CHAPTER IX
THOMAS WHATELY

In the pages that have gone before, we have, more than once, sought to draw attention to the peculiarly anticipatory character of 18th century Shakespeare Criticism. If pioneering work is any credit, the Shakespeare criticism of the age can claim it in generous measure. It is a real path-finder, it visualises new horizons, sometimes boldly. Not content always to walk the beaten track, it reaches out, however imperfectly, in new directions of endeavour, thereby adding bits of fresh understanding to the study of Shakespeare. Perhaps the most important of these anticipatory trends is the study of individual character in Shakespeare's plays. Of those critics who deserve to be mentioned in this connection (they include Rowe, Warton, and Johnson), Thomas Whately is one whose importance can hardly be overemphasised.

Like Maurice Morgan Whately was a busy government official and did not, strictly speaking, belong to the world of letters. His work — Remarks on Some of the Characters of Shakespeare, described as "a Fragment only of a greater work" — contains a comparative study of Macbeth and Richard III —
a study which is indeed the first of its kind. Intrinsic merit apart, it is "important as the earliest volume devoted exclusively to the minute analysis of Shakespeare's characters."¹

A question previously asked and attempted may perhaps be repeated at this stage: how was it that the century, as it progressed, was getting increasingly interested in characters to the neglect of Shakespeare's language and poetry? It will be recalled that we suggested that this interest in characters is perhaps explainable in terms of the well-known neo-classical pre-occupations of the age. Inspired by their peculiar socio-political motives, the neo-classical writers came to take a keen interest in the action and behaviour of their fellow-men, their motivation and psychology. And on coming to Shakespeare they must have been struck by the intricate psychology displayed by the pulsating and life-size individuals peopling his world, and this challenged and provoked their probing instinct.

Viewed from a different angle, this interest in character might seem to inherit a classical legacy. Both Aristotle² and Horace — the great arbiters of 18th century thought — stressed the importance of character, whatever might have been their difference in the degree of emphasis.


². He no doubt gives the first importance to action to which all other elements in poetry are subordinate. But the fact remains that next to action, character-drawing acquires considerable importance.
We quote below the relevant words of Horace from Joseph Warton's paper in the Adventure no 97:

"Whoever ventures", says Horace, 'to form a character, let him endeavour to pursue it with uniformity and consistency; but the formation of an original character is a work of great difficulty and hazard.'

And Aristotle:

".....Plot therefore is the first essential .........character comes second..... Third comes thought..... Fourth among the literary elements is Diction."\(^1\)

It is clear that Aristotle does not attach as much importance to character as does Horace. At the same time, however, it is clear that character has a high place next to action (plot) in poetry. Even that apart, the neo-classical writers took Aristotle in their own light, reading their own meanings and suggestions in the Poetics much as the writers and critics of every other age have done in their own ways. And it is a fact that Aristotle has appeared differently to different epochs. Every age has had its own understanding of him.

The point is that Horace gives character portrayal an over-riding importance, and Aristotle, although he does not go so far, attaches considerable importance to it. Their critical dicta,

as understood by the Augustan writers, are likely to have served to strengthen their peculiar socio-political interest in human beings as either individuals or types.

Richard III and Macbeth look very much alike in the eyes of a superficial observer since they are found in much the same world — a world of ambition and cruelty, murder and bloodshed — and meeting the same sad end. They commit treachery and wade through blood. It would therefore be only natural to regard them as sinister creatures of the dark night of terror, as villains of the same dye. However, a deeper study brings out an essentially different picture. The apparent similarity in Shakespeare is oftentimes deceptive, for under the garb of similarity can be seen clearly marked distinctions in motivation and spirit, well-demarcated individuals working out their separate destinies. Shakespeare, more than any other playwright, excels in etching out individuals who, however much they may seem to resemble others, truly resemble only themselves. Having recognised this, Whately picks up Macbeth and Richard III to show how two apparently similar characters may differ and
so widely. Whately says:

