that Hamlet demonstrates only the kind of suffering that is caused and can be punished by others – not suffering that could pardon suicide. Examples: incurable diseases, deep melancholy, an incorrigible aversion to life, grief over a friend or a loved one or blessings never to be regained – things that so easily take from life all its attraction – or the misery of an involuntary murder, or the like. Nothing is affected by these.

According to my exposition I understand everything in Hamlet's character that preceded as well as all that follows, such as his admonishing the players, his forgetting himself during the play in the King's presence, yet missing the opportunity when the King's conscience has betrayed him. When he finds the King in prayer he again hesitates to perform the decisive deed, imagining rather a more than inhuman vengefulness – an explanation by which he explains away any reason and excuses himself. The opposite extreme is presented by Laertes, who, in spite of the insolence he demonstrates upon entering, likewise vacillates when facing the King, doubting, letting the unique moment of opportunity pass, imagining he will have a second one and an even better opportunity some time in the future. In his mother's presence the prince gives free rein to his anger; the ghost admonishes him again, but he, having worked out no definite scheme, takes leave of the King and sails for England. As if by accident Polonius has been murdered. There is so little real tragedy associated with his death that there seems to be a slight trace of the comic about it. During his journey Hamlet is rescued in a miraculous manner. Upon his return he spends his precious time philosophizing sombrely, as if to celebrate his animosity towards life. His conceit and his mood together cause him to forget himself with Laertes. He dallies, he is moved by fearful imaginings when challenged to a duel; and again he ponders the dread of hazarding life and reflects on how cheaply life must be valued. And thus he proceeds towards the destruction not only of the King but of himself as well.

This disdain for life, coupled with an unusually determined dependence upon it, characterizes Hamlet throughout most of the scenes. This is also an indication of all those emotions

which have not only abandoned the freshness of human existence because of wounded pride and hurt feelings but have also lost that quiet secure confidence by excessive brooding. In Hamlet's melancholy soul are lodged many dark passions; revenge, anger, jealousy, pride, and awe are frightfully in evidence, but so mitigated and transformed by mood, wit, taste, knowledge, and nobility of personality that this miracle-like phenomenon charms and enchains, that even its repulsive qualities are not without splendour even when stripped of all greatness. This bizarre, impenetrable combination of foolishness and wisdom, magnanimity and pettiness, love and hate, conceit and genuine pride; this lover who shows passion and yet to whom no love can be entrusted, who speaks and feels like a noble friend, who by assuming charm at will is an idol of the people, who in a certain sense closes his eyes to his whole environment and yet is actually betrayed by one person; this mixture of heterogeneous ingredients which we generally find in real life only in a much smaller measure and which in more recent times we have come to call 'interesting'; these beautiful contradictions from which nearly every gifted individual suffers to a greater or lesser degree – in short, what is here combined and summed up is certainly the reason why this character and this tragedy have had such universal success.

Byron and Shelley[11]

It was indeed a delightful day. We had spent the hot time under some of the old, over-canopying chestnuts of the Grand Duke's wood; and perceiving now the green and golden light of sunset through the valleys of tree-tops, we began to wind our way home through the wilderness of underwood, following the track of a little path or sheepwalk, which led through the forest, as it gradually opened, and ended in the stately avenue of the Grand Duke's palace. Here, in the wide space, under those lofty trees, we were no longer constrained to walk singly, and Shelley placed himself beside Lord Byron, who led the way through the trees: 'You seem very ineffable this evening,' said he.

'I have been reading,' he replied, '*Hamlet*.'

'No wonder then you are melancholy.'

'No,' said Lord Byron, ''tis not so much melancholy, but I feel perplexed, confused, and inextricably self-involved; a nightmare sensation of impotence and vain endeavour weighs upon me, whether my own or Shakspeare's. Nor do I at all recognize in my feelings that calmness and grandeur which you said the other day one always felt in the presence of great genius.'

Shelley I understand you! 'Tis a feeling one but too often feels; when an object stands before one, unintelligible, 'wrapped in its own formless horror like a ghost.'

Byron I don't wonder you quote that line of yours. It is one of the best you ever wrote. I think it great affectation not to quote oneself.

