The London Theatre Scene in William Hazlitt's Dramatic Criticism

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The English drama and literary critic William Hazlitt (1778-1830) made criticism a kind of creative writing. His style is fascinating and completely free from pedantry and didacticism. What he brought to the criticism of Shakespeare was a highly imaginative and poetic mind, a very uncommon power of expression, and an enthusiasm never turning into sentimentality. Hazlitt was always a creative writer, even as a critic. His greatest gift was an ability to convey to the reader his own eagerness for Shakespeare's mastery. He had uncommon taste and judgment and never suffered from timidity, yet never indulged in sweeping generalizations.

Hazlitt was enchanted by Shakespeare's genius, as he declares in every chapter of his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817). It was the first of his book-length literary studies, the outcome of a long critical exercise and one of the most complete accounts of the plays of Shakespeare to have appeared at that time. Hazlitt opens the way to a new understanding of Shakespearean characters when he replies to Dr. Johnson—who in his *Preface to Shakespeare*

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wrote that "in the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species"—with these unforgettable words: "every single character in Shakespeare, is as much an individual, as those in life itself; it is as impossible to find any two alike." His comments on the plays' dramatic structure and poetry, and on their central themes, laid the groundwork for later critics' more elaborate interpretation, especially in the late nineteenth century.

Hazlitt's lectures and articles on theater tend to focus not on the aesthetic design of the plays on the printed page—as Coleridge was doing in his London lectures on Shakespeare—but on dramatic character in relation to both audience and performers. Hazlitt thought that what principally attracted playgoers was the ability of the performer onstage to establish empathy between performers and audience, and among spectators. Hazlitt constantly relates the characters on the page to performances in an attempt to show how the players' physical and emotive presence on stage links the literary work to the social awareness of the spectators.

His lively reviews of performances of plays published in newspapers and popular magazines—then collected in *A View of the English Stage, The Round Table* and *Dramatic Criticism*—led him to investigate the nature of Shakespeare's characters, and thus to question the style of the actors. Hazlitt rereads the most famous passages of the works of Shakespeare, exploring and comparing the different acting techniques of the most acclaimed actors on the London scene: David Garrick, Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons, and Edmund Kean.

Examining some of his reviews reveals the development of his opinions about the Shakespearean actors he was interested in. The essays collected in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817) often echoed thoughts and remarks first expressed in the reviews published from 1814 on the pages of T*he Morning Chronicle, The Examiner, The Times,* and *The Edinburgh Review,* for instance, his reflections on Hamlet.

In an article published on March 14, 1814, entitled "*Mr. Kean's* Hamlet," Hazlitt begins by examining "the wonderful variety and perfect individuality" of Shakespeare's characters, "as if they were living persons, not fictions of the mind," and goes on to assert, a few lines later, that "his characters are real beings of flesh and blood; they speak like men, not like authors."[1]

When the critic begins to write about Hamlet, he admits that his character "is probably of all others the most difficult to personate on the stage." Nevertheless, Edmund Kean performed the role successfully, though in some scenes he displayed more energy than was required, perhaps because he tended to imitate the style he used when performing Richard III, one of his first Shakespearean characters, as he would also do in his Macbeth. Yet, the "striking beauties" of his acting exceeded the defects, as in the fifth scene of the first act, when Hamlet first sees the Ghost and follows him with "filial confidence."

Hazlitt here focuses his attention on the new reading introduced by Kean—as he will do for Mrs. Siddons' *handwashing* as Lady Macbeth. Every actor could follow or re-interpret the tradition of his predecessors, and the audience was very attentive in recognizing the similarities or the differences. Hazlitt had a keen eye for these details and his review of Kean's Hamlet ended with a description of a sequence of scenes. To begin, here is the new reading: "In the scene where he breaks from his friends to obey the command of his father, he keeps his sword pointed behind him, to prevent them from following him, instead of holding it before him to protect him from the Ghost."[2] Then we read that "Hamlet's speech in describing his own melancholy, his instructions to the players, and the soliloquy on death, were all delivered by Mr. Kean in a tone of fine, clear, and natural recitation." The most impressive scenes were "the closet scene with his mother, and his remonstrances to Ophelia."