"Every play of Shakespeare abounds
with instances of his excellence in distinguishing
characters. It would be difficult to determine
which is the most striking of all that he drew;
but his merit will appear most conspicuously by
comparing two opposite characters, who happen to
be placed in similar circumstances." 1

No two characters "seem to agree so
much in situation, and to differ so much in
disposition, as Richard III and Macbeth," 2 and
Whately presently shows where they agree and where
again they differ:

"Both are soldiers, both usurpers;
both attain the throne by the same means, by
treason and murder; and both lose it too in the
same manner, in battle against the person claiming
it as lawful heir. Perfidy, violence, and tyranny
are common to both, and those only, their obvious
qualities, would have been attributed indiscriminately
to both by an ordinary dramatic writer. But Shakespeare,
in conformity to the truth of history as far as
it led him, and by improving upon the fables which
have been blended with it, has ascribed opposite
principles and motives to the same designs and
actions, and various effects to the operation of
the same events upon different tempers. Richard
and Macbeth, as represented by him, agree in nothing
but their fortunes." 3

All this is so well presented. The
observation is acute and particularly so in view of
the general state of criticism of the time which

1. Remarks on Some of the Characters of Shakespeare,
in Shakespeare Criticism, 1623-1840, ed. D.N.
Smith, 1958, P. 125.
2. Ibid, P. 125.
3. Ibid. PP 125-126.
delighted in generalities and spoke in terms of types, patterns, and uniformities. Johnson and a few others had no doubt broken fresh grounds, but then none had hitherto thought of launching upon any comparative study of Shakespeare's characters with a view not to emphasising their truth to nature but to pointing out the concrete and pronounced particularity (or uniqueness?) of each. Whately's deep interest in the peculiar and exclusive psychology of characters reminds one of what Maurice Morgan said at more or less the same time. Morgan got absorbed in Falstaff study, and knowing the general trend of Shakespeare study of his time and being afraid lest he should be accused of having only a narrow vision, he observed:

"It is true that this Inquiry is narrowed almost to a single point: But general criticism is as uninstructive as it is easy; Shakespeare deserves to be considered in detail: — a task hitherto unattempted."

Now it cannot be denied that there was good justification for his dig at 'general criticism', although it is to be admitted at the same time that Morgan was unaware of the valuable work done in

the direction of detailed criticism by Warton and Johnson, and among his contemporaries, by Richardson. He could not possibly have been aware of Whately's work, since, although written much earlier (about 1770), it appeared only in 1785.

We are told that Whately had had in mind a similar study of a few other characters. If we are dwelling at some length on this point, it is because we wish pointed attention to be drawn to this distinctive way of Whately's looking at Shakespeare. For if Maurice Morgann looks at Shakespeare through Falstaff, Whately does so through his reading of Macbeth and Richard III. And his Shakespeare is a magnificent gallery of people who illustrate an amazing variety of attitude and taste, character and mental make-up. It is no non-descript assemblage, nor even a spectacle where small differences tend to get lost. Rather it is a great hall teeming with people who are distinguished from each other by their hard individualities. To study Shakespeare is to recognise hard-boiled individuals who refuse to coalesce and who are each a distinct centre of consciousness. If the general trend of 18th century
thought was to underline the general, Shakespeare accented the particular, the individual. And Whately seizes upon the poet's way of looking and analyses it in his own suggestive way. Here lies his distinction as a Shakespeare critic.