Shelley But you must not let *Hamlet* pass. Pray go on with your observations upon it, if not disagreeable.

Byron It takes some time for one's feelings to form themselves into any definite and expressible shapes – just as they say that it takes three days for the rain-water to get to the rivers – one for the ground, one for the drains, and one for the ditches; and it is very hard of any one to come as you do now, and trampling over one's feelings, while they are yet soft with the drenching of your Castalian dew, to stamp uneffaceably the impression of the moment.

Shelley Oh, I assure you we won't print you down at your word. You may say just the contrary, if it please your Lordship, to-morrow; but sufficient for the evening is the opinion thereof.

Byron Why, believe me, I have no opinion of any sort. If I had but an opinion – what can any man want more? But now I am like a nothing, a want, a privation. What *is* Hamlet? What means he? Are we, too, like him, the creatures of some incomprehensible sport, and the real universe just such another story, where all the deepest feelings, and dearest sympathies are insulted, and the understanding mocked? And yet we live on, as we read on, for

> Who would lose
> Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
> These thoughts that wander through eternity?

And who can read this wonderful play without the profoundest emotion? And yet what is it but a colossal enigma? We love Hamlet even as we love ourselves. Yet consider his character, and where is either goodness or greatness? He betrays Ophelia's gentlest love; he repulses her in a cruel manner; and when in the most touching way, she speaks to him, and returns his presents, he laughs her off like a man of the town. At her grave, at the new-made grave of Ophelia his first love, whom his own unkindness had blasted in the very bud of her beauty, in the morn and liquid dew of youth, what is the behaviour of Hamlet? A blank – worse than a blank; a few ranting lines, instead of true feeling, that prove him perfectly heartless. Then his behaviour in the grave, and his insult to Laertes, why the gentlest verdict one can give is insanity. But he seems by nature, and in his soberest moods, fiend-like in cruelty. His old companions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he murders without the least compunction; he desires them to be put to sudden death, 'not shriving-time allowed.' And the same diabolical refinement of revenge, when he finds the King at his prayers, induces him to wait for some more horrid time, 'when he is drunk, asleep, or in his rage,' to assassinate him, that 'his soul may be as damned and black as hell, whereto he goes.' Polonius, the father of Ophelia, he does actually kill; and for this does he lament or atone for what he has done, by any regret or remorse? 'I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.' – 'You shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby!'

But suppose him heartless, though he is for ever lamenting, and complaining, and declaiming about the false-heartedness of every one else; Richard is heartless – Iago – Edmund. The tragic poet of course deals not in your good-boy characters. But neither is he, as Richard is, a hero, a man of mighty strength of mind. He is, according to his own admission, as 'unlike Hercules' as possible. He does not, as a great and energetic mind does, exult under the greatness of a grand object. He

is weak; so miserably weak as even to complain of his own weakness. He says

> The time is out of joint, – O cruel spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right.

And yet he is always boasting and bragging of his own powers, and scorning every one else, and he swears he will sweep to his revenge, 'with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love.' For revenge was his love. But in truth he loved it, Shelley, after your own heart, most platonically; for his heart is too faint to win it fairly, and he contents himself with laughing at himself, mocking his own conscious cowardice, and venting his spleen in names, instead of doing any thing like a man. So irresolute is he, that he envies the players, he envies Fortinbras, Laertes, any one that can do any thing. Weak, irresolute, a talking sophist. Yet – O I am sick of this most lame and impotent hero!

Shelley And yet we recognize in him something that we cannot but love and sympathise with, and a grandeur of tone which we instinctively reverence.

Byron Then Ophelia, how gross are the scenes of her madness! She, too, seems as inconsistent and as false a character as her faithless lover. The graceful and gentle Ophelia changes somehow or other as shapes change in a dream, into an insane gypsy, singing no very delicate songs. Laertes is a braggadocio kind of fellow, and as for the rest of them, King and Queen, and Polonius: – why do we, through five long acts, interest ourselves in the fates and fortunes of such pitiful beings?

Shelley But do you not admire the buried majesty of Denmark 'revisiting the glimpses of the moon?'

