol. vii. p. 167.

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catory epistle to the same English friend he reiterated his warnings. !“You ought,” he wrote, “to submit to the rules of our theatre, as we ought to embrace your philosophy. The art of pleasing belongs to the French; the art of thinking is yours.”

But if he entertained any expectation of success in this crusade, he realized more and more its futility, as time went on. Interest in Shakespeare, great as it had been, was steadily increasing; admiration was steadily growing. Before the middle of the century five men, two of eminence, had brought out successive editions of his plays. A number of similar undertakings were already promised or threatened. Comments and commentaries were multiplying on every side. Criticisms were put forth in profusion; even if at all hostile, they evinced the existence of the interest that prevailed. The admiration, too, as it became more widespread, was becoming distinctly more aggressive. The proclamation of Shakespeare's superiority to all other dramatists, ancient or modern, grew louder and more vehement. That he was superior to Corneille and Racine was hardly thought worth asserting. It was self-evident. If a Frenchman believed otherwise, it was due to affectation on his part or to ignorance. Views of this nature were stoutly maintained even by those who did not question the doctrine, still accepted by many, that Shakespeare's productions abounded in gross absurdities.

Voltaire could not and did not shut his eyes to the increasing strength of this heresy, as he sincerely deemed it. Whatever hope he may at one time have entertained of seeing England converted to what he regarded as the

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orthodox dramatic faith, disappeared altogether. A few choice spirits like Bolingbroke, Chesterfield, and Hume might rise superior to the taste of the generality. But such men as these were exceptional. Their influence too in matters of this nature was steadily diminishing, their small number was becoming smaller. They had never represented the multitude at all, they were ceasing to represent any considerable portion of the educated body. A model of pure and correct taste, the nation, according to Voltaire, had received in the 'Cato' of Addison. But as the century advanced, it fell into disfavor. Playwrights showed little disposition to conform to it, audiences exhibited for it a growing indifference. During the closing years of Voltaire's life it was rarely brought on the stage. Obviously nothing could be expected from a people who considered Shakespeare an improvement upon Sophocles, and who continued more than ever to be pleased with his barbarous scenes.

In a letter of June, 1750, he embodied his opinion of the low state of the English stage, and his despair of ever seeing it any better. It was written in the English tongue to Lord Lyttelton, and is as interesting for the manner in which it is expressed as it is for its matter. "Yr nasion," he wrote, "two hundred years since is us'd to a wild scene, to a croud of tumultuous events, to an emphatical poetry mix'd with lose and comical expressions, to murtherss, to a lively representation of bloody deeds, to a kind of horroir which seems often barbarous and childish, all faults which never sullyd the greak, the roman, or the french stage; and give me leave to say that the taste of y<sup>r</sup> politest countrymen in point of tragedy differs not

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much in point of tragedy from the taste of a mob at Bear-Garden, 'tis true we have too much of words, if you have too much of action, and perhaps the perfection of the Art should consist in a due mixture of the french taste and english energy." Voltaire, after this general statement, proceeded to drag in the everlasting Addison. He it was who, "warn'd often y<sup>r</sup> nation against the corrupted state of the stage — and since he could not reform the genius of the country, j am afraid the contagious distemper is past curing."<sup>1</sup>

The views expressed in this letter were by no means new. Voltaire's attitude towards Shakespeare and the English stage never really varied in its character from first to last. It varied distinctly, however, in its manner of exhibition. It assumed by degrees an aggressive, not to call it an offensive character. It finally awakened lively resentment. He had from the very outset laid a good deal of stress upon the inability of English dramatists to depict the passion of love. One reason, he tells us, that had been given for the fact was that it was something for which English audiences did not particularly care. But this was not the real cause. The heroes of English plays did not express themselves in a natural manner. "Our lovers," he wrote, "speak as lovers; yours only as poets." It was in gallantry therefore that the French surpassed the English. All this he said in the first dedicatory epistle of *Zaire*. In the second he returned to the subject. If the introduction of love into the drama be a fault, it is certain that in the representation of the passion the French have succeeded better than

<sup>1</sup> Letter of May 17, 1750, in Lyttelton's Correspondence, vol. i. p. 324.



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all other nations, ancient and modern, put together. "Love appears in our theatres," he declared, "with the good manners, with a delicacy, with a verity which is found nowhere else." He enforced the failure of the English in this matter by a comparison of passages from Dryden and Racine. If we wonder at the selection, we can take no exception to the particular criticism. The former, he observed, had put into the mouth of his lovers either rhetorical hyperbole or indecency.

These remarks, however, created no feeling, and apparently no comment, at the time. It is not until a good while later that counter-assertion can be found expressed. Even then it might as well have been left unsaid; it certainly cannot be deemed very convincing. Voltaire's ignorance of love as portrayed by Shakespeare was due to his ignorance of all his comedies and of some of his tragedies. But in his case it can be pardoned, when we contrast it with the ignorance displayed by Shakespeare's countrymen. In the indignant protests put forth later against Voltaire's assumption of the inability of the English to portray the passion of love, there is not, so far as I can discover, the slightest allusion to the representation of it by the greatest of their dramatists. There is no apparent conception of the inexhaustible variety of its portrayal in his writings, or of the peculiar delicacy and refinement with which it has been made to display itself. Feelings of this sort undoubtedly existed; but to all appearance they were entertained privately, and not expressed publicly. We know that 'Romeo and Juliet' was early deemed by many to convey the very soul of love. The man who tells us this tells us also

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that he did not dare to say that the speeches in it were not natural, because of the offence it would give to the admirers of the play.<sup>1</sup> But it is noticeable that while he did not venture to contradict their judgment, he did not confirm it. It was reserved for a foreign judge, more than fifty years later, in contrasting this play with *Zaire*, to assert that 'Romeo and Juliet' was the only one at which love itself had ever labored.<sup>2</sup> If English critics did not recognize the propriety and force of the delineation of the passion, as found in this tragedy, they were little likely to observe the varied pictures of it found in other pieces, such as 'The Tempest,' 'As You Like it,' and 'Twelfth Night.' With these examples close at hand of the representation of the tenderness, the fervor, and the purity of love, of the portrayal of its spiritual side as distinguished from its sensual, English writers brought forward as evidence of the untruthfulness of Voltaire's assertion, its representation as found in Otway and Rowe and Southerne. The credit of the attack was in consequence strengthened by the wretchedness of the defence.

It was by the preface to his tragedy of *Mérope* that Voltaire first aroused the national indignation. That play had been brought out at Paris in February, 1743. It created a tremendous sensation; its reception the first night remained long famous in the annals of the French drama. Since the appearance of the *Athalie* of Racine it was the only tragedy which had succeeded without containing a love-story. Voltaire, who had been

<sup>1</sup> Gildon's Remarks on the Plays of Shakespeare (1710).

<sup>2</sup> Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, No. XV., June 19, 1767.



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well aware that it was a good deal of a risk, was justly elated over his success. To the play when printed he prefixed an essay in the shape of an epistle to the Marquis Scipio Maffei who had written the piece, with the same title, upon which his own had been founded. In it he discussed particularly the subject of love in tragedy. In his opinion it ought to be everything, or it ought not to appear at all. In the course of this letter he took occasion to make some reflections upon the English stage and the English people. With his characteristic inability to correct an incorrect statement, he repeated his previous assertion that the dramatic writers of that nation had a custom of finishing their acts with similes. It is fair to say that he had learned a little in the meantime; in consequence, while he did not make his observation true, he made it less untrue. The remark underwent a slight modification. Previously it had been implied that the custom was universal; now it was said that it was almost universal.

It was, however, no such petty misrepresentation of fact that disturbed the English. The remarks to which they took exception were of a totally different nature. A drama on the subject of *Merope* had been brought out at London in 1731. Into it a love-intrigue had been introduced. This play, unsuccessful at the time, and long forgotten, was here made by Voltaire the occasion of a general attack upon their productions in tragedy. "Since the reign of Charles II.," he wrote, "love has taken possession of the English stage, and it must be said that there is no nation that has painted the passion so badly." This cannot be called agreeable

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criticism. What followed was much worse. Though this play of 'Merope' had failed, he observed that the wonder really was that it had ever been thought worthy of representation at all. It was a proof that their theatre had not yet attained refinement. "It seems," he continued, "that the same cause which deprives the English of genius for painting and music, has taken away from them also that for tragedy. That isle, which has produced the greatest philosophers in the world, is not so fertile for the fine arts. If the English do not apply themselves seriously to follow the precepts of their excellent countrymen, Addison and Pope, they will not approach other nations in matters of taste and literature."

Voltaire in the play of *Le Fanatisme*, which had immediately preceded *Mérope*, had not merely represented Mahomet as a conscious impostor, but as a lover, alternately ruthless and whining, who at the end bewails most pitifully the loss of the woman whom his machinations have caused to kill herself. Under the circumstances it seemed rather unjust for him to fall foul of an English playwright for introducing the same passion into a tragedy like 'Merope.' Consistency, however, was not a matter to which he ever felt the necessity of paying heed. Nor did others seem to heed it so far as he was concerned. Had he here confined his attack to this particular writer, no one would have taken offence. But he had extended his censure to a whole people. Their incapacity for music, painting, and tragedy had followed upon the assertion of their incapacity to portray the passion of love. To this attack upon the nation

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in general he added a few years after a severe attack upon their favorite dramatist. In the dissertation upon tragedy prefixed to his *Sémiramis* he had justified the introduction of his apparition by the example of 'Hamlet,' and the favor those scenes in the play met with in which the ghost takes part. But Voltaire, whenever he made any use of Shakespeare, was much inclined to disburden his mind of the obligation he was under by calling him names. As the dramatist was dead, this course could not hurt him; and to his own feelings it was a sensible relief.

Accordingly, while employing the device found in 'Hamlet' he went out of his way to attack 'Hamlet's' creator. He was assuredly, he said, very far from justifying that tragedy of his throughout. "It is," he continued, "a coarse and barbarous piece, which would not be tolerated by the lowest rabble of France and Italy. In it Hamlet becomes mad in the second act, his mistress becomes mad in the third; the prince kills the father of his mistress under pretence of killing a rat,<sup>1</sup> and the heroine throws herself into the river. A grave is dug upon the stage; the grave-diggers indulge in quibbles worthy of themselves, while holding in their hands the skulls of the dead. Prince Hamlet replies to

<sup>1</sup> In comparing this translation of the passage with that made by Dr. Francklin, which was published in 1761, I find that he renders it as follows: "The prince kills the father of his mistress, and fancies he is killing a rat." In a note he says that the original is *croyant tuer un rat*. For *croyant* the later editions, to which alone I have access, read *feignant*. If *croyant* is the reading of the earlier, as seems to be no doubt the case, it is only another instance of the unfamiliarity of Voltaire with a play of which he pretended to give an outline. The reading of Francklin's note probably opened his eyes to the error.

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their abominable vulgarities by stuff not less disgusting. During this time one of the actors makes the conquest of Poland. Hamlet, his mother, and his step-father drink together on the stage. They sing at the table, they quarrel, they beat one another, they kill one another. One would suppose this work to be the fruit of the imagination of a drunken savage."

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It would be a waste of time to point out the gross blunders contained in this passage. To adopt its author's language, a misrepresentation of the play so confused and grotesque would certainly seem, to any one really familiar with it, the fruit of the imagination of a drunken imbecile. Those who study Voltaire carefully will see, in the account he gives, only another illustration of that distinguishing peculiarity of his mind which, when his memory of facts failed, enabled his imagination to go to its rescue and invent others to repair their loss. His observations, however, were not all censure. He repeated his usual remark that there were beauties to be discovered in this drama in the midst of its terrible extravagances. "Among these gross irregularities," he went on to say, "which still continue to render the English stage so absurd and barbarous, there are found in 'Hamlet,' by a singularity still greater, some sublime strokes worthy of the greatest geniuses. It seems as if nature had been pleased to bring together in the head of Shakespeare whatever there is most forcible and grand, along with whatever is of lowest and most detestable that coarseness without wit can exhibit."

The English never forgot or forgave the remarks found in the epistles prefixed to *Méropé* and *Sémiramis*.

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Jeffreys, whose play had been made the pretext for the attack, naturally retorted. In a preface to a collection of miscellanies, which included a reprint of his tragedy of 'Merope,' he charged Voltaire with plagiarizing all but one of the changes he had made in the Italian piece; then, while abusing him personally, with having "flourished on them as his own."<sup>1</sup> But long before the publication of his work the wrath of the English had manifested itself. It is idle indeed to pretend that Voltaire's earlier depreciatory comments upon Shakespeare, though conveyed in more kindly terms, were relished by them generally. True, there was nothing he said that had not previously been said by themselves. The critical views he put forth did not differ materially from many which had been publicly expressed by professed admirers of the great dramatist. They had come in with the Restoration. They had met then and afterwards with wide acceptance. But nations, while perfectly willing to be censured by one of themselves, do not take kindly to the censure of foreigners, especially of foreigners of distinction and influence. Their assumed indifference speedily gives way to very genuine and frequently very ugly resentment. The offence in this case was aggravated by the knowledge that Voltaire's hostile reflections would travel the round of Europe, and would meet, wherever they went, with unhesitating acquiescence. On the other hand, any contrary view that would be taken in reply, would reach few ears but those of his own countrymen. These naturally needed no convincing.

<sup>1</sup> Page viii of Preface to 'Miscellanies in Verse and Prose,' by George Jeffreys, London, 1754.

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But in these two later instances reflections had been cast by him not only upon an individual but a race. All were alike deficient. In their secret hearts the English felt sore upon the subject of music and painting. They could not persuade themselves that their achievements in either had been of the very highest grade. They were willing to say this among themselves; it was not agreeable to have it assumed and asserted as a mere matter of course by a foreigner. But they were far from considering themselves as inferior in tragedy. Of their pre-eminence in that field they entertained not the slightest doubt. Nor did it soothe their irritated feelings to be recommended to Addison. Of his 'Cato,' so constantly held up by Voltaire for their imitation, they had already had the good sense to be growing tired. That play indeed had never had, from the outset, anything but an artificial vitality. That it contained fine passages all were willing to concede; but its cold declamation and languid action were little suited to the national taste. These characteristics, too, were constantly forcing themselves more and more upon their attention at this time, by the contrast they presented to the fervor and energy of Shakespeare, whose greatness was then producing an impression, deeper even and broader than before, under the wonderful acting of Garrick.

From this time on Voltaire met with scant courtesy from many English writers. His repute and authority distinctly declined. This is far from implying that he did not continue to have in that country a body of admirers and followers. These, as was natural, con-

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sisted largely of those who entertained the views about Shakespeare and the drama which he expressed, and would have entertained them, had he never uttered a word. Still, it contributed a good deal to their comfort and credit that their opinions were the opinions of the foremost man of letters in all Europe. To be sure, they were in England a feeble folk as contrasted with the hosts holding similar beliefs on the Continent; but they made up to a certain extent for their lack of numbers by superiority of attitude. Their taste was better than that of the general public. On their side was the wisdom of the ancients, and with the partial exception of their own country, the practice of the moderns; at their head was the greatest of living literary authorities. A representative of this class was Chesterfield. He not only agreed with Voltaire in most of his views, but in all sincerity regarded the *Henriade* as a greater epic than the 'Iliad.' It must be conceded that there is something cruel in the vengeance which Shakespeare invariably takes upon his undervaluers. Wise and unwise alike fall under the rod. Neither station nor ability can exempt the detractor from paying the same distressful penalty. Chesterfield thought the *Henriade* the greatest of epics. Hume found the 'Epigoniad' of Wilkie a wonderful production, full of sublimity and genius, and taking rank as the second poem of its kind in the English language.

But though he did not lose his hold over the select few, by the mass of educated men a distinct depreciation of Voltaire was henceforth manifested even when hostility was not. One of the most common forms in which

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it was shown was in the charge of plagiarism. His indebtedness to Shakespeare had been recognized from the very beginning; but with the single exception of Hill's remarks in the case of *Brutus*, there had been nothing disagreeable about its utterance. All this was now changed. The obligations of Voltaire to the great dramatist, always visible to the English, however hidden from the French, were pointed out, after this, not for the sake of approving his judgment, but of emphasizing his ingratitude. He was constantly taunted with his indebtedness to the man whom he first plundered and then reviled. It is not worth while to give up space to the words of anonymous writers who from this time to the end of the century vented their sentiments or their spleen on the subject in the periodical literature of the day. The number of these was legion. But the spirit that animated them, the opinions they expressed can be gathered from the writings of authors, then if not now of some repute, who published under their own names.

A very general feeling which early came to prevail among the English, was expressed by Foote, at the time he was setting out on his theatrical career. In 1747 he brought out a pamphlet on Roman and English comedy. In the course of it he attacked Voltaire, though that author had apparently little to do with his subject. It is in these words that he gave vent to the indignation which the preface to *Méropé* had already succeeded in inspiring. "Can our contempt and resentment," he wrote, "be too strongly expressed against that insolent French panegyrist who first denies Shakespeare almost every dramatic excellence, and then, in his next play,



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pilfers from him almost every capital scene. Let those who want to be informed of this man and this truth, read the *Mahomet* of Voltaire and compare it with the 'Macbeth' of Shakespeare; to this add (if you have patience) a perusal of his letters;<sup>1</sup> you will then have at one view the Zoilus and the plagiarist, the carping, superficial critic and the low, paltry thief."

Resentment so expressed is hardly entitled to the epithet of restrained. Yet imputations of the same sort, though less offensively put, can be found in the writings of men who had a genuine admiration for Voltaire, and were largely under the influence of his opinions. The dramatist, Arthur Murphy, had received a good share of his education in France. He had inevitably imbibed many of the views about the drama there prevalent. In 1759 he brought out at Drury Lane an adaptation of the *Orphelin de la Chine*. To the printed play he appended a letter addressed to Voltaire personally. In it he defended the very great deviations from his original which he had introduced; but throughout he spoke of the author himself in terms of highest deference and admiration. The sincerity of his feelings there is no reason to question. But while acknowledging his own obligations to the French writer, he took none the less care to insist upon the French writer's obligations to the English dramatist. Using the phrase in which Dryden had pointed out Ben Jonson's imitations of the ancients, he remarked that he also had tracked Voltaire in the snow of Shakespeare. "The snow of Shakespeare," he added, "is but a cold expression; but per-

<sup>1</sup> These must be the *Lettres philosophiques*.

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haps it will be more agreeable to you than a word of greater energy, that should convey a full idea of the astonishing powers of that great man; for we islanders have remarked of late that M. de Voltaire has a particular satisfaction in descanting on the faults of the most wonderful genius that ever existed since Homer; inso-much that a very ingenious gentleman of my acquaintance tells me that whenever you treat the English bard as a drunken savage in your *avant propos*, he always deems it a sure prognostic that your play is the better for him."

But the change of attitude which the English underwent is perhaps best exemplified in Aaron Hill. Between him and Voltaire mutual compliments had been exchanged. But after the publication of *Méropé* — which he himself was to bring on the English stage — Hill looked with jaundiced eyes upon everything done by the man whose interests he had once professed the utmost solicitude to advance. It colored his view of things to which he ought to have felt indifference. In 1745, for instance, Voltaire, then at the court of France, had dashed off a poem celebrating the victory of Fontenoy. Whatever opinion we may now have of its merits or defects, every one will concede that it was an exceedingly natural thing for a man in his position to do. It could not justly have been resented by a personal enemy belonging to the beaten side. But the comment of Hill upon it in a private letter is interesting, not for any importance it has in itself, not even for the exemplification it furnishes of his peculiar turgid style, but as an evidence of the hostility which Voltaire had now

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succeeded in calling down upon himself in England. It is of the man for the possession of whom other nations, he had said, were to envy France, that he speaks. "What a puny spume of frothiness," he wrote, "has he fermented his poor mite of meaning into! The lowest depth of our late friend's *profund* wants many a thousand fathoms to this very bottom of all bottoms which the Frenchman's *Fontenoy* has plunged him into. One might pronounce him fallen below contempt, but that he aims to heave in his reptility; and has diffused on others such a barren waste of praise as may assure himself extent of infamy."<sup>1</sup>

The bitterness of Hill's feelings was doubtless intensified by the pessimistic views which he had come to take of everything. He was getting along in years. His life, on the whole, had been a failure. None of his many schemes for benefiting his country and enabling his countrymen to reach his own level had met with success. He attributed to the decadence of taste, which had come to prevail, the incapacity of his contemporaries to prize at its true worth the inestimable jewel it was their good fortune to possess, and their folly not to appreciate. If a work like his epic of 'Gideon,' he wrote in 1740, met with general neglect, he would renounce desire of praise in such an age without a sigh.<sup>2</sup> It was to posterity that he looked for recognition, forgetting that posterity must necessarily be so taken up with its own bores that only at rare intervals can a pious

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Mallet, July 13, 1745, Works of Aaron Hill, vol. ii., p. 250. "Our late friend" is Pope.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Hill's Works, vol. ii., p. 286.

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pedantry be trusted to exhume even temporarily the extinct bores of the past. Still, though Hill had lost property and health, he had not lost self-confidence. At the very time he was expressing the views about Voltaire which have just been quoted, he was laboring at an adaptation of *Mérope*. As early as September, 1745, he had it finished. The play, however, lay many years upon his hands before it was produced. At last Garrick succumbed to the pressure brought to bear upon him, and on the 15th of April, 1749, it was put upon the stage.<sup>1</sup> There it struggled to its ninth night.

In several ways the translation deviated from the work as Voltaire wrote it. Hill had designedly improved upon that author, and it must be added that he had done so maliciously. This we know to be true, for he has told us so himself. He made a frank confession of the evil motives which had led him to mortify the haughty Frenchman by bringing out an adaptation which was superior to the original. "You will receive," he wrote to his friend, "my 'Merope,' upon a plan as near Voltaire's as I could wring it with a safe conscience. Let me fairly own what I am truly guilty of; I undertook this piece upon a motive more malignant than it should have been; for I but sought to mend, with the bad view to mortify him. Indeed I wou'dn't bear with patience his provokingly unreasonable vanity, that treats it as an act of downright impudence, when Englishmen presume genius for tragedy."<sup>2</sup> Voltaire made neither comment upon nor reply to the published out-

<sup>1</sup> Genest's *English Stage*, vol. iv. p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Hill's *Works*, vol. ii. p. 247.

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burst which followed. He seems to have succeeded in this instance in concealing his mortification.

The state of mind exhibited by Hill in his private letter was displayed much more fully in the advertisement to the reader which stands as a preface to his 'Merope' as printed. The English, we are there told, were partial to even the defects and levities of the French; while the latter in their turn lacked gratitude to pay a like civility due to the best qualities of the former. France was so unsatisfied with her ambition for the monopoly of empire that she sought to extend it to supremacy in wit and learning. This was especially true of Voltaire. Some of his pieces, we are told by the indignant Englishman, "are so swelled with this presumptuous puffiness, that I am forced into abatements of the disposition, I once felt, to look upon him as a generous thinker. So much over-active sensibility to his own country's claims: with so unfeeling a stupidity in judging the pretensions of his neighbors, might absolve all indignation short of gross indecency, towards one who has not scrupled (in the preface to his *Mélope*) to represent the English as incapable of tragedy; nay, even of painting or of music. We are men, he says, who push to their extremes, upon our theatres, barbarity, absurdity and absolute indecency. — Men born in a too barren climate to produce a taste for the fine arts: and who must rank beneath all other people in the points of genius and of literature."

But Hill, like the author he was attacking, was not satisfied with denouncing an individual. He ravaged the whole of French dramatic poetry, as Voltaire had

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the English. In this particular instance he observed that he had been compelled to retouch the characters in this high-boasted *Mérope* in order to meet the requirements of that noble taste of dignified simplicity which characterized the London stage. It was a necessity. French dramatic poetry he described as having been deprived of everything that animates the passions. It was given up to the pursuit of a cold, starved, tame abstinence. From an affectation to shun figure, as he phrased it, it had sunk to flatness. It had achieved an elaborate escape from energy into a grovelling, wearisome, bald, barren, unalarming chilliness of expression that emasculated the mind instead of moving it. Not content with thus wreaking himself upon adjectives in the capacity of critic, he further took up the rôle of prophet. He declared that not only had England had much finer writers in the past than France, but it had them now, and it would always have them. He added that he purposed to bring out a work comparing the stages of the two countries, which would convince French judges themselves of the inferiority of their own. Unfortunately Hill died in the early part of the following year. Consequently the design of removing the scales from the eyes of Voltaire's countrymen was never carried into execution. The loss to France has been irreparable. During the whole of the century it kept on with its blind preference for its own dramatists, and not to this day has the unhappy nation got over the error of its partiality.

The passage just given from Hill reveals, however, one phase of the controversy which it could have been

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predicted beforehand that Voltaire's censures of England's greatest author would surely develop. A series of counter-attacks would inevitably be made upon French dramatic poetry and its leading representatives. In order to exalt Shakespeare it was not really necessary to decry Corneille. But national feeling had been kindled by Voltaire's assertions, and this peculiar sort of literary argumentation continued to rage during the rest of the eighteenth century. Henceforth the remarks about the two greatest of the French dramatists were not unfrequently as contemptuous and ignorant as had been Voltaire's references to Shakespeare. In this way of standing up for one's side imitation is easy; and the English soon bettered the instructions they had received. In May, 1747, for illustration, an essay on tragedy was put forth by William Guthrie, little heard of now, but well known at the time as a miscellaneous writer and a historian. In it he took the ground that the extravagant reputation which the French dramatists then possessed was due to French art, and the extent to which they had spread the criticism of their drama, especially in enforcing the sacredness of the doctrine of the unities. Yet the truth was that they had never produced a poet with one spark of that real fire which animates a true dramatic genius. For it they had substituted correctness. They knew nothing of the English stage. They were ignorant that Jonson had written regular plays before they themselves had dreamed of their desirability. They decried Calderon and Lope de Vega. There was a cold admission on Guthrie's part that Corneille had accomplished something highly credit-

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able in the *Cid*; but Racine was dismissed with the remark that he had written "several tragedies of which our middling rate of English poets need not be ashamed."

It shows how far prejudice and resentment were taking the place of knowledge and judgment that these words came from a man who was as much of a believer in the so-called classical drama as was Voltaire himself. It is noticeable, indeed, in the treatises put forth avowedly or covertly in reply to Voltaire's attacks, that no one ventured to repel the charge of irregularity brought against Shakespeare. In particular, no one of his defenders had the audacity to deny the obligation of observing the unities. Disbelief in the Trinity would have incurred at the time less reprobation. There was an uneasy feeling visible among the partisans of Shakespeare that by his disregard of these rules he had made the defence of his art difficult. Voltaire's influence in strengthening the conviction that it was of first importance to conform to the doctrine of the unities cannot easily be over-estimated. Its sacred character had been theoretically admitted long before in England; but largely under the influence of his exhortations it had come to be more rigidly observed than ever in practice. To the feeling which was shocked by its violation he assuredly gave greatly increased intensity and force.

Many illustrations of the fact can be furnished. The antiquary, Daines Barrington, for instance, while still a young man, wrote from Oxford in 1746 a letter for the periodical which goes usually under the name of 'Dodsley's Museum.' It was an essay in imitation of Swift's 'Battle of the Books,' and purported to give an



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account of an engagement between the English and French writers. It was not printed then, but its author showed that he had never outgrown the callow ideas of his youth by including it among his 'Miscellanies' published in 1781. In this piece Shakespeare is represented as commanding the right wing of the English forces, and Corneille the corresponding wing of the French. A battle takes place between them — probably the first time in history the right wings of two opposing armies managed to confront each other. Voltaire is represented as having been sent out to ascertain the strength and disposition of the English troops. After making his reconnoissance, he advised Descartes, the commander-in-chief, to give direction to his engineers to charge the artillery which was to be pointed against Shakespeare with the unities of time and place. By this course they could not fail of producing great effect. In a battle in which two right wings were opposed to each other, it was undoubtedly the proper business of the engineers to load the cannon. Accordingly they performed the duty which had been ordered. Shakespeare was represented as advancing to the attack at the sound of the trumpet; but though he behaved with the greatest resolution, he did not meet with all the success he had promised himself. The artillery charged with the unity of time and of place, made a terrible havoc among his troops. Addison obtained leave to go to his assistance, and charged the English artillery with an essay against bombast declamation in tragedy. This had as terrible an effect upon Corneille as the other had had upon Shakespeare. Neither side

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was able to obtain a decided advantage, although the English, as was natural, are represented as having on the whole the superiority.

There was in truth an apologetic tone almost invariably assumed by these early defenders of Shakespeare against Voltaire. They conceded that the laws laid down by Aristotle and Horace were agreeable to nature. They did not deny that Shakespeare had violated them. But after all they insisted that the beauties produced by the observance of the Aristotelian rules were of a secondary class. They could easily be attained by men of inferior power. Precedence in dramatic poetry depended upon the exhibition of natural qualities, and upon the ability to excite the passions. This it was that required genius of the first order. It was here that Shakespeare surpassed all possible rivals. Much stress indeed was laid upon another unity — that of character — in which he excelled. This was devised to offset the very ancient and respectable ones which he confessedly disregarded.

To this effect wrote Foote in 1747. Arthur Murphy took the same attitude in 1753. The future playwright, who had then abandoned banking for literature, had in the year last mentioned, set up a periodical of the essay order entitled 'The Gray's Inn Journal.' In its twelfth number he addressed a letter to Voltaire.<sup>1</sup> It was based upon the discourse prefixed to the tragedy of *Sémiramis*. It was easy to expose the blunders the French author had made in his statements of fact. But Murphy did not content himself with the mere correction of details. He

<sup>1</sup> The number for Dec. 15, 1753.

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reproached Voltaire, as was now the fashion, with constantly complaining of the barbarism of Shakespeare while he as constantly availed himself of his labors. In *Mahomet*, 'Macbeth,' he said, marshals you the way you are going. You advertise to bring in a ghost in *Sémiramis*, taken from the very play which you abuse. This charge of plagiarism became a sort of stock reply to Voltaire's fault-finding. Again and again he was told that he himself never mounted to so high a flight as when supported by the wings of the English dramatist. The further suggestion is found that he sought to hide his obligations. To vary slightly the words and entirely the meaning of a line of Pope's, it was plainly intimated that he was one who sought to do himself good by stealth, and blushed to find it fame.

## CHAPTER VIII

### LA PLACE'S TRANSLATION OF SHAKESPEARE

THE clamor of the English rolled for a long time over Voltaire's head without disturbing in the slightest his peace of mind. Of most of the criticism to which he was subjected from that quarter, he probably remained in ignorance. At any rate, whatever he heard, he did not heed. The years immediately following his departure from Berlin, in the early part of 1753, were spent by him principally in Switzerland. In his retreat on the shores of the Genevan lake he heard little said of Shakespeare, and he pretty certainly thought of him even less. During the sixth decade of the eighteenth century the name of the English dramatist hardly occurs in his correspondence. Furthermore, whatever references there are to him are of no importance. Voltaire's thoughts were in fact far removed from any controversies save those connected with his own writings or his personal fortunes. Of these he usually had enough to occupy a good share of his time. He was engaged likewise in original composition. There was much too in the political situation to keep his attention fixed. During the closing years, in particular, of this sixth decade, the one outside interest to which his

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thoughts were directed, was the desperate struggle which his old friend, from whom he had parted in bitterness, was waging with the combined powers of the Continent.

So he paid no heed to English attacks, even if he knew of them. He went on, whenever occasion presented itself, repeating in the same calm, complacent way as of old, his previous misstatements about Shakespeare. Thus, in the preface to the *Orphelin de la Chine*, which came out in 1755, he referred once more to those plays of Shakespeare and Lope de Vega, which still pleased on the other side of the channel and beyond the Pyrenees. The action of these monstrous farces, he tells us, lasts sometimes twenty-five years. Though nothing but a heap of incredible stories, they are called tragedies. His pleasure was to contrast with these monstrosities the productions of his own land. In the same preface he tells us that the French have been able to produce about a dozen pieces which, if they are not absolutely perfect, are at least much above anything of this nature to which the rest of the world can pretend. A man who in all honesty thought the stage of his own country was superior to the Greek was not likely to take very seriously the productions of a theatre so alien as was the English, both in spirit and method, from the one which he sincerely deemed had made a narrow escape from being absolutely faultless.

But while his thoughts were absorbed in other matters, a change of feeling was slowly going on in his own land. The attitude of his countrymen towards the dramatist to whom he had earlier directed their atten-

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tion was imperceptibly altering. In his Swiss retreat movements of literary currents were known to him only in a general way. He was not in the midst of them. All information he would gain about them would come from the views expressed in periodicals, or from the reports of correspondents or visitors. The last would be sure to be one-sided, and therefore imperfect. But from no quarter would he get any real notion of those gradual changes of public opinion, of those unseen influences which modify or alter previously accepted beliefs. These, in truth, escape the notice of most of us until the results they have wrought present themselves to our eyes as accomplished facts. Had he dwelt in the great capital, the nervous susceptibility he possessed as a man of genius would have rendered him sensitive to their existence long before they were suspected by the multitude. When, therefore, the knowledge came, it was an unpleasant surprise to which Voltaire was treated. As the sixth decade of the century reached its close, he became aware that the interest in Shakespeare was assuming proportions of which he had formed no conception. The admiration for the English dramatist was taking a shape which was to become to him later one of the clearest evidences of the general decadence of taste which had overtaken the age.

There is not the slightest doubt that Voltaire was perfectly sincere in the somewhat disparaging estimate which he took, on the whole, of Shakespeare. In fact, up to the period that we have reached, he can scarcely be said to have regarded him seriously. He had there-

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fore been perfectly willing at the outset to accord him the praise of having produced admirable scenes, while every one of his works was deficient as a whole. He had used him to attack practices on the French stage which he disliked, and to sustain innovations which he was anxious to introduce. Still in his eyes Shakespeare was a barbarian, was, in fact, little better than a clown, — the Gilles, as he later delighted to call him, of the booths at the fair. This contemptuous epithet, which towards the end of his life was to be constantly in his mouth, was used by him as early as 1735. When in that year he sent to correspondents the concluding scenes of his tragedy dealing with the death of Cæsar, he usually shed a little light upon the density of their ignorance by informing them that these scenes had been translated from an English author named Shakespeare, who had flourished one hundred and fifty years before. "He is," he wrote to one of them, "the Corneille of London, great fool of everywhere else, and resembles Gilles more often than Corneille; but he has some admirable bits."<sup>1</sup>

At that time he could say what he pleased. In the general ignorance which then prevailed in his country about Shakespeare, there was no one to correct or to contradict. But during the more than quarter of a century that had since elapsed, the words of the prophecy of Daniel had been fulfilled. Men had been running to and fro, and knowledge had increased — in particular, knowledge of English literature. One agency there was, in bringing this about too important to be

<sup>1</sup> Letter to M. de Cideville, Nov. 3, 1735.

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passed over slightly. Shortly before the half-century drew to its close, a series of eight volumes had appeared containing partial versions of many of the most famous pieces of the English stage. Four of them had been given up to the plays of Shakespeare. This translation, however imperfect and unsatisfactory, furnished some definite idea of their character. For the first time men, who could not read English, were put in a position to get for themselves some conception of an author who had hitherto been known to them only by the reports of others. They could ascertain for themselves what was really that English taste in which it was pretended that *La Mort de César* was written. This earliest translation of parts of Shakespeare was the work of Pierre Antoine de la Place.

It is no easy matter for a foreigner to get any satisfactory impression of La Place, without paying an attention to his works which the intrinsic importance of the man would probably not justify. His original writings do not rank high enough to be widely circulated. In consequence they are not ordinarily accessible. Hence about most of them we have usually to trust the reports of others. It has been the fortune and the misfortune of La Place that the few and scanty accounts of his career which have been transmitted to later times, have come from the mouths of unfriendly critics. They have come too from men who were full believers in the old order of things which was to pass away, and to whose eventual disappearance his version of Shakespeare was one of the agencies that contributed. There is no question that this work in-



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curred the secret hostility of Voltaire, and the open hostility of his partisans. From the writings of one of these, La Harpe, modern impressions of La Place have been largely derived. No sooner had the latter died than the former gave to the press a sketch of his life and character.<sup>1</sup> It was written with some wit, a good deal of vivacity, and with a great deal more of ill-will — with a degree of it indeed that almost approached malignity.

La Harpe's account of the man has accordingly all that attractiveness for most readers which generally belongs to pieces written under the influence of malice, envy, and all uncharitableness. He denied La Place the possession of knowledge, of taste, of talents. It is the spirit and often the words of this sketch which have filtered down to modern times through the ordinary channels of reference. It has colored most notices of this writer in biographical dictionaries. Whether the estimate it gives be true or false, it obviously comes from a suspected quarter. La Harpe was a disciple of Voltaire, who adopted his master's failings and prejudices much oftener than he did his better characteristics. Wherever Voltaire was narrow, he was narrower. Wherever Voltaire talked confidently with little knowledge, La Harpe talked more confidently with no knowledge at all. He could not translate a single English sentence. That did not prevent him from passing decisive judgments upon English authors, and expressing positive opinions about the comparative

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in his *Lycée, ou Cours de littérature*, tome xiii, p. 311.

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merits of French and English pieces which treated of the same subject.

It is not for a foreigner, who has read nothing of La Place save what he finds in his work on the English drama, to question the correctness of the depreciatory opinions expressed about his writings. But one thing can not be gainsaid. La Place had the suffrages of the multitude, if he lacked those of the critics. The favor he met with from the public was admitted on all sides. It was one of that sort of grievances which could never be forgiven. La Harpe, who denied him the possession of all other ability, conceded him the ability to succeed far beyond his merits, though not up to his own estimate of his merits. This last characteristic, assuming it to be correctly reported, was a failing which he shared in common with La Harpe himself, even if we cannot also include the vast majority of the human race in the number so feeling. The same testimony to his popularity is furnished by other contemporaries nearly as unfriendly. His play of *Adèle de Ponthieu* was brought out in 1757, and was received with a good deal of favor. It was severely criticised by Grimm. Yet he admitted that in so doing he was giving his own personal views, and not the views of the public. He spoke furthermore of the previous works of La Place, which consisted largely of adaptations and translations. These, he tells us, had met with much success, without gaining much esteem.<sup>1</sup> Remarks of such a sort, coupled with the facts given with them, make the reader, unable to test their correctness by independent investigation, doubtful of the

<sup>1</sup> Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire*, tome ii, p. 130.

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estimate expressed about the man and his writings. It disposes ~~him to believe, at least~~ it inclines him to suspect, that while La Place's work may not be good, it is not so bad as it has been represented.

La Place had been educated at the Jesuit college of St. Omer. There English only was spoken. He thus became familiar with that tongue, so much so that, according to his enemies, he never regained a full acquaintance with his own. The possession of this knowledge led him to undertake many translations. Among them was this project of giving to his countrymen in a series of volumes partial versions of the leading plays of the English stage. Naturally he began with the author in whom was the greatest interest, and about whom was the greatest curiosity. To Shakespeare he originally purposed to devote two volumes. These in his opinion would be sufficient to furnish all the information about him and his writings which his countrymen would care to have. He found himself mistaken. The two volumes — which appeared in 1746 — included 'Othello,' the third part of 'Henry VI.,' 'Richard III.,' 'Hamlet' and 'Macbeth.' The success which attended this instalment surpassed his expectations. In consequence he yielded, as he tells us, to the solicitations of men for whose opinions he had profound respect, and devoted two more volumes to the foremost English dramatist.<sup>1</sup> In these were included 'Cymbeline,' 'Julius Cæsar,' 'Antony and Cleopatra,' 'Timon' in Shadwell's alteration, and 'The Merry Wives of Windsor.' The list of the plays contained in these four volumes furnishes ad-

<sup>1</sup> *Le Théâtre Anglois*, tome iii. *Preface du Traducteur*.

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ditional evidence of how little repute Shakespeare's comedies had then for stage purposes. Only one of these is given, and that one by no means his best. In so doing La Place had been faithful to the English sentiment of the time, so far as that was represented by its theatre.

With the exception of 'Richard III.,' no whole play was translated. A version of one or more scenes would be followed by a summary of the contents of others in order that the reader should in no case miss the drift of the story. But besides the ten plays, which have been specified, an abstract of the plots of twenty-six others was given — thus accounting for all indeed which at that time were included in editions of Shakespeare. The translation was partly in prose, and partly in verse. It has frequently been made the subject of hostile and sometimes of contemptuous criticism. Grimm, for instance, magisterially but somewhat fatuously informs us that those who know Shakespeare only from La Place's version would not be absolutely in a position to judge him.<sup>1</sup> Never was a safer statement made. It is a safe statement to make about all the French versions which have been produced since, or all that are ever likely to be produced. To such an observation it would have been a sufficient answer then, as it is now, that they would be in a better position to judge him than those who knew nothing of his works at all. It was the men of this last class who were the most voluble in the expression of opinion and the severest in their censures.

The truth is that La Place was what Voltaire pre-

<sup>1</sup> Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire*, tome ii, p. 130.

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tended to be, an explorer. He brought back pretty full accounts, such as they were, of the unknown literature which he had gone to seek. That there would be error in his versions could be predicted beforehand. That there would be misunderstanding of meaning could be assumed, and far more frequently inadequacy of representation where the meaning was understood. That in particular he should fail to render things in accordance with the requirements of our present knowledge is something that was absolutely certain to happen. But this is a defect that pertains to every first attempt, and argues nothing against the man who has made it. The merit of Columbus is not obscured because he had opinions and published statements about the world he had discovered which would now be laughed to scorn by the dullest schoolboy. To the first adventurer in any new enterprise is rightly awarded the glory due him who has rendered possible the more perfect work of those who are to follow. To this justice La Place is entitled. Further, he made no greater blunders than Voltaire himself, nor did he deliberately set out, as Voltaire did later, to misrepresent his author,—to execute a version of part of one of his plays which was little better than a travesty, and then dignify it by the title of the most faithful and exact of translations.

To the first volume of his work La Place prefixed a very ample discourse upon the English stage. If one can judge of the author by this preface, his ideas were far in advance of the great majority of his contemporaries. The discourse indeed makes one hesitate about yielding unquestioning assent to the depreciatory esti-

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mate of the man which Voltaire's partisans have handed down. Nothing that La Harpe ever wrote upon the drama, or for that matter La Harpe's master, can compare with it in breadth, in good sense, and in acuteness. Like every one who fell under the attraction of Shakespeare's all-dominating personality, La Place was led to view with secret distrust the beliefs which he had been brought up to regard as sacred. The professed aim of his discourse was to give an account of the peculiar character of the English stage. It turned out to be largely a furtive treatise in its defence. It indirectly censured the French for their disposition to disregard and disparage the works of other peoples because they did not approach perfection, or at any rate the sort of perfection which they themselves cherished. Their stage up to the time of Corneille had been ruder and more immature than the English. Now it was the only one in Europe where the rules were observed with the strictest exactitude. No censure of this condition of things was expressed; it was very certainly suggested. La Place furthermore enlarged upon one view which Voltaire had previously indicated; but he laid a stress upon it which the latter had failed to do. Can a whole people, he asked, continue to be made the dupe of a false impression that merit exists where there is really little or none? Can a delusion of this sort continue for an indefinite period? It is impossible. The merit may be exaggerated; but it must be there. Shakespeare may be irregular; he may be full of faults; he may defy the rules of Aristotle; but he fulfils the first condition of the dramatic art: he interests, he pleases, he excites.

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So long as La Place was speaking in his own person, he evidently did not deem it desirable to say everything he felt. He brought forward, in consequence, an eminent Englishman whose observations he purported to give. This gentleman, with that agreeable frankness of his countrymen which foreigners frequently find so engaging, indulged in some disagreeable strictures upon the French stage and the rules by which it was governed. These rules, he is represented as saying, are of course very proper rules; they are no doubt worthy of all respect; but instead of adding to my pleasure, they destroy it. It is useless to tell me that they are founded upon reason. I prefer a license which keeps me awake to a regularity which puts me to sleep. I go to the theatre to be amused, surprised, moved, softened, affected. No observance of rules can make up to me for being bored. Such are some of the views of the eminent Englishman, who is pretty certainly a creature of La Place's own invention. There is altogether too suspicious a likeness in them to the views which he himself seems to entertain, but is careful not to express openly.

It is clear that the long monologues to be found in the French plays found no favor in La Place's eyes. He felt their impropriety especially when they were plainly designed to give information to the audience, not to carry on the action of the piece. It is equally clear that he had a strong suspicion that dramatic art had not reached perfection in France. Still, all these views were expressed very guardedly. He had been careful not to lay himself open to any direct damaging

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attack. He had indulged in no unwarrantable admiration. He had done all in the way of censure that could properly be demanded of a Frenchman at this period. He set forth the authorized strictures upon Shakespeare. He censured the English stage for the low characters it introduced, for its bloody scenes, its revolting incidents, its terrible catastrophes. He specified particular passages which were shocking to the just delicacy, the pure and refined taste for which his countrymen were distinguished. In truth he did his duty nobly. He gave full expression to all the conventional judgments which it was the correct thing for an eighteenth-century critic to pronounce.

Still he had not done enough. By the classicists it was felt that there was no heart in his censure. There was manifestly a latent sympathy with the views of that eminent Englishman who had expressed himself as bored by French plays. The praise was out of all proportion to the condemnation. Furthermore the praise was given to what was essential, the condemnation to what was accidental. The language in the English plays, he had observed, was always suited to the character of the speakers. It was noble when they were noble, low when they were low, commonplace when they were commonplace. Consequently there was nothing less monotonous than their tragedy. This was really an indirect apology for the mixture of the serious and the comic in the same piece. La Place even translated the gravediggers' scene in 'Hamlet,' not only because it was famous in England, but, as he says, on account of its exceeding singularity. Such passages in Shakespeare's plays as this fell of



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course under the regular official condemnation. But the force of the censure was impaired by the insinuation that the French taste was perhaps too delicate; that it did not follow because the English taste was different, that it was on that account necessarily bad. "Let us guard," he said prophetically, "against condemning to-day what our grandchildren will perhaps applaud."

Again, La Place was not thoroughly sound upon the doctrine of the unities. He had the same idea of the fiction of representing things as happening at one place and in one day which could hardly happen in a dozen places or a dozen days which Lessing was afterwards to expose so pitilessly as the fraudulent device to avoid the operation of rules which it was pretended to observe with special strictness. Of this monstrous abuse of the doctrine of the unities, no one, it has been pointed out, had been more guilty than Voltaire, who posed as its special champion. La Place did not say this; he exhibited no disrespect to the greatest man of letters of the age. But he could hardly help displaying a secret sympathy with the change of scene and the prolongation of time. There was no open profession of faith in this heresy. On the contrary, it met with a mild kind of reprobation. The arguments against the unities, he confessed, were undoubtedly plausible; still they were not sufficient to overthrow them. But he scuttled away from the exposure he ought to have made of the falsity of these plausible arguments, with the petty excuse that he would not undertake to repeat the solid replies to them which all the world knew so well. In shirking the duty of denunciation in this and in other matters, La Place had

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shown the cloven foot. Its existence was at once detected by the keen-sighted guardians of regularity. In the preface to his third volume, which came out later in the same year as the first two, he felt compelled to defend himself against criticism which implied that he had compared the French stage with the English to the disadvantage of the former.

The discourse upon the English theatre was naturally offensive to the partisans of the rules; the work itself was much more offensive by the fuller information it furnished. Voltaire, who seemed to think that his countrymen should be contented with what he had doled out to them, could not have been pleased with the translation. He was not pleased with it; but as there was nothing in it to justify special attack, he did not at the outset give public expression to the sentiments he privately felt. He was still less pleased with it as time went on. The work did not profess to be complete. It was made up of selections, especially of those scenes which the translator regarded as the finest and most striking. Naturally almost everything particularly repellent to the then reigning taste in France, was omitted or modified. This necessitated the throwing out of any coarse passage or low scene in the original. The worst of these could be excluded all the more easily because they rarely helped forward the action of the piece. But it soon became Voltaire's idea that the only proper way to display Shakespeare, as he really is, was to pick out the passages which would be offensive on the score of delicacy, and to lay a stress upon them which they never had in the place

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where they are found. The object of La Place had been to reveal Shakespeare, so far as in him lay, in his greatness and majesty; to render clear to his countrymen what it was that had made him for a century and a half the favorite dramatist of his own nation. He was intent on explaining him, not on befouling him. But in the omission of any passages that would offend the susceptibilities of the French, Voltaire felt that La Place had not done his duty. He should have selected such passages by preference. They were the ones, as we shall see, upon which later he was himself to dwell particularly; the ones to which he called the attention of his readers; the ones which he culled out in order to render them into the language of his countrymen, and in so doing took pride in proclaiming himself a faithful translator.

