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OBSERVATIONS
ON
SHAMLET;

AND ON THE MOTIVES WHICH MOST PROBABLY INDUCED

SHAKSPEARE

TO FIX UPON THE STORY OF

Amleth,

FROM THE DANISH CHRONICLE OF
SAXO GRAMMATICUS,
FOR THE PLOT OF THAT TRAGEDY:

BEING AN ATTEMPT TO PROVE THAT HE DESIGNED IT AS
AN INDIRECT CENSURE ON

Mary Queen of Scots,
BY JAMES PLUMPTRE, M. A.

*SEASON YOUR ADMIRATION FOR AWHILE,
TILL I MAY DELIVER THIS MARVEL TO YOU.*

HAMLET.

C A M B R I D G E,

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THE Author of these Observations is aware that haste is in general a bad excuse for incorrectness; yet he hopes some allowances will be made him on that account in the present publication. Having inadvertently mentioned what he deemed a discovery before he had investigated the subject, or intended publishing his Observations on it, a fear of being anticipated has induced him to hurry the work through the press as fast as possible. Some improvements might be made in the arrangement of the arguments; but many of them have been added while the work was going through the press, and after the parts to which they more properly belonged were printed off.

CLARE HALL,

FEB. 22, 1796.

E R R A T A.

- Page 3, Note 3, Line 21, for *couclude* read *conclude*.
—— 6, Note 6, for *Jutoram* read *Jutorum*.
—— 23, Line 9, for *come* read *came*.
—— 29, Note, for *alluffion* read *allusion*.
—— 30, Line 15, for *improbabilities* read *inconsistencies*.

OBSERVATIONS

ON

HAMLET, &c.

WHEN we consider the immense bulk to which the later editions of the works of our immortal Dramatist are swelled, it naturally leads us to imagine that Industry must have exhausted all her patience, and Ingenuity her conjectures, in attempting to elucidate his unrivalled compositions. Yet the contrary appears to be the real state of the case, and the press still teems with new Shakspeares and fresh Shakspeariana. This “vast garden of criticism” still puts forth its flowers and its weeds, and invites the attention of the labourer and the florist. A solitary wanderer, in casually passing through this delightful spot, has accidentally discovered a flower, which appears to have hitherto escaped the notice of its more studious admirers.

A

When

When the Author of these Observations was reading lately, in Mr. Tytler's "Inquiry into the Evidence against Mary Queen of Scots¹," the account of the various artifices used by Queen Elizabeth to blacken the fame of that unfortunate Princess; it occurred to him, from the similitude of the stories, that Shakspeare had perhaps written his Tragedy of Hamlet to flatter the prejudices of his mistress, and exhibit to the world an indirect crimination of her injured rival; what, at that time, appeared to him to be a probable conjecture, an investigation of the subject has ripened into conviction.

Lord Orford has shewn², with equal ingenuity and probability, that our incomparable Bard wrote his Winter's Tale as an indirect apology for Anne Boleyn, the mother of Elizabeth. He who could write an allegorical apology, would well know how to write an allegorical censure.

In the Midsummer Night's Dream, written in 1592, he has paid a compliment to Elizabeth at the expence of Mary³. It is certain then that he had
no

¹ A book which for depth of research, soundness of reasoning, and humanity and candour of sentiment, shews the author to be at once the gentleman, and the scholar.

² Historic Doubts, p. 114.

³ Thou remember'st

Since once I sat upon a promontory;
And heard a mermaid, on a dolphin's back,
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath,

no scruples of delicacy towards her, even after her death⁴. And he, who could write thus in 1592, would

That the rude sea grew civil at the song;
 And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
 To hear the sea-maid's musick.
 That very time I saw, (but thou could'st not)
 Flying between the cold moon and the earth,
 Cupid all arm'd: a certain aim he took
 At a fair vestal, throned by the west;
 And loos'd his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
 As it should pierce an hundred thousand hearts:
 But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
 Quench'd in the chaste beams of the watery moon;
 And the imperial votress passed on,
 In maiden meditation, fancy-free.

“The first thing observable on these words (says Dr. Warburton) is, that this action of the *mermaid* is laid in the same time and place with Cupid's attack upon the *vestal*. By the *vestal* every one knows is meant Queen Elizabeth. It is very natural and reasonable then to think that the *mermaid* stands for some eminent personage of her time. And, if so, the allegorical covering, in which there is a mixture of satire and panegyric, will lead us to conclude, that this person was one of whom it had been inconvenient for the author to speak openly, either in praise or dispraise. All this agrees with Mary Queen of Scots, and with no other. Queen Elizabeth could not bear to hear her commended; and her successor would not forgive her satyrise. But the Poet has so well marked out every distinguished circumstance of her life and character in this beautiful allegory, as will leave no room to doubt about his second meaning. She is called a *mermaid*, 1. to denote her reign over a kingdom situate in the sea, and 2. her beauty, and intemperate lust:

“—————*Ut turpiter atrum*

“*Desinat in piscem mulier formosa superne.*”

for as Elizabeth, for her chastity, is called a *vestal*, this unfortunate lady, on a contrary account, is called a *mermaid*. 3. An ancient story may be supposed to be here alluded to. The emperor Julian

would not hesitate four years after (1596, the year

Hamlet

tells us, Epistle 41. that the Sirens (which, with all the modern poets, are *mermaids*) contended for precedency with the Muses, who overcoming them took away their wings. The quarrels between Mary and Elizabeth had the same cause and the same issue.