'Alas! poor ghost!' said Byron. 'I had forgot it, but the ghost is as whimsical a person as any of the others. It seems to come and go without any reason at all. Why should it make all that bustle in the cellerage when it cries out "Swear!" in echo to Hamlet? Why should it appear so unexpectedly and uselessly in that scene with his mother? But ask not why, seek not reason, or consistency, or art, in the wild rhapsodies of this uncultivated genius.'

Shelley Are you then so orthodox in any thing as to think Shakspeare a man of no art or thought – a prophet of poetry, possessed by a spirit unintelligible to himself?

Byron My dear fellow, who can read this very play, and call Shakspeare a thoughtful artist? Let us rise a little higher, and consider the whole play, and the play as a whole. The story, the action, after the first prologue and preparation of this ghost, remain stagnant; all the rest is stationary, episodical, useless. What is Fortinbras to the usurpation of the King, or the revenge of Hamlet, or any part of the plot? nor do Ophelia or Polonius conduce to the main of the story, or to the progress of the interest. Add *quantum suff.* of courtiers, players, grave-diggers, clowns, and such like stuff, ridiculous and incongruous, and out of all keeping with the high-heeled, tragic strut; useless, in truth, in relation to the play considered in itself; but I suppose poor Will found sufficient use and reason in the pence and praises of the gods of the galleries. And thus this will-o'-th-wisp, this meteor of genius, leads us poor mortals, who would fain analyze his nature and detect his 'airy purposes,' a weary and a fruitless chase; while the simpler solution of the difficulty would be, that Shakspeare was a man of great genius but no art, and much preferred satisfying his hostess of the Mermaid with a good night's profit, to satisfying the troublesome and inquisitive readers of future ages, which he dreamed not of.

This seemed to make Shelley melancholy, and we walked in silence through the arched gateway into the public road; nothing was heard but the echo of our steps. I felt a kind of sorrow and mournful shame, as if the glory of man was proved indeed to be the 'dream of a shadow.' 'But,' said Shelley, beginning again, with the kind of wedgelike, thin voice with which a man brings in a solid argument that he is sure of, 'What do you exactly mean by a great genius without art? do you mean a man who throws out in his writings some odd passages of great beauty, but leaves the whole, as a whole, rude and unformed?'

Byron Take it that way, if you will.

Shelley Well then, what do we mean by a beautiful passage or line? Is not a line, as well as your outspread heroics, or a

tragedy, a whole, and only as a whole, beautiful in itself? as, for instance, 'How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank.' Now, examining this line, we perceive that all the parts are formed in relation to one another, and that it is consequently a whole. 'Sleep,' we see, is a reduplication of the pure and gentle sound of sweet; and as the beginning of the former symphonizes with the beginning *s* of the latter, so also the *l* in moonlight prepares one for the *l* in sleep, and glides gently into it; and in the conclusion, one may perceive that the word 'bank' is determined by the preceding words, and that the *b* which it begins with is but a deeper intonation of the two *p*'s which come before it; sleeps upon this slope, would have been effeminate; sleeps upon this rise, would have been harsh and inharmonious.

Byron Heavens! do you imagine, my dear Shelley, that Shakespeare had any thing of the kind in his head when he struck off that pretty line? If any one had told him all about your p's and s's, he would just have said, 'Pish!'

Shelley Well, be that as it may, are there not the coincidences, I suppose you would call them, that I showed in the line?

Byron There are. But the beauty of the line does not lie in sounds and syllables, and such mechanical contrivances, but in the beautiful metaphor of the moonlight sleeping.

Shelley Indeed, that also is very beautiful. In every single line, the poet must organize many simultaneous operations, both the meaning of the words and their emphatic arrangement, and then the flow and melting together of their symphony; and the whole must also be united with the current of the rhythm.

Byron Well, then, I'm glad I'm not a poet! It must be like making out one's expenses for a journey, I think, all this calculation!

Shelley I don't say that a poet must necessarily be conscious of all this, no more than a lady is conscious of every graceful movement. But I do say that they all depend upon reason, in which they live and move, and have their being; and that he who brings them out into the light of distinct consciousness, beside satisfying an instinctive desire of his own nature, will

be more secure and more commanding. But what makes this metaphor beautiful? To represent the tranquillity of moonlight is the object of the line; and the sleep is beautiful, because it gives a more intense and living form of the same idea; the rhythm beautifully falls in with this, and just lets the cadence of the emphasis dwell upon the sound and sense of the sweet word 'sleep;' and the alliteration assimilates the rest of the line into one harmonious symmetry. This line, therefore, is it not altogether a work of art?