There was another reason that led Voltaire to entertain a dislike for this version. However imperfect and unsatisfactory it was, it gave the public an infinite deal more of information about the matter and manner of the great English dramatist than had been supplied by himself. We must not allow ourselves to forget that up to this time Voltaire had contributed scarcely anything to the real knowledge of the author whom he claimed to have made known to his countrymen. His version of the speech of Brutus, his so-called translation of the soliloquy of Hamlet, his adaptation of the speech of Antony over the dead body of Cæsar, sum up everything which he had himself directly furnished. His indirect influence in stimulating interest in Shakespeare's writings is quite another thing; but while this excited

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curiosity, it did not impart information. The latter was a work which La Place's version performed in a measure. One result of it was inevitable. The justice of much of Voltaire's criticism came in question. His obligations to the English dramatist—nearly all of which he had forgot to mention—became apparent. It was certain that there would be men who would begin to entertain a different opinion of Shakespeare from that officially authorized as the only proper one by the literary dictator of Europe. It took years to bring about any such result on a large scale; and even then it was but partial. It was little more than a critical revolt against the doctrine and practice of the French stage that manifested itself; the revolution was to wait nearly a century.

But there was enough of it at the time to excite the indignation of the vainest and most sensitive literary man of Europe. The feeling can be traced earlier; but from the end of the sixth decade it becomes very conspicuous. By this time Voltaire had become aware of the disaffection. Thenceforward his attitude towards Shakespeare distinctly changed. Though there was never any essential difference in the view he took of the English dramatist, there was a vast difference in the way that view was expressed. He continued to speak, with assumed impartiality, both of his merits and his defects; but as years went by, his merits were steadily minimized, and his defects maximized. Finally the former were thrown almost entirely out of consideration, or were at best perfunctorily acknowledged. For the rest of his life, indeed, the war he waged upon

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Shakespeare became one of the most important of his many minor controversies in the perpetual round of hostilities of all sorts in which he was engaged. It is hardly saying too much that it indirectly contributed to hasten his death, though that, however, could not have been delayed many years; for it was one of the agencies that led him to undertake that last journey to Paris, in which he was to gain the glory of a momentary triumph and to die.

One must avoid getting an erroneous impression from what is here said. The life of Voltaire was one of perpetual warfare. The attacks on Shakespeare, the contentions he carried on with the admirers of that author, were little more than mere incidents in his stormy career. Compared with the controversies in which he was engaged in behalf of toleration and of freedom of speech, those concerned with the English dramatist are insignificant. Nor into them did he throw himself, except on rare occasions, with anything like the ceaseless and fiery energy with which he went forth to fight with those who persecuted opinion under the guise of promoting religion. It was here he did his most congenial and naturally his most effective work. It was here he achieved his greatest successes; it was here also that, like the war-horse in Scripture, he invariably scented the battle afar off. In such contests there was little limit to his zeal or toil. To the bigots and persecutors of his time he must have seemed an incarnation of the Puritan conception of the devil, as a being not equal, of course, to the Almighty, but making up largely for his inferiority in power by his infernal activity. Still, in-

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considerable, relatively speaking, as were the hostilities directed against Shakespeare and Shakespeare's admirers, they actually took up no small share of his attention; and as time went on, a proportionately greater share. As such they demand a full examination.

It is right to add here, that unjustifiable as were many of Voltaire's proceedings, inaccurate as were many of his statements, and even discreditable as were some of his devices, there was at bottom a rugged intellectual honesty in the old warrior, which at times compelled him, almost in spite of himself, to admit the merit which he hated to see others applaud warmly. True, the acknowledgment was too frequently made for the sake of depreciating some one else; but for all that, there was in it the ring of genuine sincerity. The power of the great Elizabethan attracted him as much as his practices shocked him. The varying feelings of admiration and dislike, with which he regarded him, we shall see exemplified in the years that follow. According as the one or the other sentiment prevailed at the moment, corresponded the character of his utterance. Still, it must be said, in general, that as he advanced in years his enmity steadily increased, and his disparagement became more frequent and pronounced. His change of attitude was not due at all to any change in his opinions. It was simply the result of the change of attitude which had come over his own countrymen.

During the course of his life Voltaire passed, in fact, from that state of mind about Shakespeare in which he had felt something of the rapture of a discoverer, to another state, which, starting out with feelings made up

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of admiration, disgust, and jealousy, developed into positive dislike and ended in what may fairly be called genuine hatred. He watched the progress of his reputation with anxious eyes. This poet, lawless and irregular, of whom the world outside of England would, in his opinion, never have heard had it not been for himself, was now threatening to drive his benefactor from the hearts of his own countrymen. The vastness of his genius was coming to be insisted upon. The faults that were found in him did not strike men as serious, if it was even proper to speak of them as faults at all. There was at times a disposition manifested to regard them as virtues. There were occasionally ominous indications that men were going to the inconceivable length of preferring him to Corneille. By certain rash and reckless panegyrists indeed this very assertion had been made. Voltaire's feelings were outraged. As he looked at it, he had a right to be angry; it was a duty on his part to protest. He it was who had introduced Shakespeare to the knowledge of France. It seemed to him something almost like ingratitude that his countrymen should not be content with the estimate of the English dramatist which he had taken the pains to set forth as the one strictly correct. Voltaire was a man of genius. As such, he possessed that insight which is so much better than knowledge. It was nevertheless hard for him to appreciate that even with a people wedded, as were the French, to classical models, a genius so much mightier than his own could <sup>not</sup> long remain under his patronage.

To avert the degradation which threatened, as he

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honestly believed, the honor of France became now an object which he kept steadily in view. His countrymen were still true to Corneille and Racine. To us it seems peculiarly absurd to fancy that the time would ever come when they would cease to be true. Individuals might dissent from the general partiality; but not the nation at large. But such a result did not seem impossible to Voltaire. There was a small but noisy minority which was disposed to look with disrespect upon the traditions of the French stage. Its members celebrated the grand manner of Shakespeare. They spoke of him as the faithful interpreter of nature, they contrasted his fire, his simple but strong expression, with the dry and meagre tragedies, without action and without emotion, so many of which in their opinion then afflicted the French stage.<sup>1</sup> Would this minority ever become a majority? Voltaire unquestionably feared so at times. There was in his thoughts an uneasy foreboding, similar to that which haunted the hearts of the Romans of the Empire at the possible ruin to Latin civilization and rule which lay hid in the depths of the German forests. That gigantic figure across the channel loomed up larger and more terrible every time he turned his eyes in that direction. Was this monster destined to cross the narrow seas and effect the conquest of the Continent? Was this carefully constructed dramatic art, in which France excelled all nations, even the Greeks; was this regularity, this decorum, this purity, this elegance to be swept away by the rude brute strength

<sup>1</sup> These are almost the very words used later by Mercier in his *Tableaux de Paris*.



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of a savage barbarian who had no knowledge of the beautiful and noble past, and lacked utterly a particle of taste which might in a measure make amends for his ignorance? Though he usually pretended to regard such a result as impossible of occurrence, it was the secret dread of it which henceforth influenced the expression of his feelings and changed his manner of speech. From the outset Shakespeare had been in his eyes an inspired barbarian. As time moved on, he came to forget the adjective and remembered only the noun.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE APPEAL TO THE NATIONS

OF the numerous periodicals which circulated on the Continent during the eighteenth century, one of the most important was the *Journal Encyclopédique*. It was a fortnightly. It was first established at Liège in 1756 by Pierre Rousseau, a personage altogether different, it is needless to say, from the poet, or from the far more celebrated novelist. Its founder sympathized with the political and religious views of the philosophers, as they called themselves and were called. The periodical came in consequence to be considered one of their organs. Voltaire is said to have written for it frequently; he certainly spoke of it in high terms. Driven out of Liège because of the objectionable opinions it expressed, the journal found at last an abiding-place in Bouillon. There it remained during the rest of its existence, which lasted until near the end of the century.

In the autumn of 1760 there appeared in successive numbers of this periodical two articles which excited to a high degree the wrath of Voltaire.<sup>1</sup> The first contained a parallel between Shakespeare and Corneille, the second a similar parallel between Otway and Racine. Both of them purported to be translations from the

<sup>1</sup> Oct. 15 and Nov. 1, 1760; tome vii, Deuxième Partie.

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English. But no information was vouchsafed as to the place where the originals appeared or the time when. Nor was there any attempt put forth to identify the English author or even suggest his name. For all this reticence there was ample reason. The fiction of translation, which was maintained in both articles, is susceptible of an easy explanation. The tyranny of dramatic taste and opinion was then as potential in France, as intolerant and unsparing, as was the tyranny of religious dogma. Against the latter Voltaire was perpetually protesting; in behalf of the former he frequently manifested the disposition to act the part of persecutor. Few in consequence could then be found to express openly views which were beginning to be entertained privately. In particular, no French periodical would have been willing to make itself directly responsible for the unpatriotic and scandalous sentiments that were conveyed in these two articles.

Unpatriotic as coming from an Englishman they could not be deemed; but scandalous in Voltaire's eyes they certainly were. The second article does not particularly concern us here. Our interest is limited to the first, which has a certain significance as indicating the views that in some quarters Frenchmen were beginning to entertain of the comparative merits of Shakespeare and Corneille. In this article they were both spoken of as the fathers of dramatic poetry in their respective countries. They were both described as excelling in tragedy and even in comedy. It was the sublime which chiefly characterized Corneille. On the other hand, Shakespeare had distinguished himself in so many

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different ways that it was difficult to say in which he most excelled. If one were compelled to make a decision, he would perhaps select the species which Longinus calls the terribly beautiful as that in which the dramatist surpassed himself. The ghost scene in 'Hamlet,' the writer went on to declare, is incontestably the masterpiece of the stage in this line. It presents a great variety of objects, all diversified in a thousand different fashions, all proper to fill the spectator with terror and awe. There is not a single one of these variations which does not form a picture worthy of the pencil of Raphael.

The remarks about the French author had been complimentary; still, the comparison with the English one could hardly be called flattering. Worse yet was to follow. The eloquence of Corneille was declared to be always equal, majestic, and sublime. As in that consisted the eloquence of the Romans, it was no surprising matter therefore that his subjects should be taken from Roman history. Scenes in *Cinna* were given as masterpieces in this style. But the dead fly which the writer now proceeded to cast into this laudatory ointment made it peculiarly offensive to the patriotic heart. "Though Corneille," he added, "is full of elevation and a masculine eloquence, and though he abounds in sententious speeches and profound maxims, in which he equals Tacitus himself, one will vainly search in his writings for that inexhaustible fund of an imagination equally pathetic and sublime, fantastic and picturesque, sombre and gay, and that prodigious variety of characters, all so well marked, all so well contrasted, that there

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is not a single one of their speeches which can be transferred from the one to the other: talents which are peculiar to Shakespeare, and in which he surpasses all other poets. He is, so to speak, the mirror of nature, in which all the traits of the human soul are reflected as perfectly as the features of the countenance are displayed in the glass of ordinary mirrors."

As if this were not enough, the writer went on to make a comparison between the ways the two authors had treated their subjects. He found in all the plots of Corneille a sensible uniformity in the principal characters; in those of Shakespeare an infinite variety. Even when the latter makes ambition the leading motive, as in *Macbeth* and *Richard III.*, one cannot sufficiently admire, we are told, the skill which renders conspicuous the distinguishing differences between the two. Hence the conclusion was drawn that in general Corneille was inferior to Shakespeare. He consoled the former's countrymen, however, by crediting their dramatist with superiority in certain particulars. The French author surpassed the English in the talent of introducing skillfully the various incidents of his plays and in the art of rendering them regular. But even this acknowledgment of his superiority was more than counterbalanced by the implied depreciation which followed of this very regularity in which he was admitted to excel. "In a word," he continued, "one can say that Shakespeare has too much genius to subject himself to the rules of the stage, and that Corneille, had he been a great genius, would have been less subservient to them." Then follows the dreadful conclusion of the whole matter.

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“Shakespeare,” summed up the writer, “was incontestably a great poetic genius, and Corneille an excellent dramatic poet.”

Well might such a parallel pretend to be a translation. As an original contribution it would have outraged all the reputable public sentiment of France. Well might the writer take refuge in the assertion that it was the reproduction of the views of the men of another race. The author of the article manifestly felt that he was carrying audacity to an extreme in even presenting in his own tongue matter so repellent to good sense and good taste. He therefore appended a note for the purpose of expressing his dissent from these sweeping statements. Still, his dissent was of the mildest character. “These distinctions,” he wrote, “are very forced. There could be much to say about all this. But let us permit the English to do honor to their great men.” This method of publishing his own opinions under the guise of revealing to his countrymen the opinions of a foreign people was a device — not to call it a trick — which had been learned from Voltaire himself. It was one of the early fruits of that author’s teachings, often destined ultimately to destroy in many instances the dogmas of their creator. The note further enabled the writer to keep up the fiction of the pretended foreign origin of the views set forth. This imputation of an alien source from which these reprehensible sentiments were derived, was made still more pronounced in the article on Racine and Otway which followed in the next number of the periodical. There the declaration was expressly made that it was not only

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translated from the English, but that it was translated literally.

At the time these articles appeared England and France were in the midst of the Seven Years' War. The contest extended over the two hemispheres. England, under the able and energetic administration of Pitt, was triumphant alike in the East and the West. Voltaire was in many respects a genuine cosmopolitan. But his cosmopolitanism had been rudely shaken by the successive blows which had been dealt to the prestige of his native land. For the loss of Canada he cared little; for the retention of India, where he had the interest of personal investment, he cared a great deal. The war too displeased him. He justly felt that it had been undertaken with as little reason as it had been carried on with little success. To the disasters of France by land and sea was now added this assault, as he deemed it, upon the supremacy of the French drama. He seems to have been more disturbed by it than by the material losses his country had sustained. Bad too as was this first article, he was further irritated by the second — the authorship of which has been ascribed to the Abbé Prévost — on Otway and Racine. This last-named writer was the god of his dramatic idolatry. But here he was not only put, as a mere matter of course, below Corneille, but Otway was reckoned his equal, and was proclaimed in some respects his superior.

It is a natural inference from his comments that Voltaire accepted without reserve the legend of the foreign origin of these articles. His outraged feelings found expression at once in his correspondence. "I

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an angry with the English," he said in one of his letters. "Not only have they taken Pondicherry — at least I believe so — but they publish that their Shakespeare is infinitely above Gilles." Thus he wrote to the Marquise du Deffand, known more particularly to students of our eighteenth-century literature as the friend and correspondent of Horace Walpole. In order to give her a full comprehension of the ridiculousness of the pretensions put forth in behalf of Shakespeare, he furnished her with a slight sketch of 'Richard III.' His account of that tragedy is not so far out of the way, for Voltaire, as might have been anticipated. There are probably in it not more than half a score of instances of errors of fact or of inference. It would be a waste of time and space, out of all proportion to their intrinsic importance, to trace the variations from exact truth, or misunderstandings of it, or perversions of it, which are scattered up and down the brief account of the play contained in this letter. Two of them, however, are perhaps worth some notice. Shakespeare had represented as a special mourner attending the interment of the corpse of Henry VI. the widow of that king's slaughtered son. She was the daughter of the Earl of Warwick, and subsequently became the wife of Richard. Voltaire took her to be, not the widow of the son of Henry VI., but the widow of Henry VI., himself. It required almost a genius for inaccuracy to make this particular mistake, with the text of the original before his eyes. Still, he accomplished it. In his account Richard is therefore represented as wooing not a young woman, but the fierce Margaret of Anjou, who was actually



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more than a score of years older than himself. To her face he celebrates her personal charms. He tells her that it was the hope of making her and her beauty his own which had led him to commit the crimes he did. There is something amusing in the young Richard addressing these remarks, as he does in Voltaire's account, to a woman of over fifty years of age. Had he found in Shakespeare a blunder so gross, there would have been hardly any limit to the delight with which he would have gloated over it, or to the frequency with which he would have called to it the attention of his correspondents and readers.

Perhaps no such gentle term as blundering can be applied to another passage in this account of the tragedy. In the altercation which is represented as having gone on between Richard and the mourning daughter-in-law of the king, the latter is described by Shakespeare as spitting at him in her wrath. To Richard's question why she does this — it is only from this question of his that the text of the play lets us into the knowledge of the fact — she answers that she wishes it were mortal poison for his sake. To that he replies that never came poison from so sweet a place. The conversation is assuredly violent enough not to stand in need of exaggeration. But in no such feeble way does it appear in Voltaire's report. Here is the incident with its attendant circumstances, as found in his account: The so-called queen not merely spits at her questioner, she "spits in his face. Richard thanks her and asserts that nothing is so sweet as her spittle." The face, the thanks, and the particular comment made by Richard are all

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Voltaire's contribution to the scene; Shakespeare had neglected to introduce any of them. It was pabulum of this sort which the French critic dealt out to his confiding countrymen as specimens of the work of the English author. Naturally he was grieved at what he depicted. "Is it not true," he asked, "that if our water-carriers made dramatic pieces, they would make them more refined?" It is certainly to be hoped that they would report more honestly those they had read. "Is it not sad," he concluded, "that the same country which has produced Newton has produced these monsters, and that it admires them?"<sup>1</sup>

He said to his correspondent that he told her all this because he was full of it. He was fuller of it, as we see, than he was of knowledge of it. His letters during this period show that these two articles in the *Journal Encyclopédique* troubled him deeply. He could offer no reasonable objection to their appearance in a French periodical. To exhibit to his countrymen the opinions and tastes of other peoples was something for which he had been wont to contend clamorously. But in spite of his probably genuine belief in the foreign authorship of these pieces, he was vaguely conscious that they represented the views of a certain body of his countrymen. These would be cheered by reading sentiments of this sort in an influential periodical printed in their own tongue. Voltaire, too, felt at heart that he himself was personally concerned. In defending the repute of the great writers of his land, he had constantly in mind his own repute. If they were

<sup>1</sup> Letter to the Marquise du Deffand of Dec. 9, 1760.

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wrong, if their art was inferior, he too was wrong and his art was inferior, possibly more inferior. If, therefore, he could not becomingly object to the diffusion in France of this poison, he could at least furnish a speedy antidote. Before these articles could do their deadly work he hastened to prepare a specific which should counteract their evil effects. He at once set about composing a treatise on the English drama and its inferiority to the French. "Zeal for my country has seized me," he wrote to D'Argental. "I have been made indignant by an English brochure, in which Shakespeare is preferred exceedingly to Corneille."<sup>1</sup> The overweening arrogance of the islanders ought in his opinion to be rebuked. "Aid me," he wrote nearly a month later, "to avenge my country for this Anglican insolence."<sup>2</sup>

As a result of his labors early in 1761 appeared at Paris his dissertation against the barbarous English,<sup>3</sup> as in his correspondence he at one time described it; or at another, as the apology of his masters against the English.<sup>4</sup> The treatise came out anonymously. It was the method of publication he preferred for many reasons, but particularly because it enabled him to speak of himself and do full justice to his own merits. The publisher naturally took care that the secret of the authorship should not be kept. Voltaire, who declared that the work as originally printed was as full of errors

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Dec. 16, 1760.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Jan. 9, 1761.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to the Comte d'Argental, Feb. 16, 1761.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of April 11, 1761, to D'Argental.

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as it was of lines,<sup>1</sup> was indignant at the revelation. At least he pretended to be; still no one is ever able to ascertain his real feelings about a transaction of this sort from what he says himself. He wrote to his friend D'Argental with an assumption of great indignation that this justification of Corneille, this plea against Shakespeare, this preference given to French refinement over English barbarism had been announced as the work "of your creature of the Alps."<sup>2</sup> This first edition bore the title of *Appel à toutes les nations de l'Europe*.<sup>3</sup> Three years later it was published with some changes and additions as a treatise on the English drama. Its ostensible author was then Jérôme Carré, one of the numerous aliases under which Voltaire wrote. It is upon the form of it which appeared in 1764, that all comment is based which is made here upon the work.

The opening paragraph of this treatise revealed the reason of its production. The longer he thought of the matter, the more important had it become in Voltaire's mind. The articles in the *Journal Encyclopédique* had been dignified as we have seen, by the name of a brochure. They now developed into two volumes, though it was admitted that they were little ones. From any record of the time and place of the publication of these, bibliographical research would have retired baffled; but Voltaire contented himself with assuming it as a fact.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Damilaville, April 22, 1761.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of March 19, 1761 to D'Argental; also of March 29 to the same.

<sup>3</sup> The full title is *Appel à toutes les nations de l'Europe des jugements d'un écrivain Anglais ou manifeste au sujet des honneurs du pavillon entre les théâtres de Londres et de Paris*. Bengesco, *Bibliographie, etc.*, tome ii, p. 96.

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“Two little English books,” he said, “teach us that this nation celebrated by so many good works and great enterprises, possesses in addition two excellent tragic poets. One is Shakespeare, who, we are assured, leaves Corneille far behind him; the other the tender Otway, much superior to the tender Racine.” Here again the English source of these articles appears accepted in all sincerity. In this treatise he took the two sets of comparisons under consideration; it is the first alone to which we need pay attention.

It was, Voltaire said, and said justly, a matter of taste. Accordingly it did not seem possible that any reply could be made to the English contention. The dispute was certainly one which could not be settled by those immediately concerned. One could hardly expect to convince a whole people that the very taste they showed was positive proof that they showed bad taste. What resource, therefore, remained for those who sought to ascertain the truth? There was but one way, Voltaire told us, to set the question at rest. This was by calling for the verdict of other nations. Let them decide between the stage of London and of Paris. Let the readers from St. Petersburg to Naples pass judgment upon their comparative merits. It was with this idea in his mind that he had composed his treatise. It was this which had suggested the original title. It was to be an appeal to all the nations of Europe.

The proposition had on its face a look of fairness. There was a wide difference between the taste of the French and the English in dramatic art. Since it was asking too much of either to submit to the judgment

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of the other, what more equitable course presented itself than to refer the point in dispute to the arbitration of foreigners? From the very nature of things they can be assumed to be disinterested. They have no national prepossessions. Accordingly it can fairly be expected that their decision will be impartial. Plausible as this method may seem, it can impose only upon those who do not take the trouble to think. This would be true of such an appeal in any case. Few men there are who are capable of judging the merit of poetry in a foreign tongue. The number of those capable of judging the comparative merits of poetry in two foreign tongues is far fewer. Even if they have the requisite taste, they rarely have the requisite familiarity with both languages which enables them to exercise their taste to the best advantage. The value of the foreign verdict is consequently always vitiated by the very limited number of those to whom the appeal can be properly made. There is, besides, the inherent defect belonging to the body which is to render the decision. Some of the judges will have knowledge, but little taste. Others will have taste, but little knowledge.

But the method proposed, untrustworthy at any time, would at this time have been ridiculously untrustworthy in the case of Shakespeare and Corneille. French was then read and spoken all over the Continent. English was a comparatively unknown tongue. Voltaire could not, or would not see the worthlessness of any verdict pronounced by the tribunal he had selected. He however unconsciously revealed the hopelessness of expecting from it under any circumstances an impartial decision.

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Foreign nations, he implied, had already spoken. No man of letters, be he Russian or Italian, German or Spanish, Dutch or Swiss, but knew the *Cinna* of Corneille. Few there were who had read or could read Shakespeare. This he tells us himself. Yet the pretensions of two authors were to be submitted to a body of men who were thoroughly familiar with the works of one of them. Of those of the other they knew little and naturally cared less. They were not acquainted with the speech in which these were written. Furthermore, they would certainly never take the requisite pains to learn it, which would be a necessary preliminary to enable them to decide upon the merits of what was referred to their judgment.

It is accordingly obvious that there was but one way in which the Continent could be put into a position to judge of Shakespeare — that is, by attaining a familiarity with the language in which he wrote so intimate that his works could be read with ease. A complete translation could give a certain degree of knowledge of the poet's intellectual characteristics. It could give a better one of his dramatic methods, a still better one of the mere matter of his plays. But a translation, however excellent, could furnish only the faintest possible conception of his manner, of his force and fire, above all of his poetry as poetry. This would be true, in particular, of a version made into a tongue so remote as is the French from the English both in diction and spirit. Such a view as this of the situation was something that might fairly be called self-evident; but it seems never to have occurred to Voltaire. To provide for the lack-

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ing knowledge of the English author, not even was a complete translation essential in his eyes. An outline of the plot, with the rendering into prose of a few passages, struck him as all that was really needed. Yet even under these circumstances a further question would naturally present itself to the man looking for an impartial decision. Who was the one that could be depended upon to supply fairly the meagre information required? It excites a mingled feeling of amusement and astonishment to find Voltaire entertaining no doubt that he was the proper person to communicate this knowledge. His undertaking it gave at once to the whole proceeding the character of farce. It was very much the same as intrusting to the devil's advocate the duty of urging the reasons for the canonization of a saint.

The proposition itself had been delightfully preposterous; the performance was to be even more so. Voltaire set about it as gravely as if he were a judge, and not an advocate. There was, as he had indicated, a presumption in favor of the French dramatist, in consequence of the familiarity of foreigners with his works, and of their ignorance of Shakespeare. Still it was only a presumption. It was now his purpose to give to the educated men of all nations the ability to decide for themselves the question of superiority between the two dramatists. Of Corneille it was not necessary to say anything, for with him they were already acquainted. He on his part would undertake to supply them with the knowledge of Shakespeare requisite for reaching a decision. Voltaire appears to have been impressed with the generosity which had induced him to set about this task. It was



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a singular culmination to the successive steps he had taken to settle impartially the matter in dispute. He had selected his own tribunal. He had selected one which at that time, according to his own account, would be naturally biassed in favor of his own side. He was now to set forth to the judges he had chosen the merits of the side to which he was opposed. This he did by giving a somewhat detailed account of the tragedy of 'Hamlet.'

It is fair to say at the outset that the outline he furnished of the plot of this play is far more accurate than that he ever gave of the whole plot or single scene of any other of the pieces of Shakespeare upon which from time to time he dilated. This does not imply that it is accurate in itself. It is a charitable supposition that several of his statements are based upon imperfect or confused recollection. But the blunders are not gross ones, as is usually the case in his comments. The mistakes, the exaggerations, the omissions, the jumbling together of events out of their proper order, tend, it is true, to give an injurious impression of the original. Still, even when taken collectively, they are not serious, especially when compared with the havoc he was wont to make with the characters and incidents of other plays. There are versions given by him in prose of nearly a dozen different passages in the tragedy. Not one of them is long; some are very short. In three instances attention is called to the fact that the lines translated had been starred by Pope in his edition as worthy of admiration. It is clear from these that at the time of writing his 'Appeal' Voltaire had the original in his hand. Yet with the book open before his eyes he began

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his account of the play with a blunder. Horatio, as all readers of 'Hamlet' know, is not a soldier. He is the friend and fellow-student of the hero of the play. He it is who in the opening scene accompanies the sentinels to their night watch to witness the sight of something which on their mere report he has been unwilling to accept as having actually occurred. He it is who is asked to address the ghost, because he is a scholar. But Voltaire makes no account whatever of his presence. In his outline of the plot he does not appear at all until considerably later in the play. Both the soldier who in the first scene is relieved, the two soldiers who relieve him, and Horatio brought along to be a witness of the apparition, are all compressed into two sentinels, one of whom is addressed by the other as a scholar. This, for Voltaire, is not a very gross error; but there was no possible excuse for making any error at all.

There is another feature which detracts more decidedly from the impartiality which was vaunted to be characteristic of this account. In addition to the necessarily fragmentary character of the sketch of 'Hamlet,' all the details are accompanied with a running comment of direct or implied depreciation. Yet this meagre abstract, this imperfect and one-sided account of the play, from which no one could get the remotest conception of its real interest or power, was complacently put forward as an exact and lifelike portrayal. "Such," asserted the reputed author, Jérôme Carré, "is precisely the famous tragedy of 'Hamlet,' the masterpiece of the London theatre. Such is the work which is preferred to *Cinna*." At the time of its publication men could never have had

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the slightest doubt as to the identity of Jérôme Carré, had no other source of information been available, after he had told us, as he did in this treatise, that it was Voltaire who had been the first to make known to his countrymen the beauties of Shakespeare. This, like the reference to Addison's 'Cato,' was the burden of the song he now invariably sang. Nor did he fail to repeat his remark that Shakespeare exhibited certain beauties. He conceded here as elsewhere that there were in his writings traces of genius and lines full of nature and force. In making this admission, which he did constantly, Voltaire honestly thought that he was paying the highest possible tribute to the merit of the English dramatist, and that it was exceedingly to his own credit that he was not so offended by his barbarism as to deny him the justice which was his due.

The puzzling question which Voltaire further felt obliged to consider was the continuous devotion to Shakespeare of Shakespeare's countrymen. How was it to be accounted for? How could any one have his soul so stirred as to see tragedies like 'Hamlet' with pleasure? — for he tells us that all the pieces of the divine Shakespeare, as he now began to call him ironically, were written in this style. How could throngs continue to attend their representation in an age which had produced the 'Cato' of Addison? Of the fact itself there was no doubt. It almost shook his faith in human nature. It was in this way he descanted upon the conventions which he had been coming more and more to confuse with the essentials of art if not with art itself. "Why should one, after this," he said, "speak

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to us of the rules of Aristotle, and of the three unities and of the proprieties; of the necessity of never permitting the scene to be vacant, and of never allowing any one to enter upon it or to leave it without manifest reason; of skilfully linking the parts of the plot, of giving it a natural dénouement; of expressing one's self in noble and simple terms; of making princes speak with the becomingness they always exhibit or should wish to exhibit; of never deviating from the rules of the language. It is evident that one can enchant a whole nation without giving himself so much trouble."

For this continuous popularity Voltaire contrived to put forth an explanation which, it seemed to him, might serve in lieu of a better. It constituted the basis of all his subsequent comments upon the perverted taste manifested by the English in their admiration of Shakespeare. The theatre in their country had been and remained open to all classes in the community. Sailors, shopkeepers, boys, coachmen, butchers, tradesmen of all sorts loved passionately spectacular exhibitions. Give them cock-fights, bull-fights, prize-fights, interments, duels, gibbets, sorceries, ghosts, and they would throng to the show in crowds. In this taste too shared more than one man of high position. The citizens of London found in Shakespeare everything which could please those fondest of novelty and excitement. The courtiers were swept along by the torrent. For one hundred and fifty years there had been nothing better. Admiration had steadily strengthened itself, and had finally become idolatry. Certain strokes of genius, certain happy verses which every one learned by heart

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and never forgot, had gained favor for the rest. These beauties of detail had made the fortune of the piece as a whole. Such was Voltaire's explanation of the prolonged popularity of Shakespeare's plays. If it was no better, it was no absurder than several similar efforts to account for it, which have been and still continue to be put forth by the countrymen of the great dramatist.

The play presented one further problem which he tried to solve. It consisted in the nature of the incidents which enter into the development of the plot. For the solution which he found for it, such as it was, he was indebted to one of Shakespeare's commentators. How came it that so many marvellous occurrences were accumulated in a single head? He had here in view the whole circle of pieces with which he was familiar. His explanation lay in the fact that Shakespeare took all his tragedies from history and romances. In the instance of this particular drama he had simply put into dialogue the story of Claudius, of Gertrude, and of Hamlet, written entirely by Saxo the grammarian, to whom, he piously added, glory be given. All that there is true in this remark was taken from Theobald; all that is false — which most of it is — was Voltaire's own. Theobald was the first to point out that the remote original of the plot of 'Hamlet' was to be found in the Danish history of Saxo Grammaticus. He supplied a brief summary of the material circumstances of the account there given.<sup>1</sup> It is from what he found in Theobald's edition that Voltaire derived all which he said about the source of the tragedy. The inferences he drew

<sup>1</sup> Theobald's Shakespeare, ed. of 1733, vol. vii. p. 226.

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from the information he got were entirely his own; and as was not unusual, they were entirely incorrect.

Voltaire's 'Appeal' contained in conclusion some reflections upon La Place's version of Shakespeare. He regretted that this translator, whose name however he never mentioned, had, out of a false delicacy, not rendered faithfully certain parts of Otway's 'Venice Preserved.' Still more did he lament that with the same hardheartedness he had deprived the French reader of some of the most beautiful passages of 'Othello.' The failure was unpardonable. For the sake of this French reader Voltaire took it upon himself to remedy such scandalous neglect. He proceeded to translate a few sentences from the first scene of 'Othello,' in which Iago, in accordance with his character, announces to Brabantio, with all possible coarseness, the flight of his daughter with the Moor. La Place had given a version of the entire scene. He had, however, committed the inexcusable crime of softening anything in it which might seem offensive to French taste. Voltaire's sense of justice was outraged. These coarse passages should have been the ones above all selected for exact translation. Furthermore they should have been translated in all their coarseness. This was the only way to get a proper conception of the work of the English dramatist. With the laudable object of representing Shakespeare as he really is, and of furthermore exposing the unfaithfulness of La Place, he himself took the occasion to render a few passages from 'Othello.' His scent for garbage was keen, and either through ignorance or malice he sometimes caused very healthy food to partake of its odor. If he found

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or fancied he found anything objectionable, anything suggestive of coarse associations to a coarse mind, he took care that it should be produced with a directness, or rather a bluntness, which would inevitably carry with it sensations of disgust to every one possessed of delicacy and refinement. What was healthy his touch turned too often into putrefaction. All this he called giving his countrymen a faithful and correct idea of Shakespeare. He was not in the least ashamed of the part he played. On the contrary, he took in it infinite gratification. It was with peculiar feelings of self-satisfaction that he contemplated the result of his labors. At the end of his treatise he announced that the reader was now in a position to pass judgment in the trial which had been conducted between the stages of London and Paris.

## CHAPTER X

### THE COMMENTARIES ON CORNEILLE

“THE Appeal to the Nations” seems to have fallen flat, so far as that statement can be made of any work written by Voltaire. For those who knew nothing of the English dramatist it was unnecessary. Upon them it could have no other effect than to impart a still darker shade to the density of their ignorance, and to confirm them still more in their indisposition to be enlightened. For them on that very account interest was lacking. They were so perfectly satisfied with their own stage that they did not even care to learn about the stage of another country. On the other hand to those who really knew something of Shakespeare the treatise was shallow and inconclusive. Its sophistry and unfairness were obtrusively apparent. Of these two classes of readers the former was at that time in the vast majority. The little impression made on its indifference by this appeal can be inferred from the conduct of the Comte d’Argental, Voltaire’s faithful friend and supporter. Though sent to him to superintend its publication, he did not deem it worth while to mention it in his letters. “The dissertation against the barbarous English,” wrote Voltaire, “you do not speak of it.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Feb. 16, 1760.



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As an offset to this silence the members of the class who knew even a little of English literature, did not speak well of it. When the treatise was republished in 1764 in the volume entitled *Contes de Guillaume Vadé*, its futility and unfairness struck Grimm, one of Voltaire's warmest admirers. "I should like to take away from it," he wrote of the volume, "only the observations upon the English theatre. Jérôme Carré does not exhibit good faith, and expresses several rash judgments."<sup>1</sup>

The subject, however, continued to prey upon Voltaire's mind. A very short time before the treatise was written he had been deeply agitated by the information that Mademoiselle Clairon, who was to take the part of Aménade in his tragedy of *Tancredé*, was proposing to hang the theatre in black and to erect a scaffold in the third act. He wrote to all his friends about the matter. He expostulated with the great actress herself. "Let us not imitate," he said to her, "that which makes the English odious. Never did the Greeks, who understood so well the art of stage representation, think of this invention of barbarians."<sup>2</sup> He had clamored, he cried, during thirty or forty years for more action, for more spectacular exhibition in these dialogues in verse which went under the name of tragedies. But while he had asked for more water, he had not desired a deluge. "To prepare a scaffold," he wrote further, "for the mere pleasure of putting there some hangman's assist-

<sup>1</sup> Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire* (1829), 15 Mai, 1764, tome iii, page 476.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Oct. 16, 1760, to Mademoiselle Clairon.

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ants, is to dishonor the only art in which the French distinguish themselves; it is to sacrifice propriety to barbarism." The more he thought of the matter, the greater became the state of excitement into which he worked himself. Such an abominable proceeding, he declared, was good only for the English stage.<sup>1</sup> Study their philosophy, he cried, imitate their liberality of thought, but guard against imitating their savage scene.<sup>2</sup> How can the French public, he wrote on another occasion, adopt the English barbarism, the English violence, the English conduct of an English play? "Poor French," he ended, "you are in mire of every sort."<sup>3</sup> Restore the reign of good taste, was his almost despairing appeal.

He felt the need of active measures to arrest the decadence which in his opinion was overtaking the French stage. When he had first brought Shakespeare to the attention of his countrymen, he had never once dreamed of the position that dramatist was speedily to occupy. That any one — at least outside of England — should place him on a level with Corneille and Racine, had probably never occurred to his thoughts. That in particular, any Frenchman should exalt him above those authors, had it appeared to him possible, would have struck him with horror as well as indignation. It was because of this security that he had allowed himself to speak of him in terms which he was now disposed to regret. He began to reproach himself for what he had

<sup>1</sup> Letter to the Marquise du Deffand, Oct. 27, 1760.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Thieriot, Oct. 27, 1760.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to D'Argental, Dec. 15, 1760.

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done. "I have unhappily," he wrote later to the Abbé d'Olivet, "been the first who has made English poetry known in France. I have spoken some good of it, just as one praises an awkward child in the presence of a child that one loves, when it wishes to excite the latter's emulation. I have been taken too much at my word."<sup>1</sup> For Voltaire was fully persuaded that Shakespeare would never have been known in France at all, had he not taken the pains to introduce him to its notice. In consequence he regarded it as the duty of his countrymen to adopt the view of him which he had formed and expressed. That others should go beyond his scanty and imperfect appreciation was something not to be endured.

He had, however, grown to be aware that even among his own countrymen there were those who had come to look upon the ill-favored child as preferable to the beautiful one. There was unquestionably a party forming in France who were disposed to talk despitefully of the stately and dignified deity of French tragedy, and pay their worship instead to ugly and outlandish gods. He wrote to an Italian on the ridiculous deference paid by some men of that country to Dante; but he admitted the existence of its counterpart in his own land. "There are found with us," he said, "in the eighteenth century, persons who struggle to admire imaginations as stupidly extravagant and as barbarous. These they have the brutality to oppose to the masterpieces of genius, of wisdom, and of eloquence which we have in our tongue. *O tempora! O judicium!*"<sup>2</sup> With his dislike of this body of men was coupled his detestation

<sup>1</sup> Letter of April 25, 1764.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Bettinelli, March, 1761.

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of the Jansenists, who exhibited a Puritanic hostility to the art he loved. "I should not know," he wrote to D'Argental, "how to end this long letter, without telling you to what a degree I am revolted by the absurd and debasing presumption with which men still affect not to distinguish the theatre of the fair from the theatre of Corneille, not to distinguish Gilles from Baron. It casts an ugly opprobrium upon the only art which is able to put France at the head of all nations. . . . I had rather see the French stupid and barbarous as they were twelve hundred years ago than to see them half-civilized."<sup>1</sup>

It was in a measure feelings of such a character that prompted him to engage in a new undertaking. This was a commentary upon the plays of Corneille, or rather upon those of them which he deemed worthy of comment. He began this task in 1761 and labored at it assiduously for many months. The work partook necessarily of the nature of drudgery; though he said on one occasion that it was better to write annotations upon Corneille than to read what other people were then writing. France was at that time engaged in its disastrous war with England, in which every day brought the report of fresh losses. "All the news afflict me," he wrote; "all the new books tire me."<sup>2</sup> There were two objects in particular which he professed to keep in view in undertaking what to a man of genius must have seemed the most tedious of occupations. One was to fix the language. It was on the ground that it was

<sup>1</sup> Letter of June 21, 1761.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to the Marquise du Deffand, Aug. 18, 1761.

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daily becoming more corrupt. The attempt was a dream once cherished, the reason for it a belief once held by great writers. With the advance of linguistic knowledge both have now been left to those who are not great, and who cannot write. The other object was to establish a standard by which to test the excellence of dramatic productions. As Voltaire said himself, his aim was to be useful to the younger generation whose tastes had not as yet been formed. In his secret heart he felt it was desirable to save them from the devilish devices of the spoilers who were intent upon destroying the beautiful fabric of French tragedy. Accordingly his commentary upon the plays, with the aid derived from the members of the Academy, was to form a treatise on both grammar and poetics.<sup>1</sup> It was to show men how to write and what to think.

But it was not solely for the benefit of his countrymen, or from admiration of the author whom with a proud humility he called his master, that he was led to assume the drudgery of this task. It was generously undertaken and indefatigably carried through for the sake of the grand-niece of the great dramatist, whom he had adopted as a member of his family. As he spent upon the work much time and toil he was happy to find at last that the profits from it had secured the dowry of a portionless girl. He set about insuring the pecuniary and literary success of the undertaking with his wonted skill and assiduity. In all such enterprises Voltaire, while affecting the guilelessness of the dove, invariably

<sup>1</sup> Letter to D'Argental, June 26, 1761, and to the Abbé d'Olivet, October, 1761.



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exhibited the possession of a double portion of the wisdom of the serpent. He aimed to secure for the work the sanction of the French Academy, and as far as possible its co-operation. He succeeded in wheedling that respectable body into a sort of responsibility for his criticisms upon language. Into ratifying his decisions upon the merits of his author, it declined to be dragooned. It is further a striking proof of the tremendous influence then wielded by Voltaire that subscriptions to the work came not only from his own country but from all parts of Europe — from England, from Italy, from Germany, from Russia. Persons in high or highest position all over the continent contributed their aid. The King of France took two hundred copies, the Empress of Russia the same number. He had a right to rejoice over the result of his labors. "It is a very ungrateful and a very disagreeable task," he wrote to a friend, "but it has served to marry two young people; something which has never happened to any commentator, and never will happen again."<sup>1</sup> The labor connected with its preparation and publication extended from 1761 till 1764, in which last year the work made its appearance.

The 'Commentaries on Corneille,' considered as the pastime of a great creative genius, is a striking illustration of Voltaire's many-sided activity. It is one of the enterprises which make his life in some ways the most astounding in the history of literature. Our wonder is heightened by the fact that while he was still engaged in this piece of protracted drudgery, he threw himself

<sup>1</sup> Letter to the Marquise du Deffand, May 9, 1764.

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heart and soul into the conflict excited by the terrible tragedy which had befallen the family of Calas. These victims of as outrageous injustice as ever clothed itself under legal forms stirred every feeling of pity and wrath in his nature. The matter lay heavy on his heart. As he said himself, it more than saddened his pleasures; it destroyed them. To the task of repairing the iniquitous wrong which had been inflicted he devoted himself for months which lengthened into years. He listened to no dissuasions. Once having taken up the burden he never let it fall. Alone, against odds apparently insurmountable at the outset, he set out to remedy this judicial crime. Single-handed he beat down all opposition. He made himself heard by the deafest ears. He converted indifference into active support; he animated with his own persistency and fire those whom he had succeeded in enlisting in the cause. He aroused the conscience of all Europe; he made it share in his horror. He overthrew the efforts of the parliament of Toulouse to prevent investigation; he drew upon it the execration of all lands. He excited the sympathies of foreign sovereigns; he compelled the indifferent court of France for very shame to intervene. Tardy justice halted slowly on to right, so far as in it lay, a cruel wrong. It could not indeed bring back the judicially murdered dead; but it could restore name and fame and liberty and property to the persecuted survivors. It was all his own work. Literature can boast no greater achievement than was here accomplished by one of her most wayward and irresponsible sons. No higher title did Voltaire's many productions win for him than that

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which came to him unsought, as defender of the rights of outraged humanity in his rescue of the family of Calas.

Yet the living tragedy in which he acted a chief part did not divert thought or attention from that tragic stage which he had earlier taken up for consideration. All the while he was engaged in this fight for justice he never lost sight of his literary enterprise. In the one undertaking, however, there was hardly the unmixed satisfaction which belonged to his efforts in the other. It must be confessed that the work he did on the 'Commentaries,' though it contributed to the support of one of the Corneille family, hardly contributed to the support of Corneille's reputation. His great predecessor was for Voltaire a sacred author; but he anticipated the higher criticism by finding perpetual fault with his divinity. The annotations cannot be said to be written in a sympathetic spirit. On one side the reader gets from them the general impression that the particular thing of which Corneille was profoundly ignorant was his own tongue. The language he employed underwent constant castigation. Solecisms, barbarisms, violations of grammar without number were pointed out. On the other side his prolixity, his fustian, his rhodomontade, his far-fetched thoughts, his low and ridiculous expressions, his multitude of bad verses were dwelt upon unceasingly. As he reached the conclusion of his labors he declared that the prodigious number of Corneille's faults against language, against clearness of ideas and of expression, against propriety, and finally against interest, had dismayed him so much that he had not



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ventured to say the half of what he would have been able to say.<sup>1</sup>

The feeling that he had neglected any opportunity to point out Corneille's faults was far from being shared by the admirers of that author. They made no complaint that he had not said enough. Great was the indignation kindled among them by the 'Commentaries,' great the clamor which arose in consequence. Voltaire was conscious of the coming of the storm long before it broke. But to all the outcry he answered complacently that, while admiration was due to Corneille, much more was devotion due to truth. His annotations, he knew, would not please the fanatic worshippers of the dramatist; but he cared more for the interests of good taste than he did for their suffrages. He had said freely what he thought; it was impossible for him to say what he did not think. He had aimed to be useful. In order to be useful one must tell the truth. In this respect he had done his duty, and to him belonged in consequence the testimony of a good conscience. Pious reflections of this sort turn up with great regularity in his private correspondence, and are found not unfrequently in his published works. Truth, he kept constantly repeating, was to be preferred to anything and everything. Never were more glowing eulogiums passed upon it. There is something very entertaining in his persistent harping upon the necessity of truth in this particular instance, when we consider that in his controversial discussions there was hardly another thing in the use of which he could be more economical, when it suited his purposes

<sup>1</sup> Letter to the Marquise du Deffand, May 9, 1764.

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to indulge in it sparingly. It is perhaps even more entertaining to find Voltaire constantly affirming that it was impossible for him to say anything which he did not think. He was naturally the highest authority in regard to his own opinions; unfortunately he was not always the most trustworthy. The student of his life, in order to know what he does not mean, is too often compelled to pay strict heed to what he asserts emphatically and repeatedly.

Still, there is no question that in this instance he was giving expression to his sincerest convictions. No one, indeed, can read the commentary, and along with it his correspondence during the time he was engaged in its preparation, without becoming aware that the more Voltaire occupied himself with Corneille, the greater became his dissatisfaction with that dramatist, and the profounder his idolatry of Racine. His study of the former, he said, led him to find the latter admirable. The one enchanted him; the other bored him. "Let the world talk as it will," he wrote to a friend, "Racine will gain every day, and Corneille will lose." To him the former author was and continued to be the great, the inimitable. In truth, Voltaire believed in Racine almost as much as he did in himself. He was naturally not disposed to be too lenient to Racine's great rival. It was inevitable that his persistent depreciation of the one author and glorification of the other should excite the indignation of the partisans of the elder dramatist. They were unwilling to accord to Voltaire the monopoly of either good taste or of truth; for of both he constantly talked as if they were in his sole possession. They

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intimated that he had confounded two distinct things. He had said devotion to truth; he meant devotion to Racine and himself.

