"The book grew under his hands till it became more than its title promised — not merely a vindication of Falstaff's courage, but an enthusiastic exposition of the genius of Shakespeare as revealed in the minute examination of a single character. No title could have been more misleading in its modesty. 'Falstaff is the word only, Shakespeare is the theme.' The passage where he breaks away exultantly from his main subject to write in sheer delight of Shakespeare's essential difference from all other writers and his imperishable gifts, is one of the great things in the whole range of English criticism. There is nothing greater — perhaps nothing so great — in Coleridge of Hazlitt. Forty years were to pass before they gave us the new criticism in all its strength, and they, to their loss, did not know Morgann."

The book referred to is the Essay On the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff published in 1777. A study of this invaluable Essay will show how justified the above opinion is. Speaking of the 18th century, the new criticism heralded, among others, by Warton, Johnson and Whately will be seen to have reached its crowning glory in Morgann. What is equally note-worthy is that Morgann's criticism of Shakespeare shows a kind of culmination of the liberating influence of Longinus that we first noticed in Dryden and then in a number of subsequent critics.

When we remember that Maurice Morgann was no academician but a government official who wrote on Shakespeare by way of relaxation from his main duties, we possibly realise all the more fully the extent and depth of his interest in his subject, and the true character of the passion with which he dealt with it. From what he tells us in the preface to his work it becomes clear that he had been greatly taken up by the character of Falstaff and that he took it upon himself to attempt to absolve the great comic figure of the oft-levelled charge of cowardice. He had warmed to the character so much that it pained him to know that people in general thought Sir John a coward. Whether or not he succeeds in

establishing his thesis, one thing is certain, which is that he succeeds in convincing us of his being thoroughly soaked in Shakespeare, of his exceedingly intelligent and large-hearted appreciation of the master-dramatist.

The first thing that he does in his great endeavour to disprove the charge of cowardice is to open a short but rewarding discussion on the distinction between 'mental impressions' and 'understanding'.

As Morgann observes:

"There are none of us unconscious of certain feelings or sensations of mind, which do not seem to have passed thro' the understanding: the effects, I suppose, of some secret influences from without acting upon a certain mental sense, and producing feelings and passions in just correspondence to the force and variety of those influences on the one hand, and to the quickness of our sensibility on the other. Be the cause, however, what it may, the fact is undoubtedly so: which is all I am concerned in. And it is equally a fact, which every man's experience may avouch, that the understanding and those feelings are frequently at variance. The latter often arise from the most minute circumstances, and frequently from such as the understanding cannot estimate, or even recognise: whereas the understanding delights in abstraction, and in general propositions, which however true considered as such, are very seldom, I had like to have said never, perfectly applicable to any particular case."

It would appear that what Morgann drives at is that instinctive perception and intellectual apprehension do not generally coincide, that our instinct may say a thing which our reason will not approve of, but that in certain affairs of life instinctive reading should take precedence over intellectual or rational proposition, since the former is truer than the latter. The discussion would seem almost to centre round the distinction between intuition and intellect, and when we find Morgann opting for intuition in preference to intellect, we cannot help persuading ourselves that he shows the influence in this instance of the significant change that had come over aesthetic criticism in the latter half of the 18th century — the change that consisted in the gradual shifting of emphasis

from reason to emotion, imagination, and such other comparatively mysterious forces of the human mind.

Now what is the impression concerning Falstaff? The impression is one of courage although the understanding makes the character one of sport and laughter. And in a dramatic composition "the Impression is the Fact." While endorsing Morgann's contention in course of his brilliant discussion of The Tempest, George Gordon observes:

"... Some analysis, indeed, there must be, if we are to use our understanding at all. To analyse the working of a plot is always permissible: and, anyhow, we do it. To go further .......... and enumerate the deliberate contrivances by which the feelings of an audience are moved, is a more dangerous adventure, but one not to be declined. The disaster comes when these analyses are substituted for the total impression of the play, which is the chief thing of all, and the last test of the author's art. It is possible to imagine an analysis of The Tempest which should resolve it as follows: a wreck upon an island: a high-born magician and his love-sick daughter: an aerial spirit and some dancing nymphs: a monster: some music and songs: several comical misadventures: and three or four spectacles, including a hunt with dogs. But by this method of inventory all that is left to the world of Helen's beauty is, item one nose, item two lips, item two eyes with lids to them, and so forth. These, we see, are not the facts. In such matters it is absolute that 'the Impression is the Fact.'" 1

H.B. Charlton recognises the same truth when he says:

"Morgann loved Falstaff. He recognised, however, that if Falstaff's character were to be judged by normal moral standards, it would seem hard to find anything worthy of commendation in the man. Yet Morgann loved him. To account for this, he develops a theory that we really estimate the quality of a man in a play, by two distinct faculties of judgment, by our 'impression', and by our 'understanding', faculties more or less corresponding to intuitive sympathy and 'pure reason'. Pure reason, he finds, is frequently in error, it judges on but partially apprehended evidence, for much that is essential can only be perceived by intuitive sympathy." 2