Byron If it is, I don't see what this has to do with the discussion about *Hamlet*.

Shelley Why, just this. You recollect, you said Shakspeare was a great genius with no art?

Byron Yes.

Shelley And that you meant by that, a man who would strike out two or three good lines, and purple patches of poetry in his work, but who leaves the whole unfinished?

Byron Yes.

Shelley And we afterwards agreed that every line, or part of a line, that was good, was made good by art only?

Byron Well!

Shelley Why, then, this is the conclusion, that a man of great genius, but little art, means only, one who is able to perceive in the small what his powers are not wide enough to comprehend in the greater.

Byron Well, well – for heaven's sake, what does it signify about the *words*, art, or genius? This does not explain *Hamlet*.

Shelley Only that, if what I have said is true, and if Shakspeare is one of the most glorious names among mankind, and *Hamlet* one of his most famous plays, it is more than probable that he was not so blind as you would make him; and that there must be some point of view, if we could find it, some proper distance and happy light, in which the whole would appear a beautiful whole. I once attempted a kind of commentary upon this very play, and if you will allow me, I will read it to you.

Byron, though half provoked and half amused, with what he thought the mad and ridiculous speculations and

imaginations of his friend, agreed – and, after dinner, Shelley read us out his view of *Hamlet*:

'The character of Hamlet himself we must first endeavour to penetrate into, and if we can understand this central germ, we shall be better able to follow the poet in the conception and organization of his great work, and to see how every part is what it is necessarily, and bears in itself the reason of its existence and its form.

'The character of Hamlet, as I take it, represents the profound philosopher; or, rather, the errors to which a contemplative and ideal mind is liable: for of necessity the lessons of the tragic poet are like the demonstrations, *ex absurdo*, of Parmenides, since the mind's eye is so dull and blinded, so "drunk-asleep," to use Hamlet's words, as not by intuition to recognize the beauty of virtue, to prove it, as it were, by the clashing contradiction of the two opposite extremes: as, if a man derived a more sensible, or rather sensual, consciousness of health, which also is indeed a gift of the same Apollo who bestows upon us truth and beauty, from having been previously in sickness: – there is but one demonstration of the excellence of health, and that is disease.

'Purposing, therefore, to body forth a character so deeply, indeed, and pre-eminently tragic, but most hard to fix and bring down into the definite world of action, as it seemed to lie beyond it in the sphere of thought, silent and invisible, Shakspeare invented the sublime idea of the ghost; an outward and visible sign of the sudden apparitions of the mysterious world within us. The ghost of his father, clad in complete steel, revisiting the glimpses of the moon, may be considered as a great purpose coming suddenly upon a meditative mind. All the outward circumstance and actual reality, of course, immediately become necessary as the laws and conditions of the visible world into which it is translated. Now Hamlet the father was a man of action: his character is finely realized for us in two admirable lines, where, describing the appearance of this buried majesty, Marcellus says –

> So frown'd he once, when in an angry parle
> He smote the sledded Polack on the ice.

But his son Hamlet, brooding over the remembrance of his father, has embarked upon that shoreless sea of melancholy,

> Whose bottom none could ever sound, or find
> The ooze, to show what coast his sluggish craft
> Might easiliest harbour in.

At the time when the play opens, he is about thirty years old, as we learn from the clown in the fifth act. He is by birth a German; and from indulging in the inactive habits of that deep-thinking nation, he has become "fat, and scant of breath," as the Queen says. He has passed all his life at Wittenberg, famous in Shakspeare's time, as the college of Dr. Faustus; and we know that he had there been very much with the players. At the court, he still lived a recluse life, complaining of the excesses of the times, and "walking for hours in the lobby" reading or meditating.

'The play opens with mysterious notes of preparation, –

> And prologues to the omen'd coming-on.