It is not for the men of alien races to interfere in the disputes carried on by Frenchmen as to the comparative merits of these two authors. To us the interest lies here in the fact that Voltaire took in many ways the same view of Corneille which he had previously taken of Shakespeare. The same language was used about the one which had been employed in the case of the other. Both were the founders of the stage in their respective countries. To them, therefore, was due the glory to which the creator is entitled. But they exhibited likewise the imperfections which belong to all early work. For their faults the times in which they flourished were responsible. Had they come later, they would have done better. Both wrote splendid detached scenes; but neither had produced a perfect whole. At times his disposition to undervalue Corneille to his own countrymen led him to go farther. In certain particulars he was willing to set Shakespeare above him. It would be unjust to impute this merely to a desire to detract from the reputation of his predecessor. Of the sins forbidden in the dramatic decalogue he saw and said that the only one which was absolutely unpardonable was that of tediousness. It was the one sin of which Shakespeare was never guilty. When, consequently, he came to contrast with his works the early plays of Corneille he unhesitatingly gave the preference to the former on this very account. The tragedies of Shakespeare, he said, were still more monstrous than *Clitandre*; but they did

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not bore.<sup>1</sup> In one particular indeed he conceded the superiority of the English dramatist to the playwrights of every age and clime. "I will confess," he said, "that of all tragic authors Shakespeare is the one in whom are found the fewest scenes given up purely to dialogue. In each of them there is almost always something new. It is brought about, to be sure, at the expense of the rules of decorum, of truth to life. It is by mingling together the grotesque and the terrible. It is by passing from a wineshop to a field of battle, from a graveyard to a throne. But the result is, he interests."<sup>2</sup>

Of course the ideal was to arouse and maintain interest without the use of those irregular and improper agencies which interfere with the purity and perfection of dramatic art. To this, Shakespeare had neither attained nor thought of attaining. Voltaire, therefore, never harbored the idea of putting him on a level with Corneille. How could any really high position be given to a man who disregarded the unities, who joined in the same play the comic and the tragic, who filled his scene with acts of violence and bloodshed committed in full view of the audience? From all these gross violations of art the French dramatist in his maturer works had been thoroughly free. That one fact of itself established his superiority. Voltaire's view of the two men was summed up at the conclusion of his observations upon 'Julius Cæsar' which he appended to his so-called translation of that play. "Like Shakespeare," he said of Corneille, "he was unequal, and like him abounding

<sup>1</sup> *Commentaries sur Corneille; Remarques sur Médée.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid., Remarques sur les Horaces, acte iii. scène iv.*

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in genius. But the genius of Corneille was to that of Shakespeare as is a lord compared with a man of the people endowed by nature with the same spirit as himself." That the commoner always interested, while the nobleman frequently wearied, was not to the purpose. The former had gained his success by illegitimate means. Art consists in interesting by beautiful and noble portrayal, not by the production of monstrosities. Still, there lurked always in his mind the consciousness that the all-important thing is to interest. Perfection that wearies can never hold its own against imperfection that charms. Was it really beauty that repelled, was it monstrosity that attracted? Voltaire never asked himself the question.

He never indeed was able to free himself from the delusion that it would be comparatively easy to awaken and maintain interest, if one paid no heed to the requirements of what he called art. If the writer interspersed in his plays duels, sorceries, deeds of violence, murders, the attention of the audience could always be held. Yet the observations he was constantly making failed to sustain the position he took. He complained of Corneille that in his early pieces he indulged in these improper and reprehensible practices. Nevertheless, he as constantly complained that these plays were tiresome. He kept repeating that the English dramatists who tried to imitate Shakespeare were invariably condemned for resorting to the very devices which, when employed by him, were applauded. Success could be assured, he told us, by neglecting art; yet these writers had neglected art without securing success. It never

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occurred to Voltaire that there might be a flaw somewhere in his reasoning ; that it was not merely the thing done which had met with favor, but the way in which it was done. He did not reflect that he who wields the forces of nature must possess powers that enable him to master them, or he will be torn in pieces by the agents he has called to his help. In art, the end justifies the means. If the great result desired has been attained in defiance of the rules we have formulated, the rules must be set aside as naught. It is really not art which is at fault ; it is our definition of what constitutes art.

## CHAPTER XI

### SECOND APPEAL TO THE NATIONS

IN his 'Appeal to the Nations' Voltaire had set out to display the inferiority of Shakespeare to Corneille by furnishing an abstract of the play of 'Hamlet.' It was by this agency that foreign peoples were to learn all that it was necessary to know in order to form a just judgment of the English dramatist. The inadequacy, not to say absurdity of the method pretty certainly came home to him at last; it was probably forced upon his attention by the words and acts of others. No likelihood existed that men who really desired to become even slightly acquainted with Shakespeare would be content with a way eminently designed to impart the show of knowledge without its substance. They could learn far more about the play in question, and with infinitely more accuracy, by reading the partial version of it to be found in the work of La Place.

Up to this time Voltaire had professed to speak a great deal for Shakespeare; he had certainly spoken much about him. Still, it was only after the most beggarly fashion that he had let Shakespeare speak for himself, even through the inadequate agency of translation. He must have become conscious that this contrast between his words and his acts would strike his countrymen more

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and more. Accordingly, while engaged in the preparation of his 'Commentaries on Corneille' he made up his mind to perform more than he had promised to the subscribers of the edition. In order to show the difference between the lord and the commoner, to exhibit unmistakably the superiority of the French stage to the English, he set about an undertaking which was to be of the nature of another appeal to the nations. This was to append to the *Cinna* of Corneille a translation of the first three acts of 'Julius Cæsar.' The whole of one play and a part of the other dealt with a conspiracy. The treatment of a similar subject by the two authors would put readers in a position to make a test of their comparative merits.

To carry out his object properly it was all-essential, he now said, that the translation should be literal; upon this he laid special stress. There was no other one thing which he deemed of so much importance, no other one thing which he professed, after his work appeared, that he had kept more steadily in view. He gave a general assurance in the preface to the version, and special assurances in notes, that it was a reproduction of 'Julius Cæsar,' almost word for word, line for line. Wherever there was blank verse in Shakespeare he had turned it into blank verse. Wherever there was prose he had rendered it in prose. What was familiar and low in the original had been made familiar and low in the translation. On the other hand, whenever the language was elevated he had striven to make it elevated. When it was bombastic care had been taken to render it in the same vein. In fact to passages he so considered



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he added notes to the effect that his was a literal translation. A statement of this sort is sure to occur whenever he wished to call attention to anything which struck him as especially objectionable. He even took the pains to furnish explanations of the quibbles which he found it impossible to render literally.

Voltaire's theory of translation had clearly undergone a revolution since the appearance of the essay on English tragedy which is contained in the *Lettres philosophiques*. There he said that any version whatever is at best but a faint copy of a fine picture. The man who attempted to give a literal rendering sacrificed the spirit of his author to his words. It was in accordance with this view that he had put forth those free reproductions of two or three passages in Shakespeare which up to this time had constituted about all the direct contributions that he had made to the knowledge of the English dramatist. But for his present purposes it was desirable to follow another practice. It was exactness and literalness upon which he now came to insist. In public and private he prided himself upon the success which had attended his efforts in that direction. Before his version was published he forwarded it to the Cardinal de Bernis. "Here," said he, "is the very faithful translation of the conspiracy against Cæsar by Cassius and Brutus, which is played every day at London, and is preferred infinitely to the *Cinna* of Corneille. I beg you to tell me how a people who have so many philosophers can have so little taste." He seems never to have modified the sentiments here expressed. As late as 1776 he condemned to an English visitor the version of La Place for its un-

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faithfulness. "As for me," he continued, "I translated the three first acts of Julius Cæsar with exactness. A translator ought to lose his own genius and assume that of his author. If the author be a fool, the translator should be so too."<sup>1</sup>

One is reluctant to impute to a man of genius intentional dishonesty; but it is hard to resist the conviction that Voltaire's course in this whole matter was designedly dishonest, both in what he did and in what he failed to do. The scheme itself can only be saved from the suspicion of deception by imputing to its promoter self-deception; and whatever were Voltaire's other failings, lack of comprehension of what he was about is the last thing which can be reasonably laid to his charge. In the very first place he must have known that his method of comparison was utterly valueless. Had the conditions been reversed, no one would have been quicker than he to point out the fraud which by its very nature existed in the course he pursued of testing the merits of two authors. No one would have been more earnest in denouncing the injustice of an Englishman presuming to decide upon the merits of Corneille, as contrasted with Shakespeare, by setting even a good translation of the former against an original of the latter. He had had a full opportunity to observe for himself the worthlessness of all such comparisons. The *Andromaque* of his favorite Racine had been translated into English by Ambrose Philips. In Voltaire's own

<sup>1</sup> Sherlock's 'Letters from an English Traveller,' translated from the French original, London, 1780. Letter xxiii. page 152; dated Ferney, April 26, 1776.

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expressed opinion it was an excellent translation. It was brought out in 1712 under the title of 'The Distrest Mother,' and was acted not unfrequently during the rest of the century. Yet no one then thought of putting it on a level with any production of Shakespeare. No one reads it now; no one would contemplate reading it for itself. The work has been left hopelessly behind. Were an Englishman compelled to derive from it his conception of Racine he would not adjudge that dramatist a higher rank in literature than the one held by his translator.

Furthermore, it is perfectly easy to give an author's meaning faithfully in another speech and yet produce an utterly erroneous impression of his work. Words which suggest noble associations in one tongue can be rendered by words of precisely the same signification, as found in the dictionary of another tongue, while yet in the latter they convey commonplace or ignoble ideas. A similar statement can be made indeed about any individual speech taken by itself. In it two words can exist with precisely the same meaning, one of which can be used everywhere without giving offence, the other hardly anywhere. It is easy therefore to translate an author literally and misrepresent him scandalously. To a certain extent it is an accident which only the extremest familiarity with the two tongues can obviate. It occurred now and then in the version of Shakespeare, made by Le Tourneur, who was so far from seeking to depreciate his author that he was eager to exalt him. With Voltaire it was a practice to which he constantly resorted. The act may have been sometimes due to

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ignorance, but there are instances in which the only explanation possible is that it sprang from deliberate malice or criminal carelessness. There were times in which he committed forgery upon his author by imputing to him what he did not say. A peculiarly glaring illustration of it occurs in his version of 'Julius Cæsar.' In a footnote intimating his own faithfulness, he called attention to a very gross word which he said the original contained. As it was there, he was under the necessity of translating it. The necessity was purely of his own invention. The word which he complained of by implication, was not there. It was never there in any edition whatever. A term conveying the same idea did indeed appear; but it was one which could have been used before an English audience of any period without offence, and has been so used repeatedly.

But Voltaire's worst act from the purely literary point of view was his rendering English blank verse into the corresponding sort of verse in French. It was as dishonest in intention as it was ridiculous in execution. No better expedient could have been found to make his version unfaithful to the spirit of his original. In the one tongue the measure was a peculiarly powerful instrument of expression. It had in consequence become almost sacred to tragedy. Much of the finest poetry of the language, much that was most beautiful in diction and lofty in sentiment was associated with it. Nothing of this sort belonged to it in French. There it did not exist at all, and could not exist. Its structure was entirely unsuited to the genius of that tongue. To render Shakespeare in it was infinitely worse than it

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would be to render Corneille into English in alexandrines; to render him in doggerel would be the nearest equivalent in our tongue to Voltaire's proceeding. Yet this was the measure which he selected in order to give his public a conception of Shakespeare.

Not content with choosing it, he deliberately misrepresented it to those who knew nothing of its character. He gave his readers to understand that the measure did not differ essentially in French from what it was in English. Anybody, he said in the preface to his version, could write blank verse, — which was indeed true of the sort of blank verse he wrote himself. Anybody, it can be added, who could make seriously such an assertion about the English measure rules himself by that very fact out of the consideration of any court of criticism. Yet it was no hasty remark made in the heat and hurry of composition or in the ill-humor of momentary vexation. Later it was repeated essentially in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*.<sup>1</sup> There we were told that those who had written in blank verse did so because they did not know how to rhyme; that blank verse is born of the inability to overcome that difficulty, and from the desire to do something quickly. Yet he had once professed envy of the English for the possession of what he had termed the happy facility of blank verse. Nor did his words here come into conflict alone with assertions previously made; they conflicted with some he was making at the time in the comparative truthfulness of his correspondence.

Under such conditions, therefore, Voltaire's wooden

<sup>1</sup> Under *Rime*.

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translation would have all the unpoetical quality of prose without its accuracy. By the method he adopted it was impossible to give any proper conception of Shakespeare, had he sought to make his version a faithful reproduction of the original. But he really sought no such thing. Every step in what he did, as well as every statement he made, was tainted with fraud. He pretended that his version was a translation of the first three acts of 'Julius Cæsar.' It was nothing of the sort. Not a single one of the events and speeches, both in prose and verse, which follow the assassination of the dictator was rendered. As regards mere quantity, the part he omitted to translate was about a third of the three acts which he professed that he had translated. As regards quality, it contains the most striking and powerful passages found in them. In it the genius of Shakespeare is exhibited in its highest form. It includes the flight and return of Antony after the assassination, his interview with the conspirators, his apostrophe to the corpse of the murdered ruler, the address made by Brutus to the people, the funeral oration pronounced by Antony over the dead body of the dictator, with the portrayal of the tumult which followed his speech. Without these, 'Julius Cæsar' would not be the play we all know. It is this part more than any other which has caused the lofty scene it depicts to be acted, as the author unconsciously prophesied, in states yet unborn and accents yet unknown. For Voltaire's purposes the omission was as wise as it was dishonest. Even his bald translation could hardly have succeeded in hiding altogether the skill and

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effectiveness displayed in these scenes. But there was an additional reason for its omission. This portion of the tragedy had been imitated by Voltaire himself in his *Mort de César*. Even the faint reproduction of its power there found would have exposed the obligation which, once acknowledged, he was now trying hard to forget.

But, furthermore, in the part which he translated he did not live up to his claims of faithfulness. The rendering of prose by prose, of blank verse by blank verse was in general fairly maintained. Yet to this there were exceptions. These would not be worth the slightest notice, were it not for the pertinaciousness with which Voltaire kept insisting upon the literal exactness he had observed. As one instance, the speeches of the tribunes at the very opening of the play are in blank verse; they were rendered by him in prose. But much more unfaithful was he in matters of greater importance. His version was far from being a line for line translation, as he pretended. A goodly number of the speeches were cut down from a fourth to a half of the length which they had in the original. In not a single instance were they expanded. This abbreviation was gained by the sacrifice of lines essential for conveying the full sense. To give a clearer conception of his method of proceeding, it may be well to cull a few sprigs from the statistical garden. Let us leave aside the prose and consider only those parts of the play which are in blank verse. In the first three acts of the 'Julius Cæsar' of Shakespeare there are about fourteen hundred and twenty-five lines written in that measure. A little over

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three hundred of these at the conclusion Voltaire made no pretence to translate. This left somewhat more than eleven hundred lines in that portion of these three acts of which he in theory gave a literal version. They were rendered in nine hundred and sixty-two. These statistics are not particularly enlivening; but they are very enlightening. The line for line translation disappears.

But much more serious than this were the misunderstandings and perversions of meaning. A sort of excuse can be made in the case of certain words, in consequence of their employment by Shakespeare with a signification which in the eighteenth century had become somewhat archaic. *Favor*, for instance, in the sense of 'face,' 'countenance,' is found three times in these three acts. In his two translations of it — once he avoided rendering it — Voltaire gave as its French equivalent *amitié*. This necessarily perverted the meaning of the passages in which it occurred. Much more inexcusable in a man assuming the functions of a translator was his misunderstanding of the signification of certain common words. At the very time he subjected himself to a good deal of ridicule in England by making in one instance his ignorance conspicuous in a note. To the line spoken by Brutus, —

“Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius,” —

he appended the following sage remark. “The word *course*,” he wrote, “may perhaps be an allusion to the course of the Lupercal. *Course* also signifies a ‘change of plates on the table.’”



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But even such things were slight compared with the studied care he took at times to lower the character of Shakespeare's language. It was bad enough to render the dramatist's powerful and poetic blank verse by the lines much more prosaic than prose, which went under that name in French. The fitness of the measure in English for tragic representation was due to the fact that it could pass at once from the language of ordinary conversation to the highest flights of the inspired imagination without strain and without the slightest impairment of its dignity. In colloquial speech it could be familiar without being mean. Voltaire did not know the distinction between the two adjectives in English. We can get an idea of his conception of rendering what was familiar in the original by a familiar equivalent in his own tongue, by retranslating one of the couplets of his version. Cæsar, in addressing the company which had assembled early at his house to escort him to the capitol, makes use of the following words :

“ Good friends, go in and taste some wine with me,  
And we, like friends, will straightway go together.”

Voltaire's version of the lines, literally retranslated into English, reads as follows :

“ Let us all go into the house, let us drink a bottle together,  
And then like good friends we will go to the senate.”

Not satisfied with this peculiarly choice rendering, he appended the following note to the first of the two lines :  
“ Always the very greatest fidelity in the translation.”

There was one instance, however, in which he did not

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call the attention of his readers to the faithfulness of his version. This was in the case of a noted passage about which there has been and still continues to be much comment, though little controversy. Cæsar, in replying to the appeal of Metellus Cimber for the recall of his brother from exile, concludes his refusal with these words :

“ Know Cæsar doth not wrong, nor without cause  
Will he be satisfied.”

Such are the lines as they are found in the play as handed down. But in his ‘Discoveries’ Ben Jonson reported another version of them. There this passage appears in the following form :

“ Cæsar did never wrong but with just cause.”

This is cited by Jonson as an illustration of Shakespeare, in the heat of composition, giving utterance at times to things which were ridiculous. He also quoted them sneeringly in the Induction to his ‘Staple of News.’ But whatever may have been the original of the speech, there is but one form of it now which has authority. There is but one form of it which Voltaire had a right to render. But from the note to the passage in Theobald’s edition he had learned of the way in which Jonson represented it. This accordingly he chose to translate, and not the lines as found in the printed play. It is with these words he rendered the passage :

“ Lorsque César fait tort, il a toujours raison.”

In this instance there is no escape from the conclusion that the misrepresentation was deliberate.

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Pages could be taken up with exposing the intentional unfaithfulness of this most faithful of translations.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the annotations all the standard devices were employed which tend to lower the estimate of an author, while professing to treat him with candor. Not even was praise spared. One scene in particular, Voltaire pointed out as full of grandeur, strength, and genuine beauties. Remarks of this sort gave a fine air of impartiality to his criticism, and added force to his censure. He assumed constantly a half-apologetic tone

<sup>1</sup> As one illustration which must suffice for many, compare Voltaire's translation of a short passage in a speech of Portia's with the original. It is where she remonstrates with Brutus for the impatience he has exhibited with her, when she has begged him to tell her what has caused his peculiar behavior. On witnessing his impatience she has left him, as he has bidden her,

"Hoping it was but an effect of humor,  
Which sometime hath his hour with every man.  
It will not let you eat, nor talk, nor sleep,  
And, could it work so much upon your shape  
As it hath much prevail'd on your condition,  
I should not know you, Brutus. Dear my lord,  
Make me acquainted with your cause of grief."

The following is the extraordinary way in which this passage appears in Voltaire's version :

"Je craignis de choquer les ennuis d'un eponx,  
Et je pris ce moment pour un moment d'humeur,  
Que souvent les maris font sentir à leurs femmes.  
Non, je ne puis, Brutus, ni vous laisser parler,  
Ni vous laisser manger, ni vous laisser dormir,  
Sans savoir le sujet qui tourmente votre âme.  
Brutus, mon cher Brutus, ah, ne me cachez rien."

Was it ignorance or intention that led to this perversion of the sense of the original? It almost seems as if it must be the latter, for Voltaire called particular attention to this passage in a note, in which he said that it was one of those admired passages which had been marked by asterisks — that is, in the editions of Pope and Warburton.

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for the dramatist. It was not his fault, it was the fault of his age, it was the fault of circumstances, that he so constantly violated good taste. He had received but little education. He had had the misfortune to be reduced to the condition of an actor. One ought not to be too hard upon a man so situated for seeking the suffrages of those to whose favor he was compelled to look for support. It was therefore more in sorrow than indignation that Voltaire affected to censure Shakespeare's deviations from the dignity of tragedy. It was to please the taste of a rude and ignorant audience that he had debased the majesty of Roman history by making these masters of the world talk at times like madmen and buffoons and street-porters. It was also in a grieved way that he reprehended his anachronisms, his violations of the verity of manners and customs,<sup>1</sup> as indicated by the mention of papers, exorcists, and other matters peculiar to England or to modern times, but attributed by him to the Rome of the republic. These constitute the kind of criticism that one might expect to find coming from a pedant; not from a poet, unless pedantry had overpowered inspiration. It is somewhat irritating, in addition, to find them pompously brought forward by an author who could not claim exemption from the same practice; who, for instance, in his tragedy of *Mahomet*, had made one of his characters "senator" of Mecca.

The version of 'Julius Cæsar,' taken as a whole, was much nearer a travesty than a translation. The French word for the discharge of this function, as rendered by

<sup>1</sup> *Costume*, recently introduced into French from the Italian, is the word Voltaire uses.

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its corresponding etymological equivalent in English, expressed both its intention and its character. Shakespeare had been traduced, not translated. The version had been craftily calculated to mislead the reader ignorant of the original. But Voltaire was eminently satisfied with what he had done. He spoke of it both then and afterward with pride. He boasted constantly of the superiority of the methods he had followed to those of La Place, whose translation of Shakespeare was still the only one to which French readers had access. That translation he censured constantly for its unfaithfulness. To D'Argental he transmitted his own in August, 1762. "I believe," he wrote, "that you will be convinced that La Place is very far from having made known the English drama. Concede that it is well to become acquainted with the excessive intemperance of its extravagance."

In the preface to the version he returned to the attack which he had previously made upon La Place in his 'Appeal to the Nations.' "We have in French," he said, "some imitations, some sketches, some extracts from Shakespeare, but no translation. A desire has apparently existed to treat tenderly our delicacy." No weakness of this sort could be imputed to Voltaire himself. From what he now and henceforth wrote, his countrymen would inevitably come to the conclusion that Shakespeare was addicted by choice to low and coarse expressions, to indelicacy of thought, and to grossness of speech. It was the inference actually drawn and proclaimed by his disciples, Marmontel and La Harpe. In this preface reappeared the same version

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of the opening scene of 'Othello,' which had done duty in the 'Appeal.' Against the euphemistic manner in which the speeches of Iago had in this case been rendered by La Place, conveying the same idea as the original but in softened language, Voltaire felt called upon again to enter a protest. "I do not say," he continued, "that the translator has done wrong to spare our eyes the reading of this tit-bit. I only say that he has not made Shakespeare known, and that no one can tell what is the genius of an author, the genius of his time, of his language by the imitations which have been given us under the name of translation. There are not six consecutive lines in the French 'Julius Cæsar' which can be found in the English play." The magnificent mendacity of this last assertion — the falsity of which any one who could read English could detect at a glance — excites admiration and even captivates the imagination by its matchless effrontery. It shows how well Voltaire could rely upon the ignorance of his readers and their faith in himself. Yet even it is perhaps equalled by the assertion which follows. "The translation," he wrote of his own, "which is here given of 'Julius Cæsar,' is the most faithful which has ever been made in our language of either an old or a foreign poet."

He had good reason for seeking to give a false impression of La Place's version. It had now been before the public for nearly a fifth of a century. During that period, fragmentary as it was and in many respects unsatisfactory, it had been slowly but steadily making its way. The genius of Shakespeare was so great that, even in the imperfect presentation of it there found, it

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was working havoc with the accepted canons of French dramatic art. The anxiety Voltaire felt at the growth of sentiments hostile to the traditional beliefs and practices which still dominated the stage, he made little attempt to conceal. His translation of 'Julius Cæsar' was preceded by a note to the public which purported to come from the publishers. Among other things, it pointed out the resemblances and differences between the English and Spanish theatres. In both there was the same irregularity, the same mixture of tragic situation and gross buffoonery in the same piece. In the English drama there was more passion, in the Spanish, more grandeur; more extravagance in Calderon and Lope de Vega, more disgusting horror in Shakespeare. Then the translator, in his capacity as publisher, displayed his wrath by commenting upon the misguided beings who had sought to recommend to the French public the barbarous practices in which these two nations indulged. "M. de Voltaire," wrote M. de Voltaire, "has during the last twenty years of his life combated the mania of some men of letters who, having learned from him to know the beauties of these rude dramas, have believed it their duty to praise almost everything in them, and have conceived a new system of poetics, which, had they been listened to, would have absolutely replunged the dramatic art into chaos."

Accordingly, to show still more conclusively the superiority of the French stage, Voltaire made also a translation of the *Heraclius* of Calderon in order that his readers might contrast it with the *Héraclius* of Corneille. This latter undertaking partook rather of

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the nature of a work of supererogation. The motive to enter upon it may have been in part a purely literary one; but it was also largely a personal one. There was really no occasion for translating anything of Calderon. It was not he who was threatening the supremacy of Corneille. It was not he who was loosening the hold which French dramatic art had upon the French people. The real mischief-maker, the real one to be dreaded was Shakespeare. But the introduction of a translation from the Spanish author veiled his motive for introducing his translation from the English one. So in the preface to the *Heraclius* of Calderon he gravely kept up the pretence that both translations were equally necessary to the object he had in view. "The reader," he said, "had already made the comparison of the French and English theatres in reading the conspiracy of Brutus and Cassius after having read that of Cinna. He will in like manner compare the Spanish theatre with the French. If after that there remain any disputes, they will not take place among cultivated people." The man who said this had been capable of saying a year before it was published, that he pushed his blasphemy against his great predecessor so far, that were he condemned to re-read the *Héraclius* of Corneille or the *Heraclius* of Calderon, he would give the preference to the Spanish author.<sup>1</sup>

Voltaire followed up the preface which he put forth under the name of his publishers with an avowed preface of his own as translator. In this his intention to make his version of 'Julius Cæsar' a sort of second

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Cardinal de Bernis, May 14, 1763.



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appeal to the nations was definitely stated. He had taken the trouble to supply the readers of all countries with the means of comparison. It was now left them, he said, to decide for themselves upon the merits of the two authors. A Frenchman or an Englishman might be suspected of partiality. Here an opportunity had been afforded by him to men not influenced by national prepossessions or prejudices to weigh the thoughts, the judgment, and the style of Shakespeare against the thoughts, the judgment, and the style of Corneille. To his translation he appended some observations upon the original play itself. In it he expressed his wonder that races so opposed in genius as the English and Spanish should have agreed in the production of dramatic pieces which revolted the taste of all other nations. For this he recognized that there must be a reason. Instead of one he gave four of them. He began by asserting that both countries had never known anything better. Spaniards must answer for their own drama; but so far as the English stage is concerned, the remark was due to Voltaire's profound ignorance of both the predecessors and contemporaries of Shakespeare. Of the efforts put forth to cause it to conform to the classic drama — efforts made years before Corneille was born — he never had the glimmering even of a suspicion. Nor was the darkness of his ignorance on this point ever illuminated by the slightest spark of knowledge. He never ceased to repeat that the English had been unaware of the rules of the unities until the era of the Restoration. He never learned that some of the Elizabethans had observed them, and

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that others who knew them had deliberately rejected them.

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His other explanations were better. They consist essentially in the statement of the fact that these foreign pieces do not weary the spectators. He admitted their attractiveness in representation. Bizarre and barbarous as they were, they never failed to interest. Besides, they were natural. The naturalness, to be sure, was of a low and base sort. Cæsar, who, according to Voltaire's faithful translation, asks his comrades to take a drink, in no ways resembles the real Cæsar; for apparently in his opinion no high-born Roman would ever contemplate such a proceeding, which in its very nature was unworthy of the rulers of the world. Further, these plays appealed to the fondness of the populace for spectacular exhibitions. It required a very cultivated taste, such as the Italians had possessed in the sixteenth century, and the French in the seventeenth, to desire theatrical pieces that conformed merely to what was reasonable and was judiciously written. Both Lope de Vega and Shakespeare had flourished in a time when taste had not yet been formed. Consequently these authors had corrupted that of their countrymen; and the inferiority in genius of those who had imitated them had served to establish their reputations on a still firmer basis. In consequence the theatres of these nations had always remained in a state of infancy. The French would have been like them had not the reign of good taste come in with Louis XIV. Still, he conceded that their drama erred in turn from too much refinement. He remarked almost regretfully that could the movement and action of these

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rude foreign theatres be combined with the judgment, the elegancy, the nobility, the decorum of the French stage, perfection would be reached, assuming that it did not already exist in the *Iphigénie* and *Athalie* of Racine.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE CRITIC CRITICISED

UP to this time Voltaire had paid no attention to the criticisms which had been passed upon him in England. Of the existence and nature of some of them he could hardly have been unaware. Still, assailed as he was on many sides and about many things, these probably did not affect him seriously enough to provoke reply, or even comment. He kept sufficiently well-informed in regard to English opinion to know that it continued to set Shakespeare far above Corneille. Ridiculous as was such a view on the part of the countrymen of Newton and Locke, he was compelled to accept the fact. But as yet he had come into no personal collision either with the supporters of this opinion, or with those who had championed the English dramatist against his own attacks. This state of things was now to undergo a change.

While Voltaire was appealing directly to the nations of Europe, the English had begun to do so indirectly and undesignedly. The first proceeding of this character which in some slight degree attracted the attention of the Continent was the work of Henry Home, who in 1752 had taken his seat upon the Scottish bench under the title of Lord Kames. Ten years later he brought out

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a treatise in three volumes entitled 'Elements of Criticism.' For a work of the kind it met with much success while the author lived; nor was its sale checked by his death, which took place in 1782. Not long after its publication it was translated into German. It covered a great deal of ground. There was scarcely any topic about which tastes differed that escaped Kames's judicial eye; though he modestly said that he had omitted the definite article before the word 'Elements' of the title, because its introduction would imply that nothing which could be criticised had been left unconsidered. He took up at the outset the subject of emotions and passions, and closed with a discussion of gardening and architecture. About every point in dispute he furnished a set of rules neatly ticketed and labelled. By these the student could test the value of all that he read. By them he could ascertain definitely what he ought to admire or to disapprove. Furthermore he would be able to tell why he admired or disapproved.

A consideration of the elements which go to the formation of judgment and taste is not apt, under the most favorable circumstances, to furnish easy reading. Nowhere in these volumes is the difficulty inherent in the subject lightened by any brilliancy of treatment. It was serious throughout; those who disliked it called it dry. But one alleviation there is to him whose soul revolts at critical discussion in the style of a text-book of law. No sooner had Kames laid down his principle than he proceeded to illustrate it by extracts taken from the works of great writers. The reader was told in each case whether the author should receive praise or blame for

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the passage selected. Not unfrequently he was told he ought to blame where he felt he ought to praise. But whether he agreed in opinion with his legal adviser or not, he could not fail to entertain gratitude for the frequent recurrence of these oases of quotation in the desert of dry disquisition through which he was ploughing his way. Moreover, it is fair to say that the system of the hard-headed lawyer did not turn out in its practical workings as badly as might have been expected. The old Scotch judge had a good deal of appreciation of the beautiful, as well as sagacity in detecting weaknesses and improprieties of thought and expression. While, therefore, his work cannot be called entertaining, it is very often suggestive and instructive. Still, its interest, at least to us at the present day, consists more in those portions of it which the author did not write than in those which he did. The extracts are almost invariably worth reading, even when the criticisms are not worth heeding.

As regards his judgment of Shakespeare's art, Kames was frequently much in advance of his time, though he had not freed himself entirely from its cant. In general, however, he expressed for the poet the most unbounded admiration. He spoke of him as the finest genius for the stage the world had ever known. Yet this admiration did not hinder him from pointing out the blemishes which he discovered in the great dramatist. He acted consistently as the stern and inflexible lord of sessions, who metes out justice, or what he deems justice, with an impartial hand. While selecting a large number of passages for praise he found fault with others that did not

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conform to the principles of taste he had laid down. He found fault indeed with some which men before and since his time have generally agreed to regard with admiration. The orbit through which the mind of Shakespeare revolved was altogether too vast for Kames to measure by any of the critical appliances which he had at command. Those views of life which the dramatist had divined by the intuitive perception of genius had never been suggested to the Scotch judge by anything he had met with in his limited experience. Still if he found something to blame, he found far more to praise; and the unstinted measure with which he dealt out his commendation is one proof of how much the reputation of the great Elizabethan had risen, not indeed with the mass of men, but with the critical fraternity, during the course of the century.

But Shakespeare's writings were far from being the only works from which extracts were derived. Illustrations of the principles he laid down were taken from several of the most eminent authors of ancient and modern times. Among these Corneille and Racine received a good deal of attention. Their various errors were pointed out with an unsparing hand. It was rarely the case that examples were chosen from them to exhibit beauties of expression; while to exemplify faults their writings were drawn upon lavishly. In truth the whole French drama itself was attacked in general terms as having been composed in a style, formal, pompous, and declamatory, which suited not with the expression of any passion whatever. Not satisfied with criticising the dead, Kames in one instance made a

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target of the living. The writings of Voltaire formed a pretty constant subject of comment.

Much of what he said could hardly have furnished the French author agreeable reading. The *Henriade*, in particular, came in for a great deal of severe criticism. That work disagreed with all the principles of art which Kames had laid down. He found fault with the subject. An epic poem no one ought ever to think of rearing upon recent and well-known events in the history of one's own country. He found fault with the verse. No subject of that important nature could be clothed in rhyme, and supported by it on an elevated plane. Tasso and Ariosto had both suffered on this account; far more Voltaire. In fact an epic poem could not be produced anyway in the French tongue. The very character of the language forbade it. This was one of the prejudices prevailing among his own countrymen which the writer of the *Henriade* had long before felt called upon to combat. Here it was reiterated almost offensively. Furthermore Kames found fault with the treatment. Voltaire had no business to introduce imaginary beings into a work filled with well-known historical personages. The blending of fictitious characters with real ones was bad enough under any circumstances; but the introduction of such creations as the god of Sleep, the demons of Discord, of Fanaticism, and of War, in a history so recent as that of Henry IV., was simply intolerable. He further censured the love-episode in the poem as insufferable in consequence of the discordant mixture of allegory with real life.

Voltaire, like most men who are liberal in their



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criticism of others, was keenly sensitive to any reflections made upon his own writings. Those of his countrymen who presumed to discharge that office were, in his opinion, either the vilest of the vile or were acting under the influence of a malignant diabolical spirit. He had likewise none of that reticence which is supposed to characterize and generally does characterize great souls. If anything hurt him, he cried aloud. Not unfrequently he shrieked, he filled the air with exclamations of pain. He burdened his letters to his friends with complaints of the way in which he was made an object of persecution. It was on the side of literature that he was perhaps most sensitive. His supremacy there had hardly been denied by those who objected most violently to his religious and political opinions. It was often conceded grudgingly; nevertheless it was conceded. To attacks of this nature, coming from a man of the character and position of Kames, he was not accustomed. It must have been nearly two years after the publication of the Scotch judge's work, before he came to know of its existence. The reading of it cut him to the quick. His resentment was aroused not merely by the character of the strictures upon himself and others, but by the quarter from which they came. It was bad enough that any person whatever, besides pointing out particular defects of the French dramatic writers, should assert frequently and imply constantly their general inferiority to Shakespeare; but that this man should be a Scotchman was in his eyes adding insult to injury. Apparently he would as soon have expected criticism from an Eskimo.

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He sought at once to take vengeance for the affront. His review of the work of Kames appeared in 1764 in the *Gazette littéraire de l'Europe*. This was a periodical started a short time before, in which he took a good deal of interest. Hume was at that time in Paris and heard of the projected criticism before it appeared; for everything that Voltaire did or was going to do was widely discussed in the literary circles of that city both before and after it was done. Hume was not specially intimate with Kames; but he had that patriotic instinct which prompts every Scotchman of letters to stand up for every countryman, reputable or disreputable, who belongs to his profession. He tried to prevent the publication of the review. Naturally it was to no purpose. "Our friend, I mean your friend, Lord Kames," he wrote to Dr. Blair, "had much provoked Voltaire, who never forgives, and never thinks any enemy below his notice." He then gave an account of the article which had appeared in the *Gazette littéraire* and of his own ill-success in keeping it from the public. "I tried," he continued, "to have it suppressed before it was printed; but the authors of that *Gazette* told me that they durst neither suppress nor alter anything that came from Voltaire. I suppose his lordship holds that satiric wit as cheap as he does all the rest of the human race; and will not be in the least mortified by his censure."<sup>1</sup>

It is hardly necessary to say that Voltaire's review is delightful reading. He could always be depended upon to be entertaining. He was so witty, indeed, that he was even witty when he tried to be. He could not

<sup>1</sup> Burton's Hume, vol. ii. p. 193; Letter of April 26, 1764.

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indeed save himself from perpetrating a blunder; he began with a most unnecessary one. Frenchmen have never been noted for the accuracy with which they reproduce foreign names; and it must be admitted that for the man of any nationality not to commit this particular error in the case of another speech requires not only extensive knowledge but perpetual vigilance. But of all offenders in this respect Voltaire was much the worst. It seems to have required great familiarity on his part with an English author to enable him to spell his name correctly. He played all sorts of fantastic tricks with the letters. He varied their order. He substituted others for those which the man himself had chosen to employ. If a letter was doubled he omitted one; if it was single he doubled it. For illustration, Addison's name usually appeared as Addisson or Adisson. Walpole was sometimes Walpool, Van Brugh was Wanbruck, Otway was Otwai. Mistakes of this sort, of no great importance in themselves, could be pardoned were they the mere accident of momentary inattention or of a failing memory; but some of the most flagrant examples are where the author's names must have been before his eyes. The present is a case in point. Lord Kames appears as "Lord Makaimes."

Towards his newly created Lord Makaimes, Voltaire maintained throughout an ironically deferential tone. "No one," he remarked, "can have a profounder knowledge of nature and the arts than this philosopher, and he puts forth every effort to render the world as wise as he is himself. He proves to us at the outset that we have five senses, and that we feel less the pleasant im-

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pression made upon our eyes and ears by colors and sounds than we do a kick on the leg or a knock on the head. . . . He teaches us that women pass sometimes from pity to love. . . . In considering the measurements of time and space we come mathematically to the conclusion that time seems long to a girl who is going to be married, and short to a man who is going to be hanged." It was in this way he travestied some of the statements and arguments in the work. After further criticising Kames's censures of Corneille and Racine, and his assertions of their inferiority to the divine Shakespeare, Voltaire indulged in an ironically contemplative comment upon the treatise itself and the country from which it came. "It is a wonderful result of the progress of human culture," he observed, "that at this day there come to us from Scotland rules of taste in all the arts, from epic poetry to gardening. Every day the mind of man expands, and we ought not to despair of receiving ere long treatises on poetry and rhetoric from the Orkney isles. True it is," he added with apparent regretfulness, "that in this country we still prefer to see great artists than great discoursers upon the arts."

In this reply to Kames care had been taken not to say anything of the *Henriade*. No indication was given that a single word had appeared in the work criticised to the discredit of the author of that epic. Voltaire was altogether too crafty to proclaim aloud his own personal grievances. The bare mention of these would have been certain to send to the study of this treatise the hostile critics of his own country. Without this particular incentive he could rely upon their not being tempted to

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look into an English book upon such a subject. He therefore took care that no hint should be given that either he himself or his views had been attacked. It was not his own cause that he represented himself as defending. It was that of Corneille and Racine, and therefore that of taste and art. He is none the less to be credited with perfect sincerity. There is no question that he honestly believed that the adoption by the French of the methods of the English stage would be a return to barbarism. Yet, for all that, the feeling which inspired his article was personal, and not national. The sensitiveness he showed both then and afterwards to the censures of Kames proves conclusively how much nearer to his heart was his anxiety about his own fame than about the fortunes of French literature. It was not care for the reputation of Corneille and Racine that troubled him; it was care for his own. The condemnation of the *Henriade* as a failure, coming as it did from a comparatively obscure Scotch judge, could hardly have affected him more had it been pronounced by Aristotle himself. His resentment ceased only with his life.

The biographer of Mrs. Montagu tells us that Kames read to her the article of Voltaire, not only laughing himself but raising inexpressible laughter in his listener.<sup>1</sup> Of the amusement it gave the lady, we need feel no doubt. That of the former probably resembled more the grim sort of smiling which an Indian exhibits when tortured at the stake. Yet Kames could not have failed to recognize the effectiveness of the blow he had dealt.

<sup>1</sup> Doran's 'Lady of the Last Century,' p. 163.

It made itself more apparent as time went on. Voltaire speedily returned to the attack. A few years after came out his story entitled *L'Homme aux quarante écus*. It concludes with a supper at which many subjects are discussed. In the report given of the conversation that went on, a rough assault is mentioned as having been made upon the French stage by a Scotch judge, who had taken it into his head to lay down rules of taste, and to criticise some of the most admirable passages of Racine without knowing French. Not satisfied with this allusion, Voltaire appended a note. Its object was to illustrate by a remarkable example how this great Scottish judge instructed his readers as to the manner in which heroes of tragedy ought to express themselves in order to express themselves with *esprit*. The passage selected was the speech made by Falstaff in presenting his prisoner, Sir John Coleville, to Prince John of Lancaster in the second part of 'Henry IV.'<sup>1</sup> Kames had introduced it into his work as a specimen of wit in the thought, and particularly of that sort of wit which is created by ludicrous images. Voltaire seized upon the citation. He translated it in full. To his version he added the comment that this absurd and abominable gallimaufry, very frequent in the divine Shakespeare, is what Mr. John Home proposes as the model of good taste and wit in tragedy. "But, in recompense," he added, "Mr. Home finds the *Iphigénie* and the *Phèdre* of Racine extremely ridiculous."

The representation of Kames as not knowing French, it suited Voltaire to assert, apparently on the ground

<sup>1</sup> Act iv. sc. 3.

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that had he known French he would not have made the criticisms he did. The further assertion that because exception had been taken to certain passages in Racine's plays, these plays had been found extremely ridiculous, is merely an illustration of that convenient and delightful kind of memory which enables its possessor, whenever it suits his purpose, not only to forget what the object of his attack has said, but to recollect what he has not said. But his comments upon his own critic are of slightest importance when contrasted with those to which he gave free scope upon the extract from Shakespeare. No more amusing set of blunders, exhibiting all sorts of misconception and misinformation, was ever perpetrated by Voltaire himself than what he accomplished in the limits of this brief note. We need not find too much fault with his calling 'Henry IV.' a tragedy, or with his representation of Falstaff presenting his prisoner to the king instead of the king's son, or with his christening the author whom he was criticising with the name of John instead of Henry. Petty details of this sort, he would have said contemptuously, are not worth heeding. But why does he style the speech he translated a piece of abominable buffoonery? Why is it utterly inappropriate to be said by the person speaking it, or to be heard by the person to whom it is spoken? Voltaire gives us to understand the reason in introducing his version of the passage in question. It is inappropriate, it is buffoonery, because it comes from the Lord Chief Justice. As he had converted a younger son of the king into the king himself, so he further proceeded to elevate Falstaff to this high judicial position. It is the

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putting a speech of such a character into the mouth of such a dignitary that led him to regard the passage as absurd and abominable. The blending of the Lord Chief Justice and Falstaff into one person — especially considering their relation to each other in the play — is as amusing as anything that Falstaff has been reported by Shakespeare as ever having uttered himself.

The origin of the blunder is easy to trace. In the list of the personages of the play in the editions to which Voltaire had access, the Lord Chief Justice appears simply under that title. His name is not given. He is immediately followed by Sir John Falstaff. Voltaire had gathered whatever knowledge he then possessed or remembered of these two characters, not from reading the piece itself, but from reading the extract taken from it by Kames, and from consulting the list of dramatis personæ printed at its beginning. When he saw the two in close conjunction, he jumped to the conclusion that Falstaff and the unnamed Lord Chief Justice, who preceded him on the page, were one and the same person. It is not the only instance in which he manifested the amazing extent of his ignorance of this famous character. As in the tale just mentioned he had raised him to high judicial position, so in his 'Philosophical Dictionary' he promoted him correspondingly in the military service. A part of the article on 'Taste' in that work was given up to pointing out the superiority of the great French to the great English dramatist. "One does not see in Corneille," he remarked, "an heir to the throne talking to a general of the army with the beautiful naturalness which



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Shakespeare sets forth in the Prince of Wales who subsequently became Henry IV." Then follows a translation of the speech of the Prince to Falstaff in reply to the inquiry of the latter as to the time of day.<sup>1</sup> Voltaire's criticism is interesting for the ignorance both of English literature and of English history which it displays. It is hardly necessary to say that the Falstaff of Shakespeare became a general of the army about the time the Prince of Wales, with whom he converses, became king under the title of Henry IV.

In another article<sup>2</sup> in this same 'Philosophical Dictionary, Voltaire made some further comments upon his Scotch critic. He was engaged in his favorite occupation of celebrating the beauty of certain passages in Racine. One of them contained a line which had fallen under the condemnation of Kames. He turned abruptly aside from his disquisition on the beauty of sentiment and of verse to be found in the play he was considering, in order to inform the world that a Scotch judge, who has sought to give rules of poetry and of taste to his countrymen, has declared that he does not like the verse, —

"Mais tout dort, et l'armée, et les vents, et Neptune."

Had he only known that it was an imitation of Euripides, it might perhaps have found favor in his eyes; but he prefers the answer of the soldier in the first scene of 'Hamlet,'

"Not a mouse stirring."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Henry IV. Part 1, act i. sc. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Art dramatique*.

<sup>3</sup> Voltaire translates these words here, *Je n'ai pas entendu une souris trotter*, in another place, *Je n'ai pas vu trotter une souris*.

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This is natural, he represents Kames as saying; this is the way a soldier ought to speak. Voltaire's further comment sets sharply before us the difference in the point of view from which tragic representation was then looked at by the two nations. "Yes, my lord judge," he wrote, "it is natural in a guard-house, but not in a tragedy. Know that the French against whom you inveigh, admit simplicity, but not what is low and coarse. One must be sure of the goodness of his taste before establishing it as law. I am sorry for the litigants, if you judge them as you judge poetry."

Voltaire himself never had the slightest doubt of the goodness of his own taste. That a Scotchman should presume to have a taste opposed to his filled him with disgust. Kames had furnished him with many opportunities for experiencing this feeling. There were several passages in his work in which the views entertained by Voltaire were controverted, though with no mention of his name and possibly with no thought of him personally. The doctrine of the unities in particular had been attacked with much vigor. Views of this sort might have been put forth without subjecting their holder to comment; not so the strictures upon the *Henriade*. Voltaire showed how profoundly he had been irritated by them in the defence he kept making, never ostensibly of himself, but always of his countrymen. "The author of the three volumes of the 'Elements of Criticism'" he wrote, "censures Shakespeare sometimes; but he censures much more Racine and our tragic writers." He admitted the justice of one of the criticisms of Corneille, but he went on to assert that

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the French dramatist not only rose higher than the English one, but that he never sank so low. The opinion would have had more weight had he not sought to fortify it by examples. These, as we have seen, did not so much illustrate Voltaire's knowledge of his art, as it did his ignorance of the author he was discussing.

