

General Observation. The play of *Henry the Eighth* is one of those which still keeps possession of the stage by the splendour of its pageantry. The coronation about forty years ago drew the people together in multitudes for a great part of the winter. Yet pomp is not the only merit of this play. The meek sorrows and virtuous distress of Katharine have furnished some scenes which may be justly numbered among the greatest efforts of tragedy. But the genius of Shakespeare comes in and goes out with Katharine. Every other part may be easily conceived and easily written.

The historical dramas are now concluded, of which the two parts of *Henry the Fourth* and *Henry the Fifth* are among the happiest of our author's compositions; and *King John*, *Richard the Third*, and *Henry the Eighth* deservedly stand in the second class. Those whose curiosity would refer the historical scenes to their original may consult Holinshed and sometimes Hall; from Holinshed Shakespeare has often inserted whole speeches with no more alteration than was necessary to the numbers of his verse. To transcribe them into the margin was unnecessary, because the original is easily examined, and they are seldom less perspicuous in the poet than in the historian.

To play histories, or to exhibit a succession of events by action and dialogue, was a common entertainment among our rude ancestors upon great festivities. The parish clerks once performed at Clerkenwell a play which lasted three days, containing *The History of the World*.

'KING LEAR'

IV.6.11 EDGAR *How fearful! And dirty 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!* [This description has been much admired since the time of Addison, who has remarked, with a poor attempt at pleasantry, that 'he who can read it without being giddy has a very good head or a very bad one'. The description is certainly not mean, but I am far from thinking it wrought to the utmost excellence of poetry. He that looks from a precipice finds himself assailed by one great and dreadful image of irresistible destruction. But this overwhelming idea is dissipated and enfeebled from the instant that the mind

can restore itself to the observation of particulars and diffuse its attention to distinct objects. The enumeration of the cloughs and crows, the samphire-man, and the fishers, counteracts the great effect of the prospect, as it peoples the desert of intermediate vacuity and stops the mind in the rapidity of its descent through emptiness and horror.

[Boswell reports an extended conversation on the same passage in *King Lear*, between Johnson and several theatrical friends, under the date of 16 October 1769. In the following excerpt illustrative quotations from Congreve's *The Mourning Bride* and *King Lear* are inserted within double brackets.

Johnson said that the description of the temple in *The Mourning Bride* was the finest poetical passage he had ever read; he recollected none in Shakespeare equal to it.

[[ALMERIA

It was a fancied noise; for all is hushed.

LEONORA

It bore the accent of a human voice.

ALMERIA

It was thy fear; or else some transient wind
Whistling through hollows of this vaulted aisle.
We'll listen.

LEONORA

Hark!

ALMERIA

No, all is hushed and still as Death — 'Tis dreadful!
How reverend is the face of this tall pile,
Whose ancient pillars rear their marble heads,
To bear aloft its arched and ponderous roof
By its own weight, made steadfast and immovable,
Looking tranquillity. It strikes an awe
And terror on my aching sight; the tombs
And monumental caves of death look cold
And shoot a chillness to my trembling heart.
Give me thy hand and speak to me, nay, speak,
And let me hear thy voice;
My own affrights me with its echoes.
— William Congreve, *The Mourning Bride*, 1697, II. 11]

'But', said Garrick, all alarmed for 'the god of his idolatry', 'we know not the extent and variety of his powers. We are to suppose there are such passages in his works. Shakespeare must not suffer from the badness of our memories.' Johnson, diverted by this enthusiastic jealousy, went on with great ardour: 'No, Sir, Congreve has *nature*.' Smiling on the tragic eagerness of Garrick, but composing himself, he added, 'Sir, this is not comparing Congreve on the whole with Shakespeare on the whole; but only maintaining that Congreve has one finer passage than any that can be found in Shakespeare. Sir, a man may have no more than ten guineas in the world, but he may have those ten guineas in one piece; and so may have a finer piece than a man who has ten thousand pounds; but then he has only one ten-guinea piece. What I mean is that you can show me no passage where there is simply a description of material objects, without any intermixture of moral notions, which produces such an effect.' Mr Murphy mentioned Shakespeare's description of the night before the battle of Agincourt; but it was observed it had *men* in it. Mr Davies suggested the speech of Juliet, in which she figures herself awakening in the tomb of her ancestors. Some one mentioned the description of Dover Cliff.