We are far removed from all the stir of society, in the solitude of the open air and darkness; only distant noises from the palace come at intervals, making solitude more solitary; the soldiers of the watch begin talking mysteriously about the signs of the times, "dreaming on things to come," when the ghost appears. In the next scene, we come back into the pomp and pride of the world, and kings and courtiers: Hamlet is among them, but not of them. His very first words are most significant of his character, when he exclaims, "Seems, Madam! I know not seems." Observe, too, when Horatio tells him of this wonderful appearance, how philosophical his questions are, as of a man trying to realize completely, in his own mind, the image of the thing. The mysterious contradiction between reality and ideality, one of the most profound questions of ontology, is strongly shown in the beginning of this dialogue. "My father! methinks I see my father!" – "O where, my Lord?" cries Horatio, starting in terror. "In my mind's eye, Horatio." To this subject Hamlet recurs again, in the conversation with his two good friends: "There is," says he, "nothing either good

or bad, but thinking makes it so." And again in another place, where Osric asks "if he knows Laertes?" he replies, "I dare not confess that, lest I should compare with him in excellence; for to know a man well were to know oneself."

'In the next scene of the first act, Hamlet, in the midst of a long metaphysical speculation, in which he had forgot all time and place, is suddenly visited by the apparition. He breaks off in terror. When the ghost has faded from him, he is left overcome with his feelings, and with the weight of the commanded action. He confuses his external body with his inner self, as if he were nothing but a spirit; and when he says that he will raze out all that he learned from experience or from thought,

> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain,

he takes out his real tablets and writes it down.

'The levity of his expressions afterwards is most true to nature; and the mysterious movements of the ghost make flesh and blood shudder to think upon the invisible world that is around us, and within us, and whose purposes, and silent operations and recoilings, are to us most awfully unaccountable.

'But the great artist, between these two more intense scenes, has interposed a gentler shade, which not only relieves and alleviates the deeper interests of the tragedy, but brings out also many new views of Hamlet's character, and marks the moral of the whole more deeply. She was a beautiful young creature,

> Forward, not permanent; sweet, not lasting,

but not the woman to fix or seriously engage the mighty mind of Hamlet; and thus he is here also perplexed with the difference between mind and body; and she, like a dew-drop from a lion's mane, is shaken to air. As to old politic Polonius, his precepts are most amusing; certainly they are the very reverse of Hamlet's ignorance of all external seemings, as they appear to know nothing but appearances, and they all follow each other, after the manner of his own sage simile, "as the night the day," that is, without any method of reason.

'The whole play is a play of plots and contrivances of all sorts, and an endless extravagance of ingenuity in every thing; and the first scene of this act shows us Polonius, who is a kind of mock Hamlet, or a Hamlet grown old, and with nothing left of "the soul of wit" but the husk and "frothing circumstance," the limbs and outward flourishes – and here we see him working at his little underplots with windlasses and with assays of bias –

> By indirections to find directions out.

Hamlet, meanwhile, in pursuance of his plan of pretending madness, which, indeed, he does by indulging into excess his own real feelings, and thus feeding the loneliness of his heart with exaggerated solitude; led now by the instinct of his shock at the detected infamy of his mother, has frightened poor Ophelia, and so set off all these sage old folk –

> Who hunt the trail of policy so sure –

on the very scent which he intended; where let us leave them in full sonorous cry.

'The next scenes are too insignificant to require any comment, excepting, perhaps, Hamlet's letter. Many have agreed with Polonius in thinking "beautified" a vile phrase; but it is just of a piece with his signature, – "while this machine is to him, Hamlet," – and only shows in every thing his metaphysical turn of thought. "My soul's idol" sounds ordinary, but Hamlet, I do not doubt, meant it more accurately.

"Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as Goethe well observes, are a brace of those half creatures, who, taken single, would be nothing, and always take care to go in couples. How deplorable would the smiling but crooked-councilling Rosencrantz have been without the gilded and guileful Guildenstern! But here come men much more to Hamlet's taste – how heartily he welcomes them! – there are the players. The introduction of these players is one of the most admirable and artful inventions of any in all Shakspeare. They represent the whole body of literature, "whose object is, and always has been," as Hamlet with his usual profundity observes, "to hold

up the mirror to nature," and is dedicated to the same light-giving God who bestows upon us the heaven-descended *γνωθι σεαυτον*.[12] We have here an opportunity of learning something of Hamlet's taste, and we accordingly find him deeply delighted with the most lofty and imaginative poetry that ever swept over a theatre in tragic pall.