On his part Kames was surprised — at any rate he affected surprise — at the commotion he had caused. In a note to a later edition — the fifth edition of 1774 — he apologized for what he had said about the *Henriade*. His apology remains to this day altogether the best thing in his book which is purely original. In a bland way he expressed great regret for having indulged in the strictures he had made, though carefully implying at the same time that they were unquestionably true. The reading of this apology must have been gall and wormwood to Voltaire's sensitive nature, if it ever fell under his eye, which it is likely its writer took care that it should. It is not at all improbable that the renewed outburst against Kames which appeared two years later in the 'Letter to the French Academy' owed its origin to this note. It was substantially as follows. "When I commenced author," observed Kames, "my aim was to amuse, and perhaps to instruct, but never to give pain." There is something peculiarly delightful to the reader of his work in finding its writer saying in all sincerity that it had been his principal object to amuse. Coke might as justly have avowed such a motive for writing the 'Institutes.' There is more ground for the assertion that it had never been his design to give pain. Accordingly he had taken care, he said, to avoid commenting

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upon the productions of living authors. But the *Henriade* had furnished so fair an opportunity to illustrate the doctrines of the text, that he had yielded in this instance to the temptation, and had broken his rule. But he had had no idea that his slight criticisms would ever reach Voltaire. To his surprise he found that they had done so, and that they had stirred up some resentment. At this he was afflicted. He had no right to wound the mind any more than the body. Besides, his course showed ingratitude to a celebrated author from whom he had derived much entertainment. The only excuse he could make was that he had no intention to give offence. At this point came in the sting which accompanied all this honey. He did not regard it as an excuse, he added, that his criticism was just. But as his offence was public, he took the opportunity to make the apology equally so. "I hope it will be satisfactory," he concluded. "Perhaps not; I owe it, however, to my own character."

It would have required a peculiarly constituted mind to regard it as satisfactory. With all his genius Voltaire could not well have concocted a better example of that mean sort of apology which does not apologize. While professing to draw it out, Kames had turned the blade in the wound. He was right, however, in thinking that even the most abject excuses would have been of no avail. Voltaire never got over the criticism which had censured the *Henriade* as cold and unnatural, which had blamed its action as being too recent and familiar, and had declared that its reputation could be only short-lived. It hurt him the more because he thought and

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said that Kames had made some very excellent observations; and the judgment he had displayed in these rendered him especially sensitive to the discredit cast upon his own production. He cherished his resentment to his dying day. In his attack upon Shakespeare towards the close of his life, in the famous letter sent to the French Academy, he could not refrain from bringing in again an allusion to his critic. He spoke of him as a great Scottish judge who had published a work which he was now careful to call, not 'Elements of Criticism,' but 'Elements of English Criticism.' In this its author had had the misfortune to compare the first scene of that monstrosity called 'Hamlet' with the first scene of that masterpiece of French literature, the *Iphigénie* of Racine. The old complaint was revived; the old comparison was lugged in. The mouse the sentinel had not seen was once more brought to the view of a French audience. It had not actually stirred in the English play; but after the publication of Kames's work it never ceased to disturb Voltaire's rest as long as he lived.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE VOLTAIRE-WALPOLE CORRESPONDENCE

FROM the blow which the criticism of Kames had inflicted upon his vanity, Voltaire never entirely recovered. A little later he had the opportunity of observing another example of the perversity of the countrymen of Addison, in a quarter where once he would have least expected to find it. He could gather from it additional evidence which went to show that the fanaticism of the English in their worship of the monstrous creations of their favorite dramatist had now taken complete possession of all classes. That select company of superior beings in which he had found many sympathizers during his residence in England, was giving every indication of disappearing as a recognizable body. It had always been limited in influence; it was now becoming limited in numbers. Its views lingered in a languishing way in the critical literature of the time. But rarely was it the case that they were proclaimed in the self-assured tone which had formerly characterized their utterance. How far this blind admiration of Shakespeare was extending was brought home to Voltaire by a correspondence—it is hardly proper to call it a controversy—which in 1768 he carried on with Horace Walpole. The challenge he offered was declined with insincerities as flattering as any which he himself had ever used. There was an

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affected submission to the strength of his arguments. He was highly gratified by the extravagance of the praise he received ; but it is hardly credible that he could have been imposed upon by his correspondent's pretended recantation of his opinions.

Walpole's 'Castle of Otranto' had come out anonymously at the very end of 1764. A few months later appeared the second edition, to which he contributed an additional preface. In this he acknowledged the authorship of the work, and described the motives which had led to its production. It was an attempt to blend two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. The incidents of the story were to be as marvellous and improbable as in the former ; the personages were to think and talk and act as naturally as they did in the latter. For that reason he had made the inferior characters behave and express themselves as they would be expected to do in real life. In so doing he professed to have followed the example of "that great master of nature, Shakespeare." He avowed his approval of much-disapproved passages in the works of that dramatist on the ground that they added by contrast to the beauty and effectiveness of the play. Among these, a good deal to the horror of some professional critics of the time, he specifically mentioned the grave-diggers' scene in 'Hamlet.'

These sentiments led him to combat the views expressed in the 'Commentaries on Corneille' about the mixture of the comic and the tragic in the same play. Such a practice had been there declared intolérable. Against this assertion Walpole appealed to Voltaire's

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own words, found in places where it was not his object either to recommend or to decry the course adopted by English dramatists, especially by the greatest of them all. These consequently might be justly supposed to reflect his impartial judgment. Of Voltaire himself he spoke with respect, indeed with admiration. But he added that while he was a genius, he was not a genius, of Shakespeare's magnitude. He believed—which was to some extent true—that he was receding from the liberality of his earlier opinions. Contrasting indeed his present utterances with his past, Walpole expressed himself sorry to see that Voltaire's judgment was growing weaker, when it ought to be further matured.

To maintain that the genius of Voltaire was inferior to that of Shakespeare would strike many, perhaps most Frenchmen, of that time with as much surprise, not to say horror, as it would similarly strike men now to say that it was superior. But to no one then would it have seemed a greater profanation than to Voltaire himself. I have called attention to the fact that, in the preface to his translation of 'Julius Cæsar,' he had pointed out with the serenest satisfaction that any one who took the pains to compare his version of Shakespeare's play with his own *Mort de César* could easily decide whether the tragic art had made any advance since the days of Elizabeth. But Walpole had not been content with asserting Voltaire's inferiority as a dramatic poet. He had carried his rank heresy still farther. He had impugned his competency as a critic. He indulged in a note to the effect that Voltaire's knowledge of the force and power of the English language was about on a level with his



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knowledge of English history. Of his ignorance of the latter he gave a glaring example. To his annotations upon Pierre Corneille, the commentator had appended remarks upon two pieces of Thomas Corneille, which still held then their place upon the stage. One of these bore the title of *Le Comte d'Essex*, the favorite of Queen Elizabeth. The younger brother did not fare much better at the hands of the critic than the elder. A great deal had Voltaire to say of the gross perversions of truth in this piece, the plot of which was based upon events which had occurred so near the time of its production. It could be palliated, but not pardoned, on the ground that French audiences were then totally ignorant of English history. Consequently they were not affected by the manifest impropriety of representing the young Essex and an old woman like Queen Elizabeth as lovers. Now they were better instructed. In consequence such misrepresentations of fact would no longer be tolerated.

Accordingly, from his ample stores of historical knowledge Voltaire set out to correct the errors of the author and to supply precise information to his countrymen. With this object in view he was led to give an account of the successive favorites of Queen Elizabeth. The first, he said, was Robert Dudley, son to the Duke of Northumberland. This lover, he went on to inform his readers, was succeeded by the Earl of Leicester. The observation did not tend to inspire confidence in the exactness of the information he was seeking to impart. By making it he had advertised his ignorance of the fact that Robert Dudley and the Earl of Leicester were one and

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the same person. The mistake derived its importance, such as it was, from its occurrence in critical remarks which laid special stress upon the necessity of accuracy in a work of the imagination — a place where accuracy is of the very least possible account. Walpole dwelt upon the blunder with ill-concealed satisfaction. It was not the only error in Voltaire's somewhat pretentious historical note of which he could have taken notice. In particular the famous story of the cloak, laid at Elizabeth's feet, was in it transferred from Raleigh to Essex. He contented himself, however, with specifying the conversion of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, into two persons. This he introduced mainly to show that the severe criticisms of Voltaire upon Shakespeare were more likely the effusions of wit and precipitation than the result of judgment and attention.

Three years later Walpole brought out his 'Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of Richard III.' Notice of this latter work — he had doubtless never heard of the previous one — came to Voltaire's ears. He wrote to the author and begged of him a copy.<sup>1</sup> Walpole was unquestionably flattered by the request. It was like an intimation from a great monarch to a commoner that his acquaintance was desired. At the same time he was disconcerted by it and somewhat disturbed. There came into his mind the recollection of the censure passed on Voltaire's views, and the comparison between his genius and that of Shakespeare, which he had made in the preface to his romance. This work had

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Voltaire to Walpole, June 8, 1768, in Lord Orford's Works (1798), vol. v. p. 629.

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the year before been translated into French. It was likely at any moment to fall into the hands of the man whose glance swept at intervals the whole literature of Europe. The only course which it seemed to him proper to follow was to have the opinions which he had expressed come to Voltaire's knowledge directly from himself.

This was the action he determined to take. Accordingly he wrote to Voltaire that while he appreciated the honor done him, he felt that with justice to himself he could not comply with his request without sending him also the volume containing the criticisms he had previously expressed. All this was accompanied with many marks of homage to the greatness of the man he addressed, and many complimentary expressions. The historical work, he said, he sent with fear and trembling to the first genius of Europe who had illustrated every science. Whatever merit there were in his own writings, provided any merit existed at all, was due to his having studied those of Voltaire. But the other book stood on a different footing. In the preface to this trifling romance, as he termed it, he had taken the liberty to find fault with the criticisms which the French author had made on Shakespeare. He could not therefore accept even the honor of Voltaire's correspondence, without letting him judge whether he deserved it. "I might retract," he continued, — "I might beg your pardon; but having said nothing but what I thought, nothing illiberal or unbecoming a gentleman, it would be treating you with ingratitude and impertinence to suppose you would either be offended with my remarks,

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or pleased with my recantation. You are as much above wanting flattery, as I am above offering it to you.”<sup>1</sup> It is no easy matter to tell whether the former or the latter part of this final sentence contains the greater falsehood.

Voltaire did not altogether like this letter; but he liked far less the criticism found in the preface to ‘The Castle of Otranto.’ To most of his countrymen one of the remarks contained in it would have been more than startling. Walpole’s friend, the Marquise du Deffand, to whom he communicated all these details, was a good deal disturbed when she learned of that extraordinary comparison between the genius of Shakespeare and of Voltaire. With the latter she corresponded, though her admiration of his character was clearly not equal to her admiration of his abilities. Of these she had the then usual extravagant estimate. She could not read a line of English; her knowledge of Shakespeare was of the vaguest and shadowiest character. But the imputation of his superiority to her celebrated countryman shocked her beyond expression. She recognized the terrible nature of the provocation given. Knowing Voltaire as she did, she could not conceive of his ever forgiving it. “You have determined that Shakespeare had more genius than he,” she wrote to Walpole. “Do you believe that he will pardon you? It is all that I — even I — can do to pardon you.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter of June 21, 1768, in Cunningham’s ‘Letters of Horace Walpole,’ vol. v. p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of June 28, 1768; ‘Letters of the Marquise du Deffand to Horace Walpole’ (1810), vol. i. p. 244.

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It is right to say here — it is further a symptom of the change coming over the national taste — that this correspondence between the two men set the Marquise a little later to re-reading, as she said, or more probably to reading for the first time, the English dramatist. Of course it was in the translation of La Place. The perusal filled her with enthusiasm. "I cannot express to you," she wrote to Walpole, "what an effect these pieces have wrought upon me. They have done to my soul what Lillium does to the body, they have resuscitated me. Oh! I admire your Shakespeare; he makes me adopt all his faults. He almost makes me believe that there is no necessity of any rules, that rules are the trammels of genius; they chill, they stifle. . . . There are many things in bad taste, I agree to it, and which can easily be cut out. But for the failure of the three unities, far from being shocked by it, I approve of it, there result from it such grand beauties. . . . Ah! there is a course of reading which pleases me, which is going to occupy me for some time."<sup>1</sup>

But though Voltaire did not like what he read, he returned in kind the compliments he had received.<sup>2</sup> He found the preface to Walpole's historical work too short. He praised the philosophic mind of the author and his manly style. He told him that his father had been a great minister and an excellent speaker, but he could never have written so well as did his son. After various flattering remarks of this nature he set out to reply to what had been said in the preface to 'The Castle of Otranto.' He protested against the accusa-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* p. 279; letter of Dec. 15, 1768.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of July 15, 1768.

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tion that he undervalued Shakespeare; he complained that in the existence of this disposition on his part the English were now too much inclined to believe. He proceeded to set forth, in the way which had become habitual to him, his own services. He had been the first to make English literature known to his countrymen. He had proclaimed the greatness of Locke and Newton, and for so doing he had been persecuted for thirty years by a swarm of fanatics. "I have been your apostle and your martyr," he wrote; "in truth, it is not just for the English to complain of me." As for Shakespeare himself, he had long ago said that had it been the good fortune of that dramatist to have lived in the time of Addison, he would have combined with his own genius Addison's purity and elegance. His genius, he had asserted, was his own; his faults were the faults of his age.

Not satisfied with defending himself from this particular charge, Voltaire proceeded to reply to criticisms found in this preface in which the excellence of Shakespeare was only indirectly involved. The superiority of the French stage to that of all other nations was with him a cherished article of faith. The sincerity with which he believed it, the tenacity with which he held it, the frequency and fervor with which he proclaimed it, will go far to account for the fury into which he later fell as he contemplated the derelictions of some of his countrymen in the preference they expressed for the English drama and its great dramatist. A quarter of a century before, in the epistle to Maffei prefixed to *Méropé* he had maintained the superiority of the stage

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of France to that of Greece. He there expressed himself as disposed to believe that a more refined taste existed in the modern country than in the ancient. In the principal city of Greece, theatrical pieces, he said, appear to have been represented only on the occasion of the four solemn festivals; whereas in the principal city of France there was always more than one every day of the year. Further, at Athens the number of citizens was computed at only ten thousand; while Paris had nearly eight hundred thousand inhabitants, of whom about thirty thousand were competent critics of dramatic performances, and passed judgment upon them almost every day of their lives.

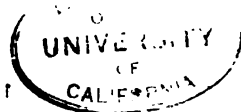
Remarks of this sort had amused Walpole, as well they might. They gave him ample opportunity to indulge in somewhat sarcastic comments, of which he had not been slow to avail himself. Voltaire had remarked that the familiar dialogue found in the *Merope* of Maffei, natural as it was and agreeable to the characters and manners represented, would doubtless have been well received at Athens; but he implied that it would have met with scant favor at Paris. There, he said, they expected a simplicity of another kind. It struck Walpole that even thirty thousand men, assuming the existence of this numerous tribunal, living two thousand years after the events made the subject of a tragedy, were hardly as competent judges of the manners belonging to a Greek play as were the Greeks themselves. The amusement he expressed at the preference given to the verdict rendered by the parterre of Paris over that of an Athenian audience nettled Voltaire a

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good deal. The subject was too important in his eyes to be treated jestingly. "You have made game of me to some extent," he wrote to Walpole. "The French understand raillery; but I am going to answer you seriously."

And with the utmost seriousness he repeated all his previous assertions. "I have believed," he wrote, "I believe, and I shall believe that Paris is much superior to Athens in the matter of tragedies and comedies. Molière, and even Regnard, appear to me to surpass Aristophanes. . . . I will say to you boldly that all the Greek tragedies seem to me to be the work of school-boys in comparison with the sublime scenes of Corneille and the perfect tragedies of Racine." He repeated also his previous remark about the audiences of the two cities. There were, he declared, more men of taste in Paris than in Athens. Against the ten thousand citizens of the latter place he brought forward again the thirty thousand of the former, who took pleasure in the fine arts. Furthermore, one special advantage the stage of the one city had over that of the other: At Athens the populace attended theatrical exhibitions. At Paris they were never permitted to be present save on festival and festive occasions, or when no price was charged for admission. The polished, the refined, were consequently the only judges. In addition, the presence of the female sex, with the deference paid to its feelings and wishes, had imparted more delicacy to French sentiments, more decorum to French manners, more refinement to French taste. "Leave us," he cried, "our theatre. You are rich enough otherwise."





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Without being aware of it himself, Voltaire in these last sentences had hit upon the causes which had been mainly instrumental in producing the divergences between the stage of Shakespeare and that of Corneille and Racine. He had unconsciously pointed out the principal agency which had imparted to each its distinctive character. The English theatre was the theatre of the nation; the French was the theatre of a class. The energy, the liberty, the disregard of useless conventions which Voltaire had found in the drama of the land to which he had come, were not really due, as he fancied, to the different character of the people, any more than was what was in his eyes its rudeness, its license, its disregard of decorum. Similarly the elegance, the delicacy, the beauty of the drama of which he boasted, did not owe their existence to the character of the people he had left behind, any more than did the monotony, the lifelessness, the dull dialogue of which he constantly complained.

These are not and cannot be distinctive features of the stages of different nations in which the social life is essentially the same; they are the marks which distinguish the drama of an aristocracy from that of a whole people. Results essentially alike would have followed in each country, had the conditions been alike. The French theatre was the theatre of the drawing-room, the theatre of women who would shudder at the sight of imaginary blood shed in an imaginary quarrel, the theatre of men who would turn into jest the utterance of deepest emotion, or the portrayal of strong situations which were outside of the conventional repre-

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sentations to which they had been accustomed. The drawing-room may be delightful and beautiful; but it is not the place to develop force and fire. The literature of a class will appeal but to a class, nor to that will it appeal forever. It is a hot-house production as compared with that which springs from the soil and grows in the open air exposed to sunshine and storm. It was here that French classicism had failed. The countrymen and contemporaries of Voltaire were becoming dimly conscious that something was wrong with their drama; that what it had gained in beauty, it had lost in naturalness and power. They were blindly groping about for a remedy. They were beginning to realize in a vague way that no literature of any sort can succeed permanently which does not strike its roots deep down into the national character and life.

With these movements of the spirit Voltaire had so little sympathy that he did not even comprehend their meaning, and felt indignation whenever he came to know of their existence. The long and elaborate letter he sent to Walpole was a manifesto in behalf of the principles and practices of the French stage such as it had come down from the time of Cardinal Richelieu. It was of the nature of a challenge; he spent time and thought upon it in order to provoke a reply. It is plain that he hoped, and pretty certainly expected that a discussion would go on between himself and Walpole. He sent his letter to the Duchess of Choiseul, the wife of the minister. He asked her to read it, and if she approved of his sentiments to have it forwarded. In the course of his letter to her he begged her to take the

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part of the French against the English, with whom he was now at war. The delusion that a controversy upon the comparative merits of Corneille and Shakespeare was a national and not an individual quarrel appears, perhaps for the first time, to have entered his head. Once there, it took complete possession of it. "Judge between Walpole and me," he wrote to the Duchess. "He has sent me his works," he added, "in which he justifies the tyrant, Richard III., for whom neither of us, you or I, care a particle. But he also gives to his vulgar buffoon, Shakespeare, preference over Racine and Corneille, and that is something for which I care a great deal."<sup>1</sup> The clown, the buffoon, were now the epithets which he applied pretty regularly to the English dramatist, especially in his correspondence. The terms represented sentiments which he was beginning to entertain strongly. In public he might speak of Shakespeare's beautiful but savage nature, of his tragedy which like the earth at the creation was without form and void, a chaos out of which flashed intermittently dazzling rays of light; but in his private thoughts he appeared to him more and more the clownish actor, the Gilles who delighted the rustics at market-places and at fairs.

Voltaire, in his letter to the Duchess, had spoken of the communication he had received from Walpole as a declaration of war. He wished her to be the judge of the combat he was carrying on for his country; he wished, he said, to fight under her orders. But Walpole had no more notion of accepting a challenge

<sup>1</sup> Letter of July 15, 1768, to the Duchesse de Choiseul.

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of this sort than he had had of offering one. He may very properly have doubted his abilities when matched against those of Voltaire. In truth he was little calculated to make a defence of Shakespeare, either in consequence of the knowledge he possessed, or the appreciation he felt, great as in many ways the latter certainly was. In his correspondence on this very subject with the Marquise du Deffand he remarked very justly, as regards the preface to 'The Castle of Otranto,' that he had not asserted in it any superiority of the English theatre to the French. Such, however, had been the state of mind attributed to him in the letter which the Duchess of Choiseul had received. The impression to that effect was due to a certain way of understanding, or rather of misunderstanding, on the part of Voltaire, which in cases of this nature he had assiduously cultivated. If any one affirmed his inferiority as a dramatist, he invariably managed to mistake it for an assertion of the inferiority of the French theatre in general and of Corneille and Racine in particular. Walpole's disavowal of the charge was doubtless due in part to the necessity of considering the national susceptibilities of his friend, who had been already sufficiently horrified by his assumption of the superiority of the English dramatist to Voltaire. On other occasions he had stoutly maintained to her that he would be willing to be burned at the stake for the primacy of Shakespeare. "He is," he wrote to her, "the most beautiful genius to which nature has given birth."<sup>1</sup>

But while these feelings had made him a partisan of

<sup>1</sup> Letters of the Marquise du Deffand to Walpole, vol. i. p. 243.

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Shakespeare, they did not equip him for appearing in the rôle of his defender. In fact, over him as over so many hundreds since, the great dramatist had exerted the peculiar power once ascribed to the moon, of addling men's brains and making them mad. In this very volume, dealing with Richard III., appears the first example of that long line of absurd theories connected with Shakespeare's life and writings, which give to the man of melancholy temperament and tendencies gloomy views as to the immense abysses of asininity in human nature which still lurk unexplored. 'The Winter's Tale,' in Walpole's opinion, should be ranked among the Histories. It had been left to him to discover its drift, which had hitherto escaped the notice of critics and commentators. It was intended as an indirect apology for Queen Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn. It therefore constituted in reality the second part of 'Henry VIII.' The unreasonable jealousy of Leontes formed a true picture of that monarch. Passages were cited to prove the fact; and though passages can be cited to prove anything, it must be conceded that these as marshalled by him form a fairly strong argument to show that to be true which we know to be false. Walpole's theory was based upon the assumption that 'The Winter's Tale' — which throughout he persisted in calling 'The Winter Evening's Tale' — was written in the time of Queen Elizabeth; for it was then generally taken for granted that in none of his later productions would Shakespeare have been so reckless of geography, history, and the unities as he had shown himself in all these in this one play. As soon as the assumption was

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proved to be false, the superstructure built upon it fell with its fall.

On any ground, however, Walpole would have been justified in not entering into controversy. As he subsequently said himself, all Englishmen would be substantially on one side, and all Frenchmen on the other. But he had an additional reason for his disinclination. Voltaire, as we have seen, had sent his reply to the Duchess of Choiseul to be forwarded. But the Duchess of Choiseul was herself a friend of Walpole. More than that, she was an intimate friend of the Marquise du Deffand, Walpole's correspondent. To her was not only Voltaire's reply at once shown, but also the letter to the Duchess accompanying it, in which he had expressed his indifference to Richard III., and on the other hand his expectation of taking part in an international quarrel, in which, according to his own account, he had now become involved. The two ladies spent the evening of the day these documents came in reading them together.<sup>1</sup> The Duchess went beyond Voltaire's expectation, and unquestionably beyond his desires, in her willingness to forward his communication. He had given as his reason for seeking to transmit his reply through her instead of the regular channels, that Walpole's declaration of war, as he termed it, had very likely reached him through the Duke. He based this belief upon the fact that it was so spirituelle and polished. It was therefore natural for him to assume that since it was of such a character, it must have found its way to

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of Madame du Deffand to Walpole*; letter of July 21, 1768, vol. i. p. 251.

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him through the medium of her husband, the prime minister. It is hardly credible that Voltaire himself could have fancied that his correspondent would not see through this thinnest of disguises. His course had been dictated merely by the wish to interest the Duchess in the controversy in which he was hoping to become engaged. As a matter of fact he had himself informed Walpole of the proper way to send him the book for which he had asked ; and there is no reason to doubt that it had been forwarded in accordance with his directions. The Duchess could be relied upon not to be duped by the pretence. She more than complied with Voltaire's request. She not only transmitted to Walpole the reply sent through her, but passed over to the Marquise the accompanying letter to herself to be forwarded to him at the same time. This latter action was of course to be kept a secret. In the general game of cheating which was going on, the honors rested easily with the two noble ladies. Voltaire was an adept in every sort of finesse ; but by this time he was assuredly old enough to know that in attempting to practise it on a clever woman, he would be beaten the moment he showed his hand.

Along with the documents went urgent entreaties to Walpole from the Marquise du Deffand not to enter into any controversy with Voltaire about Shakespeare. She herself most cordially approved of the sentiments found in the reply the latter had sent. It struck her as unanswerable, at least at that time. To Voltaire himself she wrote that his letter to Walpole seemed to her a masterpiece of taste, of good sense, of eloquence, of

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politeness, and of various other abstract nouns. "National pride," she added, "is great among the English. They are reluctant to accord us superiority in matters of taste, while we recognize in them complete superiority, with the exception of you, in matters of reasoning."<sup>1</sup> She had not yet read her Shakespeare; and with this belief of hers she doubtless supposed that any controversy about him would result in the speedy annihilation of her English friend. That Voltaire was seeking to have one was evident. This letter of his, she wrote to Walpole, was merely the first skirmish to bring about a little war between you and him in regard to Shakespeare. "In the name of God," she exclaimed, "do not fall into this trap. Get out of the affair as politely as possible, but avoid war." It was her own advice; she added that it was also the advice of the Duchess of Choiseul.<sup>2</sup>

Walpole needed no urging to follow this counsel. It was in fullest accord with both his own convictions and intentions. It had never been his design, he wrote to his correspondent, to enter into a controversy. He saw and said that Voltaire was only seeking an occasion to air his sentiments. That his vanity had been sorely wounded by the declaration of the superiority of Shakespeare to himself was likewise evident. But Walpole's disinclination to continue the discussion was furthermore much increased by the disgust he felt at the double-dealing which Voltaire's letter to the Duchess of Choiseul

<sup>1</sup> Letter of August 14, 1768 to Voltaire: in 'Letters of Madame du Deffand to Walpole,' vol. iv. p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. vol. i. p. 251. Letter of July 21, 1768.



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revealed. He pointed out to the Marquise the kind of good faith which had been exhibited in the matter. "He seeks me out," he wrote, "he asks of me my 'Richard,' I send it to him, and then he speaks of it as if I had been intriguing to get him to read it."<sup>1</sup> However, he assured his anxious friend that he would take occasion to soothe Voltaire's wounded feelings in his reply, a copy of which he would transmit to her. He carried out his promise so effectually that she was deceived by it herself, or at least pretended to be deceived. "Walpole," she wrote to Voltaire, "is thoroughly converted; his past errors must be pardoned."<sup>2</sup> When the originals of this correspondence came into Walpole's possession after her death, he wrote a comment against this assertion, that it was only the friendship of the Marquise for him that had led her to make such a statement, which he certainly had never authorized. "I had broken off all commerce with Voltaire," he added, "being indignant at his falsehoods and his petty tricks." Walpole's own self-love had been a good deal hurt by the slighting mention of his 'Richard III.' made in the letter to the Duchess of Choiseul, as well as by the implication conveyed in it that he had been plotting to secure from the French author a recognition of the work. He never got over this feeling.

But on the present occasion he made no manifestation of it. He set out to perform a certain task, and fully did he carry through what he had planned. When it

<sup>1</sup> Letters of Madame du Deffand to Walpole, vol. i. p. 252.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. vol. iv. p. 100.

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came to exchanging compliments he proved himself no unworthy competitor of the most skilled adulator of Europe, if indeed it be not conceded that he displayed decided superiority. There was assuredly a delicacy, an artistic finish in his falsehoods which his correspondent never surpassed. He could not, to be sure, rival Frederick the Great in the extent and profusion of praise he lavished upon the patriarch of Ferney. He was not equal to saying, as did the king, that here was a Frenchman who had surpassed Vergil in his own art; that in this one man were united the different merits of Sophocles, Euripides, Thucydides, and Quintus Curtius. But then Frederick was sincere in these wholesale laudations, at least at intervals; whereas Walpole had to struggle to express views he did not hold, and to coin phrases not one of which he believed. To him, therefore, must be awarded that credit which is bestowed upon the artist who triumphs over obstacles apparently insurmountable. He had fulfilled the condition which Voltaire was wont to proclaim as one of the tests of genius, that the greater the difficulty, the greater the glory.

Full of flattering remarks as had been his first letter, Walpole surpassed it altogether in this reply. He made amplest confession of his error. One would wish to be in the wrong, he said, in order to have his mistakes pointed out in so obliging and masterly a manner. He would consider Shakespeare himself to blame, if he had seen Voltaire's reply and had then failed to conform to the rules laid down in it. "When he lived," he continued, "there had not been a Voltaire both to give laws to the stage, and to show on what good sense those laws were

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founded." He was prouder of receiving rules from him than of contesting them. It had been presumptuous on his part to dispute with him before making his acquaintance through this correspondence. Now it would be ungrateful, since he had been both noticed and forgiven. Voltaire was one of those truly great and rare men who know at once how to conquer and to pardon.<sup>1</sup>

Other flattering falsehoods of this sort are scattered up and down the pages of this not very long letter. Walpole was apparently uncertain which to admire more in the man he was addressing, the greatness of his genius or the goodness of his heart. One would suppose that Voltaire, unless totally incapacitated by vanity, should have felt the ring of insincerity in these words, even if he did not suspect them of irony. Yet there is nothing in his writings to indicate that any impression of either sort had been made upon his mind. He was so used to receiving as well as dispensing incense, pungent and penetrating enough to offend ordinary nostrils, that it is possible that what seems to us fumes absolutely unendurable may have afforded his organs nothing more than an agreeable titillation. Certain it is he henceforth always spoke of Walpole with much respect. The latter deserved some such recognition for the skill with which he effected a retreat from a contest in which success would have depended, not on the weight of the argument, but upon the prejudices of the reader. Furthermore, he had a right to plume himself upon the fact that on his correspondent's own field of adulation he had met

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Walpole to Voltaire, July 27, 1768; Cunningham's 'Letters of Walpole,' vol. v. p. 112.

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him squarely and had had no reason to feel a sense of inferiority. To him in the interchange of complimentary mendacities which went on between the two, the palm must in justice be awarded. From another and a higher point of view his letter was distinctly discreditable. He was utterly insincere. He not only disbelieved what he had written, but in his secret heart he was ashamed of himself for having written it. The result followed which might have been expected. With all his admiration for his genius, he never thought or spoke well of Voltaire again.

## CHAPTER XIV

### TWO NEW ENGLISH ADVERSARIES

BEFORE the correspondence described in the last chapter had taken place, a mightier antagonist than Voltaire had ever met loomed up for a moment. Had the preliminary skirmishes which occurred developed into a regular conflict, there would have been a battle-royal which would have been memorable in the history of literary controversy. In 1765, Dr. Johnson had brought out his edition of Shakespeare. In its celebrated preface he had said a good deal to irritate the admirers of his author ; but he had said a great deal more to irritate the critics who for a century had been trying to measure the gigantic proportions of the great Elizabethan by the limited tape-lines of their rules. To many of the views then generally accepted he had run counter. He had treated the unities with disrespect. In his opinion they gave more trouble to the poet than pleasure to the auditor. He had further defended tragi-comedy. Not only had he spoken of the theories he combated as foolish, but he had strongly insinuated that those holding them were fools. He represented that the course adopted by Shakespeare had exposed him to the censures of critics who formed their judgments upon narrower principles than those which the dramatist himself had adopted.

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Two of these critics — one a native and one a foreigner — he mentioned in the same paragraph; and the Frenchman could hardly have been pleased at finding himself associated with the Englishman who was selected for animadversion. The latter was John Dennis, the then generally depreciated critic of a bygone age. He had found fault with Shakespeare because in his 'Coriolanus,' Menenius, a Roman senator, had been converted into a buffoon. This was a view of the character which would naturally meet with the approval of Voltaire. In a note to his version of 'Julius Cæsar' he had himself remarked that Casca had been made a sort of buffoon. What Johnson had specially in mind, however, was the disgust the French author had expressed because the king in 'Hamlet' had been represented as a drunkard. Neither of these hostile criticisms can be accepted as merited, because neither of them had any justification in fact. It requires a thorough-going belief not so much in the dignity of tragedy as in its pomposity, to consider Menenius a buffoon. That he is very far from being, though he has the wit to clothe his wisdom in humorous language. Claudius too is represented in 'Hamlet' as being fond of drinking; but nowhere does he appear in a state of intoxication. Johnson accepted, however, both these characterizations as correct. He defended the propriety of them in the places where they appeared. Shakespeare he said, wanted a buffoon, and wanting one, he went into the senate-house for that which the senate-house would certainly have afforded him. He wanted to make the Danish ruler not only odious but despicable. Therefore he added to his other

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vices that of drunkenness, to which kings are subject as well as other men. Shakespeare had made nature predominant over accident. Preserving the essential character he had not paid much heed to distinctions which were superinduced or adventitious. After pointing out in this way the futility of the criticisms which he had been combating, he summed up his opinion of them and of those who had uttered them in the following words: "These," he wrote, "are the petty cavils of petty minds."

The cavils might be petty; but the mind of the man who had given them utterance was not petty, and Johnson knew it. The hostility which Voltaire's criticism of Shakespeare had evoked in England often took now, as in this case, the form of unwarrantable personal depreciation. There were several other passages in this noted preface in which his views were attacked and he himself slightly mentioned. In his disdainful rejection of the obligation of the unities Johnson had observed that the violations of these rules were becoming to the comprehensive genius of Shakespeare, while the censures passed upon him for disregarding them were suitable to the minute and slender criticisms of Voltaire. The French author was unquestionably stung by the somewhat contemptuous tone that was employed. He had indeed a right to resent it. Whether his views were correct or absurd, — and very absurd at this day they seem to most — the epithet of "petty" applied to a man of his intellectual powers and rank was indefensible. He noticed the attack in one of the essays now found in his 'Philosophical Dictionary.' It is the one which treats of

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‘Dramatic Art.’ In it he repeated all his old criticisms of the English theatre. He spoke of it as full of life and passion, but uniting in the same piece buffoonery and horror. The unities of time and place are grossly violated. The vilest of the rabble appear on the stage along with the greatest princes; and the princes often use the language of the rabble.

But he had also something to say of the attack upon himself in this preface of which mention has just been made. “I have cast my eyes,” he remarked, “over an edition of Shakespeare put forth by Mr. Samuel Jonhson.” He was true to the habit early acquired and steadily maintained. With the very volume before him he could not succeed in spelling properly the name of the author whose views he was combating. “I have seen,” he continued, “that in it those foreigners are treated as possessing petty minds who are astonished to find in the pieces of this great Shakespeare a Roman senator playing the buffoon, and a king appearing on the stage intoxicated. I do not wish to suspect Mr. Jonhson of being a sorry jester and to be too fond of wine: but I find it a little extraordinary that he counts buffoonery and drunkenness among the beauties of the tragic theatre.” This is language far more courteous than that of his antagonist; but as an argument it cannot be said to be particularly conclusive. The real point in dispute had been evaded.

In truth any prepossession in favor of Voltaire due to the greater politeness of the language he employed is rudely shaken by finding him once more resorting in this article to his old and disreputable trick of selecting, as



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peculiarly representative of Shakespeare, passages which he believed would be specially offensive to his own countrymen either on the score of delicacy or of dramatic art. He quoted the line of Vergil which represented the Britons as utterly separated from the rest of the world. The implication was that it was as true of their taste as of their geographical position. For confirmation he referred his readers to that exact translation of the first three acts of 'Julius Cæsar,' the exactness of which we have learned to know too well. He quoted again the coarse sentence in the speech of Iago in the opening scene of 'Othello,' which twice before had been made to do duty. "It is this," he said, commenting upon it, "which they speak on the tragic stage of London." He gave some further illustrations of what he held forth as distinguishing characteristics of English dramatic art. He translated the short conversation of Cleopatra with the peasant who brings her the asp,<sup>1</sup> and a part of that which went on between Henry V. and the Princess Katharine.<sup>2</sup> To have a king's daughter wooed by a king in the way here represented was to him very strange; so in rendering it, he contrived to make it stranger by some extraordinary blunders.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, he called atten-

<sup>1</sup> Antony and Cleopatra, act v., scene 2.

<sup>2</sup> Henry V., act v., scene 2.

<sup>3</sup> It is not always easy to decide whether Voltaire's mistranslations are due to ignorance or to intention. There are some of slight importance in the two short passages here rendered; but in the interview between the king and the Princess Katharine there are two most extraordinary perversions of the sense. In one of the speeches of the monarch to the princess he tells her that he is glad she cannot understand English, for if she could, "thou wouldst find me such a plain king that thou wouldst think I had sold my farm to buy my crown." Voltaire translated "farm" by

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tion to the scene in this same play in which the princess is represented as trying to learn English from her maid-of-honor. He could not mar it by translation, for it was almost entirely in French. Still, for the benefit of his countrymen he was careful to select from it a peculiarly obscene allusion which, as being in a foreign tongue, the ordinary Englishman would never have understood. He dwelt upon it with unmistakable pleasure. "All this," he added, "has been played for a long time upon the London stage in the presence of the court." This statement was a fabrication of his own. He himself had never seen 'Henry V.' played, nor at that period indeed had many Englishmen. It had been revived for the first time since the Restoration several years after Voltaire had left England. In addition, this last scene upon which he commented — utterly unnecessary to the conduct of the piece — had very certainly never been played since the Elizabethan age.

It must not be inferred that the essay on 'Dramatic Art' consisted entirely of attack. Voltaire was altogether too crafty to resort to a method of criticism which would have detracted from that attitude of impartiality which he affected to maintain. He devoted a few paragraphs to saying something in the way of approval. Yet if his method of censure was objectionable, his praise was much more so. Never in his later years did Voltaire display his venom towards Shakespeare more manifestly

*femme.* The king is further represented as saying that he knew no ways "to mince it in love," — that is, to speak primly and affectedly. Voltaire must have supposed that the king had in view some culinary operation, for he rendered "mince" by *hacher menu*.

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than when he pretended to appear in the rôle of his advocate. Even when his observations are apparently truthful, they exhibit that unvarnished veracity which produces the effect of a lie. In this particular instance he magnanimously set out to defend him against a hostile opinion which either had no existence at all, or owed to his own efforts whatever existence it had. "The Italians, the French," he wrote, "the men of letters of every country who have not dwelt some time in England, take him only for a Gille of the fair, for a *farceur* very much below Harlequin, for the most contemptible buffoon who has ever amused the populace." With a fine sense of fair play he assured his readers that this opinion was a mistake. In spite of the extraordinary stuff with which he had just been regaling them, Shakespeare was really a genius. To demonstrate it, he quoted three short passages from 'Julius Cæsar,' or as he called it, 'The Death of Cæsar.' Nor would he omit, he said, the beautiful monologue of Hamlet which was in everybody's mouth. So once more appeared that extraordinary version of it which had been first published in the 'Philosophical Letters.' Now it was no longer spoken of as having been translated. It had been imitated in French, Voltaire asserted, with that circumspection which is demanded by the language of a people scrupulous to excess in matters of decorum. The necessary inference was that an exact rendering of it would have offended their susceptibilities. To all this followed what he regarded as a concession to English prejudices which justified him in entertaining the highest admiration for his own fairness and candor. Shakespeare would have

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been a perfect poet, had he only lived in the time of Addison.

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Boswell tells us that he urged Johnson to reply to this attack. Voltaire, he justly thought, was an antagonist with whom he should not disdain to contend. Johnson said that he perhaps might; but he never did. His constitutional indolence was pretty certain to prevail over any inclination he may have felt. Besides, he could not fail to see, as did Walpole, that his views would hardly influence any but his own countrymen; and every day they stood less and less in need of being convinced of their truthfulness. In France the only ones who could successfully combat Voltaire on the matters in dispute were Frenchmen themselves; and they had already done this sufficiently to give him perceptible uneasiness. But the task which Johnson refused was taken up by another; taken up perhaps before he had refused it. In the latter part of April, 1769, appeared anonymously a work entitled 'An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare, compared with the Greek and French dramatic poets, with some remarks upon the misrepresentations of Mons. de Voltaire.'

The writer of this work was the noted head of the blue-stocking world, Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu. In undertaking it she was animated by no special hostility to Voltaire personally. She had indeed for him that reluctant admiration which religious souls of a highly intellectual cast could not then keep from exhibiting for the most brilliant man of letters of his time. She entertained the regulation horror of his impiety, but she was also impressed by his wit, even when it was most

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wicked, as in *Candide*; and in her secret heart it would perhaps have been difficult for her to tell which of the two qualities attracted her the most. But like the rest of the English race she was more irritated by his attacks on the greatness of Shakespeare than she was by those on the credibility of the Bible. This found at times peculiarly energetic expression. In 1755 Voltaire's *Orphelin de la Chine* had been published. She wrote to her sister that she had read it without caring for it. "When I compare this indifference," she said, "with the interest, the admiration, the surprise with which I read what the saucy Frenchman calls *les farces monstrueuses* of Shakespeare, I could burn him and his tragedy. . . . Oh! that we were as sure our fleets and armies could drive the French out of America as that our poets and tragedians can drive them out of Parnassus. I hate to see these tame creatures, taught to pace by art, attack fancy's sweetest child."<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Montagu unquestionably thought that she admired Shakespeare. She did so after a fashion; but it was the inept fashion of the earlier half of the eighteenth century, which her advancing and more advanced contemporaries were outgrowing. "Had Shakespeare lived in Sophocles' age and country," she wrote in 1760, "what a writer had he been! what powers had he by nature, and alas! what deficiencies in art!"<sup>2</sup> It was with a faith of this sort that she set out to champion the cause of fancy's sweetest child, and incidentally dislodge his French rivals from their habitations on Par-

<sup>1</sup> Letters of Mrs. Montagu, vol. iv. p. 7; letter of Nov. 18, 1755.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. vol. iv. p. 301; letter of Sept. 10.

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nassus. There was nothing in the contents of the book she published to indicate that it was the work of a woman. Indeed there was a good deal to give the impression that its author was a man. But the secret was not long kept. Manifestly indeed to a pretty large circle it was only officially a secret. In December Mrs. Montagu wrote to a friend in her large style that the authorship having been whispered about, the news had circulated with incredible swiftness. If there had been any doubt about the success of the work, this disclosure would have removed it at once. The first edition of one thousand copies was soon after exhausted. As such books go, this must be deemed a large sale. A second edition appeared in May, 1770, another in 1772, and a fourth in 1776. Others followed later. It was reprinted in Dublin, then the chosen home of the book pirate. As early as 1771 it was translated into German by Eschenburg, who a few years later was to bring out a complete version of Shakespeare's plays. The number of editions, and the way the work was spoken of by men of great and of little ability, furnish an interesting illustration of how much social position and reputation can do to advance the fortunes of a book — especially when a general but superficial acquaintance exists with the subject, coupled with an ignorance of it really profound. How little value such a work may have in itself, it has exceeding value in the history of criticism.

In the periodical press of the time the 'Essay' was spoken of in all cases favorably, and in some cases with unbounded applause. Indeed it is hard, or rather impossible, to believe that the secret of its authorship had

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been kept from the writers in these publications; for in certain instances they reviewed it with an enthusiasm of praise which had never been bestowed by them upon the dramatist whose cause it professed to champion. Its author was described as the only essayist, almost the only critic, who had yet appeared worthy of Shakespeare. If the partisans of Voltaire, said one of them, "have one grain of modesty or candor, the controversy, if so unequal a conflict can be so called, is now at an end."<sup>1</sup> "The age," said the writer further, "has scarcely produced a more fair, judicious, and classical performance of its kind than this essay." Part of the favor with which the book was received was due to its flattery of English self-love. It had charged presumption upon the man who had ventured to impute barbarism and ignorance to a country which understood Sophocles and Euripides as well as any in Europe. This statement was about the only one to which the critic just cited took exception. The author should have said it was a country that understood these tragic writers, not as well as, but better than any other.

But it must not be imagined that it was merely anonymous or long-forgotten writers in long-forgotten reviews who indulged in this enthusiastic language. From all quarters, both at the time and afterward, came praise. An early admirer was George Grenville, a man of special interest to Americans as the originator of the Stamp Act. Within less than a month after the publication of the work he wrote to Lord Lyttelton from his home at Wotton that they were reading the

<sup>1</sup> *Critical Review*, May, 1769, vol. xxvii. pp. 350 ff.

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'Essay' over and over by their fireside, in order to form the taste of their young people.<sup>1</sup> We know that Sir Joshua Reynolds had the highest opinion of the treatise. Warton, in his 'History of English Poetry,' spoke of it as "the most elegant and judicious piece of criticism which the present age has produced."<sup>2</sup> By Harris, in his account of modern critics contained in his 'Philological Enquiries,' the authoress is designated as "the ornament of her sex, the critic and patroness of our illustrious Shakespeare."<sup>3</sup> Potter, in his translation of *Æschylus*, paid profuse compliments to several living writers, but to none more than "the elegant female author of the 'Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare.'" Davies, in his 'Life of Garrick,' thought that the various powers of the great dramatist had been as faithfully, warmly, and even critically described by that actor in his jubilee-ode as had been done, he was almost inclined to say, "by the excellent pen of the learned and judicious Mrs. Montagu."<sup>4</sup> The force of panegyric, it was felt, could no further go. A few years later he returned to the subject in his 'Dramatic Miscellanies' in the course of some comments he was making upon Voltaire's mistakes in his account of 'Hamlet.' "Mrs. Montagu," he there wrote, "has by an incomparable defence of our author, defeated the weak attempts of this envious but brilliant Frenchman to blast the laurels of our great poet."<sup>5</sup>

Equal enthusiasm was felt and expressed for the

<sup>1</sup> Grenville Correspondence, vol. iv. p. 424.

<sup>2</sup> Note in vol. i. (1774), Dissertation i, end of § 2.

<sup>3</sup> Book i. chap. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Vol. ii. p. 225 (ed. of 1806).

<sup>5</sup> Vol. iii. p. 103 (1784-85).



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'Essay' by members of her own sex. All petty female jealousy fled abashed before this wonderful display of critical sagacity. The tuneful virgins of the time had long been in the habit of celebrating the writer as the ornament of the social and literary world. They came forward now to chant her praises again. The spirit which animated them all can be seen, for example, in Hannah More, who had not yet assumed her brevet title of Mrs. In the epilogue to her pastoral drama of 'The Search for Happiness'<sup>1</sup> she commemorated her sister-authoress in these words:

"When all-accomplished Montagu can spread  
Fresh-gathered laurels round her Shakespeare's head."

Tributes like this could be multiplied almost endlessly. As an illustration of a very general feeling, take the way the work was referred to by one of Garrick's female correspondents in a letter written to him from Dijon. She gave expression in it to a very genuine admiration for Voltaire. But one reason of her fondness for him would have been little to his satisfaction, had he known of it. "I own," she wrote, "I think we are all under a peculiar obligation to him, for had he not gone beyond his depth, and injudiciously criticised our immortal Shakespeare, our language would never have been enriched by its masterpiece. I mean Mrs. Montagu's 'Essay,' which does honor to our country and much more to our sex."<sup>2</sup>

All this is somewhat trying to the modern man who

<sup>1</sup> Published in July, 1773.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Mrs. Pye, dated May 16, 1774, 'Garrick Correspondence,' vol. i. p. 628.

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desires to believe that any criticism is worth anything. Yet there is a worst behind. Extravagant as is the laudation which has already been recounted, it was surpassed by the words of one much greater as a man of letters than any of those so far mentioned. Cowper had not yet sunk into insanity ; but he certainly gave alarming indication of the aberration of judgment accompanying it in a letter he wrote to Lady Hesketh in 1788. "I no longer wonder," he said, "that Mrs. Montagu stands at the head of all that is learned, and that every critic veils his bonnet to her superior judgment. I am now reading and have reached the middle of her 'Essay on the Genius of Shakespeare,' a book of which, strange as it may seem, though I must have read formerly, I had absolutely forgot the existence." This loss of memory will not seem so strange to us as it did to Cowper. The work is one which, unless circumstances call attention to it, is of a kind very easy to forget. But it did not so strike the poet. "The learning," he continued, "the good sense, the sound judgment, and the wit displayed in it justify not only my compliment, but all compliments that have either already been paid to her talents, or shall be paid hereafter. Voltaire, I doubt not, rejoiced that his antagonist wrote in English, and that his countrymen could not possibly be judges of the dispute. Could they have known how much she was in the right, and by how many thousand miles the bard of Avon is superior to all their dramatists, the French critic would have lost half his fame among them." It was somewhat unfortunate, in view of this last remark, that Mrs. Montagu's work had been

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translated while Voltaire was still living, and the faith of his admirers had not been perceptibly shaken in consequence.