[[How fearful
And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!
The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
Show scarce so gross as beetles; half way down
Hangs one that gathers samphire — dreadful trade!
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
The fishermen that walk upon the beach
Appear like mice; and yond tall anchoring bark
Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy
Almost too small for sight. The murruring surge,
That on the unnumber'd idle pebbles chafes,
Cannot be heard so high. I'll look no more,
Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight
Topple down headlong.
— *King Lear*, IV.6.11–24]]

JOHNSON 'No, Sir, it should be all precipice — all vacuum. The crows impede your fall. The diminished appearance of the boats

and other circumstances are all very good description; but do not impress the mind at once with the horrible idea of immense height. The impression is divided; you pass on by computation, from one stage of the tremendous space to another. Had the girl in *The Mourning Bride* said she could not cast her shoe to the top of one of the pillars in the temple, it would not have aided the idea, but weakened it.' 5]

General Observation. The tragedy of *Lear* is deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare. There is perhaps no play which keeps the attention so strongly fixed; which so much agitates our passions and interests our curiosity. The artful involutions of distinct interests, the striking opposition of contrary characters, the sudden changes of fortune, and the quick succession of events, fill the mind with a perpetual tumult of indignation, pity, and hope. There is no scene which does not contribute to the aggravation of the distress or conduct of the action, and scarce a line which does not conduce to the progress of the scene. So powerful is the current of the poet's imagination that the mind which once ventures within it is hurried irresistibly along.

On the seeming improbability of Lear's conduct it may be observed that he is represented according to the histories at that time vulgarly received as true. And perhaps if we turn our thoughts upon the barbarity and ignorance of the age to which this story is referred, it will appear not so unlikely as while we estimate Lear's manners by our own. Such preference of one daughter to another, or resignation of dominion on such conditions, would be yet credible if told of a petty prince of Guinea or Madagascar. Shakespeare, indeed, by the mention of his ears and dukes, has given us the idea of times more civilized and of life regulated by softer manners; and the truth is that though he so nicely discriminates and so minutely describes the characters of men, he commonly neglects and confounds the characters of ages, by mingling customs ancient and modern, English and foreign.

My learned friend Mr Warton, who has in the *Advertiser* very minutely criticized this play, remarks that the instances of cruelty are too savage and shocking, and that the intervention of Edmund destroys the simplicity of the story. These objections may, I think,

be answered by repeating that the cruelty of the daughters is an historical fact, to which the poet has added little, having only drawn it into a series by dialogue and action. But I am not able to apologize with equal plausibility for the extrusion of Gloucester's eyes, which seems an act too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition, and such as must always compel the mind to relieve its distress by incredulity. Yet let it be remembered that our author well knew what would please the audience for which he wrote.

The injury done by Edmund to the simplicity of the action is abundantly recompensed by the addition of variety, by the art with which he is made to cooperate with the chief design, and the opportunity which he gives the poet of combining perfidy with perfidy and connecting the wicked son with the wicked daughters, to impress this important moral, that villainy is never at a stop, that crimes lead to crimes and at last terminate in ruin.

But though this moral be incidentally enforced, Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles. Yet this conduct is justified by the Spectator, who blames Tate for giving Cordelia success and happiness in his alteration and declares that, in his opinion, *the tragedy has lost half its beauty*. Dennis has remarked, whether justly or not, that to secure the favourable reception of *Cato, the town was poisoned with much false and abominable criticism*, and that endeavours had been used to discredit and decry poetical justice. A play in which the wicked prosper and the virtuous miscarry may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life; but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or that, if other excellencies are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue.

In the present case the public has decided. Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with victory and felicity. And, if my sensations could add anything to the general suffrage, I might relate that I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor.

There is another controversy among the critics concerning this play. It is disputed whether the predominant image in Lear's disordered mind be the loss of his kingdom or the cruelty of his daughters. Mr Murphy, a very judicious critic, has evinced by induction of particular passages that the cruelty of his daughters is the primary source of his distress, and that the loss of royalty affects him only as a secondary and subordinate evil. He observes with great justness that Lear would move our compassion but little, did we not rather consider the injured father than the degraded king.

The story of this play, except the episode of Edmund, which is derived, I think, from Sidney, is taken originally from Geoffrey of Monmouth, whom Holinshed generally copied; but perhaps immediately from an old historical ballad, of which I shall insert the greater part. My reason for believing that the play was posterior to the ballad, rather than the ballad to the play, is that the ballad has nothing of Shakespeare's nocturnal tempest, which is too striking to have been omitted, and that it follows the chronicle; it has the rudiments of the play but none of its amplifications; it first hinted Lear's madness but did not array it in circumstances. The writer of the ballad added something to the history, which is a proof that he would have added more if more had occurred to his mind, and more must have occurred if he had seen Shakespeare. [At the end of this note Johnson appends 'A Lamentable Song of the Death of King Lear and his Three Daughters'.]

'TIMON OF ATHENS'

IV. 2 *Enter Flavius.*] Nothing contributes more to the exaltation of Timon's character than the zeal and fidelity of his servants. Nothing but real virtue can be honoured by domestics; nothing but impartial kindness can gain affection from dependants.

IV. 3. 478 TIMON . . . *all* | *I kept were knaves, to serve in meat to villains.*] *Knave* is here in the compounded sense of a *servant* and a *rascal*.

General Observation. The play of *Timon* is a domestic tragedy and therefore strongly fastens on the attention of the reader. In