Arthur Sewell, dwelling on the same point, observes:

"It was surely a mistake ever to ask the question: Is Falstaff a coward? Morgann, who first asked it, very rightly made the distinction between the Understanding which deals in actions, and the Impression made upon us, often at variance with the Understanding. Morgann also affirmed of

1. Shakespearian Comedy And Other Studies, 1953, PP 92-93.
character-presentation that 'just so made is shown as is requisite, just so much as is impressed': but he went on to say that this & 'just so much' is able to imply a character which, though 'seen in part', may yet be 'capable of being unfolded and understood as a whole'. He therefore believed it possible to answer the question and proper to put it."¹

Morgann does not deny the existence of a kind of conflict between the 'secret impression' of courage and the intellectual understanding of the character as a coward. But he argues that this need not mislead or confound us, for Shakespeare has need for such an obviously self-contradictory situation to serve his purpose; he is no common writer but "a Name which contains All of Dramatic artifice and genius."²

The implication is clear. Shakespeare moves with princely ease in the handling of all manner of devices, and what enables him to do so is his transcendent genius. Such indeed is his dramatic skill that he can make even an impossible-looking situation serve his turn. He wills and things start happening — such is the magic of his art. Having in mind the uncommonly difficult character of Falstaff who has been shown in a variety of situations and as possessed of a puzzling variety of attributes, Morgann observes later:

"Shakespeare who delighted in difficulties, was resolved to furnish a richer repast, and to give to one eminent buffoon the high relish of wit, humour, birth, dignity, and courage. But this was a process which required the nicest hand, and the utmost management and address."³

In the delineation of Falstaff Shakespeare displays a most marvellous dramatic skill, for Falstaff is no one person but a great multitude of persons. Such a variously manifested personage can only be portrayed by an artist who is himself of endless variety.

³. Ibid. P. 181.
The richness of his critical faculty is revealed by the way in which Morgann faces and attempts to solve an important question — what is there about the delineation of Falstaff which accounts for the character yielding perpetual joy? The answer that he provides seems to involve a full cognizance of the great element of mystery that is implicit in the character:

"Perhaps, after all, the real character of Falstaff may be different from the apparent one; and possibly this difference between reality and appearance, whilst it accounts at once for our liking and our censure, may be the true point of humour in the character, and the source of all our laughter and delight."

It needs reiterating that in his many incisive comments on the character, strewn all through the Essay, Morgann gives evidence of his conspicuous ability to look below the surface and apprehend the extra-rational aspects or faculties which constitute the under-lying essence of a character. He recognises that the mind is not all rational, but a strange reservoir of conflicting forces. He does not therefore shy away from facing the rather elusive character of the inner self, however difficult it might be to grapple with.

It will have been evident by now that Falstaff is being treated as though he were a living person — as living and real as any that can be seen in life. The character in question seems to be lifted out of the play and given an independent reality where-upon a thorough examination is conducted from the psychological angle in order to find out its essential nature. This kind of criticism was certainly not non-existent before. Johnson, Whately, and Richardson had taken up Shakespeare's characters and made penetrating observations on them. And even before them Joseph Warton had responded to the appeal of Shakespeare's characters. What is however especially remarkable about Morgann's work

1. Ibid. P. 162.
is that he is far more through-going than his predecessors. It looks as though he were being drawn, as by a kind of self-impulsion, further and further into the inexhaustively complex inner world of Falstaff. He is like a psycho-analyst fascinated by a particular character into whose inner chambers he peers with endless curiosity and tireless zest. As L.C. Knights observes so pertinently:

"Since Shakespeare criticism began, people have praised Shakespeare for the life-likeness of his character. But it was not until the end of the 18th century that Shakespeare's remarkable power to make his man and women convincing led to a more and more exclusive concentration on those features of the dramatic personae that could be defined in terms appropriate to characters in real life. The local classicus is of course Maurice Morgann's Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff (1777)............ Morgann...... is interested in what is uniquely individual in the character he describes, and these individual traits, he affirms, can be elicited from the stage characters in much the same way as one builds up the character of an acquaintance in real life."1

Morgann is evidently Falstaff-intoxicated. Therefore it would be no exaggeration to regard him as one of the inaugurators of character criticism which was destined to attain a great vogue in the next century and which even survived it to find its culmination in the writings of A.C. Bradley in the first decade of the 20th century. Incidentally, he was also the first to arouse a world-wide interest in Falstaff.