Of all the prominent men of letters of the time Dr. Johnson was perhaps the only one who avowed dissent from the high estimate taken of the work. His unfavorable opinion was genuine, because it was given before he knew who was its author; it was unprejudiced because in it he himself had been complimented. He expressed surprise to Boswell that Reynolds should be fond of the book. "Neither I, nor Beauclerk, nor Mrs. Thrale could get through it," he added. When this disparaging remark was published in the 'Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides,' Mrs. Thrale, now become Mrs. Piozzi, tried to wriggle out of having shared in this feeling. It was in vain. Boswell, who was possessed by the devil of accuracy, shut off every loophole of escape.<sup>1</sup> The biographer further reports that Johnson growled out the following amiable criticism in reply to a remark of Reynolds that the 'Essay' did Mrs. Montagu honor. "Yes, sir," he said; "it does *her* honor, but it would do nobody else honor." He then went on to declare that there was not one sentence of true criticism in the book. These were unquestionably his honest sentiments. Yet in the additions which he made to his life of Young he expressed himself as being indebted for some of them to "Mrs. Montagu, the famous champion of Shakespeare." In truth her name came so generally to be associated with that of the great dramatist that the mention of

<sup>1</sup> See in 'Gentleman's Magazine' for 1786, vol. xlvi. p. 285, Boswell's letter of April 17.

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the one was apt to bring up the mention of the other. Walpole admired her none too much ; yet in his letters she was dubbed half-humorously, half-contemptuously, Mrs. Montagu of Shakespearshire.

Modern criticism is very far from sharing in the enthusiasm which this work created on its first appearance. It is never celebrated now in the exaggerated style once regularly employed. It is moderate approval only which is given it in these days, even by those who preserve themselves from any prejudice against it by refraining from its perusal. In fact, so far from being spoken of with praise, it is much oftener mentioned with contempt. It must be said that there is a great deal more to justify the later opinion than the earlier. To the reader of it at the present day — he is a somewhat solitary character — it is in many respects one of the most exasperating of books. Mrs. Montagu was as little fitted by her knowledge to defend Shakespeare as Voltaire was by his to attack him. As much as he, she was under the sway of the pedantic rules and prejudices she affected to despise and occasionally pretended to condemn. All the ignorance about the subject she treated, which had been accumulated and handed down by successive generations of critics, was faithfully reproduced in her pages. In them appeared in its most offensive form that apologetic tone of the eighteenth century which represented Shakespeare as abounding in faults due to his poverty, to the low condition of the stage, and the necessity he lay under of consulting the barbarous taste of the time in which he flourished. She had been saved as by fire from censuring him for his

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neglect of the unities; for she conceded that Dr. Johnson in his ingenious preface had greatly obviated all that could be objected to him on that score.

But in other respects she was faithful to the criticism of the past, puerile where it was not ignorant. She spoke of Shakespeare as rude and illiterate.<sup>1</sup> She conceded the nonsense, the indecorums, the irregularities of his plays. He had not been tutored by any rules of art or informed by acquaintance with just and regular dramas.<sup>2</sup> He was in truth so little under the discipline of art that we are apt to ascribe his happiest successes as well as his most unfortunate failings to chance.<sup>3</sup> These are some of her general criticisms; her specific ones display the same marvellous insight. By following minutely the chronicles of the time he had embarrassed his drama with too great a number of persons and events.<sup>4</sup> She found the speech of Brutus to the people, in 'Julius Cæsar,' quaint and affected.<sup>5</sup> She exhibited her utter incapacity to comprehend the rhetorical skill of Antony by declaring that the repetition of the epithet "honorable" in his speech was perhaps too frequent.<sup>5</sup> The character of Pistol in the second part of Henry IV. was too much for her to understand.<sup>6</sup> Following previous critics she found many bombast speeches in the tragedy of 'Macbeth.'<sup>7</sup> Like her predecessors she unfortunately forgot to particularize them; lapse of time has now made it difficult to discover them.

So much for her critical acumen. In the communi-

<sup>1</sup> *Essay, etc.* (1769) p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 273.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 186.

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ocation of erroneous information this defender of Shakespeare proved herself no unworthy rival of his assailant. We are told that the age in which he lived was rude and void of taste;<sup>1</sup> that he wrote at a time when learning was tinctured with pedantry, when wit was unpolished and mirth was ill-bred;<sup>2</sup> that in the court of Elizabeth a scientific jargon was spoken; that a certain obscurity of style was universally affected;<sup>3</sup> that all the writers of the time were disposed to indulge, not merely in obscurity, but in obscure bombast.<sup>4</sup> The scientific jargon here mentioned seems to have been the particular discovery of Mrs. Montagu herself. In another place she tells us that it not only pervaded the court, but the universities; that statesmen and scholars employed it, and necessarily this had a pernicious influence upon Shakespeare's style.<sup>5</sup> What makes this pernicious influence hard to comprehend is the further information vouchsafed that the theatre was not then frequented by persons of rank. The plays Shakespeare wrote were acted, we are informed, in paltry taverns, to unlettered audiences just emerging from barbarity.<sup>6</sup>

This Elizabethan audience, to whose wretched taste Shakespeare too often catered, met with but little mercy at Mrs. Montagu's hands. In one place it was described as rude and illiterate,<sup>7</sup> in another as fierce and barbarous.<sup>8</sup> It was its members who preferred to speeches the hurly-burly of action, it was they who were most pleased when the playwright, to use her ornate language, "raised the

<sup>1</sup> Essay, p. 285.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 186.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 285.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 71

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bloody ghost and reared the warlike standard." It was they who delighted in sanguinary skirmishes upon the stage, which she could wish had always been hissed.<sup>1</sup> Correct taste too was naturally offended by the transition from grave and important to light and ludicrous subjects, and still more with that from great and illustrious to low and mean persons.<sup>2</sup> For all these offences against art, that dreadful audience was responsible. It compelled the author to consult their barbarous preferences and tastes. One naturally wonders who it could have been that was responsible for the production of those magnificent passages of which she in other parts of her 'Essay' boasted.

Mrs. Montagu's general conclusion about Shakespeare was that "he wrote to please an untaught people, guided wholly by their feelings, and to those feelings he applied, and they are often touched by circumstances that have not dignity and splendor enough to please the eye accustomed to the specious miracles of ostentatious art and the nice selections of refined judgment."<sup>3</sup> In the words just quoted we have the summary of her opinions conveyed in elegant language befitting their value. Her book abounded in the finest of fine writing. It was pervaded throughout by a faint reflection of Johnson's orotund phrase, but unfortunately without Johnson's weight of thought. In this grandiloquent style was also conveyed an easy erudition which ranged at will over the literatures of all ages and climes. There was no subject about which she did not have definite views; none which she considered herself incompetent to discuss. She could not read the

<sup>1</sup> *Essay*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 276.

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Greek tragedians in the original; she could not have spoken more confidently about them had she known them by heart. In certain particulars Voltaire and she were well mated. Vast as was the disproportion between their intellects, there was one common ground upon which they met. Neither ever shrank from cultivating the fertile fields of human gullibility by the exhibition of any hesitancy in pretending to a knowledge they did not possess.



## CHAPTER XV

### ATTACK AND DEFENCE IN ENGLAND

THE statements cited in the last chapter from Mrs. Montagu's 'Essay' are sufficient to show the modern reader that she had ignorantly sacrificed the cause she had professed to advocate. She had vehemently proclaimed Shakespeare's superiority; she had conceded nearly everything which had been brought forward to establish his inferiority. How came it, then, that this utterly inadequate work met with so enthusiastic a welcome? How came it that she, with knowledge and powers hardly more respectable than those of a highly intelligent school-girl, should have been celebrated almost everywhere as a great critic? Of the fact itself as regards both particulars, there can be no question. Feeble and pretentious as was the 'Essay,' it was hailed on nearly all sides as a triumphant vindication of the dramatist. Obviously such success could not be entirely due to the social position of the authoress, powerful as that factor was in securing it. There must have been other agencies at work. It becomes accordingly of some interest in the history of Shakespearean criticism to trace what were the causes, outside of this specific one, which contributed to bring about a result which strikes us now as so exceedingly singular.

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One reason lies upon the surface. Mrs. Montagu had neither the knowledge nor the judgment to see not merely how inadequate, but actually prejudicial to her own side was the defence she had set up. But fortunately for her, the age was generally in the same situation as herself. There had been a great advance during the century in the rectification of the text of Shakespeare, and in the explanation of obscure words and phrases. There had been an even greater advance in the appreciation, or rather in the extension of the appreciation of his powers. But there had been but little corresponding advance in the scientific criticism of the skill he had shown in his vocation. The success of Mrs. Montagu's work was due largely at the time to the very things which we now regard as its defects. It was assisted by the general ignorance, which then prevailed, of Shakespeare not as a poet, but as a dramatic artist. Johnson's powerful voice was making itself heard in combating some of these delusions; but it had by no means overcome them. Lessing's far more triumphant vindication of the practices of the poet had only just appeared in Germany and was scarcely known at all in Great Britain. Consequently the views to which Mrs. Montagu gave expression were largely in harmony with those generally held in theory. They had come down from the past with little contradiction; they had apparently been strengthened, even in England, by the powerful influence of Voltaire; and though they were about to give up the ghost, they never seemed destined to a longer life than just before they died. As a result, her concession of the deficiencies of her author was simply regarded as

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an evidence of her candor and impartiality. It is these characteristics which to a certain extent kept alive her work later on the Continent, long after it had been nearly forgotten in the country of its birth. As late as 1828 it was translated into Italian, and at that time and later it was spoken of favorably by Continental critics.

In one way in particular it appealed directly to the age in which it was published. One of the articles of faith to which the eighteenth century clung was its superiority to the age of Elizabeth. Its learning was incalculably greater, its language was more polished, its taste was more refined. It strikes the modern reader with constant amusement to find pigmy playwrights who then wrote for the theatre, and critics who discussed what these wrote, designating the latter part of the sixteenth century as rude and barbarous, and talking patronizingly of their superiority to a generation which had produced Raleigh and Sidney and Speuser and Bacon; and contrasting to their advantage the art displayed in their own productions with that exhibited in those of that body of dramatists, with Shakespeare at their head, whom Dryden, looking across the chasm of the civil war, had styled the giant-race before the flood. Yet the belief existed then in full force. There was not the slightest suspicion that the whole question of the unities had been threshed out in the Elizabethan age as completely as in the Georgian. There were then some few who knew it or suspected it; the vast majority were as ignorant of the fact as was Voltaire himself or any Frenchman of the time. All Mrs. Montagu's absurd utterances about the early stage, and the character of the early audiences, were

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consequently accepted as exact statements of fact. The terrible state of things then existing was additional evidence of the greatness of Shakespeare. He had triumphed without art; it was because he was superior to art. He produced effects which the most rigid observance of the rules could not approach even remotely. This led no one, as might have been supposed, to the natural inference that there must be something wrong with the rules. On the contrary, with the abstract correctness of these, few as yet ventured to find fault. The contention was that by the special privilege of genius Shakespeare had been exempted from their operation.

There were still other causes that contributed to the success of the work. Among these must be reckoned the personal hostility which Voltaire's attacks upon Shakespeare had aroused in England, and the consequent disposition to approve anything which controverted his opinions or affected to treat them with disrespect. One fact there is which is suggestive as to the attitude of the English at this time. For several years after Voltaire's return from exile his plays had been invariably adapted for the London stage very shortly after they had been produced upon that of Paris. *Brutus*, *Zaïre*, *Alzire*, *Mahomet* had followed one another in succession. Of *Zaïre* there had been two different translations, though only one had been acted. Even *La Mort de César* had been used as the foundation of a tragedy, whose fortunes were no better than those of its original. In truth English playwrights were disposed at that time to lay hands upon anything and everything Voltaire wrote for the theatre, without

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regard to the way it was received in the land of its birth. The first turn of the tide came with the publication in 1744 of the preface to *Mérope*. The great success of that play upon the French stage did not lead to any speedy reproduction of it upon the English. It was brought out several years after its appearance in France; it was printed, as we have seen, with a preface containing an attack upon its author. After *Mérope* Voltaire composed during the rest of his life about thirty dramatic pieces of all kinds. More than half of these were tragedies. But of these thirty only a beggarly number were adapted for the London stage, and usually long after they had been published or produced in France.

The sudden cessation of interest in Voltaire is suggestive. The following list of his pieces fitted for representation in England, with the date of their appearance, will show the change of attitude which had been assumed by the men of that country. The *Orphelin de la Chine* of 1755 was adapted by Murphy and brought out in 1759. The comedy of *L'Écossaise*, belonging to 1760, was translated by Colman, and in 1767 appeared on the London boards under the title of 'The English Merchant.' The *Tancrède* of 1760 formed the model of the 'Almida' of Madame Celestia, the daughter of Mallet. It was brought out in 1771 by Garrick rather as a return for favors done him while abroad than for any interest he had in the piece itself. In the same year also *Les Scythes* of 1767 was reproduced as 'Zobeide.' The adaptation was the work of Joseph Cradock. In 1776 the *Sémiramis* of 1748 was translated by Ayscough and brought out at Drury Lane. To this summary may be added that the

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version of *Oreste* which Dr. Francklin had made in his translation of Voltaire's writings was in 1768 selected by Mrs. Yates for her benefit at Covent Garden, and later, in 1774, was played by her at Drury Lane. Further, Murphy brought out in 1764 a prose piece entitled 'No One's Enemy but his Own,' which was taken from the little comedy in verse, called *L'Indiscret*, written in 1724. With the exception of 'The English Merchant,' none of these pieces had much success, none outlived their first season. Two of them at least were distinct failures.

It was the state of feeling thus indicated which contributed no small share in inducing England to welcome Mrs. Montagu's book with acclamation. Even more perhaps did the counter-attack contained in it add to its popularity. Much of it was taken up with criticising French plays for their intolerable tediousness, languor, and lack of truthfulness of characterization. Their beauties were trivial, their faults were essential. She pointed out the defects of Corneille and Racine and insisted as a mere matter of course upon the inferiority of both to Shakespeare. Comparisons of this sort between the great writers of different nationalities constitute the most unprofitable branch of criticism. They are rarely anything else than the expression of personal tastes and prejudices, usually combined with ignorance of one of the authors contrasted, and sometimes with ignorance of both. They of course never convince one's opponents; in truth they rarely convince any one worth convincing. The best they can do is to irritate. But they always appeal to national prepossessions, and on this account are sure to meet with a certain degree of favor. The

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only excuse that can be pleaded for Mrs. Montagu's attack upon the French tragedians is that the example had been set her by Voltaire. Unfortunately, she imitated him also in practices least worthy of imitation. Though one of her chapters was devoted to *Cinna*, several of her animadversions were directed against pieces of Corneille which his commentator himself had thought so poorly of that he had refused to make them the subject of annotation. Her conduct was almost as bad as that of Abbé Le Blanc, who, in order to give his countrymen a conception of the taste of the English for scenes of violence in theatrical representation and incidentally to reveal to them the character of Shakespeare's plays, had devoted a long letter to a detailed account of the plot of 'Titus Andronicus.'<sup>1</sup>

The injustice of such criticism always destroys its force with men not carried away by prejudice; for the greatness of a writer is not to be measured by his poorest work, but by his best. Far more effective, therefore, was Mrs. Montagu's direct attack upon her opponent. She pleased herself and pleased her readers by exposing mistakes which Voltaire had made in his version of 'Julius Cæsar.' She applied to him the remark of Pope about the interpreters of Homer who first misunderstand their author, and then triumph in the awkwardness of their own translation. The censure was well deserved. In this most faithful of versions it was easy for her to point out error after error. She condoled with Voltaire upon these mistakes. Why had

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres de Monsieur l'Abbé Le Blanc*, tome iii. pp. 91-103 (ed. of 1751).

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he not secured a better English dictionary? she asked; for it was clear that it was on the dictionary that he relied, and not upon his own knowledge. Why had not some friend prevented him from falling into these blunders? Many of his countrymen understood English very well, and could easily have explained to him the meaning of words and phrases he misunderstood and misconstrued. The observations she made upon this point are almost all unanswerable, though in one instance she herself misinterpreted the passage she set out to correct. But none of her critics, French or English, knew enough to detect it. The remarks upon Voltaire's errors of translation are the only portions of her book now worth reading. Still, it is just to admit that there are also in it some observations which can be seen to be sensible, as soon as they are unrolled from the swathing of fine language in which they are enveloped. It is also fair to observe that, while Mrs. Montagu made many comments upon Shakespeare of the same character as Voltaire himself, she did not lay upon them the stress he had done. Nor were they made prominent, as they have been in the pages of the preceding chapter, by being brought together. On the contrary, these absurd criticisms were scattered through the book, and upon most readers made but little impression, from the fact of being dwarfed in importance by the praise everywhere heaped upon the poet.

Successful as was the work in England, it did not attract the attention of Voltaire at the time. He perhaps knew nothing of it until a good while later, when it was translated into French, as a consequence of the



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controversy about Shakespeare which he himself had set in motion. But his side was not without a defender even in the land of his critic. It was only a few years after the publication of Mrs. Montagu's work that a writer in the most widely circulated English periodical of the century was able to announce that the distinguished female champion of Shakespeare had found an antagonist well worthy of her notice, and if possible of her correction.<sup>1</sup> This was a man little known then, and so much less since that the work he produced has not unfrequently been attributed to some one else. His name was Edward Taylor. The son of a dignitary in the English church, after his education at Eton and Cambridge he had gone to Germany to pursue the study of the civil law. He remained on the Continent several years. He was there at the time when French ideas about the stage were not merely prevalent but prevailing. The influence of Voltaire was at its highest. In the visits he paid to various parts of Europe Taylor found all men of substantially the same way of thinking. He came back to England somewhere about 1770, and spent the rest of his life in retirement. He came back with the fullest belief in the views about Shakespeare and the stage which the large majority of his countrymen were now disposed to question, and many had begun to abandon. Naturally the heterodox opinions expressed filled him with pain where they did not with disgust. The attack by Dr. Johnson upon the unities, in his celebrated preface, excited his indignation. The remarks of Mrs. Montagu about Corneille and Racine

<sup>1</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*, February, 1775, vol. xlv. p. 90.

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he regarded as unfair. These feelings led him to burst forth from his retirement in a reply to both. His treatise was entitled 'Cursory Remarks on Tragedy, on Shakespeare, and on certain French and Italian Poets, principally Tragedians.' It appeared in July, 1774.

The work is written from a position with which we in modern times have grown to be reasonably familiar. It is that of the cosmopolitan who rises so superior to the prejudices of birth and nationality that he prefers the productions or institutions of any other country or race to those of his own. So well acquainted have we become with this class of persons that their mental processes, or what they call such, have ceased in consequence either to irritate or to interest. They now serve little other purpose than to impose upon us an additional tribute of that tediousness which the goddess of ennui exacts as a compensatory due for the increase of knowledge and the advance of civilization. Such men, however, have always existed, and will always continue to exist. Shakespeare, whose all-embracing eye missed nothing, recognized them in the so-called Italianated travellers of his time. He characterized them dully. "Farewell, monsieur traveller," says Rosalind to Jaques. "Look you disable all the benefits of your own country, be out of love with your nativity, and almost chide God for making you that countenance you are, or I will scarce think you have swam in a gondola."

Of the class of works produced by minds of this calibre and character, Taylor's treatise was an excellent example. He accepted Voltaire's estimate of Shakespeare without reservation. The tone throughout his volume is

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the condescending tone of him who recognizes that his freedom from national prepossessions and his familiarity with foreign literatures have lifted his judgment far above that of the herd. From the eminence he had attained he could survey everything with that fine impartiality which it was not in the power of those to exhibit who lacked his privileges of observation. He was glad indeed to entertain a high opinion of Shakespeare in certain ways. But he must not be asked, he told us, to consider the grotesque and misshapen pieces this writer had produced as specimens of great dramatic art. No record exists to indicate that any such question had ever been asked him. He unquestionably recognized, however, that it would be a misfortune for his countrymen, if silence on his part should deprive them of the benefit to be derived from his observations and reflections; if in consequence of his failure to enlighten them, they should continue to go wrong in their estimate of their greatest dramatist, when they could so easily be set right. Therefore he laid clearly before them his exact position. He conceded that in the capacity of characterization Shakespeare was unsurpassed. As a poet pure and simple he rose above all; it was only as a tragic poet that he had failed.

The interest of this book, so far as it has any interest now, is due to its being about the last expression of what in the earlier part of the century had been a very prevalent critical view. There is nothing in the work which is original. The attitude is the old attitude; the examples are the old examples; the beliefs are the old beliefs. Not to Voltaire himself were the unities of time and place dearer. The introduction consisted of a

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fierce attack upon "a certain critic" for the views he had expressed in regard to these rules. This critic was Dr. Johnson. Taylor's argument in behalf of their rightfulness was the one which came to be regularly employed after the preface to Shakespeare had been published; it seems never to have been made prominent before, if indeed brought forward at all. It was not so much the impossibility of the change of scene which was henceforth insisted upon, as its impropriety. The spectator's feelings were supposed to be lacerated and his life made temporarily miserable by being asked to imagine himself in one place at the beginning of a drama, and in a subsequent scene to be transported to a spot scores and even hundreds of miles away. The possibility of the existence of such feelings it has been perhaps rash to question. Examples of like states of mind can be observed in other fields of literary controversy. Instances exist in the history of criticism where some men have been rendered unhappy because blank verse has been used in poetry instead of ryme. Others have been similarly afflicted because ryme has been used instead of blank verse. There is little limit to man's capability of making himself miserable; and if one gives himself up with his whole heart to the task of becoming wretched because certain practices are not observed — be it of the unities or of anything else — he can feel a reasonable confidence that his efforts, if long enough continued, will be rewarded with success.

But if there was nothing new in Taylor's reasoning, he made up for its lack of novelty by vehemence of assertion. In the conclusion of his introduction he pro-

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fessed himself ashamed to argue any longer in defence of a doctrine which was not only supported by authorities of greatest weight and consequence, but was in itself consistent with reason and good sense. Having thus disposed of Dr. Johnson in the introductory matter, he turned his attention to the 'Essay' of Mrs. Montagu — especially to that portion of it which was taken up with comments on Corneille and Racine. These writings he defended from her criticisms, though he never once mentioned her name or indicated her sex. He controverted in particular the view which ranked Shakespeare superior to these two tragedians. To both he was distinctly inferior as a dramatic artist. On his exact merits he was able to pronounce a definite opinion. "With an impartiality," he said, "that becomes every man who dares to think for himself, let us allow him great merit as a comic writer, greater still as a poet, but little, very little, as a tragedian." But though in this last particular Taylor celebrated the superiority of both Corneille and Racine, he reserved his highest praise for Voltaire. He it was who had brought the French drama to the utmost degree of perfection to which it was capable of being raised. Inferentially he was a much greater dramatist than Shakespeare. Taylor did not assert this; but it follows legitimately from what he said. The French author seems never to have known the height to which he had been exalted by his English admirer. This work apparently failed to fall under his eye. It was unfortunate for him, unfortunate for its author; for the admiration expressed, unlike Walpole's, was genuine and sincere; and whatever opinion we may

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entertain of its intelligence, it would have been reckoned by Voltaire as displaying peculiarly fine critical judgment.

This treatise was spoken of very respectfully in the periodical press, wherever it was criticised at all. But it excited attention nowhere else. Dr. Johnson took not the least notice of the attack made upon himself. It is possible that he never heard of its existence; it is certain that Boswell makes to it no reference. One of the reviewers asserted that as against Johnson the author had the advantage; but, there was added, "against the literary Amazon he gains no ground."<sup>1</sup> The literary Amazon preserved the same silence as the lexicographer. To the modern reader indeed there is something entertaining in Mrs. Montagu on the one hand, appearing as the champion of Shakespeare and the critic of Corneille; and on the other, Taylor as the champion of Corneille and the expounder of Shakespeare's inferiority as a dramatic artist. Yet there was more propriety about it than shows on the surface. The two champions were very well-matched. Both made use of the very amplest of vocabularies. As, with unconscious irony, a reviewer said of one of them, both expressed themselves "in a genteel style of language." Of their eloquence, their taste, and their erudition critics spoke in glowing terms and with equal justice. Both could talk learnedly in regard to matters they knew little about; and the arguments of both, when subjected to strict scrutiny, hardly amount to much more than the assertion of personal opinion.

<sup>1</sup> Monthly Review, vol. li. p. 281, October, 1774.

## CHAPTER XVI

### PESSIMISTIC VIEWS OF VOLTAIRE

It was not the unwillingness of the English to accept his estimate of their greatest dramatist which disturbed Voltaire. From the middle of the century, if not earlier, he had abandoned all hope of seeing them converted from the error of their ways. In the failure to say anything about Shakespeare during the sixth decade, there had been no affectation on his part. He had taught the Continent all that it was really necessary to know about the English dramatist. He had pointed out precisely his merits and defects. His duty had accordingly been discharged, and he was willing at the time to abide by the results. To him, therefore, the consideration of Shakespeare had become a closed incident. The subject had been adequately discussed; the verdict had been pronounced. There was no need of saying anything more.

As he was something of a philanthropist as well as a philosopher, the aberration of the English brought him, to be sure, a certain regret. That a nation usually so sensible should miss the right way, when it had been so clearly pointed out to them by Addison, was indeed something almost inexplicable. But he had learned to recognize the hopelessness of efforts to rescue these deluded fanatics from the slough into which they were

constantly plunging deeper. While his own disbelief in Shakespeare was increasing, at least in virulence of expression, if not in intensity of feeling, the belief of Englishmen in their dramatist was, on the other hand, even more distinctly increasing. Men with opinions like those of Bolingbroke, Chesterfield, and Hume undoubtedly continued to exist. Traces of them can be found not unfrequently in the periodicals of the time, and they occasionally promulgated their opinions, as did Richardson and Blair, from their seats in the universities. But Voltaire saw that such persons were not merely in a minority, but in a minority constantly becoming smaller. Even most of those who were willing to concede that Shakespeare did not obey the laws, and was therefore, strictly speaking, deficient in art, still insisted upon the superiority of his genius; still maintained, as the merest matter of course, that in tragedy he far surpassed Corneille and Racine, and in comedy was the equal of Molière. But a party was now coming to the front who denied that the defects imputed to him were defects. They were beginning to express contempt for the observances which in Voltaire's eyes constituted the decorum, the elegance, the perfection of theatrical art. This was the harm which devotion to Shakespeare had wrought. The English had become indissolubly wedded to a barbarous taste. It was to be regretted; but it could not be remedied. The French critic felt about them as did the Hebrew prophet about Ephraim. They were joined to their idols, and therefore to be let alone.

His feeling of hopelessness about the countrymen of Shakespeare had been manifested, as we have seen, by



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the middle of the century;<sup>1</sup> but as time went on it took a deeper hold of his heart. Two years before his death he had an interview with an English traveller, the Rev. Martin Sherlock, whom readers of Carlyle's 'Frederick the Great' will remember. Sherlock gave a pretty full account of the conversation. He represented Voltaire as saying some very shocking things about Moses. It is needless to remark that a man who could talk in a reckless way about the Hebrew lawgiver would not exhibit much delicacy in discussing the English dramatist. In response to Sherlock's inquiry he expressed his assent to Bolingbroke's assertion that the English had not one good tragedy. The inevitable 'Cato' of Addison was once more brought on the carpet. Still Voltaire had never refused to concede that a power greater than Addison possessed had definitely determined the future of the English stage. "Shakespeare," he said, "had a wonderful genius, but no taste. He has spoiled the taste of the nation. He has been their taste for two hundred years, and what is the taste of a nation for two hundred years will be so for two thousand. This taste becomes a religion, and there are in your country many fanatics in regard to that author."<sup>2</sup>

One argument to prove the inferiority of Shakespeare upon which Voltaire laid special stress was that, while the works of the French tragedians were acted everywhere, the English dramatist had never been able to overleap the narrow bounds of nationality. It became the burden of his cry that Shakespeare was known to

<sup>1</sup> See page 127.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters from an English Traveller* (1780); letter xxiii. p. 156.

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the English only, and cared for by them only. He asserted it in his 'Appeal to the Nations,' written nearly twenty years before his death. From that time onward he enforced it again and again both in public and in private. His words were repeated everywhere by his disciples. On the failure of Shakespeare to interest men of other races he expressed himself, for illustration, in the following manner in a letter to Saurin written as early as 1765. "He was a savage," he said, "who had some imagination. He has written many happy lines; but his pieces can please only at London and in Canada. It is not a good sign for the taste of a nation when that which it admires meets with favor only at home."<sup>1</sup> It was in this way that he continued to talk till the end of his life. His last public utterances called special attention to the differences in this respect between the fortunes of the tragic writers of the two nations. In his first letter to the French Academy in 1776 he declared that England was opposed in her dramatic belief and practice to the rest of Europe. "On no foreign theatre," he wrote, "has any piece of Shakespeare ever been represented." He took up the same theme in his second letter which was prefixed to his tragedy of *Irène*. There he declared that the French masterpieces were acted before all the courts of Europe and in the Italian academies. "They are played," he wrote, "from the borders of the Arctic sea to the sea that separates Europe from Africa. Let the same honor be done to a single piece of Shakespeare, and then we shall be able to enter into an argument."

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Dec. 4, 1765.

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Yet while he was uttering these words, the literary revolution was in full progress in Germany which was to dethrone Corneille, Racine, and himself, and to raise Shakespeare, not to one of these vacated thrones, but to a throne above them all. He did not appear to heed the violent reaction which was taking place in that country against the dogmas of the French school of criticism and the practices of the French stage. The agitation which had been set in motion by Lessing had been carried forward and deepened and broadened by Herder. To Shakespeare the young and daring spirits of the Storm and Stress school were paying their tribute of unquestioning allegiance. He was exalted as the supreme god of the theatrical world; all other authors had become inferior deities. At the very time indeed that the French writer was proclaiming that not a single play of the English dramatist had been produced upon a foreign stage, the famous actor Schröder was bringing out with unexampled success on the boards of the Hamburg theatre piece after piece of Shakespeare. The great poet had already begun his conquering march. Accordingly Voltaire's theory that the English drama was the representative of bad taste, because it was opposed to the taste of other nations, was undergoing demolition before his very eyes. He did not seem to see it. Perhaps it was because the dangers nearer home which he felt approaching absorbed his attention, or at any rate diverted his mind from contemplating those at a distance.

These dangers which threatened all which he held most dear had been for a long time gathering. Symptoms of revolt against the rigid rules of the French theatre

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had been manifesting themselves with increasing force since the middle of the century. It was in part due to the general disposition then prevalent to throw off all restraints of mere authority. It was likewise due to the steadily increasing familiarity with the masterpieces of foreign stages. In them was found a practice utterly at variance with the theories of the classicists. Lope de Vega, Calderon, and Shakespeare had all disregarded the unities, had all intermingled comic scenes with tragic in their writings. Acquaintance with their plays had begun to affect the belief of men of letters. It was, to be sure, only in the feeblest way that they ventured to carry their belief into practice, even if they ventured to do so at all. They acted as did the English revolvers of the eighteenth century against the doctrines of classicism, or as Lessing in Germany, who had laboriously pointed out the inapplicability of these doctrines to modern conditions. Like them they conformed to a faith which they did not hold. But the scepticism was there, and it constantly grew more defiant in its utterance. As early as 1764 Voltaire had denounced in the preface to his version of 'Julius Cæsar' the revolt which had been going on against the long-established usages of the French stage. At that time he had comparatively little fear of its extension. While he disliked, he had not learned to dread. Of some things indeed he was calmly confident. La Motte, he told us in his 'Commentaries on Corneille,' had argued against the observance of the unities. That heresy, he observed, had not made any headway.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Remarques sur les discours de Corneille.*

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But as time passed on, he lost his sense of security. The condition of things in France troubled him. During the last dozen years of his life his writings, especially his correspondence, are filled with the most dolorous lamentations as to the future of literature. Along with it was a fiery wrath against most of the contemporary works that gained the favor of the public. Not content with the time-honored epithets of Goth and Gothic and Vandal to designate the writers and writings he despised, he added the term *Allobroge*, taken from the name of the tribe which had inhabited the region where he had made his home. But the appellation he came to favor particularly was that of *Velches*. After using it in a treatise published in 1764, it appeared pretty frequently in his writings whenever he wished to express a pretty strong feeling of disgust. Etymologically the word, like the English "Welsh," is a Teutonic derivative from the Latin *Gallus*. With the Germans it designated the inhabitants of France or Italy. As used by Voltaire it referred to the descendants of the barbarous Celtic tribes which inhabited ancient Gaul, and was equivalent to Goth in the disparaging sense that term had everywhere in the eighteenth century, or to Philistine as that was employed in the nineteenth. It is the enemies of light and learning and art who are meant. Specifically Voltaire applied it to those who liked in literature what he disliked. Those possessed of true taste — that is, the same taste as his own — were Frenchmen; all others were *Velches*. During his later life one infers from his writings that the latter must have constituted a powerful body.

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His correspondence during these years bears ample witness to the feelings of dissatisfaction with which he looked upon the literary situation in France. Everything in his opinion was in a state of decadence. Precision, clearness, grace had for a long time gone out of fashion. Almost every one who wrote, whether in prose or verse, wrote in a style allobroge and unintelligible.<sup>1</sup> The great age had passed away and had given place to the petty. The bizarre had succeeded to the natural.<sup>2</sup> France was encountering the lot of all nations which cultivated literature. Each had its one brilliant period for ten periods in which the despicable and the vile prevailed.<sup>3</sup> True as was the general decadence, it was particularly true of the drama. Men had no longer strength enough to write tragedy, or wit enough to write comedy. Especially bad was the taste that reigned at Paris. Nothing was so applauded there as pieces fit only to be played at fairs. Voltaire made no effort to conceal his contempt for the insipid plays produced at the capital, the dull authors who wrote them, the spiritless actors who performed them.<sup>4</sup> Nothing was so much in favor as comic opera; but that was not going to regenerate the stage. "We are to-day in the mire," he wrote in 1767, "and the semi-quavers will not drag us out."<sup>5</sup>

It was, in fine, the age of the bizarre and the gigantesque. So he summed up the situation. The drama

<sup>1</sup> Letter to La Harpe of Feb. 25, 1772.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to M. de Chabanon, Dec. 7, 1767, and to D'Argental, Sept. 26, 1770.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to D'Argental, Dec. 7, 1767.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to M. de Thibouville, March 15, 1769.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to M. Damilaville of Sept. 4, 1767.

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had gone to pieces in its two great branches. Comedy was as dead as the Roman empire itself.<sup>1</sup> Nothing succeeded but the sentimental. It would be an impertinence to make any one laugh.<sup>2</sup> It was even worse in tragedy. The crowning atrocity was ready to be perpetrated; and there was every indication that it would be received with favor. "I have been told of a tragedy in prose," he wrote in 1770, "which it is said, will meet with success. See there the finishing stroke given to the fine arts."<sup>3</sup> This final blow of fate he saw no prospect of averting. "We are to have it," he repeated later of the prose tragedy. "The world is going to end," he exclaimed; "Antichrist has come."<sup>4</sup> This was the constant burden of his complaint about the one art in which he took the deepest interest. The theatre, he wrote to Richelieu, was like everything else, going to the devil.<sup>5</sup> The enemies of taste were even more powerful than those of reason. "Go on, my Velches," he said in the bitterness of his soul; "may God bless you! You are the scum of the human race."<sup>6</sup> He was to die soon, but the burden of his complaint was that the stage would die before him.<sup>7</sup> All he could comfort himself with was the thought that the time would come when the pieces now so much praised would sink into the river of oblivion, while the great works of the age of Louis XIV. would be found floating on its surface.

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Nov. 30, 1767, to M. de Chabanon.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of April 25, 1770, to LeKain.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of Sept. 26, 1770, to D'Argental.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of Sept. 5, 1772, to D'Argental.

<sup>5</sup> Letter of Feb. 27, 1769.

<sup>6</sup> Letter of Sept. 2, 1767, to D'Argental.

<sup>7</sup> Letter of Oct. 16, 1767, to D'Argental.

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The warmest admirers of Voltaire must concede that in his latest years he abused the privilege of the aged to praise the past at the expense of the present. The pessimistic views he took were largely due to the fact that men were beginning to think differently from him who had so long been the literary dictator of Europe. His attitude towards literature is in consequence in striking contrast with that which he maintained towards other subjects. The great advocate of toleration in matters of religion and politics was the most intolerant of men in the matter of dramatic art. He had an abiding confidence—it can not be called a serene one—that the taste which he himself had was the only taste worth having. He resented, he resisted attempts to set up any other standards than those he approved, or to introduce any practices which he disapproved. All means to counteract such efforts were legitimate. For this purpose he could not wield the axe or kindle the fagot; but all the powers of irony, of sarcasm, of invective he possessed in amplest measure,—and it must be added those of misrepresentation and calumny—these he employed without hesitation and without scruple. Could he have had his way, he would have shown himself the indefatigable and relentless persecutor in the work of enforcing the true gospel of taste and in visiting with condign punishment all heretical dissent. And nothing irritated him more than that France should seem to turn away from her own drama, and worship that of other nations. His anger was directed against the imitators of these rude writers of foreign lands and against the writers themselves. The Spanish stage was as bad as



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the English. The example of Lope de Vega was as much to be avoided as that of Shakespeare. But the former served little more than to point a moral. The last was a present threatening peril.

There was further a personal as well as a literary reason for his unwillingness to have Shakespeare's writings too well known. He would not have admitted it to others; perhaps he would not have done so to himself. Yet Voltaire must necessarily have been conscious of how much he was indebted to the English dramatist. He was equally conscious that he had never acknowledged it, save in a single instance where at first he had felt it to be for his interest to take that course. From the outset the English had naturally known of the obligations he lay under. After his attacks upon Shakespeare they dwelt upon his plagiarism, as they termed it, persistently. So long, however, as such an accusation was confined to them he did not concern himself about it. Anything said in their tongue was little likely in those days to reach the ears of his constituency of the Continent. Men dwelling there might read English romances, or even poetry; but they were not affected by English criticism. But the charge of plagiarism from Shakespeare was now extending from England to France. He became sensitive to it. No one can fail to remark this feeling on his part who reads the preface composed by himself, but purporting to come from the publishers, which was prefixed to his version of 'Julius Cæsar.'

One of the paragraphs of this preface is a quasi-defence of himself from the charge of having borrowed

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from the English dramatist. On this same subject he liberated his soul very freely in his notes. He took care to point out that both authors had based their plays upon the narratives contained in Plutarch. They naturally made use of the same incidents, and gave the same details. This would explain the resemblances between the two pieces where they resembled each other at all. Men, in consequence, he said, would be enabled to see if Voltaire owed so much to Shakespeare as had been pretended. What he neglected to mention, however, was that he had carefully refrained from translating those passages of the original which in his tragedy he had taken from the English author, but which the English author had not taken from Plutarch. It was clear that with increasing familiarity with Shakespeare, knowledge of these obligations on his part would become more widely diffused. It was already manifest to a few at the time; it was soon to be revealed to many by the agency of Le Tourneur's version. Some of his admirers admitted the fact cheerfully. In their eyes no discredit attached to him for that reason. So far their contention was a just one. It was the failure to acknowledge it, the effort to hide it, that alone was censurable. Coupled too with this concealment, his now constant depreciation of the man to whom he was indebted could hardly be regarded as being in the best of taste.

Naturally he was little disposed to look with approval upon the efforts to naturalize Shakespeare upon the French stage which about this time were beginning to be made. Few of them, however, met with any more favor from the public than they did from him. But one

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exception there was to this general indifference. In 1769 an adaptation of 'Hamlet' was brought out at Paris. It was attended with great success. Its author was Ducis, who was fated to succeed to the chair in the Academy which Voltaire's death had vacated. Three years later followed with similar good fortune a version of 'Romeo and Juliet' by the same writer. The Patriarch of Ferney, as he was now commonly called, heard of these occurrences, in his retreat near the Genevan lake. He was not pleased. The applause which had been lavished upon such pieces was an additional evidence of the general decadence. This was the view he took before he read either of the works. In regard to *Hamlet* he gave vent to his dissatisfaction in a letter to D'Argental. "The spectres are going to become the fashion," he wrote. "I have opened the course modestly; they are now going to run at full speed. I have wished to enliven the stage somewhat by more action; and everything has become absolutely action and pantomime. Nothing is so sacred that it is not abused. In everything we are going to plunge into the extravagant and the gigantesque. Farewell to the beautiful, farewell to tender sentiment, farewell to everything. Music will soon be no more than an Italian charivari; and our dramatic poetry only feats of leger-de-main."<sup>1</sup> The same feeling showed itself when he heard of the favor with which Ducis's adaptation of 'Romeo and Juliet' had been received. His own play of *Les Lois de Minos* had not secured representation. "I console myself for the success of this *Romeo*," he wrote, "and for the success

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Oct. 13, 1769.

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of all the absurd works written in a barbarous style, of which our Velches have so often been the dupes. It must be that a piece passably written should be ignored when the Visigoth pieces are run after.”<sup>1</sup>

The reading of these plays of Ducis could not have failed, however, to bring him a certain degree of comfort. They assuredly relieved him of any anxiety he may have felt that Shakespeare would be revealed by them to his countrymen. Ducis knew nothing of English. The two tragedies he had then adapted were taken not from the original, but from the fragmentary versions of La Place. In the eyes of the editor of his works, who in 1826 continued to repeat the conventional criticism of the eighteenth century, he had distinctly improved upon the original. “M. Ducis,” he wrote, “with an art which men would have admired more if they had been better able to appreciate the difficulties of the undertaking, has known how to reduce to proportion and to subject to the laws established by our dramatic system, the gigantesque and monstrous works of the English tragedian. He has known how to disengage his simple and sublime traits from the impure alloy which dishonors them, and to render them with that force, that fervor, that truth of expression which allies the claims of imitative talent with those of original genius, which almost equalizes them.”<sup>2</sup>

Far more indeed than Voltaire himself had Ducis conformed in many particulars to the canons of French art. The former kept constantly asserting that he had wished to enlarge only a little the bounds of the drama. He had

<sup>1</sup> Letter to D'Argental of September 5, 1772.

<sup>2</sup> Œuvres de J. F. Ducis (1826), tome i. p. x.

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expressed anxiety at the career of dramatic extravagance which was now to be run, especially in the way of spectral appearances. There was no need of his fear. His ghost in *Sémiramis* had carried audacity and defiance of convention to its extreme by appearing in the day-time in the midst of a crowded assembly. The ghost which Ducis introduced was of so retiring a character that he never showed himself to the spectators at all. Once only was there a fleeting glimpse conveyed of his actual existence, when Hamlet was heard addressing him behind the scenes in these words :

“ Fly, dreadful spectre !

Carry to the depths of the grave thy frightful aspect. ”<sup>1</sup>

The ghost seems to have been more terrified than the one to whom he appeared ; for he heeded the injunction and never presented himself again, even in the comparative safety of the green-room. All we learn about him henceforth is from the disclosures made by Hamlet to his friend, Norceste. Voltaire must have recognized that in these faintest of reproductions there was as little danger of Shakespeare’s manner and power being made known to his countrymen as there had been through his own representations and translations.

<sup>1</sup> Ducis, *Hamlet*, acte ii. scène 5.

## CHAPTER XVII

### LETOURNEUR'S TRANSLATION OF SHAKESPEARE

THE partial translation of Shakespeare by La Place Voltaire had found fault with repeatedly. He had censured it in particular for what he called its unfaithfulness. Much written by the English dramatist had in his opinion been modified or omitted in order to adapt the language employed to the delicacy and politeness of the French. La Place's version was confessedly only of parts of plays, not of the whole of them. He had naturally selected those scenes which struck him as most characteristic of his author or which would exhibit him at his best. The feeling had now come to amount almost to a mania with Voltaire that those passages should be chosen by preference which would exhibit him at his worst. This was the only way in which a real knowledge of the English theatre could be conveyed to his countrymen.

Fragmentary and inadequate as was in many ways this translation, it had assuredly accomplished a great deal in making the French acquainted with Shakespeare. Still, it was not a work that could impart genuine or thorough knowledge of the dramatist. Nor could it have done so, had the rendering been infinitely better than it was. For that it was altogether too imperfect. While, therefore, it had annoyed Voltaire, it had not caused him any anxiety. He felt indeed a certain confidence in the triumph of his

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own views after he had made that word for word and line for line translation of 'Julius Cæsar,' which had revealed to the nations the deficiency of Shakespeare in the highest art. He felt that in so doing he had satisfied all reasonable requirements of the Continent. He clearly entertained no expectation of the appearance of a complete translation of the works of this rude dramatist. It was impossible that pieces in which the coarse taste of the English delighted could be represented in their grossness to a refined and polished people like the French. This may seem a little strange to us now. But we must not forget that the French of the eighteenth century, however lawless they may have been in act, paid particular attention to delicacy of speech. A translation of 'Tristram Shandy' had been brought out at Paris. Voltaire wrote a review of it — at least it is usually ascribed to him — in which he observed that certain omissions had been made. He added with much satisfaction that a complete translation could no more be produced of Sterne than it could of Shakespeare. "We are living at a time," he said, "when the most singular works are attempted, but not when they succeed."

It was not a long while after the appearance of the 'Commentaries on Corneille' that he wrote these words. From the comparatively serene state of mind indicated by them he was rudely awakened some ten years later by the sight of two volumes of a translation of Shakespeare with the promise of others to follow, till all the plays had been rendered into French. The work bore on its titlepage that it was dedicated to the king. It contained a list of more than eight hundred subscribers. These

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had put themselves down for over twelve hundred copies. The character of the names was even more striking than their number. At their head stood the king and the queen. Following them were the other members of the royal family, the brothers and the aunts of the monarch. Launched under such auspices the undertaking had been assured of success from the outset. The list of subscribers was in truth fairly dazzling. It included names of members of the nobility of every grade and of influential men of every profession. Princes, dukes, marquises, counts, viscounts, chevaliers, or the consorts of such titled persons, were found on every page. Dignitaries of the church, archbishops and bishops, were not absent. Along with them were officers of the army and of the navy, members of the Academy, judges, advocates, professors, physicians, architects, bankers, mayors of cities. Nor was the subscription confined to France. It came from all over Europe. Voltaire's friend and correspondent, the Empress of Russia, was on the list, besides official representatives of various other powers. About one fourth of the supporters of the enterprise were Englishmen. At the head of these were the king and the Prince of Wales. Among them can be found the name of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and naturally those of the two distinguished actors, Garrick and Henderson. Rarely if ever has an undertaking of this particular nature been begun with brighter prospects.

The work was not only dedicated to the king; it contained an epistle addressed to him. This was signed by the Comte de Catuelan, Le Tourneur, and Fontaine-Malherbe. These were the three original collaborators



in the translation. But though the first place was given as a matter of courtesy to the noble, he who stood second on the list was the one really responsible for the undertaking. Pierre Le Tourneur, if biographical notices are to be trusted, was a man of high character, of blameless conduct, free from anxiety about his own reputation and from envy at the reputation of others. Furthermore, he was possessed of a good deal of ability. He devoted his life largely to making known to his countrymen the literature of foreign countries, especially of England. One of his earliest works was a translation of the 'Night Thoughts' of Young. One of his latest was a translation of the 'Clarissa' of Richardson. At the very time he was engaged on this, his most important undertaking, the version of Shakespeare, he produced also a version of Ossian. His character and his qualifications had been the means of securing him various positions of importance and trust. At this particular period he was secretary to the king's brother, who was subsequently to ascend the throne as Louis XVIII. It was probably through the relation he held to this person that the undertaking came to receive the support of the royal family.