'The verses themselves, as that most excellent critic Schlegel observes, are necessarily elevated two degrees above nature to modesty of nature, that they might stand out from the rest, as a play within a play. They seem like a thing seen through a magnifying glass; and are, indeed, one of the most extraordinary productions of wondrous Shakspearian art. Hamlet's soliloquy, which crowns and concludes the act, is not merely the casual product of a chance situation, but, like every work of Shakspeare's mind, contains or implies a profound view of some important question – in the present case the relative situations of the two loftiest divisions of human intellect – the poet's and the philosopher's. In his next soliloquy, the famous "To be or not to be," we may observe developed, in a grand style, the peculiarity of Hamlet's mind, its tendency to idealize every thing; he quite forgets the reality of the case, and impersonates in one all the ills that flesh is heir to –

> The pangs of despised love, the law's delay, &c.

'And this we must bear in mind against the scene at Ophelia's grave, for Hamlet was not selfish.

'But he was disposed to idealize to excess. What a deep feeling both of his weakness, and yet the grandeur of his strength is conveyed in his address to his friend –

> Horatio, thou art e'en as *just* a man,
> As e'er my conversation cop'd withal.

'After the play, he is much in the same state of uncertainty and vacillation in which the ghost left him; he recoils and swerves from action; and it is an instinctive feeling of this sort that makes him impatient even of the necessities of versification, – any thing necessary he feels a disposition to resist or avoid.

> For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
> This realm dismantled was
> Of Jove himself, and now reigns here,
> A very, very – peacock.

' "You might have rhymed," says the man of just sense, Horatio. But there is the same lame and impotent conclusion in every thing he does. Soon after this, when he tries to lash himself into exertion, reminding himself of the ghostly time of night, and graves giving up their dead, and vaunting as extravagantly as falsely, "Now could I drink hot blood," &c. his considerations about killing his mother, and determinations *not* to do it, are but a bitter though unconscious mockery of himself, and just an antistrophe to his curious refinements on the murder of the king. In both cases it is but the excess of an over ingenious intellect,

> With thinking too precisely on the event.

'There is a deep meaning signified in the next scene with his mother, where, in the midst of his declamation, gazing upon the picture, the reality suddenly comes. Always his profound meditations seem without beginning or end, while he wanders in a wilderness of thought, and enterprises of great moment, while he is declaiming with the player, or tracing the dust of imperial Cæsar to a bunghole, or flattering his own weakness with proving to himself the shallowness of all the actions and the actors of life, become "sicklied o'er with this pale cast, and lose the name of action." Whenever he does any thing, he seems astonished at himself, and calls it rashness.

> Rashly, and praised be rashness for it –

as he tells his friend Horatio, he set about his deliverance from the false ambassadors. In the next lines he gives, in my opinion, the moral of the whole:

> Let us know
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough hew them how we will.

' "That is most certain," Horatio replies.

'How different is Laertes. *His* father also has been murdered – but he at once collects the people, storms the palace, compels the king, at his peril, to account for the murder. Nothing, he cries, shall stop him, but "my will, not all the world's." His will he follow impetuously; he looks not to right or left, with "considering too curiously." But he errs on the other side. He raises the mob – he would, he says, of Hamlet, "cut his throat in church." He does kill him with a treacherous poisoned rapier. His thoughts are so fixed upon his end, that he sees not any thing between.

'Now such a rash gunpowder spark as this Laertes, Hamlet must at once have envied and despised. Well, they meet at the grave of Ophelia – for the simple young creature, half by accident, and half on purpose, in her half-witted state, drowned herself. The simplicity of her girlish youthfulness, and the manner in which Hamlet had wooed her, became sufficiently evident in her ballads; her character was necessarily what it is – for in a play so full of thought, and the deepest interests of the soul, a more strong passion would have been a note, "harsh, and of dissonant mood."