In particular, in the first scene of the third act, Hamlet has already pronounced the well-known "To be or not to be"

monologue when he sees Ophelia coming. He tells her, "I did love you once," in the next line, "I loved you not," and then "believe none of us," and ends by inviting her, three times, to get herself to a nunnery. Immediately afterwards the actors who played Hamlet used to leave the stage at this point. Kean, on the other hand, suddenly stopped, went back to the girl, took her hand and kissed it, once more, for the last time. "It had an electrical effect on the house," Hazlitt remembers, because "it explained the character at once (as he meant it), as one of disappointed hope, of bitter regret, of affection suspended, not obliterated, by the distractions of the scene around him!"[3]

Macbeth was another tragic Shakespearean character that Hazlitt wrote about at great length. His reflections on the king of Scotland inspired interesting comparisons with another king, Richard III. At the end of the eighteenth century, as demonstrated by a number of essays published between 1787 and 1817,[4] it was common to see a resemblance between the two characters' stories and evil natures: both were tempted into murder to further their ambition to the throne, and both their deaths were followed by the advent of new ruling dynasties—in *Richard III* Richmond unifies the houses of York and Lancaster when he assumes the throne as Henry VII and marries Elizabeth; in *Macbeth* the Banquo line will unify the kingdoms of England and Scotland.

In the chapter devoted to *Macbeth* in his *Characters*, Hazlitt tackles and develops this comparison when he writes, "Both are tyrants, usurpers, murderers, both aspiring and ambitious, both courageous, cruel, treacherous. But Richard is cruel from nature and constitution. Macbeth becomes so from accidental circumstances."[5] Even the supernatural elements play a significant role: Richard is haunted by the vision of his victims when he sleeps; they're nightmares to him. Macbeth is awake when he sees Banquo's ghost, which is invisible to rest of the company. A note by David Garrick about this scene survives:

> The first appearance of the spirit overpowers him more than the second; but even before it vanishes at first, Macbeth gains strength. "If thou canst nod, speak too" must be spoke with horror, but with a recovering mind; and in the next speech with him, he cannot pronounce "Avaunt, and quit my sight!" without a *stronger exertion* of his powers. I certainly recollect a degree of resolution, *but I never advanced an inch;* for, notwithstanding my agitation, my feet are immovable. My idea is this: Macbeth is absorbed in thought, and struck with horror of the murder, though but in idea; and it naturally gives him a slow, tremulous undertone of voice. I stopped at every word in the line because my intention was to paint the horror of Macbeth's mind and keep the voice suspended a little.[6]

In Hazlitt's opinion, it is extremely hard to play Macbeth. He has met the Witches on the heath and believed their prophecy. His life will never be the same, and a good interpreter of his character should make the spectators feel that in every act, in every word, in every thought, he continuously and silently goes back to that very moment. "We can conceive a common actor to play Richard tolerably well; we can conceive no one to play Macbeth properly, or to look like a man that had encountered the Weird Sisters. All the actors that we have ever seen, appear as if they had encountered them on the boards of Covent-garden or Drury-lane, but not on the heath at Fores, and as if they did not believe what they had seen."[7]

Hazlitt published a fine article four years earlier in *The Champion,* then collected it in *A View of the English Stage.* Here he anticipates the comparison between Richard III and Macbeth that we will find in *Characters*, yet he reminds his readers that "those [Shakespeare characters] that are the most alike, are distinguished by positive differences, which accompany and modify the leading principle of the character through its most obscure ramifications, embodying the

habits, gestures, and almost the looks of the individuals."[8] Here the purpose of the comparison between the two kings is designed to introduce and support the description of the way Mr. Kean performed them. It seems to the critic that Kean was not able to distinguish them so completely as he could have done and that his Macbeth resembled his Richard too much: "His Richard comes nearer to the original than his Macbeth. He was deficient in the poetry of the character. He did not look like a man who had encountered the Weird Sisters. There should be nothing tight or compact in Macbeth, no tenseness of fibre, nor pointed decision of manner. He has, indeed, energy and manliness of soul, but 'subject to all the skyey influences.' He is sure of nothing. All is left at issue."[9]

Hazlitt then quotes the beautiful soliloquy delivered by the king of Scotland in the third scene of the fifth act, beginning, "My way of life is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf," to declare that Kean was "unsuccessful" in that part, while Mr. Kemble's recitation of these lines characterized it with a "fine thoughtful melancholy." Kemble's voice was like "an echo of the past," and he really seemed to embody a Scottish chieftain of the eleventh century. Kean's movements were "too agile and mercurial" and "he fought like a modern fencing-master."[10]