The translation was in prose. The first two volumes of it appeared in March 1776. These contained versions of 'Othello,' 'The Tempest,' and of 'Julius Cæsar.' Of the way the original was rendered, Voltaire never expressed an opinion, favorable or unfavorable, beyond his usual censure of unfaithfulness in either omitting or softening any of the vulgar phrases which he himself now invariably took pains to render in their original

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coarseness, and not unfrequently with additional coarseness, as fair specimens of Shakespeare's general manner. What interested him, what excited him, was not so much the translation, as the prefatory matter with which it had been introduced. He was equally outraged by what he found in it and by what he did not find. The opinions expressed were the ostensible ground upon which he based his attack upon the work ; but a principal inspiring motive was what it had failed to say. This prefatory matter, which extends to one hundred and forty pages, plays so important a part in the controversy which now arose that it is necessary to give of it a fairly full account. It is interesting, furthermore, as indicating the point of view which a certain body of Frenchmen were now coming to take.

It began with the Epistle to the King which has been already mentioned. This was full of the warmest praise of the great English dramatist. It contained many things which, whether so intended or not, Voltaire might construe as an attack upon his proceedings, as they certainly were upon his opinions. It asserted that Shakespeare had never been exhibited to a rival nation, superb in its taste, save under a kind of ridiculous travesty which disfigured his beautiful proportions. This may possibly have been a reference to the versions of 'Hamlet' and 'Romeo and Juliet,' which had been made by Ducis. These had brought forth from Voltaire himself a number of subdued growls ; but there had been nothing in their character to produce any actual explosion on his part. They bore the slightest possible relation to their originals ; and while he was irritated

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by the success they met, he was not alarmed by it. But it is hardly likely that Le Tourneur had in mind an author like Ducis, who was as ardent an admirer of Shakespeare as he was himself. It seems more reasonable to suppose that the ridiculous travesties spoken of by the translator alluded to Voltaire's description of the plot of 'Hamlet' and his version of 'Julius Cæsar.' The phrase employed was certainly not inappropriate.

There were other things as bad in the Epistle, if not worse. The king was well known to have a taste for seeking the society of the humblest of his subjects. In this respect he was told that Shakespeare resembled him. Like him the dramatist had gone to seek for truth and nature, and for the objects of his benevolence under the lowly roof of the laborer and the artisan. As the monarch had desired to know all classes, so Shakespeare had not disdained to paint them. Why should the philosopher and the man of letters be prouder than their sovereign, and blush to make the acquaintance of persons in humble stations of life? It was quite evident that the monarch and the dramatist were fully in sympathy with each other. "In these first days of justice and impartiality," went on the Epistle, "Shakespeare can appear with confidence in the country of Corneille and Racine and Molière, to ask of the French the tribute of glory which each people gives to genius, and which he would have received from these three great men, had he been known to them."

This Epistle was universally regarded by the classicists as being in the worst possible taste. Immediately

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following it were a number of pages devoted to controverting certain statements which had been made by Marmontel. That author had published a few years before a dissertation in which he had allowed himself the luxury of indulging in certain assertions about Shakespeare and the English theatre and people. They were the outcome of crude ideas working upon scanty and imperfect information. Marmontel plainly knew nothing at first hand of what he was talking about. All his facts came to him through the medium of Voltaire, and, not very correct in the first instance, had been badly damaged in the transmission. He informed us, for example, that Shakespeare began writing at the commencement of the seventeenth century, and that he seems to have had an acquaintance with the irregular Spanish theatre. This last statement he derived and developed from Voltaire's remarks upon the *Cid* in his 'Commentaries on Corneille.' That author had observed with his usual accuracy that the custom of mixing comic scenes with tragic had infected the English theatre from the Spanish. All that Marmontel had to do further was to assert that it had infected Shakespeare in particular. This dramatist, he conceded, stood still at the head of the English stage and was almost the only one who was fervently applauded. Such a condition of things, however, could not last always: for Marmontel's ignorance of the past gave him the usual further confidence possessed by this sort of ignorance in its capacity of foretelling the future. He felt equal to making the prediction that Shakespeare's manner would not continue to be fully approved, even in his own country,

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save by the populace. The populace, he confessed, was powerful. The English had indeed got from France at the time of the Restoration a taste for propriety, for nature in its beauty.<sup>1</sup> To Molière, Racine, and Boileau they owed Wycherley, Congreve, Rochester, and Dryden. These poets of the second age had charmed the court of Charles II.

In the general muddle of misinformation here conveyed, it is perhaps not worth while to notice such insignificant details as that Congreve was only a boy in the reign of Charles II., and that Rochester never wrote a play which charmed any court, and the only original one imputed to him could never have charmed any one outside of a brothel. These are the most venial of errors compared with what followed. The French have always been a gallant race, and their critics not unfrequently attack a literature they know nothing about with the same desperate hardihood with which their soldiers venture upon a redoubt, in utter indifference to the strength of its position or to the number of its defenders. Never was there a better illustration of this characteristic offered than in this instance by Marmontel. He gravely observed that while the most cultivated part of the English nation, in accord with the rest of Europe, admired the ingenious and decent comedy of Congreve, the populace, true to the traditions and feelings transmitted from former times, remained faithful to the earlier writers. It continued to applaud upon the theatre comedy that was coarse and obscene and tragedy that was but little better.

<sup>1</sup> *La belle nature* is Marmontel's phrase.

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Ordinarily the man who discourses upon topics he knows absolutely nothing about is likely to pay for it at some time a heavy penalty. But men are sometimes saved by their badness as well as by their goodness. Marmontel's ignorance is so very ignorant that it contributes to enjoyment. The very impudence of its falsities excites a sort of tender interest in the man. What Englishman could be vexed at an author who tells us in all seriousness that Congreve is a purer writer than Shakespeare? Le Tourneur, however, was a good deal exasperated. He possessed unusual knowledge of English literature for a Frenchman of that time. He exposed with some heat the absurdity of these assertions. He expressed himself as being in ignorance of any warrant Marmontel had for charges so thoughtlessly hazarded — an ignorance in which we may be sure Marmontel himself fully participated. Fortunately, however, for the latter, he was not in a court of law, and was not obliged to confess publicly what he did not know. Le Tourneur repelled with a good deal of asperity the remark that represented Shakespeare as an author addicted to indecency and obscenity. He observed very justly that in spite of occasional coarse expressions he was a very pure writer, and had never been reckoned otherwise. There were in his plays no indelicate situations; in the plays which the French critic had called decent, it seemed at times as if there were no other kind of situations. To praise by way of contrast with the Elizabethan drama the unbridled license which had turned the theatre of the Restoration into a school of debauchery, made it a practically in-

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soluble question whether Marmontel were more ignorant of the earlier dramatists whom he censured or of the later ones whom he commended.

After Le Tourneur had finished the examination of most of Marmontel's assertions there was very little left of that author. In truth, nonsense of the sort he had been venting would never have been hazarded by a man who had even a faint inkling of knowledge of what he was talking about. The critic, however, was not quite so successful when he came to Marmontel's remarks upon the dropping of the grave-diggers' scene by Garrick in his alteration of 'Hamlet.' This proceeding had given unmixed joy to the men of the classical school in France. At last the English had begun to see the folly of their ways. At last the reign of purified taste was to dawn on that benighted land. Reason was triumphing over that blind admiration which had led a whole nation to accept the faults of its greatest dramatist as beauties. "Every day," wrote Marmontel, "Shakespeare is abridged, is chastened. The celebrated Garrick has just cut out in his stage the grave-diggers' scene and nearly all the fifth act. Both play and author have been only the more applauded." There could be no denial of the fact of the excision, though the applause with which it had been greeted was of a piece with most of the other information which Marmontel chose to communicate from the inexhaustible store-house of his ignorance or invention. Le Tourneur tried to account for a procedure which could not be explained away. The principal cause he assigned was the necessity of cutting down the piece so as to fit it for representa-

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tion in the limited time allotted. It was a lame apology. He evidently felt it to be such; for he ended by declaring that while at Garrick's theatre the play had been shortened, the multitude thronged to the other theatre, where 'Hamlet' was performed in its entirety. Still, before his translation of Shakespeare was completed, Le Tourneur had the satisfaction of seeing the alteration, which Garrick had never dared to print, disdainfully dropped from the stage where it had made its first appearance.<sup>1</sup>

The refutation of Marmontel was followed by an account of the Stratford jubilee. This had been an undertaking of Garrick's devising. In 1758 the Rev. Francis Gastrell, who had come into the possession of New Place, had cut down the famous mulberry-tree which was traditionally held to have been planted by Shakespeare's own hands. The interest inspired by it, with the consequent throng of visitors, had caused the clergyman much discomfort. Accordingly he took this means to relieve himself of the annoyance. If a nearly contemporary account can be trusted, the act produced an explosion of popular wrath. The reverend gentleman, no longer revered, found it desirable to hasten his departure from Stratford, and to make his absence permanent.<sup>2</sup> Souvenirs of various kinds were fashioned from the wood of the sacred tree. Several years later the mayor, aldermen, and burgesses of Stratford elected Garrick an

<sup>1</sup> For a full account of Garrick's alteration of 'Hamlet' and its fortunes, see the preceding volume of this series, 'Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist,' pp. 161-173.

<sup>2</sup> Victor's History of the Theatres of London from the year 1760, etc. London, 1771, vol. i. p. 201.



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honorary burgess of the corporation. In May, 1769, he was waited upon by the proper officers of the place and presented with its freedom. The parchment granting it was enclosed in a box of curious workmanship made out of the famous mulberry-tree and adorned with devices by an eminent carver of Birmingham.

As a return for the honor done him, and with the intent of being of some service to the place, Garrick planned a jubilee to celebrate Shakespeare's memory. The original scheme was to have one every seven years. The first was to take place in September, 1769. After opening with the performance of an oratorio in the church, there was to follow a series of ceremonies of various kinds. These were to occupy three days. Masquerades, assemblies, balls, races, processions, fire-works, the acting of a play were some of the festivities which were to add to the interest of the occasion. Extensive preparations were made for the various pageants. More than one hundred trees near Stratford were cut down to enlarge the prospect. A wooden amphitheatre in the form of an octagon was constructed on the banks of the Avon for the proper performance of certain functions. Arne composed music for the occasion; Garrick wrote for it a jubilee-ode in honor of the poet, which he recited himself. Everything was done by the actor that could be done by him to make the celebration a success. Unfortunately the weather was unpropitious, and few of the ceremonies could be carried out with the magnificence intended. Large sums had been spent in preparation for a great procession in which the persons composing it were to appear in the habits of various characters belong-

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ing to the Shakespearean drama. The rain compelled its abandonment, as well as of a number of other events of interest. Above all, the little town was in no position to deal adequately with the large crowd which poured into it. Complaints of the extortion practised abounded on all sides. The inhabitants were described as looking upon the jubilee not so much as a celebration designed to honor the memory of their dead townsman as an opportunity afforded them by Providence to fleece the visitors whom the lack of proper accommodations had placed at their mercy.

The enemies of Garrick had from the outset been disposed to cast ridicule upon the undertaking. They naturally rejoiced in the misadventures attending it. The press swarmed with a whole series of publications in prose and verse, some burlesquing the jubilee and everything connected with it, some attacking and some defending Garrick; for against him every charge had been brought which enmity and envy could inspire. Foote, always to be relied upon when ridicule assumed the nature of malignity, satirized the whole celebration in one of his comments upon the events of the day which he was in the habit of giving at the end of his pieces. He defined a jubilee at the close of a performance of his 'Devil upon Two Sticks.' This play, brought out at the Haymarket the previous year, had been revived in September, 1769. "A jubilee," he said, "as it hath lately appeared, is a public invitation, circulated and urged by puffing, to go without horses to an obscure borough without representatives, governed by a mayor and aldermen who are no magistrates, to celebrate a great poet whose

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own works have made him immortal, by an ode without poetry, music without melody, dinner without victuals, and lodgings without beds; a masquerade where half the people appeared bare-faced, a horse-race up to the knees in water, fireworks extinguished as soon as they were lighted, and a gingerbread amphitheatre which, like a house of cards, tumbled to pieces as soon as it was finished." <sup>1</sup> All this was essentially repeated with some added details in a farce printed after Garrick's death — it was never acted. In it he was represented as soliloquizing in the future life about the personages of all classes who had thronged to this performance, and the reception they had met. "That jubilee," he is represented as saying to himself, "to which lords and ladies, knights, squires, and justices of the peace, country lads and country lasses, authors and players, pimps, fiddlers, *filles de joie* and demi-reps, pickpockets, gamesters, jockeys and sharpers, — all ran in crowds, at my sole invitation, to be lodged without beds, to be fed without victuals, to be wet to the skin in seeing a race that was never run, and in viewing a pageant which was never shown; and all this to celebrate a poet whose works have made him immortal." <sup>2</sup>

Even among Garrick's friends there had been a disposition to treat the whole performance jocosely rather than seriously. The project of repeating it at regularly recurring intervals fell through, though there were citizens of Stratford who later were anxious to have it made an an-

<sup>1</sup> Gentleman's Magazine, vol. xxxix, p. 458, Sept., 1769. The passage is not to be found in the published play.

<sup>2</sup> Garrick in the Shades, or a Peep into Elysium (1779), act ii.

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nual festival.<sup>1</sup> But in those days of infrequent and incomplete communication no intimation of any disappointment in connection with it had reached foreign lands. In them were repeated none of the contemptuous epithets applied to it in England. Continental Europe did not hear the criticism, the disparagement, the imputation of personal motives. It was the great central fact of the jubilee itself that arrested its attention and dazzled its eyes. Here, as it seemed, was a whole nation rising up as one man to honor an author who had been in his grave for more than one hundred and fifty years. He had owed nothing to the accident of birth. He had belonged to no illustrious class. He had not added wealth or power to his country's resources. He had been the member of a despised profession. Yet a tribute which kings would have been proud to receive and had never been able to secure had been awarded him by the grateful acclamations of a whole people. For three days a great festival had been celebrated with pomp and ceremony and at vast expense in his honor. It was made more emphatic by the then professed intention to repeat it, if not every year, at least every seven years.

Such a tribute naturally struck the imagination of foreigners. Le Tourneur made the most of it. He gave a glowing account of the festival. He described it as the most remarkable event which the annals of the theatre recorded, since dramatic poetry had flourished in modern Europe. In so speaking of it he was doing nothing more than reflect the general sentiment of the Continent; indeed he was repeating what had been said by English

<sup>1</sup> Garrick Correspondence, vol. i. p. 414.

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writers themselves. It necessarily tended to make the minds of men somewhat doubtful of the opinion in regard to Shakespeare which Voltaire had so frequently and so magisterially pronounced. The old feeling, to which he had himself been the first to give utterance, came once more to the lips of many, but now with an expressed reference to his later views. Could a whole nation unite in paying this tribute of honor to a writer long dead who had been represented to them as merely a barbarian with occasional flashes of genius? Could a reputation which inspired such a ceremonial more than two hundred years after the author's birth be founded upon bad taste and imperfect judgment? The celebration set Europe to thinking.

In one way it affected Voltaire himself. Long before, he had been impressed with the respect which waited in England upon those belonging to the actor's profession. He had been struck not so much by the admiration which followed them while living, as by the honors paid them after death. In France on the contrary, they were denied burial in consecrated ground, and were even in danger of having their dead bodies thrust into the common sewers. The court demanded of the players that they should act; the church damned them for acting. Voltaire was never weary of contrasting the different treatment awarded them in the two countries. A little more than a year after he had left Protestant England the celebrated actress, Mrs. Oldfield, had been buried in Westminster Abbey. Her body had lain in state near by in the Jerusalem chamber. Men high in social position had been the pall-bearers at her funeral. In Catholic France, but a

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few months before, had died suddenly the young, the brilliant, the beautiful Adrienne Lecouvreur, the idol of Parisian theatre-goers. She had been buried like a dog in a waste place, secretly and at night. No funeral rites were celebrated over her remains, no stone had risen over the spot where her body lay. The place was left unmarked and unenclosed. Voltaire never ceased to feel bitterly over the different treatment bestowed upon the two actresses, alike beautiful, alike gifted, and alike frail.

It was natural that this new tribute to a man who had been an actor as well as a dramatist should impress him profoundly. Years after, he referred to it in one of the opening sentences of the discourse upon Shakespeare sent to the French Academy. At the time itself he mentioned it in a letter belonging to the very month in which the Stratford celebration took place. It is written with even more than his usual delightful inaccuracy. There is hardly a sentence in it which misses its opportunity to embody some blunder in the statement of facts. But for all that the feeling it expressed was deep and genuine. He commented on the low position of the actor in France. "The English," he wrote, "have given us a hundred years ago another example. They have erected in the cathedral of Stratford a magnificent monument to Shakespeare, who, however, is not at all comparable to Molière, either for art or for the representation of manners. You are not ignorant of the fact that they are about to establish a kind of secular games in honor of Shakespeare in England. They are to be celebrated with extreme magnificence. They have had,

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it is said, tables for a thousand persons. The expense which has been incurred at the festival would enrich the whole French Parnassus. It seems to me that genius is not encouraged in France with any such profusion.”<sup>1</sup>

Le Tourneur followed his account of the jubilee with a life of Shakespeare. In it occurred several passages which disgusted the classicists even more than the Epistle to the King; they put Voltaire beside himself with rage. They ran counter to all the opinions he had been promulgating ever since his return from England. One observation in particular he could never forgive. Le Tourneur said that, at a time when the Italians were corrupted by bad taste, listening to puerile conceits, and disdaining everything natural, when France took delight in mystery-plays and similar faroical productions, to the scandal of taste, Shakespeare had revived in England the art of Plautus and Sophocles, dead for two thousand years. Rather he had created it, so that it deserved to be called the art of Shakespeare as well as that of Sophocles. Furthermore he directly controverted the patronizing view which Voltaire had constantly put forth, that the dramatist would have done much better if he had only had the good fortune to live in the days of Addison. The exact contrary was the truth. Had he come later he would not have done so well. He would have found in existence a well-worn road over which he would have been compelled to travel. His originality would have been destroyed. He would have been forced into involuntary imitation. His steps would

<sup>1</sup> Letter to M. de Chamfort, Sept. 27, 1769.

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have been impeded by a multitude of obstructions which would have hindered the freedom of his movements. He would have been subjected to a mass of rules forbidding him to do this, compelling him to do that. If he should have ventured to disregard them, the fine wits, like so many gibbering ghosts, would have encircled and assailed on every side the daring explorer of new dramatic worlds. He closed this portion of his eulogy with a reference to those cold and pusillanimous critics who, measuring nature with insufficient rules, find gigantesque its noble and majestic proportions, and in order to regard them as beautiful, would reduce them so as to agree with the petty ideas which they themselves had formed.

This was certainly throwing down the gauntlet with a vengeance. Le Tourneur did not pretend that he had any particular person or persons in mind in writing such words as these. But the opinions he controverted were the ones which Voltaire had taught his disciples. His sayings they parroted, his criticisms they repeated, his conclusions they set down as absolutely irrefutable. Throughout the whole prefatory matter there were frequent passages which treated with scant respect all the views which he had been proclaiming for years as being of the nature of axiomatic truths. Shakespeare's introduction of the representatives of every class on the stage was defended. All these offensive views were put even more offensively in the discourse which followed the life. This purported to be made up of selections from the various prefaces of the English editors of Shakespeare: Rowe, Pope, Warburton, Theobald, Hanmer, Johnson, Sewell, and others who were included under a compre-



hensive "&c." The passages purporting to be taken from these writers were woven together without distinction so as to form a continuous criticism. Le Tourneur pretended to add only some ideas of his own, some phrases necessary to the development and connection of these scattered parts. It was a device worthy of Voltaire himself. Under the shelter of these English names the translator could securely proclaim the superiority of Shakespeare to all other writers. He could with impunity direct his censures against the most cherished doctrines of the classicists.

The opportunity was fully improved. No heretical utterances of Voltaire about religion were so adapted to shock the devout as those expressed here about the English poet were calculated to horrify the devotees of the French drama. Even Mercier was outdone. Never in fact had audacity been more audacious. If Shakespeare's course, we were told, was contrary to the precepts of Aristotle, it is certain that Aristotle himself would have modified his precepts and ordained other rules, had Shakespeare been a resident of Athens and introduced upon the scene representations grander and vaster than those of Sophocles and Euripides. Further, it was nothing but an abuse of criticism to proscribe one form of the drama and to hold up another as peculiarly sacred. Superstition which had deferred to laws imposed by mere authority should be shaken off. From them an appeal should be made to the laws of nature. Le Tourneur indeed raged without restraint through this portion of the prefatory matter. Several of the passages in it were taken bodily, it is true, from the pref-

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aces of the English editors. For instance, Johnson's attack upon the doctrine of the unities was pretty fully given. But there was a good deal that was suggested by what he found, rather than translated from it. There was even more which the investigator will search for in vain in the writings of any English author. For that the utterances of Voltaire and his disciples were too often in the translator's thoughts. Care in fact was taken to point out the inferiority of the much lauded 'Cato' of Addison. It may be added that Le Tourneur in this discourse introduced, as he said, into the language the English word "romantic," which was in no short time to become the designation of a party. He appended a note defining its meaning, and distinguishing it from *romanesque* and *pittoresque*.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore the conclusion of the prefatory matter might be construed into additional cause of offence. Objections to the undertaking, Le Tourneur said, had been made both by Englishmen and Frenchmen. Those urged by the former hardly concern us here. But the objections of the latter were of two kinds, and the translator's reply to them involved a reflection upon the followers of Voltaire and upon the characterization of the English dramatist by Voltaire himself. At Paris, said Le Tourneur, "some thoughtless Aristarchs have already weighed in their limited balances the merits of Shakespeare. As he has never been translated and known in France, they know the precise sum of his beauties and defects. Without having read the poet, without understanding his language, they paint him in

<sup>1</sup> Page cxviii.

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one word as a savage." They conceded him, he went on to say, some happy and forcible lines, but he had nothing that was precious to offer to a delicate and refined people. These constituted one class of objectors to the translation. The other was made up of men filled with direful presentiments at the idea of introducing into France a nature so powerful as Shakespeare's. Monstrous spectacles would be exhibited on the French stage. Blood would flow. The dead would be buried, and atrocities of all sorts would be committed in the sight of the spectators. "Our great poets," these persons are represented as saying, "will be insulted by a foreign race, which confounds all species of composition, and will crush our masterpieces under the weight of its black and bizarre productions."

Well might the classicists stand aghast at the open avowal of the heretical sentiments here given. Well might they consider views of this sort as being in the most atrociously bad taste. Many even of those who had originally favored the undertaking were a good deal shocked. Tremendous was the sensation this first instalment of the translation caused. Grimm, the chronicler of the literary situation in Paris during these years, gives us an account of the varying views then and there entertained. It is all the more trustworthy, because he was not an extreme partisan of either side, though his sympathies lay mainly with the drama of the land in which he had come to live. In spite of the liberality of his views many of the sentiments found in this prefatory matter seemed to him shocking, when not in bad taste. He belonged to the second class which



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Le Tourneur had described, who feared that the French stage would be in danger of serious harm if the methods of the English were followed. It was not because he depreciated Shakespeare; with his greatness he had been impressed far more than was ever Voltaire. And while he shared generally in the latter's feelings about the French theatre, unlike him he did not think it desirable that the English theatre should conform to it. In his eyes the stages of the two countries were representative of the races inhabiting them. What was befitting the one was therefore unsuited to the other. The English dramatists who had tried to adopt French methods had failed miserably. A like fate, in his opinion, would befall the French writers who sought to imitate Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

This was the harm which in Grimm's eyes could be and perhaps would be wrought by the translation. It might tempt young and ambitious authors into a field where they would meet only with disaster. What hope of success could they have if once they abandoned the pure and delicate taste which marked the productions of their own land? They might try to imitate, but they could not expect to approach remotely the genius of Shakespeare, all-powerful in producing sublimity even when he put himself outside of the rules, and by the mere force of inspiration and imagination supported in his pieces what is most untrue to life and monstrous. "Who else than he," wrote Grimm, "can hope to preserve, as did he in those most vast and complicated compositions, that marvellous light which never ceases to

<sup>1</sup> Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire*, tome ix. p. 21.

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illuminate the progress of the action, which bursts out, so to speak of itself over all the parts of the subject? Who can ever hope to flatter himself that he can sustain that great stock of interest which the author himself seems to interrupt of his own accord, and is always sure to take up again with the same energy? What genius has ever penetrated more profoundly into the character and all the passions of human nature?"

There was, as Grimm's words show, a sense of danger in the air. Naturally the translation, with the defiant utterances of its prefatory matter, aroused the passions of the partisans of both sides. It excited the interest even of those who were ignorant or indifferent. "It has been a long time," wrote Grimm, "since we have seen the appearance of any work which has deserved more censure and more eulogies, in regard to which there have been more keen disputes, and about which in fine, public opinion has been more divided and uncertain. Those who, from having been brought up from infancy in the fear and respect of our great masters, render to them that exclusive and superstitious worship which differs in no respect from theological intolerance, have regarded the translators as sacrilegious wretches who wished to introduce into the country monsters and barbarous divinities. The devotees of Ferney have not been able to witness without a good deal of ill-humor a work which is about to instruct France as to that admirable skill with which M. de Voltaire has known how to appropriate to himself the beauties of Shakespeare, and the less admirable bad faith with which he has afterward permitted himself to translate him. Those

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who have desired to preserve an air of impartiality have rendered to the finest genius of England the justice due him, but they have revenged themselves upon his translator.”<sup>1</sup> That indeed became the common method of compromise. Madame du Deffand, for instance, wrote to Walpole, that she was enchanted with ‘Othello.’ While she could not tell whether the translation was faithful or not, it seemed to her that Shakespeare could not have written better. On the other hand what the translators had written out of their own heads was insipid to the last degree.

<sup>1</sup> Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire*, tome ix. p. 15.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE WRATH OF VOLTAIRE

MONTHS seem to have passed before the two volumes of Le Tourneur's translation came into the hands of Voltaire. In his published correspondence the first letter in regard to it bears the date of the nineteenth of July. If all this time he was ignorant of what had occasioned so much discussion at Paris, the exchange of news that took place between the French capital and Ferney must have been peculiarly imperfect and unsatisfactory. The subscription for the proposed translation had in fact been going on since the early part of 1775; and it is almost impossible to believe that some inkling of the nature of the undertaking had not reached his ears. There was so much finesse, not to call it trickery, in all of Voltaire's proceedings, that too much reliance need not be placed by the reader upon dates which the writer feels himself compelled to follow.<sup>1</sup>

In July certainly he had the two volumes, and had read the prefatory matter. His indignation was aroused

<sup>1</sup> In Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire*, tome ix. p. 117 ff., under *June*, 1776, several pages of the 'Letter to the French Academy,' read August 25, are given: and Voltaire's letter to D'Argental, dated July 19, in *Voltaire's Correspondence*, is spoken of as having been forwarded the preceding month. I am unable to explain the discrepancy in the dates, save on the theory that those in Grimm's *Correspondence* have been wrongly given.

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to the highest pitch by the dreadful sentiments there expressed. If these did not constitute an attack upon him personally, they certainly did upon the gospel which he had persistently preached. Here too were men, devoted followers of his own, who were held up to scorn for their inability to comprehend the proportions of the colossal figure which it was beyond their power to measure. But in addition to the atrocious doctrines which he found energetically proclaimed, there was something of far greater importance in his eyes which he did not find. In those scores of pages dealing with the drama not once had the name of Voltaire been mentioned. Not a word had been said of the true successor of Corneille and Racine. Not an allusion even had there been to the greatest living man of letters, whose fame filled all Europe, unless the contradiction of the views he cherished and loudly proclaimed could be so construed. The offence was unpardonable. It is true that Voltaire's name had strictly no business in the work. The translator was not writing about the French stage but about the English. He was not ex-patiating on the living, but on the dead. Nor could he well have referred to Voltaire personally without contrasting the attitude of persistent depreciation which he had now assumed, with his early recognition, imperfect as it was, of the genius of Shakespeare. But to any considerations of this sort the great French author was insensible. To write anything about the stage and fail to mention its most conspicuous living ornament was an offence which his insatiable vanity could not forgive. So blinded was he by his fury that he suc-



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ceeded at first in overlooking any reference whatever to Corneille and Racine also. It was one of the grievances he originally put forth against this translation that their names had never been mentioned even once. He spoke of them; he was thinking of himself.

But there were particular observations scattered up and down the prefatory matter which filled him with special wrath. Here was a work which told Frenchmen that Shakespeare had never been rendered into their tongue at all. Ridiculous travesties existed, but no translation. Accordingly he was actually unknown to those who made him the subject of disparaging criticism. The positive crime of this assertion was almost as bad in Voltaire's eyes as the negative one of omitting to mention his own name. Was it not he who had brought this monstrous author to the knowledge of his countrymen? Had he not, nearly half a century before, furnished them with a version of the monologue of Hamlet? Had he not since translated the three acts of 'Julius Cæsar,' word for word, line for line? Had he not given a description of two or three of Shakespeare's most renowned plays, and thereby enabled all men to judge of these pieces? Had he not indicated the exact degree to which he was to be admired? All these services in behalf of the living and the dead were now ignored. The adorers of the new divinity had forgotten to recognize the debt they owed to the man who had introduced him to their worship. For a long time past they had been restrained with difficulty from passing the critical bounds he had set up; some there were who had had the audacity to treat with derision their sacred character. But this

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latest departure exceeded all precedent. A translation had come out which spoke with contempt of the petty critics of Paris who knew nothing of Shakespeare of their own knowledge and contented themselves with echoing the opinions of those who were incompetent to form any opinions worth heeding. In fine, the French people had been told that Shakespeare was "the creator god of the sublime dramatic art, which had received from him its existence and perfection."<sup>1</sup> Voltaire was angered to the depths of his soul.

We come now to one of the most extraordinary episodes in a life full of extraordinary passages. The state of mind the perusal of this prefatory matter produced in Voltaire would hardly be credited, did not his own letters survive to prove it. He fairly foamed at the mouth with rage. One could almost fancy that Shakespeare himself had somehow done him a gross personal injury. The farcical nature of the performance in which he was soon engaged occasionally came over him at first, and he tried to laugh about it. But it was too serious in his eyes to be long treated with levity. The 'Letter to the French Academy,' the public outcome of it all, was made comparatively tame to suit the decorum of the dignified body to which it was addressed. But in his private correspondence he gave full vent to his wrath. The spectacle he was now about to exhibit can bring delight only to those who witness with pleasure the weaknesses of a great spirit. Never did offended vanity, masking under the

<sup>1</sup> Voltaire, in a note to the 'Letter to the French Academy,' quotes this passage from "*Page 3 du programme.*" It is not in the preface to the translation.

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guise of love of country and of devotion to the cause of taste, exhibit itself in a more outrageous form. Never did it conduct its operations after a more unscrupulous and discreditable fashion. The paroxysm lasted in its full fury between three and four months; but the disease of which it was a manifestation ended only with Voltaire's life.

In the first transports of his indignation he dashed off a letter to his faithful friend, D'Argental. To the author of the translation he applied a number of abusive terms. In fact he never spoke of him afterwards without indulging in the choicest billingsgate at his command. He never once referred to his two coadjutors. All his invectives were reserved for Le Tourneur alone. The slightest suggestion of his name or work was the signal henceforth for Voltaire, either in conversation or in correspondence, to go off into a wild orgy of abusive epithets. It was in the following way he burst out in the letter previously mentioned, which bears the date of July 19, 1776:

"I must tell you how much I am angry, for the honor of the theatre, at a man named Tourneur, who is called secretary of the booksellers and who does not appear to me to be the secretary of good taste. Have you read two volumes of this wretch, in which he wishes to make us look upon Shakespeare as the only model of genuine tragedy? He calls him *the god of the theatre*. He sacrifices all the French without exception to his idol, as formerly pigs were sacrificed to Ceres. He does not even condescend to mention Corneille and Racine. These two great men are simply enveloped in the general proscription, without having even

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their names spoken. There are two volumes printed of this Shakespeare, which would be taken for pieces to be played at the fair and composed about two hundred years ago. This scribbler has found the secret of engaging the king, the queen, and all the royal family to subscribe to his work. Have you read his abominable balderdash,<sup>1</sup> of which there are to be five volumes more? Have you a sufficiently vigorous detestation of this impudent blockhead? Will you put up with the affront which he has offered to France? There are not in France raps on the knuckles enough, foolscaps enough, pillories enough for such a charlatan!<sup>2</sup> The blood boils in my old veins in talking to you of him. If he has not made you angry, I hold you a man incapable of wrath. That which is frightful is that the monster has a party in France; and to fill up the measure of the calamity and horror, it is I who long ago was the first to speak of this Shakespeare. It is I who was the first to show the French some pearls which I had found in his enormous dunghill. I did not then expect that one day I should contribute to trample under foot the crowns of Corneille and Racine in order to adorn the brow of a barbarian stage-player."

The letter was a manifesto announcing hostilities. It was designed to be made public; and it was accordingly made public. Copies of it were speedily circulated throughout Paris. It was carried to England; and a few months later a translation of it appeared in the English papers. But Voltaire had no idea of resting content with any mere outburst of momentary indignation. He contemplated a more systematic and effective attack upon

<sup>1</sup> *Grimoire.*

<sup>2</sup> *Faquin.*

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this Shakespeare propaganda which had shamelessly intruded itself into the very citadel of true art. He had determined to declare war against the translator and the translation. This seemed somewhat petty. He dignified it in his own thoughts, and tried to dignify it to others — to some extent he succeeded — by calling it a war against England. He sought to make it an international question. He was fighting, he said, for the honor of his own land. He was pleading the cause of Corneille and Racine, that is, of good taste, against the advance of that barbarism which was aiming to defile the beauty and the majesty of the French stage. For this purpose he wished to secure to his support the influence of the French Academy. With that end in view he began operations at once. He prepared a letter to that body with the design of exposing the barbarousness of the much extolled Shakespeare.

The 'Letter,' as found in his works, did not, in all probability, differ materially from what it was when first written. There was nothing new in it in the way of criticism, nothing which Voltaire had not already said before, and in some instances had said many times. It was enriched, however, with some additional illustrations of ignorance which vaunted itself as exceeding knowledge. One of the most striking of these has been given earlier.<sup>1</sup> But there were a number of others. Two, in particular, deserve mention, because they confirm the impression that there was no recklessness of assertion on any point about which he knew little or nothing, of which Voltaire was not capable, if he thought it would

<sup>1</sup> See the account of 'Gorboduc,' pp. 35-40.

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help the side he was advocating. He gravely informed his readers that almost all the words of the English language were derived from the French. He communicated the hitherto unsuspected and still undiscovered information that in the time of Henry VII. a permanent theatre had been established in London, which was still subsisting. This may be defended on the ground that evil was done in order that good might result. By a false statement of fact he was helping to destroy a false belief that Shakespeare was the creator of the English stage. These, however, are mere incidental inaccuracies. The discourse collects in an impressive whole the errors of all sorts which had been scattered through his numerous treatises. As now printed, it is divided into two parts. The first consisted mainly of an attack upon Le Tourneur. But he was not mentioned by name. He appears simply as the translator. The second was rather a consideration of the general subject of the theatre, in the course of which Voltaire sought to explain how it came about that Shakespeare wrote in the manner he did and gained the reputation he had.

Of course he could not refrain from venting his own grievances. He told the members of the assembled Academy, as he had been telling everybody else for years, that a man of letters, one of their own number, had been the first to introduce into France the knowledge of the English dramatist, as well as of several other English authors. He had sought to add to French literature some of the excellences in which English literature excelled. For this he had been persecuted at the time. He had been reproached with want of patriotism. But

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now his countrymen had gone to the other extreme and cared for little else than that which they had once condemned. It was implied, though not asserted, that it was Voltaire alone who had preserved that golden mean between extremes which is as much the characteristic of intellectual as of moral virtue. The charge made by Le Tourneur in his preface that Shakespeare was unknown in France, or rather disfigured, filled him with wrath. Voltaire had in the highest degree the courage of his mendacities, nor did he flinch on this occasion from repeating his fraudulent declaration that never had there been so faithful a translation as his of 'Julius Cæsar.' He had rendered everything with scrupulous care, words, lines, figures, spirit. If Le Tourneur reproached France for not having an exact translation of Shakespeare, all the more incumbent was it upon him to translate him exactly. But this he had not done. He had indeed brought upon the stage the artisans in 'Julius Cæsar;' but he had not rendered the quibbles found in the speeches which the shoemaker addressed to the tribunes. It made no difference to the now highly developed conscientiousness of the critic that this feat could not well be accomplished in a foreign tongue. Le Tourneur had proclaimed Shakespeare the creator god of the theatre. To withhold anything which he had said was therefore committing sacrilege against his divinity.

Voltaire also resorted to his now well-worn device of selecting passages from Shakespeare which he fancied would be peculiarly offensive to his hearers. If there was anything exceedingly plain-spoken or indecent in

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the original of these, he contrived, whenever possible, to heighten this characteristic in his version. In one instance, where he contributed additional coarseness to a phrase in the porter's speech in 'Macbeth,' he appended in the published 'Letter' an apologetic note, not to defend his own conduct, but to assail his author's. It was to the effect that he asked pardon of cultivated readers, and especially of the ladies, for the faithfulness of his translation. He had, however, been compelled to expose the infamy with which certain Velches had desired to cover France. With this same noble object in view he had chosen for translation part of the opening scenes of 'Othello,' of 'Romeo and Juliet,' and of 'Lear.' He rendered also a few sentences of the conversation between Henry V. and the French king's daughter, and of the porter's speech in 'Macbeth.' None of these scenes were given in full; only so much was selected as contained some coarse word or allusion, or some expression the utterance of which under the circumstances would be apt to strike his countrymen as inappropriate or undignified. And not only did he give but a small part of the conversation, he sought to create the belief that what he left untranslated was much worse than what he translated. Take as one illustration out of many, his treatment of the opening scene in 'Romeo and Juliet.' He introduced it with the avowed object of comparing it with an admired passage in Racine's *Bajazet*. Let us not linger over the thorough dishonesty of a comparison of this sort. He translated so much of the conversation that went on between the two servants of the house of Montague as would serve his purpose. When he reached



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the part that was inoffensive he carefully stopped with the remark that respect and politeness did not permit him to go farther. It is performances of this sort which awaken disagreeable feelings in him most inclined to admire Voltaire; for morally they are far more debasing than the coarsest phrase or vilest allusion that can be found anywhere in Shakespeare.

It is obvious indeed that not a single one of the passages inserted by Voltaire in this 'Letter,' whether regarded as appropriate or not to the character who spoke it, would ever have been selected by any one as a specimen of the genius of the English dramatist. They had been laboriously culled out of his works for no other reason than that they expressed or suggested what would be repulsive. Voltaire had made as careful a choice as he could, not merely of passages which would be offensive to French taste, but of passages containing phrases which would be offensive to the taste of everybody. He as carefully neglected to give anything which would furnish any manifestation of Shakespeare's genius at its best; or if he did, his version was of a nature to arouse quite other ideas in the minds of his readers than those which the original would inspire. He likewise repeated in briefer terms his account of portions of 'Hamlet.' In so doing he called attention to the anachronisms found in that play, to its mixture of low scenes with tragic, to its disregard of the unities of time and place. He ended up his discourse with asking his audience to picture in their minds Louis XIV. at Versailles, surrounded by his brilliant court. Into the midst of the heroes, the great men, the beautiful women who composed that assem-

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blage plunges a buffoon covered with tatters. This is Le Tourneur. He proposes to them to abandon Corneille, Racine, and Molière for a mountebank — this is Shakespeare — who has exhibited some happy sallies of wit and makes some contortions. “How do you believe,” he asked, “that proposition would be received?” So much for the buffoon translator and the mountebank who had been translated. At the end of the first part he remarked with satisfaction that the sentiments to which he had given expression had also found utterance among English men of letters. They had been made by Rymer himself, even the savant Rymer. It was his reliance upon this most ignorant as well as most wretched of critics that had led him into his blundering account of ‘Gorboduc.’ He quoted, however, with unction his words in which Shakespeare had been spoken of as inferior in taste to a pug of Barbary.<sup>1</sup> It was consequently with pride that Voltaire pointed to his own finer impartiality of judgment, unmoved either by the extravagance of depreciation or the extravagance of admiration. “Permit me, gentlemen,” he concluded this part of his ‘Letter,’ “to take a middle course between Rymer and the translator of Shakespeare; and to regard this Shakespeare neither as a god nor as a monkey.”

Such is largely the ‘Letter’ which Voltaire called a faithful exposition of the merits of Shakespeare as contrasted with those of French dramatic poetry. No sooner was it finished than he set about summoning his adherents to his assistance in this new crusade. He forwarded

<sup>1</sup> Rymer's *Short View of Tragedy* (1693), p. 124. See page 39.

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it at once to his intimate friend D'Alembert. Him he addressed as secretary of good taste even more than as secretary of the Academy. "Come to my rescue," he wrote. "Read my statement of the case against our enemy." The enemy here referred to was not Shakespeare but Shakespeare's translator. He desired D'Alembert to show to Marmontel and to La Harpe what he had transmitted. He asked his help against those who were striving to make his countrymen too English. He asked it because he was pleading for France against England. The nature of the aid he coveted was intimated rather than expressed. What Voltaire was seeking was the support of the Academy. It had been of great service to him in the publication of his 'Commentaries on Corneille.' His aim now was to secure its aid in what he chose to call a war against England. What he therefore desired in this instance was an official letter from D'Alembert as secretary, so that the attack on the translation should seem to have, if it did not actually have the sanction of the Academy.<sup>1</sup>

Before D'Alembert had had time to reply, the actor Le Kain had arrived at Ferney. He brought with him bad news. His report made all the deeper impression because he was as full of anger as his host. To the latter he announced that almost all the young people of Paris were on the side of Le Tourneur. The new generation was crying up Shakespeare. As expressed in Voltaire's language, the English boards and the English brothels were prevailing over the dramas of Racine and the beautiful scenes of Corneille. In Paris there was nothing

<sup>1</sup> Letter to D'Alembert, July 26, 1776.

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grander and more decent than the buffoonery of the London stage. Voltaire's mind was full of the gloomiest forebodings. D'Argental had written him a letter sympathizing with his indignation. It is not unlikely that this nobleman, horrified by Le Tourneur's preface, had withdrawn his subscription; for his name appears on the first list. A single fact of that nature would enable Voltaire, with his magnificent powers of generalization, to assert, as he did a little later, that all respectable persons were withdrawing their support from the enterprise. To this old friend he poured forth the deep sorrows of his soul. "The abomination of desolation," he wrote, "is in the temple of the Lord. . . . I have seen the end of the reign of reason and good taste. I am going to die, leaving France barbarous. But happily you live, and I flatter myself that the queen will not leave her new country, of which she constitutes the charm, a prey to savages and monsters. I flatter myself that Marshal Duras will not have done the Academy the honor of belonging to it in order to see us devoured by the Hottentots. I have sometimes complained of the Velches; but I have desired to avenge France before I die."

He was going, he said, to make a fight for his country. He went on to tell his correspondent of the discourse he had prepared on Shakespeare — now in the hands of D'Alembert — and of his hopes and wishes in regard to its publication. In it he had striven to suppress his grief, in order to let only his reason speak. He was not disposed to have it printed, unless the Academy gave it an authorized approval. Such was not its usage. But he thought that body might break for once over its rules.

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The occasion was one of unusual seriousness, and nice customs should give way to stern necessities. An official approval would be of the nature of a decree against the progress of barbarism. He concluded his letter as if he were about to march to the stake or mount the scaffold in all the majesty of conscious martyrdom. "I know," he said, "that I shall make for myself cruel enemies; but some day, perhaps, the nation will be glad that I sacrificed myself for her sake."<sup>1</sup> That time has never come. France has never denied Voltaire's intellectual greatness, however diverse have been the views taken of his character. As represented by some, she has looked upon him as little other than a jesting monkey possessed of genius; as represented by others, as not merely a genius, but as a valiant soldier fighting for the reign of justice, goodwill, and truth on earth. Further than this she has declined to go. She has found as insuperable difficulties in enrolling him in the company of the martyrs as in that of the saints.

D'Alembert in the meanwhile fell readily in with the objects aimed at by his friend, so far as they could be carried out. At a private meeting of the Academy, held on the 3d of August, the letter of Voltaire was read. On the following day D'Alembert, as secretary, wrote to the author that his remarks on Shakespeare appeared to the members so interesting, as regarded literature in general and French literature in particular, so useful above all for the maintenance of good taste, that it was felt to be desirable that the public should have the pleasure of listening to his production. Accordingly they desired

<sup>1</sup> Letter to D'Argental, July 30, 1776.

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his permission to read it again at the open meeting of the 25th of August. It was then that prizes were to be distributed.<sup>1</sup> This particular method of bringing the 'Letter' before the public seems to have been the expedient of Voltaire's partisans, rather than of Voltaire himself; but it had something of the effect of giving it what he ardently desired, a sort of official sanction. Mrs. Montagu, indeed, subsequently wrote to Garrick that it was much against the inclination of all but three or four members of the Academy that the paper was read.<sup>2</sup> This statement bears its refutation on its face. There was pretty surely a minority opposed to the action and perhaps a strong minority; but it could hardly have failed to receive the willing assent of the majority.

The plan of reading it on this occasion was of course based upon the supposition that the author could be induced to give his consent. The solemn farce of begging Voltaire to comply with a request to do something he was longing to have done, D'Alembert went through with imperturbable gravity. But he added certain conditions imposed by the Academy. Voltaire, in his first letter on the subject to his friend, had recognized the necessity of refraining from all undue manifestations of wrath when setting out to plead before a judicial body. In this first draft he had not sufficiently restrained his anger. He was told that the discourse could not be read in public in the condition it was. The name of the translator attacked must be suppressed; in fact, there

<sup>1</sup> Letter of D'Alembert to Voltaire, Aug. 4, 1776.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Garrick from Sandelford, Nov. 3, 1776. Garrick Correspondence, vol. ii. page 188.

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were three of them, and not one alone. Everything indeed which had the appearance of offensive personality must go. But besides this there were passages quoted from Shakespeare too outspoken to be hazarded in a public assembly. These must be cut out.

To the official communication to his dear and illustrious confrère which D'Alembert sent as perpetual secretary of the Academy, he added a personal postscript of his own to his dear master. He was desirous that the 'Letter' should be read as a sort of protest against the bad taste which a certain class of men of letters were striving to bring into vogue. It was therefore important that for the coarse speeches, unreadable in public, other passages should be substituted, which would be equally ridiculous but also readable. These of course could be easily found. So thought D'Alembert, whose knowledge of Shakespeare was in an inverse ratio to his knowledge of mathematics. Accordingly he asked Voltaire to send on these additional citations. He would charge himself with the easy task of cutting out the objectionable passages. But time was pressing. Whatever was done must be done quickly.<sup>1</sup>

Two replies came from Voltaire, one following three days after the other.<sup>2</sup> He consented to sacrifice the name of Le Tourneur. Still, he gave his correspondent to understand that this reprobate, though not to be mentioned, was the one in fact who was solely responsible for the preface — that abominable preface in which Shakespeare had been elevated to the throne of dramatic

<sup>1</sup> D'Alembert to Voltaire, August 4, 1776.

<sup>2</sup> Voltaire to D'Alembert; letters of August 10 and 13.

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art, and in which by some oversight the name of Voltaire did not chance to appear. He it was who in this introductory matter had insulted the French writers with all the insolence of a pedant ruling over school-boys. He was as impertinent as he was tedious. With that affluence of imagination or parsimony of truth—according as one is disposed to look at it—which characterized Voltaire in his controversies, he added that he had been overwhelmed by letters from Paris on this subject; that all decent people were irritated against the translator; that several had withdrawn their subscriptions. It was expedient, he continued, that men should put in the pillory of Parnassus this rascal of a Le Tourneur, who in the tone of a master, gives us English buffoons to set up in the place of Corneille and Racine; who treats us as everybody ought to treat him. Still, he was perfectly willing to let his villanous name go unmentioned.