We have seen that Whately set forth the points of similarity and difference between the two characters under study. He now proceeds to elaborate as to how essentially unlike they are and more especially how their author conceives them as springing to action from sharply divergent impulsions. This is what Whately says:

"The usurpation of Macbeth is said to have been foretold by some witches; and the tyranny of Richard by omens attending his birth. From these fables Shakespeare, unrestrained and indeed uninformed by history, seems to have taken the hint of their several characters; and he has adapted their dispositions so as to give to such fictions, in the days he wrote, a show of probability. The first thought of acceding to the throne is suggested, and success in the attempt is promised, to Macbeth by the witches; he is therefore represented as a man, whose natural temper would have deterred him from such a design, if he had not been immediately tempted, and strongly impelled to it. Richard, on the other hand, brought with him into the world the signs of ambition and cruelty; his disposition, therefore, is suited to those symptoms; and he is not discouraged from"

1. Vide the Chapters on Pope and Johnson in connection with the discussion of characters as types and individuals.
indulging it by the improbability of succeeding, or by any difficulties and dangers which obstruct his way."

And now let us turn to Hazlitt for his estimate of the same two characters:

"The leading features in the character of Macbeth are striking enough, and they form what may be thought at first only a bold, rude, Gothic outline. By comparing it with other characters of the same author we shall perceive the absolute truth and identity which is observed in the midst of the giddy whirl and rapid career of events. Macbeth in Shakespeare no more loses his identity of character than Macbeth in himself would have lost the identity of his person. Thus he is as distinct a being from Richard III as it is possible to imagine, though these two characters in common hands, and indeed in the hands of any other poet, would have been a repetition of the same general idea, more or less exaggerated. For 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. Richard is from his birth deformed in body and mind, and naturally incapable of good. Macbeth is full of 'the milk of human kindness,' is frank, sociable, generous. He is tempted to the commission of guilt by golden opportunities, by the instigations of his wife, and by prophetic warnings. Fate and metaphysical aid conspire against his virtue and his loyalty. Richard on the contrary needs no prompter, but wades through a series of crimes to the height of his ambition from the ungovernable violence of his temper and a reckless love of mischief."

It is not necessary to point out how extraordinarily identical the approach, the

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language and tone are. Let us pursue at some
more length this striking parallelism to realise
even more fully the astonishing suggestivity of
Whately's analysis. We shall first quote a few
passages from Whately to be followed by some from
Hazlitt.

Whately:

"Macbeth appears to be a man not
destitute of the feelings of humanity. His lady
gives him that a character:

........ I fear they thy nature:
It is too full or th' milk of human kindness,
To catch the nearest way........

Which apprehension was well founded:
for his reluctance to commit the murder is owing
in a great measure to reflections which arise
from sensibility ........

"A man of such a disposition will esteem,
as they ought to be esteemed, all gentle and
amiable qualities in another; and therefore
Macbeth is affected by the mild virtues of Duncan; and reveres them in his sovereign when he stifles
them in himself ........

"The intervention of a supernatural
cause accounts for his acting so contrary to his
disposition. But that alone is not sufficient
to prevail entirely over his nature: the
instigations of his wife are also necessary to keep
him to his purpose.....

"Richard is in all these particulars
the very reverse to Macbeth. He is totally destitute
of every softer feeling:

'I that have neither pity, love, nor
fear,' is the character he gives of himself, and
which he preserves throughout.....
"He has a natural propensity to evil; crimes are his delight: but Macbeth is always in an agony when he thinks of them

He is pensive even while he is enjoying the effect of his crimes

"He styles himself, high-placed Macbeth:

but in no other light does he ever contemplate his advancement with satisfaction: and when he finds that it is not attended with that admiration and respect which he had promised himself, and which would have soothed his vanity, he sinks under the disappointment, and complains that

my way of life
Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have

"These blessings, so desirable to him, are widely different from the pursuits of Richard. He wishes not to gain the affections, but to secure the submission of his subjects, and is happy to see men shrink under his control.

"Nothing can be conceived more directly opposite to the agitations of Macbeth's mind than the serenity of Richard in parallel circumstances.

"He continually reproaches himself for his deeds: no use can harden him; confidence cannot silence, and even despair cannot stifle the cries of his conscience.