At the end of the review Hazlitt admits that, in spite of all the faults, there is a scene that is one of "the two finest things that Mr. Kean has ever done." The first is his recitation of the passage in Othello, "Then, oh, farewell the tranquil mind"; the second is the scene in Macbeth after the murder: "The hesitation, the bewildered look, the coming to himself when he sees his hands bloody, the manner in which his voice clung to his throat and choked his utterance, his agony and tears, the force of nature overcome by passion—beggared description. It was a scene no one who saw it can never efface from his memory."[11]

> Another unforgettable performance for Hazlitt was Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth: It was the first character

> in which we ever saw her, and the recollection of the impression which she then made upon us is not strengthened by its having been also the last in which we saw her. To have seen her in that character but once, was never to forget her afterwards. It was no more possible to forget her than if we had seen some more than mortal vision. It was as if the Muse of Tragedy had descended to awe us into wonder. Her voice was power: her form was grandeur. Her person was the mould which her lofty and gigantic spirit alone could fill. Her face lightened with awful beauty. We forget many things one after another; year by year takes away from the list of our remembrances; but the impression which Mrs. Siddons first made on our minds can never wear out.[12]

"In coming on in the sleeping scene, … she was like a person bewildered and unconscious of what she did. Her lips moved involuntarily—all her gestures were involuntary and mechanical. She glided on and off the stage like an apparition."[13] Hazlitt is talking about the first scene of the fifth act, when Lady Macbeth reappears on the stage after the long absence and silence of the fourth act. In actual fact, during the fourth act no one even speaks her name. She has a chandelier in her hand, and she is lost in a fearful, restless sleep. The first scene of the fifth act is a very short scene, only eighty lines. It is her last appearance in the tragedy. Only six scenes remain to the end when Malcolm will be king.

In order to imagine her appearance, one might take a look at the beautiful portrait in the National Portrait Gallery in London called *Sarah Siddons in Lady Macbeth*. It shows the actress barefoot, wearing a long white dress, her hair loose and covered by a white veil. In the painting are two other figures, a doctor and a young lady, the ones who appear on the stage with her in the scene mentioned above. When observing the portrait, another important detail we should notice is Lady Macbeth rubbing her hands together, still trying to wash away the blood of the murders committed—

as she says, "Out damned spot! Out, I say!" This is the scene all the critics underline when they talk about Mrs. Siddons's Lady Macbeth, who, it seems, created the legendary gesture of the handwashing, subsequently imitated by generations of actresses.

Hazlitt's most distinctive characteristic is the way he cleverly mixes the stage fiction with the reality of human passions, providing the reader with a portrait gallery of rare truth and beauty. His expectations may be literary in that he believes the whole drama to be already present on the page, but this means that he is thrilled when an actor fulfills his expectations well or brings to a scene more than he was expecting: for instance, as I have tried to show, Kean's Hamlet coming back to silently kiss Ophelia's hand or his Macbeth seeing the blood on his hands. When emotion overwhelms him, Hazlitt records the experience with complete frankness. In this way, his readings of Shakespeare's plays often render imperceptible the line between the theatrical fiction of the texts and the reality of the performance.

Notes

1. William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets and A View of The English Stage,* vol. 5 of T*he Complete Works of William Hazlitt,* ed. Percival Presland Howe (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930-4), 185.
2. Ibid., 188.
3. Ibid.
4. George Steevens, *On Richard III and Macbeth* (1787); Thomas Whately, *Remarks on Some of the Characters in Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1785); John Philip Kemble, *Macbeth and Richard III: An Essay in Answer to Remarks on Some of the Characters of Shakespeare* (London, 1817).
5. William Hazlitt, *The Round Table and Characters of Shakespeare's Plays,* vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt,* ed. Percival Presland Howe (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930-4), 192.
6. Percy Hetherington Fitzgerald, *The Life of David Garrick* (London: Simpkin, Marshall 1899), 259.
7. William Hazlitt, *The Round Table and Characters of Shakespeare's Plays,* 194.

8. William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets and A View of The English Stage,* 205.
9. Ibid., 206.
10. Ibid., 207.
11. Ibid.
12. William Hazlitt, *Art and Dramatic Criticism,* vol. 18 of *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt,* ed. Percival Presland Howe, (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930-4), 227.
13. William Hazlitt, *The Round Table and Characters of Shakespeare's Plays,* 189-90.