It was different, however, with the passages which had been selected. Voltaire was aware, as D'Alembert was not, that it was no easy matter to find others as suitable for his purpose. He had carefully culled out from the mass of Shakespeare's writings everything he knew which would be offensive to his audience. If these were thrown aside there were no others that could take their place and produce the effect he aimed at. Their retention was therefore all-important. These vulgarities, these coarse words and phrases must be made known. The public must be put in a position "to see the divine Shakespeare in all his abominableness and in all his incredible vileness." He suggested a way out of the



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difficulty. D'Alembert, in reading, was to hesitate at these passages. He was to stop and apologize. He was to say that respect for the august assembly before which he stood would not permit him to repeat the offensive words and phrases he found in the extracts cited. An effective contrast would be thus brought out between the admirable pieces of Corneille and Racine and the terms of the market and the brothel which the divine Shakespeare had constantly put in the mouths of his heroes and heroines. "The great thing," he continued, "is to inspire the nation with the disgust and detestation it ought to have for buffoon Le Tourneur, extoller of buffoon Shakespeare; to hold back our youth from the slough into which they are precipitating themselves; to preserve a little our honor, if there is any remaining to us." Such were Voltaire's exhortations. The way to preserve the honor of French dramatists was to give an utterly false impression of the character of the writings of the English dramatist. "I am still persuaded," he wrote further, "that when you shall inform the Academy that you cannot pronounce at the Louvre what Shakespeare pronounced familiarly before Queen Elizabeth, the hearer, who will be glad of your reticence, will let his imagination run far beyond the English indecencies which will remain unuttered on the tip of your tongue."

On this point he was specially urgent. It was the main subject of both his letters to D'Alembert. To reinforce his request he wrote to La Harpe, begging him to second his appeal. The same fiery earnestness, the same indefatigable activity which he had displayed in championing the cause of victims of persecution he

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now exhibited in behalf of his own wounded vanity, though he disguised it under the name of zeal for the reputation of French writers whom no one had attacked. He complimented La Harpe on the patriotic and meritorious work which he and others had done in daring to defend in the Academy Sophocles and Corneille, Euripides and Racine against Gilles Shakespeare and Pierrot Le Tourneur. The risk involved in this undertaking will not be likely to strike the foreign reader as making a heavy demand upon the courage. In the way it was to be performed it involved, however, the necessity of doing a good deal of dirty work. Voltaire himself had no conception where the foulness really lay. He fancied it in Shakespeare, and not in himself and his associates. The filthiness of the contest was in his eyes equal to its desperate nature. "You will have to wash your hands after that battle," he wrote, "for you will have fought with the night-scavengers. I never expected France to sink one day into this abyss of ordure into which it has plunged."<sup>1</sup>

In order, therefore, that France should be preserved from any further defilement, it was absolutely essential that coarse passages in the writings of the English dramatist should be wrenched from their context and presented as fair specimens of his general work. The helot Shakespeare must be seen in his drunkenness, to save the Spartan Parisian from similar degradation. This consideration Voltaire impressed strongly upon La Harpe. "My principal intention," he wrote, "and the true aim of my labors is to have the public fully

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Aug. 15, 1776.

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informed of the infamous vileness which men dare to oppose to the majesty of our stage. It is clear that one cannot gain the knowledge of this baseness save by making a literal translation of the vulgar words of the delicate Shakespeare." It was true that D'Alembert could not disgrace himself by pronouncing aloud at the Louvre before the ladies coarse expressions which were spoken boldly every day in London. Still there was the expedient already indicated. He could stop as he reached them. By his very suppression of the proper word he would inform the audience that he did not dare to translate the decent Shakespeare in all his native force. "I think," he added, "this reticence and this modesty will gratify the assembly, who will imagine much more mischief than can be spoken to them."<sup>1</sup>

D'Alembert required no urging. La Harpe's intercession was apparently not needed to induce him to carry out this peculiar method of sustaining the honor of the French stage. He put himself wholly at Voltaire's disposition. He assured him in his reply that his orders should be executed to the very letter. He had become infected with his friend's lunacy, and fancied that a translation of Shakespeare into French with a laudatory preface was a declaration of war between France and England. His reply is a singular illustration of the influence exerted by a man of genius. D'Alembert's self-love had not been wounded. He had no wrongs real or fancied to avenge. He was as innocent of any knowledge of Shakespeare as either La Harpe or Marmontel. Yet he could hardly have exhibited more

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Voltaire to La Harpe, August 15, 1776.

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enthusiasm if his own fortune and fame had been at stake. He repeated with docility all the phrases which Voltaire had taught him. It was a war between France and England. The day of the reading he spoke of as a day of battle, in which the French must endeavor not to be beaten as at Crécy and Poitiers. In the large language on this really petty matter which passed between two of the greatest men of Europe, the contest was to be a struggle to the death. "It is necessary," wrote D'Alembert, "that either Shakespeare or Racine remain upon the field. It is necessary to make these gloomy and insolent English see that our men of letters know how to fight against them better than do our soldiers and generals. I shall cry out on Sunday in rushing to the charge, *Vive Saint-Denis-Voltaire, et meure George-Shakespeare.*"<sup>1</sup> Since Don Quixote's encounter with the windmills, literature has presented no contest of quite the same character.

D'Alembert, however, repeated his warnings as to what could and what could not be done. He regretted that he would be compelled to leave out some of the passages which were peculiarly objectionable. But the printer could re-instate them. The wider world of readers would thereby be enabled to become familiar with them in all their foulness. Still, even in that case, the grave Academy could assume no responsibility for the publication of the work. It would therefore be better not to seek for its endorsement, but to print the treatise without any retrenchments. The author could content himself with announcing that, out of

<sup>1</sup> D'Alembert to Voltaire, Aug. 20, 1776.

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respect for the assembly brought together at the Louvre, excisions had been made at the public reading of that which Shakespeare pronounced openly before Queen Elizabeth. In this way the superior delicacy of the French court and people would be shown, while at the same time there would be indicated to the public the unspeakable vileness of the man whom an ignorant and tasteless generation were celebrating as the creator god of the modern stage.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE DAY OF ST. LOUIS

SUNDAY, the twenty-fifth of August, the day of St. Louis, came at last. A large and brilliant assemblage gathered at the hall of the Forty. Members of the nobility, ladies of the court, many of the most brilliant beauties of whom Paris could boast, were present on the occasion. A large number of Englishmen attended the exercises, amounting, it is said by some, to nearly a third of the audience. Among them were the British ambassador and Mrs. Montagu, who was spending the summer at the French capital. The pieces which had received prizes were first read. They were followed by an eulogium upon Homer, and then came the attack upon Shakespeare.

In those days mail communication between Paris and Ferney took about a week. The train had been laid, the mine was about to be fired, which was to blow Shakespeare and his admirers into the air. Voltaire waited in some doubt and anxiety for the report. In a letter written during the interval, he reveals to us, inadvertently, as it were, the real cause of his agitated state of mind. D'Argental had encouraged him by the noble wrath, as Voltaire called it, which he had manifested against Le Tourneur. To him he communicated more freely than to any one else the feelings which had

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stirred up this bitterness in his heart. "It is said," he wrote, "to the shame of our nation, that he" — that is, Le Tourneur — "has a large party made up of writers of dramas and of tragedies in prose, seconded by some Velches who believe themselves to belong to the parliament of England. All these gentlemen, I am told, abjure Racine, and sacrifice me to their foreign divinity."<sup>1</sup> These last words it was which made manifest where and how the iron had entered his soul. It was bad enough to abjure Racine; but the immolation of Voltaire to this strange god was convincing proof of the frightful decadence which had overtaken literature. His indignation kept rising at the terrible and debasing idolatry into which a portion of his countrymen had fallen. "There is no example," he added, "of a similar overturn of spirit, of a similar turpitude. The Gilles and the Pierrots of the fair of St. Germain, fifty years ago, were Cinnas and Polyeuctes in comparison with the personages of that drunkard of a Shakespeare whom Le Tourneur calls the god of the theatre."

He was in a state of wrath, as he confessed himself. The first news that reached him from what he looked upon as the scene of conflict, brought him comfort and indeed exultation. He had discomfited the enemy. The Marquis de Villeville set out for Ferney early in the morning of the day following the meeting of the Academy to convey the glad tidings. He purposed to kill, if necessary, some post-horses in order to be the first to render to the Patriarch an account of his triumph. So we learn from D'Alembert, who had faithfully carried

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Aug. 27, 1776, to D'Argental.

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out his master's instructions, so far as he had been permitted. Following the military figure of speech set him by his chief, he was able to announce a great victory. The 'Letter,'<sup>1</sup> he wrote to Voltaire, had been received with the utmost favor. It had met with fervent applause. It was unfortunate indeed that certain passages had to be omitted in order not to shock the piety of the devotees or the delicacy of the ladies. Still, enough had been preserved to cause much laughter and to contribute effectually to the winning of the battle.

In a similar strain wrote La Harpe to the grand-duke of Russia, for whom he acted the part of literary purveyor. "M. de Voltaire," he said, "sent us a piece upon Shakespeare, in which, placed between Corneille and Racine, he combats like a brave general for the glory of the French theatre against that of London, and against the silly enthusiasts who have desired to overthrow our stage and substitute for it the mountebank trestles of barbarism."<sup>2</sup> To us at this distance of time all this perturbation of mind, this anxiety about the result, seems as uncalled for as the military language employed seems ridiculous. There was so little to excite surprise in the favor with which the 'Letter' was received that the surprise would have been had it met with anything but favor. It was addressed to the prejudices of the auditors. They came prepared to sympathize; or if indifferent, they were easy to be persuaded that the cause for which Voltaire was pleading was the cause of France. Furthermore the 'Letter' was the produc-

<sup>1</sup> Letter of D'Alembert to Voltaire, Aug. 27, 1776.

<sup>2</sup> *Correspondance litteraire*, vol. i. p. 417.



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tion of a man who had himself but little acquaintance and less sympathy with Shakespeare, addressed to a body of men, the large majority of whom had no acquaintance with him at all. It could not properly be said of them that their knowledge of the English dramatist was less, but that their ignorance of him was more. National prepossession, reinforced by the celebrity of the critic, the greatest genius of his time, would induce them to welcome his views with enthusiasm. Under such conditions, if the reading was to be considered a battle, the victory was certain to be one gained with ease.

Considerations of this sort did not occur to Voltaire. He was elated at the news of his success. He began to dream of a general vigorous onslaught upon this army of barbarians who were threatening the overthrow of the reign of good taste. He made up his mind, he declared, to labor for the resurrection of common-sense. He revolved a plan previously contemplated of making a more extended examination of the French theatre and the London fair. Before the day of St. Louis came, he had observed in one of his letters that he had always recognized the faults of Corneille; he had spoken of them, if anything, too often. But they were the faults of a great man, while the one opposed to him the English critic Rymer had with good reason called a villainous ape.<sup>1</sup> He was beginning to entertain for Shakespeare a feeling of positive hatred. The favor with which his attack upon him had been received tended now still more to intensify his dislike. He was determined to convert the victory he had achieved over the

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Aug. 15, 1776, to La Harpe.

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partisans of the English dramatist into a total rout. This made him unwilling to follow the course which D'Alembert had declared to be necessary, if he wished the treatise to come out as printed by the authorized publisher of the Academy.<sup>1</sup> This was the omission of the coarse words and passages which he had quoted. To these Voltaire clung, and all of them appear to have been retained.

In the first flush of exultation at the news of his success, his denunciation of Shakespeare increased in violence. He professed himself more than ever astonished at the superstitious veneration with which he was regarded by the English. His thoughts on that matter he communicated to D'Alembert in reply to his account of the success which had attended the reading. "I have always wondered," he wrote, "that a nation which has produced geniuses full of taste and even of delicacy, as well as philosophers worthy of you yourself, should be willing to pride themselves upon this abominable Shakespeare, who is in truth only a village buffoon and has not written two decent lines. There is in that obstinacy of bad taste a national madness for which it is difficult to assign a reason." To another correspondent at about the same time he revealed the secret of Le Tourneur's conduct. He had been overcome by the love of money. He was willing to exhibit the baseness of sacrificing France to England in order to obtain subscriptions for his translation from the men of the latter country who came to visit Paris. / "It is impossible," he said, "for a man who is not an absolute fool to have

<sup>1</sup> D'Alembert's letter of Aug. 27, 1776.

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preferred in cold blood a Gilles such as Shakespeare to Corneille and Racine. That infamy can only have been committed under the influence of a sordid avarice which ran after guineas.”<sup>1</sup>

Having thus satisfactorily disposed of the motives of Le Tourneur for translating Shakespeare, he went on to give an equally satisfactory explanation of the origin of the error of the English in admiring him. It was all due to the acting of Garrick. The player had created an illusion which had enveloped with its atmosphere the playwright. He had represented naturally what Shakespeare had disfigured by ridiculous exaggerations. In consequence some of the English had come to consider Shakespeare superior to Corneille because Garrick was superior to Molé. This explanation, though it reveals to us the mind of the philosopher, can hardly be said to reveal the philosophic mind. Yet during the controversy that raged in Parisian circles after this meeting of the Academy, it was a reason for Shakespeare's popularity with his countrymen not unfrequently given. Madame Necker wrote to Garrick that it was the argument employed by critics among her personal friends to explain away her enthusiasm for the English dramatist, and her growing indifference to the plays produced upon the French stage. “You deceive yourself,” they said. “It is only a majestic phantom which Mr. Garrick, that puissant enchanter, has evoked from the depths of the grave. When the charm ceases, Shakespeare re-enters into night.”<sup>2</sup> All this naturally failed to

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Sept. 7, 1776, from Voltaire to M. de Vaines.

<sup>2</sup> Garrick Correspondence, vol. ii. p. 624.

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account for that enthusiasm which had stiled him the inimitable, the divine, not only long before Garrick was heard of on the stage, but even before he was born, and to the existence of which Voltaire had himself borne frequent witness. Reflections of this sort possibly came to him as he was writing the letter. At all events he left the English to their fate. "I abandon them to their reprobate minds," he concluded; "and I shall not make a recantation in order to please them."

These last words suggest a state of mind of which he now began to make frequent manifestation. It is difficult indeed to put a serious interpretation upon his language in the moment of what he deemed his great victory. One naturally supposes that he must be jesting. But there is no jocoseness either in the manner or the matter of what he said. The tone throughout is serious. ✓ It is a tribute to the strength of outraged vanity that the one man in Europe who was gifted by nature with the keenest sense of the ridiculous seems to have had no suspicion of the ridiculous part he was playing. He had declared war against England, he said, and in his opinion England must be as much impressed with the gravity of the situation as he was himself. Unsupported, deserted even by those who should have been his allies, he had singly sustained the shock of conflict. "I am but an old hussar," he wrote, "but I have fought all alone against an army of Pandours. I flatter myself that at the end there will be found some true Frenchmen who will join me, if there are some Velches who abandon me." <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter of September 7 to M. de Vaines.

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All his utterances at this time pointed to the existence of a dreadful state of war, with its manœuvres and stratagems, and the devices of the enemy to neutralize his own efforts. Copies of his 'Letter to the Academy,' which he was distributing, failed to reach their destination. It was an old complaint of his, and in those days of lax administration and careless handling of the mails, to say nothing of espionage and confiscation of forbidden matter, it was undoubtedly often a subject of just complaint. But the reason he assigned for the miscarriage in this particular instance partook of the singular delusion which had now gained possession of his mind. "It must be," he wrote, "that some spy of the English has stopped my packages on the way, or that there is in France some great man who prefers Shakespeare to Corneille and Racine, and who takes sides against me."<sup>1</sup> The serious international nature of the controversy in which he was engaged was deeply impressed upon his mind. "I do not know," he had written a few weeks earlier to the same correspondent, "whether, after having declared war against England, I shall be able to make my peace with it. I have no Canada to give it, no Indian company to sacrifice to it. But I shall not ask pardon of it for having sustained the beauties of Corneille and Racine against Gilles and Pierrot, and I do not believe that the English ambassador will ask of the king the suppression of my declaration of war."<sup>2</sup>

These manifestations of wounded vanity are bad enough; but there is a still stranger part to this story.

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Oct. 2, 1776, to M. de Vaines.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Sept. 4, 1776, to M. de Vaines.

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It is hard to believe, yet the evidence leads to but one conclusion. The man whose pointed periods had driven injustice and cruelty from the strongholds in which they had intrenched themselves; who had wrung from a reluctant church and state unwilling reparation for the wrongs done to the families of Calas and Sirven; whose indefatigable efforts had reversed the infamous decisions of judicial tribunals; the champion of the persecuted to whom the wronged everywhere appealed for redress; the philosopher whose proclamation of the gospel of toleration had influenced the actions of the proudest potentates of Europe; this great apostle of liberty of speech would have been delighted, could he have succeeded in getting the translation of Shakespeare suppressed. At any rate he sought to have it taken out from under the patronage of the royal family. A letter of his to the Duc de Richelieu with tentative suggestions of this nature cannot well bear any other interpretation.

To this nobleman he sent a copy of his attack upon the English dramatist. In the communication accompanying it he told him that the founder of the Academy did not love the English. He was persuaded that the present representative of the family, who had made those same English pass under the Caudine Forks, would not take the part of Shakespeare against Corneille and Racine. One can pardon that people, he continued, "for boasting of their buffoons and merry-andrews. But is it permitted French men of letters to dare to prefer these burlesque shows of the fair, so low, so disgusting, so absurd, to masterpieces such as *Cinna* and *Athalie*?" All respectable people at Paris, it seemed to him, were

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full of indignation at the despicable insolence of this sort which had been exhibited. He wished the Duke, the grand-nephew of the founder of the Academy, not only to share in this indignation, but to take steps to counteract the wrong done to the nation. "Le Tourneur," he wrote, "has dared to put the name of the king and the queen at the head of his edition, which is to dishonor France throughout Europe." It was the duty of Richelieu to step forth as the protector of his country in this war.<sup>1</sup>

Precisely what sort of a reply was made to this appeal we have no means of ascertaining. We can only infer something of its nature from the answer it received from Voltaire. Richelieu's sense of the ridiculous was keen. It is pretty clear that he was more amused by the sensitiveness of his correspondent about his own reputation than impressed by his zeal for the reputation of Corneille and Racine. He undoubtedly did not feel that the fortunes of France were at stake because a French writer had written an essay which gave extravagant praise to an English dramatist, while neglecting to mention the name of a certain eminent living man of letters. As he himself was one of the subscribers to the translation, he was not likely to make any attempt to persuade the royal family to withdraw its patronage from the work. Indeed, even had he had any inclination to accede to Voltaire's wishes, he was not ignorant of the fact that he was quite a different man from the great cardinal whose name he bore, and occupied an altogether different position. He may have thought that Voltaire

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Richelieu, Sept. 11, 1776.

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was in earnest ; but he apparently did not let him suppose that he thought so. It is probable that he affected to treat the proposal as not seriously made.

If so, he was at once undeceived. Voltaire gave him to understand that, accustomed as he was to find the Duke laughing at everything and everybody, his correspondent included, this was no laughing matter. On the contrary, it was very serious. "You are our dean," he wrote ; "you are the nephew of the Cardinal Richelieu. Certainly he would not have suffered a great work to be dedicated to Louis XIII., in which France was sacrificed to England. During my life of more than eighty years I have seen ridiculous and insolent performances ; but I have never seen any equal to this. It is of you principally that I have thought it right to demand justice."<sup>1</sup> But Voltaire evidently inferred from the Duke's reply that no help was to come from that quarter. A letter which he had received a few days before from D'Alembert had shown him plainly that no help could come from any quarter. For this result he was himself largely responsible. The mortification his vanity had endured from the remarks found in the preface of *Le Tourneur* had led him unthinkingly into displaying a lack of tact of which he had soon occasion to repent. It is not the only instance of the sort which can be met with in studying his career.

No one appreciated more fully than Voltaire the influence wielded by women at that time in political and social circles. No one in the preceding reign had paid more assiduous court than he to the Pompadour. He

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Richelieu, Oct. 15, 1776.



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was just as eager now to conciliate the queen of Louis XVI. To gain her support and that of the princesses in the controversy upon which he had entered was something that lay near his heart. In his 'Letter to the Academy' he said several things which were designed for them and for them alone. In successive letters to D'Alembert he urgently insisted upon the retention — whatever else was omitted — of that which he had prepared to induce them to espouse his cause. "I conjure you," he wrote, "to leave standing my appeal to the queen and our princesses. It is necessary to engage them to take our side."<sup>1</sup> The queen especially was to be won over; of that result he was hopeful. She loves the tragic theatre, said Voltaire; she distinguishes the good from the bad; she will in consequence be the upholder of good taste. So the passage was not stricken out in the reading, nor unfortunately for Voltaire certain others which revealed the sensitiveness he felt at the patronage which had been bestowed upon Le Tourneur's translation by the royal family. He called upon the courts of Europe, upon the literary academies, upon the cultivated men of all lands, upon the men of taste in every condition of life to judge between the French and the English dramatists. This was a mere preliminary to the impassioned appeal he addressed to those whose favor in this particular emergency he believed to be of more worth than that of all the other personages he had mentioned. "I dare," he continued, "to demand justice of the Queen of France, of our princesses, of the daughters

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Aug. 13, 1766.

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of so many heroes, who know how heroes ought to talk."

✓ In Voltaire's anxiety to impress upon the ladies of the court his conception how heroes ought to talk, he forgot to follow the politic way of talking to those of them who found themselves described, doubtless in some cases to their astonishment, as daughters of heroes. In attacking in the manner he did the version of *Le Tourneur* he had really attacked the persons whom he was most solicitous to gain over to his side. The translator, he said in his 'Letter,' had sought to sacrifice France to England in a work which he had dedicated to the king and for which he had obtained the subscriptions of the queen and the princesses. Not a single one of his compatriots whose pieces were represented on the stages of all the nations of Europe, even upon the stage itself of the English, was spoken of in his preface of one hundred and thirty pages. The name of the great *Corneille* was found but a single time. "Why," he added, "did he wish to humiliate his country?" The purport of all this was plain enough even to the meanest capacity. It was not the fancied slight put upon the great French tragedians of the past which troubled Voltaire. It was the failure to recognize and celebrate the great French tragedian of the present.

The vanity displayed was surpassed by the tactlessness. The remarks just cited were really a covert insult. That neither Voltaire nor his partisans saw it, is a proof how completely they were blinded by the dust they themselves had raised. There can hardly be the slightest question that the court appreciated the absurdity of the

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pretension of warfare that had been put forth, and the ridiculousness of the clamor that had been raised. Under any circumstances to call a work which had been dedicated by permission to the king a sacrifice of France to England was not judicious. If this view were accepted, only one conclusion could follow. The court lacked either patriotism or perspicacity. This was not the way to conciliate the favor of the king or queen or of the rest of the royal family. It could not have been agreeable to them to be stigmatized by implication as unpatriotic because a translation of Shakespeare had been brought forth under their auspices. They had indeed made themselves in a measure responsible for its character and success. Le Tourneur furthermore was the private secretary of that member of the reigning family who in default of the survival of legitimate issue would inherit the crown. Wherever known, the translator was regarded with respect. It was naturally not a gratifying circumstance to have terms of gross abuse heaped upon him, as had been done in the first published letter of Voltaire to D'Argental, because he had been engaged in a work which had received the approval and encouragement of the court.

The consequences were not long in manifesting themselves. It soon appeared that the triumph on the day of St. Louis had not been so complete as D'Alembert had announced, and as Voltaire had been led to believe. About six weeks after the great victory the former was under the necessity of communicating to his commander-in-chief some mournful tidings. The success of which he had boasted had been followed by unpleasant re-

✓ verses. He had furnished the 'Letter' to the bookseller for publication, as he had been directed. That person, not having a suspicion that there would be the slightest obstacle in the way of its sale, had given it at once to the printer. No sooner had he done so than he met with a refusal to allow it to be sold. This was the first item of the interesting news, as he called them, which D'Alembert was enabled to communicate to his correspondent. The second was like unto it, only it was a good deal worse. The Academy had asked of the king five hundred livres a year, in order to increase its prizes, and arouse still more the emulation of the younger men of letters. This too had been refused. The report existed that the devotees at Versailles had persuaded the king that the extracts, culled with so much pains from Shakespeare for their coarseness, were injurious to religion; "although," added D'Alembert with natural indignation, "at the public reading all the indecent passages had been cut out." He ended the communication of his unpleasant tidings with bewailing the credit possessed at court by these hypocritical slanderers.<sup>1</sup>

✓ Criticism which depends for its success upon misrepresentation and misquotation pays for any temporary victory it achieves with ultimate defeat. The unfairness and unscrupulousness of the course Voltaire had adopted was easily seen by those Frenchmen present at the meeting of the Academy who chanced to know anything about Shakespeare. Even in that hall filled with ignorant sympathizers there had been found dissenters from the general applause the 'Letter' had received.

<sup>1</sup> D'Alembert to Voltaire, Oct. 15, 1776.

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When announcing the victory, D'Alembert had written to Voltaire that it was hardly necessary to say that the English who were present on the occasion went away exceedingly dissatisfied. Their disgust could be endured with equanimity, if not seen with pleasure. But others too were there who had to be considered. While arrangements were making for this attack upon the translation, D'Alembert had admitted that among the Parisian men of letters there were some deserters from the good cause, there were some traitorous brothers. He assured his correspondent, however, that these would be taken and hanged. It is clear that some of these traitors, lost to the sense of shame as well as of sin, had made their way to the meeting. D'Alembert somewhat grudgingly conceded the fact. Equally ill-pleased as the English, he wrote to Voltaire, were certain Frenchmen, who, not content with being beaten by the islanders on land and sea, wished also to be put to flight on the stage. This, converted into the language of common-sense, meant that there were Frenchmen present who had not lost their reasoning faculties sufficiently to consider admiration of Shakespeare as a crime, or to regard a translation of his works into their language as an act of treason. They doubtless thought that if the plays of Corneille and Racine could not stand a comparison with a version, which, even if it represented fairly the meaning of the original, could not convey any proper conception of its poetry, they had better be relegated at once to insignificance and obscurity.

Voltaire was thrown into a state of astonishment and dismay by the tidings communicated by D'Alembert.

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That there was anything injurious to religion in his attack upon Shakespeare was too ridiculous to be spoken of seriously. It might be offensive to delicacy; it certainly was not to piety. There was clearly some other agency which had brought about a refusal to license the sale of the work, though his partisans contented themselves with the one just specified. He tried vainly to fathom the cause that had produced the prohibition. The charge against the 'Letter' might have been, he fancied, the work of the translator. As he had been found capable of exalting Shakespeare, he was conceivably liable to commit any other iniquity. Voltaire suggested that Le Tourneur, conscious that he could have nothing to say for himself, had perhaps insinuated to the great nobleman upon whom he depended, that there was heresy, deism, atheism, in this diatribe against his author. His word would be believed; for no one took the trouble to read for himself.<sup>1</sup>

This was a possible explanation; but it was not altogether satisfactory even to its author. Any one indeed can now see that the plea of impiety for refusing permission to sell the piece was the baldest sort of pretext; it ought to have been seen by everybody then. But to whatever cause the prohibition was due, the melancholy fact of its existence could not be denied. The little work which was to crush the infamous conspirator who was seeking to sacrifice France to England had been struck down in the house of the authorized defenders of the realm. To add to the misery of the situation, the Academy which had cheered Voltaire

<sup>1</sup> Voltaire to D'Alembert, Oct. 7, 1776.

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on in his attack had met with a rebuff from the same quarter. That was the penalty it had paid for standing up for the honor of the national literature. Well might the old man believe that the age of decadence, so long impending, was now fully arrived. Everywhere the foes of good taste were triumphant. He had been contemplating the composition of a second letter, more interesting, he said, than the first. But the evil news he received took the heart out of him. There was no use in forming new projects or undertaking new enterprises. "I die disagreeably," he wrote; "I have seen literature die in France."<sup>1</sup>

In reply D'Alembert was able to send somewhat more encouraging news to the despondent octogenarian. The tone of his letter was however decidedly different from that earlier one in which he had announced to his leader that the deserters would be taken and hanged. The situation of affairs had in fact undergone a complete reversal. The deserters were apparently to inflict the punishment instead of receiving it. Voltaire was informed by his correspondent that he would not be burned: owing to the clemency of his judges he would merely be hanged.<sup>2</sup> His 'Letter to the Academy' could now be bought by the public. D'Alembert himself had seen it offered for sale at the Tuileries. "The prohibition," he wrote, "of saying anything against the English theatre and against Shakespeare has been removed." Still none the less, he continued, did the idiotic belief prevail at Versailles that this 'Letter' was an impious

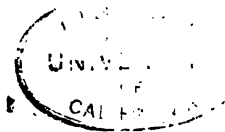
<sup>1</sup> Voltaire to D'Alembert, Oct. 7, 1776.

<sup>2</sup> D'Alembert to Voltaire, Oct. 15, 1776.

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work. In consequence the money for the increase of prizes had been definitely refused to the Academy. But he exhorted his friend not to cease his prosecution of the war, to go on with that second letter demolishing the English drama and its great dramatist. Voltaire tried to take heart. He would devote himself, he said, to the flogging of Shakespeare. But he failed to carry out his resolution. The preface to his tragedy of *Irène*, which goes under the name of the second letter to the Academy, was not written at this time.





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## CHAPTER XX

### INDIFFERENCE OF THE ENGLISH

AUTHORS are frequently disposed to take themselves very seriously. This is a feeling on their part about themselves which is rarely shared in by their brethren. With them it is more often made a subject of ridicule than of solemn consideration. But while this is true in general, it was not true in the case of Voltaire. Seriously as he took himself, he was taken just as seriously by many of his contemporaries. There was some warrant for their state of mind. He had accomplished so much that lay outside the legitimate fields of literary activity ; he had so impressed men by the fact that single-handed he had overthrown the decisions of judicial tribunals ; he had even been so successful in modifying the policy of great sovereigns, that little limit was set to what it was in his power to perform. He had declared war, he said, against England. Men asked themselves gravely, what would be the consequence. The belief in the momentous nature of this proceeding was shared in by others as well as by himself.

That Voltaire with his insatiable vanity, coupled with his long literary sovereignty, should entertain the feeling about the importance of any action he took is not so very surprising ; but that it should be exhibited

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by so clear-headed an observer as Grimm shows to what an extent this singular mental distortion had come to exist among men of letters. That generally impartial reporter of what was then going on in France had previously spoken with the slightest trace of irony of the somewhat touching state of amiable feeling which had been for some time existing between France and England. He expressed a fear that bitterness might arise in consequence of the translation of Shakespeare, and the patriotic resentment, as it was called, of Voltaire, which had led him to attack it. How widely the delusion prevailed as to the international importance of this action is evidenced by the fact that this generally cool observer regarded the 'Letter to the French Academy' as what its author called it, a declaration of war in form. He remarked that it was difficult to foresee what might be the consequences. Would the English people permit the French Academy to discuss quietly the justness of Shakespeare's claim to the idolatry with which he was regarded by that whole nation? Would they recognize the competence of the tribunal?<sup>1</sup> The answer to both questions was ridiculously easy. The decision of the French Academy on the merits of Shakespeare would have as much weight with Englishmen as a similar decision of any learned body in England on the merits of Corneille would have with Frenchmen. It is undoubtedly the truth, as Grimm remarked, that contemptuous and hostile remarks, so frequently indulged in by men of letters, contribute powerfully to the ill-will that springs up between

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, tome ix., p. 117 ff.

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nations. But it is their criticism of a whole people that irritates; rarely the criticism of individual authors.

As to any ill effect to be produced by the 'Letter to the French Academy' Grimm's mind was speedily set at rest. It was a proof, he remarked later, of the pacific disposition reigning among the rival nations of Europe that the extraordinary diatribe of Voltaire was listened to with patience from beginning to end by the large number of English who were present, and among them by the English ambassador, who sat gravely through the whole reading, not once permitting a smile to be seen upon his face at any of the amusing passages with which the discourse abounded. The only sign of resentment reported as having been displayed is recorded by La Harpe. Its importance may be estimated from the fact that it came from a boy of ten or twelve years of age. Like all good English people he had been brought up, La Harpe<sup>1</sup> tells us, in the religion of Shakespeare. He is represented as boiling over with wrath at the sarcasms of Voltaire and at the laughter of the assembly. He wanted to hiss. He found it hard to understand why he had not as much right to relieve his feelings in that fashion as the others had by applause. Assuming that he was possessed of all the precocity which this account requires, he must have longed to hiss on general principles, and not from any real knowledge of Shakespeare's plays or appreciation of Voltaire's sarcasms. There was indeed this justification for his state of mind, that there would have been full as much intelligence in the hissing to which he would have given

<sup>1</sup> La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire*, tome i. p. 417 (ed. of 1802).

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utterance, as there actually was in the applause manifested by the majority of the assembly. The incident, however, if not so exaggerated as to be practically apocryphal, was assuredly of no possible importance. The attitude of the British ambassador was that maintained by his compatriots. It was evident enough that if the Academy wished to determine the question of Shakespeare's merit, the English could not prevent it if they tried. It was equally evident that they had no disposition to try.

Voltaire's private letter of July 19 to D'Argental, which had at once been made public, had been put forth as a manifesto of hostilities. It was so spoken of generally. The 'Letter to the Academy' which followed was the actual declaration of war against the English. Such he himself loudly proclaimed it. But in order to have a war there must necessarily be two parties. Unfortunately for Voltaire's proclamation of hostilities, the English, once full of resentment at his disparagement of Shakespeare, did not now seem to care enough about the matter to make a fight. So far from answering his attack upon their favorite dramatist, they can hardly be said to have discussed it at all. Whatever plans may have been formed — if any were formed — of replying to his charges, ended in talk. His letter to D'Argental denouncing *Le Tourneur* and his version had been carried over to England. A translation of it appeared in the newspapers. It excited amusement and derision a good deal more than it did irritation; but even of the former there was little exhibition. Hardly a word of comment upon this letter

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appeared in any periodical publication of whatever character. Horace Walpole is the only person of literary prominence who seems to have left any record of the impression it made; and this was confined to his private correspondence. He transmitted to Mason Voltaire's letter to D'Argental in the original French. He spoke of it as a silly torrent of ribaldry and described its author as the worst of dunces, a genius turned fool with envy.<sup>1</sup> Voltaire's further discourse to the French Academy he characterized later as being "as downright Billingsgate as an apple-woman would utter, if you overturned her wheelbarrow." "It hurts me," he added, "when a real genius like Voltaire can feel more spite than admiration, though I am persuaded his rancour is grounded upon his conscious inferiority."<sup>2</sup> In these words Walpole may be said to have embodied the common English opinion of the 'Letter.'

A translation of this attack upon Shakespeare came out at London in March, 1777. The same indifference continued to be manifested. As had been the case with the original, the translation excited but little comment. A careful examination of the magazines of the period — the periodical publications in which the indignant Briton of those days usually vented his wrath — shows only barest references to the 'Letter' either by regular contributors or occasional correspondents. The long-established and leading reviews of the time, the 'Monthly' and the 'Critical,' had merely brief notices of

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Mason, Sept. 17, 1776, Cunningham's edition of Walpole's Correspondence, vol. vi. p. 375.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 379. Letter to Mason of Oct. 8, 1776.

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it, the longest being but a dozen lines. Their omission to consider it at length is significant of the little interest it inspired, because they not unfrequently paid a good deal of attention to works produced in foreign languages, and might naturally be supposed to have a special interest in this particular piece. There was however then published another review, the 'London.' During the first part of its brief existence it was rather a personal organ of Kenrick, its founder, than an organ of public opinion. It had little circulation and less influence. The course it took is the only exception to the general rule of indifference which prevailed. In this review a large share of the 'Letter' was translated with a few running comments. The general character of the estimate expressed by it was summed up in the opening paragraph of the criticism. In it the discourse was described as exhibiting the vanity, petulance, and invidious disposition of its celebrated author.<sup>1</sup> This was very mild for Kenrick, whom many will remember mainly from Macaulay's designation of him as "the polecat." To be abused by him was no distinction; he abused everybody. Besides these notices, a few epigrams in the magazines, a few passages translated, generally without comment, in the newspapers, make up all the part which England played in this so-called war.

Doubtless in the multifarious literature of the years immediately following Voltaire's death, further references to his attack on Shakespeare can be found; for

<sup>1</sup> The 'London Review,' vol. iv. p. 50 (1776). Kenrick further sent to the 'Gentleman's Magazine' (Dec. 1776, vol. xlvi. p. 556) a not altogether agreeable character of Voltaire, which he said had been communicated to him by a French gentleman.

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though the English did not reply, they were not likely to forget. Still the few which have come under my own observation do not rival in bitterness some of those produced much earlier in the century. Beattie indeed spoke with much contempt of Voltaire and his followers, who fancied that nothing was in taste unless it was in the French taste; who condemned Shakespeare's plays as absurd farces, because formed upon a plan which they did not approve. Criticism of this sort, he added, was as much below the notice of rational inquiry as modes of hair-dressing or patterns of shoe-buckles.<sup>1</sup> But the charge more commonly repeated was that of plagiarism. Davies, in his 'Dramatic Miscellanies,' said, for instance, that no ghost would ever have appeared upon the French stage, had not Voltaire been struck by that in 'Hamlet.' "Thence," he added, "he warmed his *Semiramis* with that fire which he stole from the man whom he admires, envies, vilifies, and grossly misrepresents."<sup>2</sup>

But not often was even so much irritation as this displayed. The truth is that by this time the English had generally settled down into the comfortable conviction of Shakespeare's assured superiority to all dramatists ancient or modern. That any one should take a different view rarely begot resentment; it was rather a feeling of compassion that was aroused for the intellectual shortcomings of the person entertaining it. The general attitude is pretty fairly conveyed in an article which appeared in 1772 in the

<sup>1</sup> *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, by James Beattie, 1783, p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> *Dramatic Miscellanies*, vol. iii. p. 36.

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leading review of the time. It is one of a series of highly favorable notices of the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* which had been published the preceding year.

✓ "When Mr. Voltaire," said the writer, "*affects to place* Corneille above our divine Shakespeare, we feel no indignation at such a preposterous preference; we do not even charge the critic with a total want of taste and judgment in the works of genius. We know the innocent vanity which attends the *amor patriæ*, and forgive him while

'He holds his farthing candle to the sun.'"<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly Voltaire need have felt no anxiety that the English ambassador would insist upon the suppression by the French government of his declaration of war. He could have safely dismissed the fear that any apology, any recantation, would be required on his part, that in fact anything would be demanded of him personally in exchange for the ratification of a treaty of peace. The time had gone by for any feelings approaching sensitiveness. An attack upon Shakespeare was either received with absolute indifference or produced the same amused wonderment with which one would now regard an attack upon the Copernican system. An attitude, not controversial but contemptuous, was taken towards those, whether natives or foreigners, who continued still to cherish the rapidly disappearing belief of a vanished age that Shakespeare was simply an inspired barbarian. We can find it exemplified in Maurice Morgann's Essay on Falstaff. This came out the year following the appearance of the 'Letter to the French

<sup>1</sup> Monthly Review, vol. xlvii. p. 536.



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Academy.' It expressed in a confident and indeed insolent way the view of Shakespeare which the English were now coming generally to hold. "When the hand of time," said Morgann, "shall have brushed off his present editors and commentators, and when the very name of Voltaire, and even the memory of the language in which he has written, shall be no more, the Appalachian Mountains, the banks of the Ohio, and the plains of Sciola shall resound with the accents of this barbarian. In his native tongue he shall roll the genuine passions of nature; nor shall the griefs of Lear be alleviated, or the charms and wit of Rosalind be abated by time."<sup>1</sup>

There was another reason too for this indifference. Voltaire suffered to some extent from the penalty which those men undergo who establish a reputation for humor. He was liable not to be taken seriously, even when he was most serious. To a certain extent it was so in the case of this particular discourse. It was regarded by some as little more than a piece of pleasantry on the part of "the old joker of Ferney,"<sup>2</sup> as he was styled in one of the reviews. Why therefore should he be answered in earnest? Garrick indeed wrote to Madame Necker that rods were in preparation for Voltaire by several English wits. Mrs. Montagu, on her return from Paris in October, had sent him the 'Letter to the French Academy.' In it, as has been remarked, his cutting out of the grave-diggers' scene had been mentioned with approval and adduced as a proof of the revival of taste among the English. It was a sore point with the actor. He had

<sup>1</sup> Morgann's *Essay*, etc. (1777), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> *Monthly Review*, vol. liv. p. 400, May, 1776.

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now come to see that his alteration had met with no favor from the educated class of his countrymen. He was also far from pleased with being reckoned as an ally of the French author in his depreciation of Shakespeare. "His letter to the French Academy," he wrote to Madame Necker, "is no addition to his genius or his generosity, and his errors are without end. I pity his ill-placed anger."<sup>1</sup> The punishment, however, which he predicted as being in store for Voltaire always remained in store. It was never taken out of it. Everything there was of that nature has been already indicated here. The only reply that came from England was written by an Italian in the French tongue.

This was the work of Baretti, the friend of Dr. Johnson and the calumniator of Mrs. Piozzi. It is itself a proof of the indifference prevalent among the English that he was the only person who undertook the task. In fact, it was their indifference which he gave as his reason for undertaking it. Everybody was asleep, he remarked, and Voltaire was permitted to speak without contradiction. This had prompted him to produce his apology for the poet; and for the sake of being read in France, to produce it in a tongue which he said he had not mastered fully, though he had studied it much.<sup>2</sup> "I have taken courage," he wrote, "to unmask an insolent impostor, who for half a century has sought to make himself accepted in all Europe as a special scholar in English and Italian, though he has no real apprecia-

<sup>1</sup> Garrick Correspondence, vol. ii. p. 190. Letter of Nov. 10, 1776.

<sup>2</sup> The Barton collection in the Boston Public Library contains Baretti's treatise with annotations by himself. Words and sentences are altered, and errors he had made in his use of the French language are corrected.

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tion of the one or of the other." The work was throughout in harmony with the somewhat violent tone of this passage. It began with denying Voltaire's knowledge of English and ended with denying his knowledge of Italian. The two treatises in the former tongue which had been produced during his exile, Baretti declared were not really the composition of the French author: nor in that tongue had he written a single letter after his return to his native land. For neither of these assertions did he give any authority; and the one in regard to his correspondence we know to be false.

Baretti was much more successful in attacking the unpoetic character of Voltaire's translations of poetic phrases and passages. These renderings he asserted, and asserted justly, could in some instances be due only to ignorance or to malice. The version of 'Julius Cæsar,' in particular, of the faithfulness of which Voltaire was constantly boasting, was attacked with peculiar savageness. It was made, Baretti said, in the style of a school-girl. 'Julius Cæsar' had not been translated, but had been assassinated. Criticism couched in such language cannot be deemed genial; but for all that, it was in this case entitled to a good deal of consideration. Baretti may not have been the highest type of man, but his knowledge and ability were conceded by men much abler than himself. Upon the accuracy and excellence of a translation from English into French he spoke with distinct authority. He was familiar with both languages; and his exposure of the unfaithfulness of some of Voltaire's renderings in spirit, even where it was not in meaning, was one not to be met successfully.

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Baretti's explanation of the outburst of wrath directed against ~~Le Tourneur~~ was based indeed upon the ground that Voltaire was conscious of the inadequacy of his own renderings. Others might be simple enough to believe what he had written; but that was a pitch of credulity at which the author himself had not arrived. A man, he observed, does not call another a scoundrel, an imbecile, a buffoon, for nothing. The reason for this abuse was manifest. If the new version came out, Voltaire believed that his own reputation as censor of English literature would be destroyed at once. Baretti represented him as soliloquizing after the following fashion: "My enemies will not fail to compare my translation of Shakespeare with Le Tourneur's. They will recognize at once its inaccuracy and unfaithfulness. People will see the English dramatist with other eyes than mine. All the horde of scribblers with whom France abounds, will hurl themselves upon me." The Italian on his part undertook to console the Frenchman by assuring him that nobody would ever undertake the trouble to institute a comparison between the two versions. Le Tourneur's he had not seen, but he knew it must be poor, because no good version of Shakespeare could be made into any language descended from the Latin. Least of all could it be made into French with its poetry enchained in alexandrines, reminding one of a procession of monks marching two and two with equal and grave steps along a perfectly straight road. It is an additional proof of the indifference of the English to this assumed state of war that Baretti's defence did not excite even as much comment as Voltaire's attack. Scarcely any notice whatever

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was taken of it in the periodical literature of the time. It was violently assailed indeed in this same 'London Review' of Kenrick's. The discourse was there amiably described as "impertinent effusions of the vanity of a self-conceited foreigner: who would be thought to know everything and hardly knows anything."<sup>1</sup> In comparison with this criticism the previous comment upon Voltaire's 'Letter' can be deemed eulogy.

But if Voltaire had not stirred up an international war, he had added fuel to a civil one. The controversy which went on in France in regard to Le Tourneur's version lies almost entirely outside of the limits of this work. But in that country it raged violently. During this and the years immediately following, the merit of the translation was a subject of constant and heated discussion in the literary journals of France and the literary circles of its capital. "There are very strong parties pro and con here at Paris," wrote one of Garrick's correspondents in May, 1777. "All the Voltairians cry it down; others again are more enthusiastic (if possible) than we are who have tasted of the Avon. For my own part the best I can say of it is, that it is Shakespeare reduced to the simple state of nature, despoiled of his gorgeous pomp and majesty, his brilliancy and his graces, but not disfigured."<sup>2</sup> Such was the report of an English woman who had, according to her own account, pointed out to Le Tourneur some of the mistakes he had made. She looked, however, upon the whole controversy with a good deal of indifference. Not so another friend of Garrick's, who

<sup>1</sup> London Review (1777), vol. v. p. 531.

<sup>2</sup> Garrick Correspondence, vol. ii. p. 214. Letter of May 30, 1777.

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was a Frenchwoman. She belonged to the Voltairian party, though in deference to her correspondent she tried to assume a tone of impartiality. In this she was not entirely successful, for her own indignation had been kindled by the views contained in that terrible prefatory matter which Le Tourneur had so shamelessly put forth. "You are right," wrote Madame Riccoboni, "in believing that La Harpe will attack your favorite poet. He is enraged against the translation of which the foolish preface has disgusted everybody. Shakespeare stood in no need of their awkward eulogies." There was the sore spot. The praise bestowed upon the English dramatist had excited the susceptibilities of the Voltairians to the utmost; it was something which could not be forgiven. "That preface," continued the irate woman, "badly written, more badly reasoned, has done considerable harm to the translation, and tends to make prominent the faults and the unfaithfulness with which its authors are reproached."<sup>1</sup>

The controversy on the Continent concerns us here only so far as English writers were directly or indirectly swept into its current. The reply of Rutledge to Voltaire may therefore be dismissed in a few words; for though of English descent he was born in France, and in that country spent his life. In its language also his works were written. Two or three months after the 'Letter to the French Academy' was published, he brought out some observations upon it in reply. Though the grandson of an Irish Jacobite, he had not renounced allegiance to Shakespeare, even if he had to Shake-

<sup>1</sup> Garrick Correspondence, vol. ii. p. 628.

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spere's country. He asserted his superiority to the dramatists of other lands. He maintained the correctness of his course in introducing into the scene characters of all sorts from the highest to the lowest. This in French eyes was a proceeding utterly unworthy of the dignity of Melpomene, as they phrased it; and their avoidance of it was unquestionably responsible for the extent to which they relied upon the pomp of declamation to supply the lack of action. Upon the inferiority of their methods Rutledge insisted strongly. But unlike Baretti, in combating the views of the man he criticised, he was uniformly respectful and even courteous in his language. Still perfectly familiar as he was with both the French and English tongues, he was necessarily struck by the bad faith which Voltaire had frequently exhibited, especially in his pretence that the so-called blank verse into which he had translated 'Julius Cæsar' revealed in the slightest degree the character and effect of English blank verse. False statements of this nature he had no hesitation in exposing. But his share in the controversy belongs rather to French than to English literature. For us it is only important to dwell upon the part played by Mrs. Montagu's 'Essay.'