'Hamlet, when he discovers her death, only says, "What! the fair Ophelia!" But when this Laertes, who always so outran his thoughts with an excess of hair-brained action, leaps into the grave, and declaims "with such an emphasis and phrase of sorrow," Hamlet is thrown into a towering passion, and conscious of the weakness and vagueness of his own feelings on the occasion, he cries out, in the bitterness of his contempt, both for Laertes and himself

> Show me what thou'lt do!
> Woul't weep, woul't fight, woul't fast, woul't tear thyself,
> Woul't drink up esel? eat a crocodile?

'What falseness is all this sorrow of yours! – I could do just as much, come, what shall we do? – weep, or fast, or tear our hair, or drink vinegar, or eat crocodiles to make ourselves shed false tears! &c. But Hamlet is ever a perfect gentleman, and his apology to Laertes is one of those gentle mellowings and

softenings of a strong outline which Shakspeare so well understood. With regard to his alleged cruelty, this appearance arose from his philosophical habit of seeing every thing as laws, or necessary consequences.

'As Spinoza says of himself, "humanas actiones non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere" – "neither to laugh at, or bewail, or detest the actions of men; but to understand them." He allowed the two false courtiers no shriving time, because it was necessary for his plot – if they should be heard, all would be found out – and he says, "They come not near my conscience," viewing it as a general and necessary case.

> 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes,
> Between the pass and fell incensed points
> Of mighty opposites.

'What noble lines! But we have passed a hundred admirable and significant groups and views; we have missed the clown and the grave-digger. In Shakspeare "one may suck matter out of every thing, as a weasel sucks eggs," as Jacques says. These clowns are very like their betters, they are not thinking of the thing they are about; but make themselves happy in the exercise of an endless ingenuity.

'Fortinbras shuts the scene. He surrounds the play as with a frame.

'It appears, therefore, that *Hamlet* is, in itself, a complete and reasonable whole, composed in an harmonious proportion of difference and similitude, into one expressive unity.'

Shelley, as he finished, looked up, and found Lord Byron fast asleep.

Hugo[13]

Hamlet, appalling, unaccountable, being complete in the incomplete. All, in order to be nothing. He is prince and demagogue, sagacious and extravagant, profound and frivolous, man and neuter. He has but little faith in the sceptre, rails at the throne, has a student for his comrade, converses with any one passing by, argues with the first comer, understands the

NOTES ON INDIVIDUAL PLAYS

Abbreviations

Characters: Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*.
Lectures: A.W. Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*.
Remains: Coleridge's lecture notes and marginalia in his *Literary Remains*.
View: Hazlitt's *A View of the English Stage*.
(For publication details, see under critics' names, above.)

All's Well that Ends Well

1. From *Lectures*.
2. From *Remains*.

Antony and Cleopatra

1. From *Lectures*.
2. From *Remains*.
3. *Feliciter audax*: 'happily bold'.
4. From *View* and *Characters*.
5. *All for Love*: Dryden's adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra* (1678).
6. Anna Brownell Jameson (1794–1860), from *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical*, 2 vols. (London, 1832), later reprints entitled *Shakespeare's Heroines*, text from edition of 1904.
7. Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), from *Shakespeares Mädchen und Frauen* (1839), translated by Ida Benecke as *Heine on Shakespeare: A Translation of his Notes on Shakespeare's Heroines* (London, 1895).

As You Like It

1. From *Lectures*.
2. From *Remains*.
3. From *Characters*.
4. *Solitude*: Zimmermann's *Solitude* (English translation 1791), a popular Romantic text.
5. From *Characteristics of Women*.

The Comedy of Errors

1. From *Lectures*.
2. From *Remains*.
3. *casus . . . inverisimile*: 'accidents of playful nature . . . truth . . . lack of verisimilitude'.