—————on a *dolphin's back*,] This evidently marks out that distinguishing circumstance of Mary's fortune, her marriage with the Dauphin (formerly spelt Dolphin) of France, son of Henry II.

Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath,] This alludes to her great abilities of genius and learning, which rendered her the most accomplished princess of her age. The French writers tell us, that, while she was in that court, she pronounced a Latin oration in the great hall of the Louvre, with so much grace and eloquence, as filled the whole court with admiration.

That the rude sea grew civil at her song,] By the *rude sea* is meant Scotland encircled with the ocean; which rose up in arms against the regent, while she was in France. But her return home presently quieted these disorders: and had not her strange ill conduct afterwards more violently inflamed them, she might have passed her whole life in peace. There is the greater justness and beauty in this image, as the vulgar opinion is, that the mermaid always sings in storms:

And certain stars shot madly from their spheres

To hear the sea-maid's musick.] Thus concludes the description, with that remarkable circumstance of this unhappy lady's fate, the destruction she brought upon several of the English nobility, whom she drew in to support her cause. This, in the boldest expression of the sublime, the poet images by *certain stars shooting madly from their spheres*: By which he meant the Earls of Northumberland and Westmorland, who fell in her quarrel; and principally the great Duke of Norfolk, whose projected marriage with her was attended with such fatal consequences. Here again the reader may observe a peculiar justness in the imagery. The vulgar opinion being that the mermaid allured men to destruction by her songs. To which opinion Shakspeare alludes in his *Comedy of Errors*.

"O train

Hamlet was written⁴) still farther to flatter his mistress by adding his drop to the flood of calumny poured out against her rival.

Shakspeare had a story at hand, most admirably adapted for this purpose, in the Danish Chronicle of Saxo Grammaticus; a story which was, in many respects, so exactly the counterpart of the calumnies circulated against Mary, that it seemed, as Mr. Malone observes of that of Dorastus and Fawnia, which furnished the plot for the Winter's Tale, almost to force the subject upon him; and, where he has made alterations, they appear to be for the purpose of adapting the story still farther to his design. The story indeed is so extremely pointed, that, unless Shakspeare wished to apply it to Mary, its similarity would have been a sufficient reason for rejecting it.

It

"O train me not, sweet mermaid, with thy note;

"To drown me in thy sister's flood of tears."

On the whole, it is the noblest and justest allegory that was ever written. The laying it in *fairy land*, and out of nature, is in the character of the speaker. And on these occasions Shakspeare always excels himself. He is born away by the magic of his enthusiasm, and hurries his reader along with him into these ancient regions of poetry, by that power of verse, which we may well fancy to be like what:

— olim Fauni Vatesque caneant."

This very able note is given at full length, as its own merit and its happy illustration of our author's mode of allegorizing will throw a farther light on these pages.

⁴ She was beheaded Feb. 8. 1587.

⁵ Vide "Malone's Attempt." Vol. I. p. 304.

It will be adviseable to take a view of the respective stories, and then to consider them as tending to establish or overthrow this hypothesis.

A brief abstract of the story of AMLETH, taken from the 3d and 4th books of the Danish Chronicle of *Saxo Grammaticus*.

In the reign of Roderic, King of Denmark, Horwendillus and Fengo, sons of Gerwendillus, had the garrison of Jutland committed to their care⁶. Horwendillus, who was the bravest pirate on the seas, was envied by Coller, King of Norway, for the glory of his actions. Coller failed in pursuit of him, engaged him, and was slain; Horwendillus put to death the King of Norway's sister, Sela; and, having given proofs of his valour for three years, he presents his spoils to Roderic to secure his friendship. After living some time in intimacy with him, he obtains the King's daughter Geruth in marriage, and had a son, named Amleth, by her.

Fengo, fired with envy at his brother's happiness, resolves to ruin him by treachery. An opportunity offers, and he embrues his hands in his blood⁷. He
wins

6 Eodem tempore Horwendillus et Fengo, quorum pater Gerwendillus Jutorum præfectus extiterat, eidem a Roderico in Jutiæ præsidium surrogantur. At Horwendillus triennio tyrannide gesta, &c.

7 At ubi datus parricidio locus, cruenta manu funestam mentis libidinem satiavit.