No sooner had Voltaire's 'Letter' been published than the partisans of Shakespeare arranged to have this work translated. Its writer had been spending her summer in the French capital. Two of her sayings had been widely circulated in the literary salons of Paris, and perhaps increased the disposition to produce her 'Essay' for the benefit of those who were interested in the controversy. They are not very remarkable, but they are distinctly

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better than anything to be found in her pretentious and over-praised book. One was a comment upon Voltaire's remark in the published letter to D'Argental that he had been the first to exhibit to his countrymen some pearls which were found in Shakespeare's enormous dunghill. "It is a dunghill," said Mrs. Montagu, when the letter was shown her, "which has fertilized a very ungrateful soil." This was a renewal of the old charge of plagiarism which the French author was never allowed to forget. Her second saying was her reply to the journalist Suard, who, after the reading on the day of St. Louis, had expressed to her some concern lest what she had heard might have proved displeasing. "Not at all," was her answer; "I never professed myself to be a friend of Monsieur de Voltaire." In her private letters, however, she displayed somewhat more feeling. She wrote to Garrick that during the meeting of the Academy, she had "felt the same indignation and scorn at the reading Voltaire's paper, as I should have done if I had seen Harlequin cutting capers and striking his wooden sword on the monument of a Cæsar or an Alexander the Great."<sup>1</sup>

The 'Essay' on Shakespeare was accordingly translated, and came out in the course of the year following the publication of the 'Letter to the Academy.' Though produced long before, it was regarded by many as a sort of reply to that discourse. From the attention paid to it by both parties, it must have met with a good deal of success. Clear-headed and impartial observers saw indeed

<sup>1</sup> Garrick Correspondence, vol. ii. p. 188. Letter of Nov. 3, 1776.



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that Mrs. Montagu had unwittingly given up the cause she was striving to champion; that she had really acknowledged the justice of all the charges which had been brought against Shakespeare to prove that he was deficient in art. But in France still more even than in England the very weakness of the 'Essay' contributed to its favorable reception. It was far better suited to the ideas and tastes there prevailing than the uncompromising preface of *Le Tourneur*, which had sent a shock to French classicism through its entire being. That had been too strong meat to suit the queasy stomachs of any but the most radical revolvers against the practices of the French drama. The foreign admirers of the 'Essay,' like the English, were more impressed with its assertion of Shakespeare's merits than by its admission of his faults. The very admission, indeed, showing clearly the candor of the writer, gave added strength to the encomiums in which she indulged.

So the war went on. Voltaire from his retreat at Ferney was constantly animating his cohorts. Yet one gets the impression from the correspondence of the closing year and a half of his life that he secretly felt that he was fighting for a losing cause. The references in it to current events are not many; but they all point one way. The pessimistic view of the condition of literature in France became, if anything, more pessimistic. The admiration for Shakespeare was merely one of many signs of that inundation of ignorance and bad taste which could not much longer be held in check. "I succumb," he wrote, "under my maladies, under my enemies, under the factious friends of Shakespeare, under the devotees,

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under all the barbarians.”<sup>1</sup> Even when he urged on his followers to continue fighting there was an undertone of depression. To friends and partisans he broke out into frequent lamentation. “I saw the end of the reign of Augustus,” he wrote to La Harpe in January, 1778, “and I am now in the Lower Empire. . . . I confess to you that the barbarism of Du Belloi and his associates is almost as unendurable as the barbarism of Shakespeare. Du Belloi is a hundred times more inexcusable, for he had models, and the English buffoon had none.” It was for La Harpe to revive the reign of good taste. It was he who must struggle bravely for it in prose and verse. With impatience he waited, he said, the result of his correspondent’s reply to that Montagu *la shakéspéarienne*.<sup>2</sup>

In certain ways the disciple he exhorted was better fitted than he himself to carry on the war which he had begun. For, after all, Voltaire remained a good deal impressed in his heart by much which he had found in Shakespeare, even at the very time he was relieving his resentment at the growing interest in the English dramatist by heaping upon him terms of abuse. He could not, however, escape entirely from his own sense of justice and keenness of appreciation. But for an impartial examination of Shakespeare’s merits, from the Voltairian point of view, uncontaminated by the prejudices which dog the footsteps of even the slightest knowledge, La Harpe had been for a long period pre-eminently equipped. He could not read a sentence of

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Madame de Saint-Julien, Oct. 30, 1776.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Jan. 14, 1778.

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the English author.<sup>1</sup> But an insignificant obstacle like that, instead of acting as a deterrent to the expression of opinion, gave it only freer and fuller course. Planted upon the solid rock of ignorance, he was enabled to survey without disturbing emotion the whole field of English literature, and to dispense praise and blame with that calm severity of judgment which belongs only to the intelligent and uninformed. When Baretti's reply to Voltaire fell into his hands he was consequently enabled to describe it with calmness and without bias as the work of a sort of Anglicized fool. Caliban, highly praised in the treatise he thus criticised, was represented as a grotesque and fantastic creation suited only to pieces that were to be played at fairs. Other views he controverted with the same imperial ignorance. "The sophisms of these crazy persons," he concluded, "who are striving to put Shakespeare above Sophocles and Euripides, above Corneille and Racine, belong to the number of remarkable extravagances in the history of the human spirit."<sup>2</sup>

Le Tourneur's translation, however, gave La Harpe some slight knowledge of the English dramatist. He improved it to the uttermost. He went to work on a criticism of 'Othello.' He set out to treat not only the conduct of the piece, but to compare the style of the

<sup>1</sup> I base this statement upon Grimm, who certainly ought to have known, and who expressly asserts that La Harpe did not know a word of English. (*Correspondance littéraire*, tome ix. p. 119.) While I entertain no doubt on the point, it is right to add that La Harpe himself constantly gives the impression in his writings, or rather implies, that he is familiar with the English tongue.

<sup>2</sup> La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire* (1802), tome ii. p. 179.

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original with that of the French version. Proceedings of this sort somewhat shocked Grimm. He had lived long in Paris; he had become pretty fully imbued with the ideas about dramatic art which prevailed in his adopted country. But the Teutonic strain in his blood could not abide with satisfaction the sight of a discussion going on about the comparative worth of productions which the critics could not read. He had witnessed a similar exhibition in the case of Homer, whose merits had been magisterially pronounced upon by men who did not understand Greek. A like procedure was now taking place in the case of Shakespeare. Knowledge of the language in which he wrote was not deemed essential; hardly indeed knowledge of what he wrote. "*Esprit*," was Grimm's sarcastic comment, "supplies everything."<sup>1</sup>

There was balm, however, to be applied to the harassed feelings of Voltaire. His closing days were to be the most triumphant of the many triumphant days of his life. In 1778 he was in his eighty-fourth year. He had for a long while been ailing. At least he was always complaining in his correspondence of his various maladies, even at the time he was accomplishing work, to do which would have tasked the strength of an ordinary man in the full vigor of his powers, if it did not break him down entirely. He boasted of his ill-health very much as he boasted of the faithfulness of his translation of 'Julius Cæsar.' Voltaire was in truth a valetudinarian by profession, — at least he became so, — and like many such men seems to have been

<sup>1</sup> Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, tome ix. p. 119.

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endowed by nature with the capacity of living forever. Certain it is he possessed a sort of health which gave him constant disquiet, and enabled him to outlive nearly all his actual contemporaries. It looks indeed as if he might have rivalled Fontenelle in length of life, and have reached too his hundredth year, had it not been for that fatal visit to Paris. In February, 1778, he suddenly left the quiet of Ferney, and most unexpectedly made his appearance in the French capital. The ostensible pretext for the journey was his desire of having the tragedy of *Irène* brought out under his own immediate supervision. He carried with him also a reply to Mrs. Montagu which he had composed in the closing months of the previous year.

It was going on towards thirty years since he had last set foot in the city. A whole generation had come upon the stage since his departure from it in 1750. Those who composed it had never seen the man; but they had read his writings, they had imbibed his views, they felt for him personally the veneration of disciples for the great master. Tremendous was the commotion when the news of his arrival was noised abroad; more tremendous the enthusiasm. Paris went mad with excitement and joy. The clergy, to be sure, stood largely aloof; but for this Voltaire cared little. The court viewed his coming with dislike; and for this he cared a great deal. But, after all, what were court and clergy to the acclamations of a whole people who hailed him as the deliverer of the human mind from intellectual and spiritual bondage, and, what was even dearer to his heart, as the triumphant champion who had compelled

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religious fanaticism and political injustice to let go their victims, though fairly in their toils. Crowds waited for hours in the streets to gain a momentary glimpse of his person. The gates of buildings he was to enter were besieged by multitudes who gave way slowly to permit him to pass, and closed upon his footsteps with clappings of hands and cries of joy. His ordinary movements indeed were like the journeys of a royal progress; but no monarch ever received from enthusiastic subjects a more spontaneous tribute of loyalty and admiration and love than was paid by high and low to this uncrowned king. Versailles looked on in moody silence at an outburst of adoration which it dared make no attempt to repress. A clerical party there was which was filled with hot indignation at this display of idolatrous devotion. In their eyes it was directed to an enemy of God who had made a mock of the religion of his country and had held its priesthood up to scorn. Never before had the world witnessed such an example of defiant apostasy. Peter had denied his Lord; but he had repented. Voltaire had done worse. He had denied the devil, and he had not repented. But it was useless to think of stemming the tide of popular transport, which burst all barriers and bore down everything before it. The wiser heads felt too that there was nothing about it permanent, and that the only safe way was to let it run its course unchecked. Voltaire himself saw the vanity of the adulation he received; he recognized its transitory character. None the less did he enjoy it, and, happily for him, he died before the inevitable reaction

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had time to set in. Followed wherever he went by enthusiastic crowds, fêted in every quarter, received with homage by the Academy, crowned in the theatre, the honors lavished upon a man still full of energy and fire, but feeble with the weight of more than fourscore years, proved too much for his strength. No one will grudge the old warrior the glories of his parting day. He did not die, it is true, in the odor of sanctity; in place of it he had been stifled by the incense of popular applause.

But even when the hour of death was drawing nigh, he did not lose sight of one object which had so long occupied his thoughts. The play of *Irène*, as originally published,<sup>1</sup> was accompanied by a dedicatory preface to the French Academy, which in later editions went under the title of a letter to that body. This preliminary discourse had been read at the meeting of the 19th of March — three days after the first public representation of the tragedy — and had been received with approval and applause. Thanks had been solemnly tendered to the octogenarian for this renewed vindication of French taste and art. Two thirds of it was given up to a reply to Mrs. Montagu's 'Essay.' It was rather a defence of Corneille, and especially of Racine, against her charges, than an attack upon Shakespeare. In regard to him he did little more than go over for the twentieth time the old ground. His pieces were not acted outside of England; they mingled prose and verse; they were a hodge-podge of serious and comic scenes, in which the princes talked like street-porters

<sup>1</sup> Bengesco's *Bibliographie*, vol. I p. 85.

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and the porters like princes; they stretched over indefinite spaces of time. Of course he could not refrain from remarking that he had been the first to extract a little gold from the mud in which the genius of Shakespeare had been plunged by his age. He had been saying it for forty years; it had now become as inveterate a habit as dram-drinking. But this preface, otherwise unimportant, shows us that the controversy was still going on as to the comparative merits of Corneille and Shakespeare. "I blush," he said, "to join together these two names; but I learn that this incredible dispute is renewed in the midst of Paris." His last letter to D'Alembert transmitted this dedicatory epistle and begged him to let him know whether it was unworthy of the Academy and his correspondent, and if he might hope it would be of any use.

This is the final utterance of Voltaire on Shakespeare. It is interesting, as everything he wrote was interesting; but, like the previous 'Letter to the Academy,' it added nothing to what he had said before. Repetition was all the argument he used; and not merely the repetition of his own words, but of those which his disciples had learned from him. He quoted La Harpe as gravely as if he did not know that an echo cannot add anything to the meaning and force of the original voice. But there is in this discourse but little trace of the truculent tone which he had displayed towards Le Tourneur. While combating the opinions of Mrs. Montagu he treated her with old-fashioned courtesy. There was an occasional flash of the ancient fire, as, for instance, in his comment upon her condemnation of Racine for his



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constant introduction of love-scenes into his tragedies. "It is beautiful, without doubt," he said, "for a lady to reprove that universal passion which causes her sex to reign." But strokes of even this kind are unusual. In general the piece is tame. It lacks throughout that virulence which is always dear to the reader when exhibited against views he does not hold or authors he does not like. Considering indeed the later utterances of Voltaire which have been quoted, breathing, as they do, defiance and threatenings and slaughter, it is beautiful, to use his own phrase, to find him concluding this preface in a spirit of meekness and charity to all. He inveighed in this closing discourse against making a national quarrel out of a question of literature. He assumed the attitude of a man who had never been influenced by the prepossessions of country or race. "I have done justice," he cried, "to the English Shakespeare and to the Spanish Calderon. I have never paid heed to national prejudice." Who will charge with insincerity the words of a dying man? The force of self-delusion could no farther go.

## CHAPTER XXI

### LATER RESULTS OF THE CONTROVERSY

IN the mean while the cause of all this tumult, the main object of all these attacks, made no sign. He had been assailed with the epithets of scribbler, scoundrel, scavenger, fool, and he had held his peace. None the less had he persisted steadily in the prosecution of his diabolical task. Henceforth the work was wholly his own. His two coadjutors had retired with the publication of the first instalment; one of them indeed died in 1780. In 1778 appeared two additional volumes, with the names of about one hundred and fifty new subscribers. What is of interest here is that they were nearly all French. In the fifth volume which came out the following year were added to the whole number about fifty more names. It was mortifying to the adherents of pure art that such an undertaking should meet with such success. But, after all, what difference did it make if useless compilations and wretched versions were received with favor by an undiscerning public! "What matters it," said La Harpe, "to enlightened spirits, who read only for instruction or pleasure, that Messrs. Le Tourneur and company translate in a barbarous style the barbarous farces of Shakespeare?"<sup>1</sup> The comments of the wren upon the eagle are always of interest, not for any value

<sup>1</sup> La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire* (1802), tome iii. p. 220.

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they have in themselves, but because they indicate the wren's state of mind.

That some of his old friends and correspondents are to be found in these last lists of subscribers would have brought an additional pang to Voltaire's heart, had he been living. The truth is that his violence, as might have been expected, had overshot the mark. He had aimed to impair the fortunes of the translation, if not destroy it altogether. He had actually done all that lay in his power to help it forward. His attacks upon it had aroused curiosity. Had there been any question as to the outcome of the undertaking, the kind of warfare he waged against it would have insured its success. The publication of the successive instalments went on steadily. Its twenty volumes are usually described as having been completed in 1782; but its nineteenth bears the date of the year following.

Le Tourneur, in spite of the provocation which he had received, had never returned the railings of his adversaries. In his later volumes, however, he introduced a number of critical opinions expressed by other writers. In a few instances they came from "Mistriss Montaigu;" but mainly they were taken from Eschenburg, who was just then engaged in putting through the press the revision and completion of Wieland's translation of Shakespeare. Le Tourneur would have been more than human had he not experienced a quiet pleasure in transcribing some of the views of the German professor. They were indicative of the new ideas that were beginning to prevail in his country. By Eschenburg Voltaire was reckoned among the imitators

of Shakespeare. Nor were his partisans treated with much respect. These opinions of his *Le Tourneur* introduced without committing himself to their justice. They constituted part of the literary history of the English dramatist, and therefore had a right to be inserted. In giving them he simply remarked that men who judged others must expect to be judged themselves; but it is noticeable that he indirectly called attention to the fact that there was nothing personal in these critical comments which he was publishing. They were purely literary. He could not but remind by implication his readers of the terms of gross abuse with which he himself had been assailed. "Some other writers," he wrote, "still living and distinguished among us, undergo also the purely literary criticism of the German translator. If he is deceived, it is their privilege to count his opinion as of no value. For myself, a faithful translator, and indifferent to these discussions, my object is to get together that which can make clear and interesting the work which I have undertaken to make current in our tongue."

It probably gave no great pang to *Le Tourneur's* feelings to reproduce the disparaging opinions expressed of the abilities of the men who had made upon him so violent an onslaught. But he himself indulged in no attacks upon his opponents. He spoke indeed of the cold and jealous criticism which Voltaire had passed upon '*Julius Cæsar*,' and referred to an essay of his own in which he had replied to that author's censures upon the play with more of detail than was due to any merit they possessed. Once only did he make any reference to the

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tempest of the tea-pot nature which had been stirred up by his translation. It was in a notice to the subscribers accompanying the volumes brought out in 1781. In that he spoke of the kind of bizarre war which had been waged against the work at its birth, to the extraordinary wrath of a great poet, the panegyrist of Shakespeare so long as he was unknown, his enemy as soon as he was translated. Over all the obstacles then raised in the way of its success the work had triumphed. The contempt which Le Tourneur justly felt for the commotion which had been aroused was very thinly veiled. "At so much noise," he remarked, "at the tocsin of certain critics, who multiplied their clamors much more than their reasons, one would have supposed that Shakespeare was an enemy who threatened to invade France, and that the translation of an English poet, which in old time would have conferred a sort of literary distinction, had become a kind of outrage against the country." By this time indeed the agitation had pretty well died out. The men who had been foremost in exciting it had apparently begun to feel somewhat ashamed of the course they had taken. Let us at least give them that much credit for the peaceful attitude that most of them now assumed. Le Tourneur at the time felt himself justified in saying that everybody had now come to concede, some openly, some secretly, that the foreign author was possessed of extraordinary merit.

With the translation itself it is easy to find fault. Being in prose, it was necessarily inadequate. Many passages were imperfectly and some wrongly rendered. Nor was the special criticism contained in the work

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always of a character to be treated with much respect. But there is no translation of Shakespeare into French, no translation of Corneille or of Racine into English, with which fault cannot easily be found. A great prose work can be rendered into another tongue so as to give the foreigner a reasonably fair conception of the effect produced by it upon the mind of him to whom its language is native. Not so in the case of a great poem. There thought and feeling and expression are too inextricably blended to be successfully separated. Even if the version produces effect, it will rarely be the effect wrought by the original. This is true of languages closely allied; but it is immeasurably truer of languages so alien in spirit and genius as French and English. In them the inherent difficulty assumes almost the nature of an impossibility. The form may be successfully imitated; the meaning may be preserved; the versification may be reproduced: what has disappeared in the process is the incommunicable something which gives to poetry its value and distinction. It is not perhaps a task beyond human power to represent Shakespeare adequately in French or Corneille in English; but Shakespeare will be really known to Frenchmen and Corneille to Englishmen only when in each case a genius of essentially the same kind and equal in degree shall devote himself to the task of reproducing the one in the language of the other. The difficulty is that when such a man comes, he will find other and more important work to do than that of translation.

It therefore follows that no Frenchman can be made to feel through the medium of translation what Shake-

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speare is to Englishmen, and no Englishman what Corneille is to Frenchmen. In poetry the manner is, if anything, more important than the matter; and manner cannot be rendered. Baretti had asserted in his reply to Voltaire that no one could really understand the great Elizabethan dramatist without making himself familiar with the language in which he wrote and hearing his pieces constantly played. This opinion excited the derision of La Harpe. As very few persons could be induced to undergo this preliminary preparation, it was a necessary consequence that practically no one but a native had a right to sit in judgment upon Shakespeare. To a man who relied for his critical conclusions more upon *esprit* than upon knowledge, this seemed the most ridiculous of views. Yet it was the very view which his master had proclaimed long before in regard to works much easier of comprehension than tragedies. In his 'Philosophical Letters,' Voltaire had declared that the only way a man could appreciate English comedy was for him to go to England, spend three years in London, make himself master of the tongue, and visit the play-house every night. Observations such as these disclose his full appreciation of the limitations put upon the judgment of the critic to whom ample knowledge of the language of an author is denied. But while it shows how well he understood the difficulties that stand in the way of the foreign reader of a great poet in getting a full conception of his greatness, it further makes almost ridiculously conspicuous his matchless effrontery in stating again and again that by his bald and unpoetic versions he had put the inhabitants of the

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Continent in a position to decide upon the merits of Shakespeare.

An adequate translation of a poet of the highest rank is in general about as visionary an object of pursuit as the quest of the Holy Grail. But though it is hopeless by this agency to convey the full appreciation of his genius, an approximation to this result is always possible. Accordingly attempts of such a nature are always to be welcomed and encouraged. The poorest version of a great foreign work may contribute something, a good version will contribute much, to break down the barriers existing between literatures and incidentally between nations. The very failures made point the way to those who follow to devise improvements. Translation gives an idea, even if an unsatisfactory one, of the genius of the writer and of the race to which he belongs. Whatever faults may be found with the version of *Le Tourneur* — and many have justly been found — it was an honest attempt to furnish his countrymen with a conception of what Shakespeare really was, not by piecemeal fragments like *La Place's*, not by poetic renderings which carefully left out the poetry, like *Voltaire's*, still less by descriptions designedly intended to turn into ridicule what was described. Whatever its errors and deficiencies, Frenchmen had now for the first time an opportunity to get some understanding of the reasons which had produced the enthusiastic admiration felt in England for their great dramatist. It was pioneer work *Le Tourneur* did, and it was certain to exhibit the defects under which pioneer work invariably labors. But that is no reason for failing to render it the praise to which it is justly entitled.



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Le Tourneur had succeeded in carrying through his undertaking. But though Voltaire had failed in his immediate object of preventing the continued publication of the translation, none the less did his words bear fruit. Upon the Frenchmen who then knew and appreciated Shakespeare, what he said produced no effect, or an effect quite contrary to what he intended. But, after all, these were comparatively few in number. The enthusiastic admiration then professed for the English author had been, in the case of many, little more than a freak of fashion. If left to run its natural course, it would in time have been displaced by some other fashion, if Voltaire had never said a word. As it was, he merely hastened the inevitable, and gave it strength after it had arrived. There seems little doubt that his 'Letter to the French Academy' produced an immediate effect upon that group of idle and thoughtless persons who relied upon others for their opinions and knowing nothing and caring less for the matter in dispute, naturally floated with the general current and tended to swell its volume. After the day of St. Louis there was probably a distinct falling off in the number not of those who felt real enthusiasm for Shakespeare, but of those who had been pretending to feel it. Grimm gives us the sentiments of the set with which he came mainly in contact. The 'Letter' of Voltaire, he said, was a criticism, displaying little moderation, both of the translation and of the original. But it was comical, it made men laugh; and the author who produces that effect, most of all in France, cannot fail to be right. In consequence it was generally decided in Paris that the poet who for two

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hundred years had been the delight of England was nothing but a barbarous actor, and his translators deserved to be shut up in a lunatic asylum.<sup>1</sup>

This is an exaggerated statement made shortly after the reading of the 'Letter,' and drawn from the opinion of a limited class. Still it contains a certain portion of truth which in process of the years was to become much truer. For another cause came gradually in to hasten the decay of the sentiment which had first been disposed to welcome Shakespeare with fervor. The touching amiability, then widely commented on, between France and England, was to disappear. Further it was to be replaced in time by positive hatred. The reasons for the estrangement were even then manifesting themselves. The one country secretly favored the cause of the colonies which had revolted from the other. It soon proceeded to give them open aid. The war which sprang up naturally did not contribute to the popularity of English literature in France. Still its effects were slight compared with the hostility and aversion that were aroused when the more terrible struggle which came later had widened the breach between the two peoples and imparted peculiar bitterness to their feelings. In the long series of Napoleonic wars the vital centre of resistance to all the aims and efforts of the emperor was the island whose sea-walls made her invasion impracticable. During this period nothing English could be or was popular in France. It was inevitable that Shakespeare should be included in the general proscription. It was no time then for Frenchmen to be asked to abandon their

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, tome ix. p. 242, November, 1776.

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dramatic deities for those of their hated foe. It took a long period after the peace to heal the literary as well as social alienation produced by years of conflict. It was a long while before the question of dramatic art could be discussed calmly. The estimate taken of Shakespeare by Voltaire found readier and wider acceptance when the Anglomania which had prevailed during his later life had been converted into Anglophobia. His influence more than held its own after the Revolution; it distinctly increased. His misapprehensions and misstatements were accepted with unquestioning faith by his countrymen. No one can glance even superficially at much of French critical literature between 1800 and 1830 without recognizing how completely it reflects the views of Voltaire, and repeats almost his very words. The custom has not entirely died out at the present day.

France had to wait fifty years for her deliverance; to Germany it came much earlier. The revolution was going on in that country during the last years of Voltaire's life, though he himself may have been unaware of it. There is little question but it would have come there some time before, had it not been for him; there is no question that his all-powerful influence during the eighteenth century distinctly retarded in every quarter the appreciation of Shakespeare's greatness. It made men content to remain in ignorance; and as long as ignorance existed there was little disposition to controvert what he said. Evidence of this state of things comes from many sources; here we confine ourselves to one. The same English traveller to whom in 1776 Voltaire had communicated his opinion of the English

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admiration of their greatest dramatist bears witness to the wide prevalence on the Continent of his critical views at the very time they were on the point of being crushed by the mightier spirit he had evoked, but found to his dismay that he could not exorcise. In his journeys over Europe whithersoever he had gone, whether it were from Paris to Berlin or from Berlin to Naples, Sherlock complained that he had heard the name of Shakespeare constantly profaned, whenever it came up for consideration. The words "monstrous farces" and "grave-digger scenes" had been repeated in every town. For a long time he could not conceive why every one uttered these two phrases and these alone. But one day he chanced to open a volume of Voltaire. The mystery was at once dispelled. Both expressions were found in the work, and from these, men everywhere had learned them by heart.<sup>1</sup> The ovine nature of man shows itself nowhere more distinctly than in criticism; and when a magnificent old bell-wether, like Voltaire, led the way, the whole flock would be sure to hurry after him, ignorant of the ground over which they were going, careless to what end the path led which they had taken.

Sherlock had another opportunity to witness the influence of Voltaire in the instance of a man of far mightier powers than the educated tourists with whom he came in contact. In 1779 he was at Berlin. There he was admitted to an audience with the Prussian monarch. Sherlock had celebrated Frederick in his writings: he had also distinguished himself by his zeal for Shake-

<sup>1</sup> Sherlock's Letters, ed. 1802, vol. ii. p. 249, under sub-title, *A Fragment on Shakespeare from Advice to a Young Poet.*

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speare, though like Mrs. Montagu's, it was a zeal not altogether according to knowledge. The great king commented upon this enthusiasm, and attacked the great dramatist with vigor. He began gently, but warmed to the work as he proceeded. "You admire Shakespeare?" he asked of Sherlock. "I do, sir," was the reply, "as the greatest genius that ever existed." But it was not for nothing that Frederick had read French literature all his life, and associated with its most celebrated contemporary author. "Permit me to observe," he answered — or as Sherlock expresses it, he condescended to say — "that when a man undertakes to labor in any art, of which the rules are fixed and determinate, he ought to confine himself to those rules. Aristotle —" The mention of that name was the signal for what were undoubtedly the usual remarks upon the unities, though they were not given by the reporter of the interview. All that we are told here is that the king spoke with great strength and learning.<sup>1</sup>

Strength and learning come easy to a king in the eyes of the admirer who is permitted to enjoy the privilege of an interview. The usual result followed. The ancient philosopher declared it difficult to contend in argument with the master of thirty legions. Sherlock found himself in a far harder case. He had to carry on a dispute with the hero of thirty battlefields. When we take into further consideration the respective intellects of the two men, the disparity assumes a character almost painful. According to his own account, Sherlock said all he could

<sup>1</sup> *Sherlock's Letters*, ed. 1802, vol. ii. p. 79.

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consistently with the respect he owed to his royal opponent. He appealed from Aristotle's rules to the tribunal of nature and reason. He insisted — humbly insisted, he tells us — upon the incontestable prerogative of genius to create, and that consequently Shakespeare had the same right to invent a species of poetry as had Theophrastus. It was all to no purpose. He found that the monarch had been corrupted by Voltaire. "I was always obliged to agree that he was right," says Sherlock, pensively, "while I endeavored to prove that he was wrong."

Frederick, as we all know, was the unconscious leader who was to guide the German people to the promised land, which he was so far himself from desiring to enter that he turned away from it with eyes of aversion. There is no more striking picture of the change of mind which was coming over the Continent, and the disgust and even horror which was inspired by it among the classicists, than his essay on German literature, which came out in 1780. No one now, after reading it, will recognize the strength and learning which Sherlock found in profusion in his hero. On the contrary, he will be mainly impressed by the ease with which a great king can exhibit himself as a poor critic. There is nothing original, nothing striking in anything which is found in its pages. It is but a rehash of commonplaces which had been said over and over again, and derive their only importance here from the fact of having been uttered by a man who was a genius in spite of being a monarch. It is Voltaire's ideas to which he gives expression; it is practically Voltaire's very words which he repeats. It is in the follow-

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ing way that he discourses upon the mighty revolution which was going on before his eyes: —

“To convince you,” he wrote, “how little is the taste which prevails even in our days in Germany, you have only to be present at the public spectacles. You will see there represented the abominable pieces of Shakespeare, and all the audience in transports of joy in listening to these ridiculous farces worthy of the savages of Canada. I call them farces because they sin against all the rules of the theatre. These rules are not arbitrary, you find them in the ‘Poetics’ of Aristotle, where the unity of place, the unity of time, and the unity of interest are prescribed as the sole means of rendering tragedies interesting. Instead in the English pieces the scene lasts for the space of some years. Where is the likeness to reality? There are street-porters and diggers who make their appearance and hold conversations worthy of themselves, then come princes and kings. How can this bizarre mixture of baseness and grandeur, of buffoonery and tragedy, move and please? One can forgive Shakespeare these bizarre errors; for the birth of the arts is never the period of their nativity. But there is yet a *Goetz von Berlichingen*, which appears upon the stage, a detestable imitation of these bad English pieces, and the pit applauds and demands with enthusiasm the repetition of these disgusting irrationalities. I know there is no disputing about tastes: however, permit me to tell you that those who find as much pleasure in rope-dancers, in puppets, as in Racine’s tragedies, wish only to kill time. They prefer that which speaks to the eyes to that which speaks to

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their minds, and that which is only a spectacle to that which touches the heart."<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately for his success in war, Frederick had not felt himself under any obligation to use the equipments and formations which had enabled Aristotle's pupil to conquer the world. He did not display the same sagacity in the field of criticism. The result was what might have been expected. He could hold his own against Europe in arms; he was powerless to contend successfully with Shakespeare. The agencies that were to overthrow all his cherished dramatic beliefs were in active operation during the latter part of his life. Nine years before his essay appeared, another English traveler had visited Berlin. It was Dr. John Moore, a writer of some note in his day and not altogether forgotten now. He had the privilege of being present at various festivals of the court. At Sans-souci he found the great French actor Le Kain appearing in some of his principal characters. Two at least of Voltaire's plays he saw performed, — one the tragedy of *Mahomet*, the other the king's favorite piece, the tragedy of *Œdipe*. This was the continuation of an ancient custom. But if Moore found the occupant of the throne rejoicing in listening to Voltaire, he found the heir to it deep in the study of Shakespeare. He was taking pains to learn the English language. He had at this time read two or three of the plays of its greatest author. Moore tells us that he was almost inclined to dissuade him from the study of Shakespeare, full comprehension of whom it was difficult for even

<sup>1</sup> *De la littérature allemande* (1780), p. 22, in Seuffert's *Deutsche Litteraturdenkmale*, 1883.



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Englishmen to gain, and almost impossible for foreigners. The prince admitted all this. But though he might never be able to appreciate the dramatist fully, he was determined to persevere: for he was confident that he should understand enough to repay him for all his trouble. Some detached parts he had already mastered, and these struck him as superior to anything he had met in the works of any other poet. The present and the future were here in juxtaposition. The reigning monarch listening to Voltaire, the future monarch studying Shakespeare, were indicative of the order of things going out and of the order of things coming in.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Works of John Moore, vol. i. p. 288 (ed. of 1820). Letter from Potsdam.

## CHAPTER XXII

### GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

A WORK of this character, which sets out to give only a single phase of the most varied literary life that was ever lived, is certain, if taken by itself, to produce a distorted and erroneous impression of the man. So far as his relations to Shakespeare are concerned, Voltaire does not appear to advantage. The evidence has been given fully in the preceding pages; it seems to me a not unwarranted claim that it has been given fairly. If so, there can hardly be any question as to the verdict to be rendered. The record is one of persistent misrepresentation; in some instances, though it is a hard thing to say, of deliberate falsification. There was at times more than the suggestion of the untrue, there was its actual assertion; while the suppression of the true was regularly exhibited in all the later references to the English dramatist.

This course on the part of Voltaire was not in all cases due to intention to misrepresent. It was partly the result of ingrained habits of mind, to the ability he possessed of persuading himself that things actually were what he wished them to be. To some extent he imposed upon himself. But there are instances in which no such palliation can be pleaded in his behalf.

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He resorted of set purpose to devices for evading and perverting the evidence when the statement of the simple facts would have been damaging to the side he was advocating. By so doing he was largely successful in imposing upon the men of his own time; nor even at the present day has his influence in this respect altogether ceased with his countrymen. His contemporaries, as a general rule, did not know enough of Shakespeare to controvert his statements. Those of them who really knew did not have repute enough with the public to make headway against his authority. Those who came later to know rarely cared enough about his views to take the trouble to expose their falsity. Hence his misrepresentations, widely circulated at the outset, continue still to be repeated occasionally, though they no longer have the general acceptance they gained at the time of their original utterance. The influence they then exerted cannot be questioned. So far as Shakespeare was concerned, Ferney became in the later life of Voltaire a centre for the diffusion of ignorance. His admirers attributed to the Patriarch not merely the impartiality which he affected, but an intimacy of acquaintance with the dramatist and his writings to which he had not the least pretension. With the ability to produce belief in his omniscience among his readers Voltaire was peculiarly gifted. No one ever possessed as much as he this most valuable of assets among those belonging to the critic's stock in trade. No one ever exhibited more than he that adroitness which leads others to believe that you know what you do not know.

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Certain conclusions—two in particular—there are which follow legitimately from the survey which has been taken of Voltaire's attitude towards Shakespeare. They have been more than once implied in the comments made in the course of this narrative; they have in some instances been asserted. But in this closing chapter it seems desirable to bring into juxtaposition and prominence some general truths which, though indicated if not expressed already, are in danger of being overlooked, separated and scattered as they have been in the preceding pages. One is that there was never any real change in Voltaire's opinion about Shakespeare. The contrary has been often affirmed. Charges to that effect were even brought against him in his lifetime, and they have been pretty constantly repeated since his death. For them there is no just foundation. In his estimate of the English dramatist, Voltaire is entitled to whatever credit belongs to consistency. That which Shakespeare appeared to him in the beginning, he remained to the end. It is by the marked difference he displayed in the manifestation of his feelings that men have been led to assume that his views varied. In his later years he was disposed to lay more and more stress upon what he regarded as the deficiencies of the dramatist, upon practices of his which seemed to him censurable. Equally he came to pass over in silence what he had once thought worthy of being mentioned with praise. But in neither instance was this conduct due to any change in his own opinion. It sprang from the irritation he felt at the change of opinion which was going on

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among his countrymen. He was angered by the undue admiration, as it struck him, that they were paying to Shakespeare; at the disposition they were manifesting to rank him above the great dramatists of his own land, and inferentially above himself.

But though outraged vanity plays a most conspicuous part in the course he took, it is important to repeat again what has been previously remarked, that in what he said Voltaire was in general perfectly sincere. He honestly believed that the art of Shakespeare was rude and barbarous. It was not an allied type, with ideas and methods peculiar to itself, but a distinctly debased and debasing type, the prevalence of which would lead to the return of barbarism. In denouncing the English author he therefore felt that he was standing up for the cause of good sense and good taste. It was his duty to do everything that lay in his power to prevent the spread of a degrading superstition which was celebrating Shakespeare as the supreme divinity of the dramatic world. Without question he interpreted very liberally the privilege of representation, or rather of misrepresentation, which it was permitted him to take in order to arrest the progress of this cult. His beliefs do not excuse his underhand efforts to give a false impression of the man and his writings; but they explain them, as well as the outbursts of anger and vituperation to which he occasionally gave way. There was perhaps a further reason for his vexation and his violence. It is hard to escape from the impression that in Voltaire's inmost soul there lurked, in spite of his colossal self-conceit, a vague consciousness

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of inferiority, whenever he came to measure himself with the great dramatist. In contrast with that mighty personality, his own personality felt dwarfed. He was overpowered by something, he knew not what. To him were applicable the words of the soothsayer to Antony. Near Shakespeare, Voltaire's angel became a fear.

Another conclusion to which the survey leads is that Voltaire really retarded the appreciation of Shakespeare on the Continent, instead of advancing it. No one can doubt the powerful impulse he gave at the outset to the desire displayed there to become acquainted with the English playwright. But the desire had manifested itself before he had uttered a word. Had he preserved silence it would have spread in time, though altogether more slowly. But it would have had then a natural and healthy growth, instead of the somewhat forced one by which he caused it to be characterized. But as at first he awakened wide curiosity, so later he was responsible for the inadequate appreciation and unintelligent disparagement which to a large extent came to prevail. The depreciatory opinions which after the middle of the century he was in the habit of expressing availed nothing where Shakespeare was really known. But really known Shakespeare was then to a comparatively limited number on the Continent; and from any desire to know him the words of the French critic kept a vast body of readers. Few realize to-day how mighty was Voltaire's influence throughout Europe during the eighteenth century. It was powerful in matters of religious opinion; but there it came into conflict with a potent hierarchy,

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with an organized body of opponents, whose interests were at stake as well as their convictions. But it was not so in literature. There his ascendancy was so paramount in his later life that it was almost hopeless for any one to stand up against it. Furthermore, in his views about the drama he was the advocate of long-cherished and well-settled beliefs. In this case he was fighting, not to destroy, but to strengthen and upbuild. Accordingly he had on his side that conservative sentiment which was arrayed against him in matters of religious belief.

Germany was the first to break away from this all-powerful influence. Before the close of the century she had succeeded in emancipating herself from the thralldom of ideas which affected both critical appreciation and creative activity. It was not so, however, in the Latin countries. In France, indeed, where the revolt began, it was arrested long before it attained to the dignity of a revolution. The influence of Voltaire in holding it in check can hardly be overrated. When the temporary enthusiasm for Shakespeare which had been awakened in his country commenced to wane, his opinions gained steadily increasing potency. They came finally to be accepted as incontrovertible gospel. The French settled down into that state of serene satisfaction with their own drama and into that comfortable belief about Shakespeare which are indicated by Condorcet in his life of Voltaire. "He taught us," said that writer, "to perceive the merits of Shakespeare and to regard his dramatic works as a mine whence our poets could derive some treasures; and when a ridiculous en-

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thusiasm has presented as a model to the nation of Racine and Voltaire the eloquent but savage and bizarre poet, and has wished to give us, for pictures full of strength and true to nature, his canvases charged with absurd compositions and coarse and disgusting caricatures, Voltaire has defended the cause of truth and reason. He had reproached us with the too great timidity of our drama; he was obliged to reproach us with being willing to introduce upon it the barbarous license of the English stage."

So the great revolution which unsettled to their foundations all other beliefs and all other institutions left in that land, unquestioned and undisturbed, the time-honored traditions of the classical stage. Other instrumentalities there were which contributed to this result; but to Voltaire's influence, more than to any single agency, was due the fact that the stately fabric of the French drama rode unchanged and uninjured through those troubled waters. The sway of his opinions lasted long after his death. It was not indeed till the coming of a poetic spirit greater than his own that it was overthrown. There was, to be sure, a period during his lifetime when his ascendancy seemed to be seriously shaken. The counter-current of opposition ran so violently that it gave him the most depressing views of the future of literature. But it only threatened his supremacy; it never came near subverting it. Even had not events come speedily to the aid of his beliefs, it is doubtful if his predominance would have been seriously disturbed. His opinions were all-powerful, because he was the genuine representative of the taste of his age. That fact



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explains both the great vogue they had at the time and the little vogue they have had since. The taste he represented is no longer our taste. In consequence the views he took often seem to us peculiarly insufficient. His criticism of the great English authors, whether favorable or unfavorable, would meet with little response now. Most of all is this true in the case of Shakespeare. Voltaire's intellect, keen, searching, and brilliant, felt on one side the full attraction of the personality of the dramatist. On other sides he lacked entirely the comprehension that springs from knowledge or from sympathy.

To Voltaire, indeed, much of Shakespeare always remained a sealed book. His incapacity of appreciation could never have been remedied. It was congenital; it was due to his innate lack of insight into man's spiritual nature. This is the wanting sense which ranks him far below either Shakespeare or Dante, and explains his inability to comprehend either. Towards both the Italian and the English author his attitude was essentially the same, though owing to circumstances the latter occupied much more of his thought and attention. It is additional proof of the vast influence he exerted that the estimate he formed of both became to a great extent the estimate of his contemporaries. In Italy and England respectively it was modified or rejected altogether by the fuller knowledge and deeper appreciation possessed by the countrymen of the two poets. But outside of their own lands Voltaire's opinion of Dante and Shakespeare became for a while the one generally received. It could not last indeed; but for the time being it ruled, wher-

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ever national partiality failed to counteract the credit of the critic. English opinion, which was but little affected by Voltaire's view of Shakespeare, was a good deal influenced by his view of Dante. It is not that the depreciatory judgment expressed always originated with him; it is that his authority gave to it both extension and stability. It is in truth a suggestive fact that a large share of the critical utterance about the Italian poet which came from the islanders during the eighteenth century was essentially the same as that which prevailed on the Continent in regard to the English dramatist. There is a similarity which approaches the ridiculous not only in the ideas which were entertained, but in the very words in which the ideas were clothed. For both matter and expression Voltaire was in each case largely responsible.

The radical change of opinion about Dante which was to come over the vast body of educated men, Voltaire never lived to see. He died while the contest was still going on in his own land about Shakespeare, and while the result seemed still in doubt. Had he remained quietly at Ferney he might have rejoiced in witnessing the full triumph of his own views; for it is not impossible that he would have attained to the age of Fontenelle, whose length of life was often in his thoughts during his later years. So far as his own happiness was concerned, it was fortunate that he did not. The seed he had sown was destined to yield a harvest which would have been little to his liking. Like Cadmus he had planted dragon's-teeth; and they were destined to spring up armed men. But

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the revolution for which he had done so much to prepare the way would have brought him personally nothing but grief and despair. He would have been filled with amazement and horror at the results to which the doctrines he preached had unexpectedly led. For his sympathies lay wholly with the old régime. The favor of courts was dear to him; the society of princes and nobles was congenial. A wise and benevolent despotism was in his eyes the ideal of human government—not in itself so very objectionable, were it not so extraordinarily rare to find a despotism either wise or benevolent. He himself was delighted to play the rôle of *grand seigneur*, and he did it worthily. He built homes for the industrious poor, he established manufactures, he converted a desert wild into the seat of a flourishing community. But nothing would have filled him with as great indignation as to have his subjects begin to question his right to control their conduct for their own good. So it was well for him that he saw not what the future had in store. He lived on unconscious of the storm which was gathering; he died before the night of terror that was creeping on had enveloped him in its gloom.

As in government his sympathies were with the old régime, so in literature they were with the old drama. Returning from England he had preached the doctrines of a pale romanticism; he had followed afar off some of its methods. But the moment the men who had imbibed his principles began to press on in the course in which he had led the way, the moment they began to carry his doctrines to their legitimate conclu-

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sions, he shrank back in disgust and horror. He would admit only the slightest possible modification of the practices of the ancient drama in the way of enlarging its scope and treatment. He did all that lay in his power to break down what was called the dignity of history. He applied to it the most opprobrious terms. But to the dignity of the drama he remained faithful. He constantly complained of the coldness of French tragedy, of its languor, its dulness; but to the conventions which made it cold and languid and dull save when genius of the first order came to its rescue, he clung with passionate tenacity.

The conduct of Voltaire is in truth the familiar story of the men who produce revolutions shuddering at the words and acts of the men whom revolutions produce. More than any other person he was responsible for the prevalence of that habit of inquiry which questions the truth of all received facts and tests the reasonableness of all received principles. He was further responsible for that scepticism which struck at the heart of all accepted beliefs and of all traditional ideas. It was hopeless for him to expect that the spirit of denial which he had called up should spare the institutions which he himself regarded as sacred. The critical attitude which took no man's mere word for the truth of the opinions he held, no matter how generally regarded as truth, was not likely to stop short at the discussion of the opinions Voltaire himself cherished and promulgated. He was accordingly struck aghast when the consequences of his own teachings came to confront him in matters where he himself had not

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changed. He had raged against all conservatism except the particular varieties of it which he himself affected. In the drama he was as strenuous a defender of the traditional and conventional as was in religion the most bigoted adherent of the creeds he ridiculed. It was the existence of heretical views about the stage which embittered him against Shakespeare, to whom he attributed their increasing prevalence. It was this which led him to resort to discreditable devices to lower the estimate in which that dramatist was held.

It was the dislike and dread he felt for the great Elizabethan which forces upon the attention one of the most curious phases of Voltaire's character. It is a striking example of the inconsistency of human nature that the great apostle of tolerance in matters of religion and government was one of the most intolerant of men in matters of literature. To read his words, one would fancy that fire, fagot, and sword, had it lain in his power, would have been the doom of those who persisted in promulgating opinions which he deemed injurious to art. When it came to the infliction of the penalty, the real kindness of his nature would have led him to spare the destined victim; but the spirit which prompted the persecution would have never been absent. We have seen that he would have been glad to prevent the publication of Le Tourneur's translation of Shakespeare. There are instances when he displayed a desire to employ active measures to suppress criticism which was directed against his own views or was intended to uphold views of which he disapproved. As men persecuted others in the name of religion, so he would have

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persecuted them in the name of taste. Without realizing it he made use of precisely the same sort of arguments for protecting the integrity of the one which excited his derision when applied to the defence of the other. That refined and excellent art which France possessed must be guarded by the severest measures from debasement and profanation. No alien influences must be permitted to contaminate its purity or threaten its permanence. He could not perceive that the art which cannot take care of itself will never be saved by any repressive measures undertaken to preserve it from decay.

It is an easy thing to find fault with Voltaire, and unfortunately it is as easy a thing to give substantial reasons for finding fault. His literary life, like that of Pope, was largely one of intrigue and double-dealing, of wanton attacks upon others, of unfounded suspicions of attacks upon himself. In one way it has been amusing to trace the windings of the tortuous course he pursued in regard to Shakespeare. In another way it has been depressing: for after all it can never be anything but an unpleasant task to expose the foibles and faults of a great nature. In his case there are special reasons for reluctance. When everything has been said against Voltaire that can justly be said, there remains to his credit an incalculable sum of services rendered to the progress of the race. He must be taken with his limitations. With all his inconsistencies, his perversities, his mendacities, his ignoble personal quarrels, he was a man of generosity as well as of genius. Much more than this can be said. We can never forget how cour-

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ageous and how mighty a soldier he was in the war for humanity. To vast multitudes in every station of life he brought the gospel of liberty of thought and of speech, the spirit of sympathy with the unfortunate and the oppressed. But as to the men of his own time he was an inspiration, so also he was a fear. Before that matchless ridicule, imbecility, narrowness, and intolerance cowered affrighted. At the sound of that trumpet-call which demanded that justice should no longer be mute as well as blind, the persecutions of bigotry were stayed, the decisions of iniquitous tribunals were reversed, the indifference and inaction of men in high places were converted into at least a pretended zeal for righteousness and the right. His services in these ways more than offset his questionable practices in other fields. That he failed at times to render the justice he demanded is little more than an illustration of the infirmities of our common nature. But much can be forgiven to one who did so much for his fellow-men.

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IN this index, for the convenience of readers, the dates of birth and death of the persons mentioned have been given, wherever ascertainable. The names of the works of Shakespeare or Voltaire, mentioned in the text, will be found only under their names; and to those of Voltaire the dates of original publication have been given from Bengesco's bibliography. In the case of some works — notably in that of the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* — this is no guide to the date of the appearance of the passage found here, or of the article cited.

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