"A mind so framed and so tortured as that of Macbeth, when the hour of extremity presses upon him, can find no refuge but in despair.

"He disdains the thought of disgrace, and dies as becomes a soldier. His last words are,

I will not yield
To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet.

"It is not a formed sense of honour, nor a cold fear of disgrace, which impels him (Richard) to fight: but a natural high spirit, and bravery exulting in danger."

The following is from Hazlitt:

"Macbeth is not destitute of feelings of sympathy, is accessible to pity, is even made in some measure the dupe of his uxoriousness, ranks the loss of friends, of the cordial love of his followers, and of his good name, among the causes which have made him weary of life, and regrets that he has ever seized the crown by unjust means, since he cannot transmit it to his posterity.

"Macbeth is goaded on to acts of violence and retaliation by necessity: to Richard, blood is a pastime. — There are other decisive differences inherent in the two characters. Richard may be regarded as a man of the world, a plotting, hardened knave, wholly regardless of everything but his own ends, and the means to secure them. — Not so Macbeth. The superstitions of the age, the rude state of society, the local scenery and customs, all give a wildness and imaginary grandeur to his character. From the strangeness of the events that surround him, he is full of amazement and fear; and stands in doubt between the world of reality and the world of fancy. He sees sights not shown to mortal eye, and hears unearthly music. All is tumult and disorder within and without his mind: his purposes recoil upon himself, are broken and disjointed; he is in the double thrall of his passions and his evil destiny. Richard is not a character either of imagination or pathos, but of pure self-will. There is no conflict of opposite feelings in his breast. — Macbeth has considerable energy and manliness of character; but then, he is 'subject to all the skyey influences' ..... Richard in the busy turbulence of his projects never loses his self-possession, and makes use of every circumstance that happens as an instrument of his long-reaching designs."1

Except for the characteristic imaginative touch, Hazlitt's approach and reading look identical with those of Whately. This is doubly remarkable;

first, because Hazlitt, a Romanticist and a well-known despiser of 18th century thought should have nearly echoed an 18th century critic's views on two of Shakespeare's characters, and, second, because Whately should have been able to achieve that much of critical depth and suggestivity. Indeed, Hazlitt was aware of Whately's criticism, although he was mistaken about its authorship, and he paid it a generous tribute. As Halliday points out:

"It was to Whately that Hazlitt — who was infuriatingly careless about verifying his facts and quotations — referred in the Preface to his own Characters of Shakespeare's Plays (1817):

'A gentleman of the name of Mason, the author of a treatise on Ornamental Gardening (not Mason the poet), began a work of a similar kind about forty years ago, but he only lived to finish a parallel between the characters of Macbeth and Richard III, which is an exceedingly ingenious piece of analytical criticism.' "1

True, notwithstanding all this agreement, the differences between the two critics cannot be altogether ignored, which differences are rather implicit in their temper and the texture of their criticism. Hazlitt's imaginative overtone is not to be mistaken, nor is the other's hard precision of language and thought.

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1. Shakespeare and His Critics, 1958, P. 13 (footnote).
That Whately could achieve so much in so little space is truly remarkable. Perhaps because of the fragmentary character of his work, he is not as often mentioned as he really deserves to be. True, while engaged in the analysis of characters, he does not pay any attention to such things as the dramatic structure, the total significance of a play, or its poetry. This might have been due to his other varied interests. At any rate, this drawback he shares with many another critic of the age. If he is judged by what he has done, then the conclusion is inescapable that he wrote indisputably meritorious criticism which entitled him to an honoured place among the influential Shakespeare critics of the 18th century. Together with Johnson and Maurice Morgann, among a few others, he can lay claim to the inauguration of the new criticism which acquired such puissance in the 19th century that it may be said to have set up a kind of supremacy throughout this long period and even a little beyond it.

In the next chapter we take up Maurice Morgann in whom the study of Shakespeare's characters reaches a new level of distinction.