Coriolanus

1. Mrs Elizabeth Inchbald (1753–1821), from *The British Theatre; or, A Collection of Plays, with biographical and critical remarks by Mrs. Inchbald*, 25 vols. (London, 1808).
2. From *Remains*.
3. From *Characters*, *A Letter to William Gifford, Esq.* and *London Magazine*, February 1820.
4. William Gifford's review (*Quarterly Review*, vol. 18 (1818), pp. 458–66) singled out the essay on *Coriolanus* as the strongest evidence that *Characters* was a seditious book; Hazlitt's reply quotes several passages from the review. See Introduction.
5. *Conciones . . . Tyler*: *Conciones ad Populum* and *Wat Tyler* were products of Coleridge's and Southey's radical youth in the 1790s, which embarrassed them in their reactionary middle age during the Regency.
6. Leigh Hunt (1784–1859), from *Examiner*, 5 December 1819, reviewing the Coriolanus of William Charles Macready (1793–1873), Kean's successor as leading actor of the day.
7. From *Shakespeares Mädchen*.
8. Charlotte Brontë (1816–55), from *Shirley* (London, 1849).

Cymbeline

1. From *Lectures*.
2. From *Characters*.

Hamlet

1. From *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. The passage begins with Wilhelm speaking about his interpretation of Hamlet.
2. From *Lectures*.
3. From *Remains*.
4. *Hume*: David Hume, archetypal sceptic.
5. *Farmer*: Richard Farmer, eighteenth-century Shakespearian critic.
6. *Dr. Johnson's mistaking . . .*: 'This speech, in which Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but

contrives damnation for the man that he would punish, is too horrible to be read or to be uttered' (Johnson's note on III, iii, 93).

7. From *View* and *Characters*.
8. *Whole Duty of Man . . . Academy of Compliments*: moralistic handbooks.
9. From 'Bemerkungen über einige Charaktere im *Hamlet*' ('Observations concerning Characters in *Hamlet*'), published in *Abendzeitung* (1823), collected in *Dramaturgische Blätter* (1826) and reprinted in Tieck's *Kritische Schriften*, vol. 3 (Leipzig, 1852), translated by LaMarr Kopp and reprinted from *Shakespeare in Europe*, ed. LeWinter.
10. *Schroeder*: F.L. Schroeder (1744–1816), German actor and dramatist whose stage-versions helped to popularize Shakespeare.
11. Lord Byron (1788–1824) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), from 'Byron and Shelley on the Character of Hamlet', unsigned dialogue, possibly by Mary Shelley, in *New Monthly Magazine*, NS 29 (1830), no. 2, pp. 327–36 – for evidence of authenticity, see Earl Wasserman, 'Shelley's Last Poetics: A Reconsideration', in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. F.W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: OUP, 1965), pp. 505–8; for attribution to Mary, see Charles E. Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 270.
12. *gnothi seauton* [Greek]: 'know thyself.'
13. From *William Shakespeare*.

Henry IV

1. From *British Theatre*.
2. From *Lectures*.
3. From *Characters*.

Henry V

1. From *Lectures*.
2. *ultima ratio regum*: 'the last resort of kings'.
3. From *Characters*.

Henry VI

1. From *Lectures*.
2. From *Remains*.

Henry VIII

1. From *Lectures*.
2. From *Characters*.

Julius Caesar

1. From *Lectures*.
2. From *Remains*.
3. *Gnostic heresy*: belief in the special power of those with mystical knowledge.
4. From *Characters*.

King John

1. From *Lectures*.

King Lear

1. From *British Theatre*.
2. *James the Second is by Hume*: in Hume's *History of Great Britain* (1754–7).
3. From *Lectures*.
4. *she remains victorious and happy*: in Nahum Tate's version.
5. From *Remains*.
6. *persona patiens*: 'suffering character'.
7. *Otway*: reference to the mad scene in *Venice Preserved*.
8. From *Characters* and *London Magazine*, June 1820.
9. *Penates*: household gods.
10. *Mr. Rae's manner . . .*: Alexander Rae played Edgar in this production; Hazlitt praised his performance, a rare instance of the critic admiring a member of the supporting cast more than the star.

Love's Labour's Lost

1. From *Lectures*.
2. From *Remains*.

Macbeth

1. From *Lectures*.
2. From *Remains*.
3. From *Characters* and *Examiner*, 25 June 1820.
4. *Mr. Macready's Macbeth*: Macbeth was among William Charles Macready's most celebrated roles.
5. Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859), from 'On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*', *London Magazine*, October 1823.
6. *Mr. Williams made his début . . .*: Williams's celebrated murders are