Yet if Morgann is Falstaff-intoxicated, he is no less Shakespeare-intoxicated. In the course of his long enquiry into the secrets of his favourite character, Morgann pauses now and again, and delivers himself of impassioned utterances on "the genius, the arts, and the conduct of Shakespeare."2 Such utterances bear the touch of a rare insight and have proved to be even more important than what

he actually said on Falstaff in particular. Thus when he exclaims: "For what is Falstaff, what Lear, what Hamlet, or Othello, but different modifications of Shakespeare's thought?" — We experience a strange feeling of restlessness, we are at once driven to find parallel statements; and when we have almost tired ourselves out looking for them in the writings of his contemporaries and predecessors, we wake to realise that ours has so far been a witless search, for we should rather have looked in the direction of the Romantic critics to find satisfaction. Thus when we come upon such words of Coleridge as:

"Shakespeare is the Spinozistic deity — an omnipresent creativeness," or: "The body and substance of his works came out of the unfathomable depths of his oceanic mind" — we agree that they bear a sort of spiritual kinship to Morgann's animated comments. It should be mentioned, however, that Richardson had made an almost identical observation on Shakespeare's relation to his characters — an observation which we have quoted in the Introduction.  

But it is more particularly when, having put aside his exclusive pre-occupation with Falstaff, he comes to lay his finger on the unique peculiarity of Shakespeare's characters that Morgann becomes altogether inimitable and hence truly memorable.

At this point he reaches a new depth of insight, and achieves a much ampler illumination than hitherto experienced by any other critic. For as though by a synoptic vision he discovers that the 'wholeness' of Shakespeare's character is what differentiates them from the characters of any other dramatist. In the hands of any other dramatist a character

1. Ibid. P. 163.
3. Ibid. 1. 272.
4. "He is the Proteus of the drama; he changes himself into every character, and enters easily into every condition of human nature."
always remains a mere dramatic character; it is purely meant for the stage, and is conceived and designed for this limited objective only. A character will always bear some impress of the creator's vision and his grasp of truth and reality. By reason of his unrivalled knowledge of life and nature and of his intuitive grasp of truth, and also by reason of his unapproachable dramatic skill coupled with the magic of his poetry, Shakespeare succeeds in creating characters, which, because of their completeness and perfection, would seem to have stepped into the dramatic world right from real life. As Morgann says:

"There is a certain roundness and integrity in the forms of Shakespeare, which give them an independence as well as a relation, in so much that we often meet with passages, which tho' perfectly felt, cannot be sufficiently explained in words, without unfolding the whole character of the speaker." 1

Again:

"But it was not enough for Shakespeare to have formed his characters with the most perfect truth and coherence; it was further necessary that he should possess a wonderful facility of compressing, as it were, his own spirit into these images, and of giving alternate animation to the forms. This was not to be done from without; he must have felt every varied situation, and have spoken thro' the organ he had formed. Such an intuitive comprehension of things and such a facility, must unite to produce a Shakespeare. The reader will not now be surprised if I affirm that those characters in Shakespeare, which are seen only in part, are yet capable of being unfolded and understood in the whole; every part being in fact relative, and inferring all the rest." 2

Shakespeare has put himself inside his characters, and has felt their situations from within. This is what accounts for the unique lifelikeness of his characters. His characters, says Morgann, live by the unique vitality of their own creator. And there is a suggestion of wholeness about them so that what we learn from outside tends to

2. Ibid. P. 171.
complete itself by our instinctively inferred knowledge of them from within. In this connection, it is important to note the language that Morgann uses. He speaks of 'feeling', of 'intuition' and of seeing a thing from within. And he speaks with such animation and spontaneity that these words seem to be natural part of his idiom. There is therefore no doubt that he is far removed from the tradition of rule-bound criticism, and rather belongs temperamentally to the new mode of criticism heralded by the emergence of emotion-cum-imagination as of greater moment than either reason or the rules.\(^1\)

We have already noted Morgann's tendency to make of Shakespeare's characters real persons in life. It is their wholeness which attracts him so powerfully. As Moreann puts it:

"If the characters of Shakespeare are thus whole, and as it were original, while those of almost all other writers are mere imitation, it may be fit to consider them rather as Historic than Dramatic beings."\(^2\)

The point that he emphasises is that Shakespeare creates such an illusion of life and such complete characters that it is impossible not to accept them as though they were historical beings. Incidentally, here exactly is the beginning of that vogue of Shakespeare criticism which regards the works as more belonging to the study than to the theatre, and which runs such as a long course through the 19th century and even a little beyond.

But we have not seen yet the real heights to which Morgann's enthusiasm can lift him. He gradually takes his mind away not only from Falstaff but from all other

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1. Vide the Chapter entitled The Temper of the Age tracing Longinus's influence on the critical thought of the time.
Shakespearean characters, and fixes it on Shakespeare himself. He is now seized of the essential Shakespeare. Here is a moment to watch. Passion touches him. He is aflame. And he utters forth inspired words which are difficult to match.

"Shakespeare is a name so interesting, that it is excusable to stop a moment, nay it would be indecent to pass him without the tribute of some admiration. He differs essentially from all other writers; Him we may profess rather to feel than to understand; and it is safer to say, on many occasions, that we are possessed by him, than that we possess him. And no wonder: — He scatters the seeds of things, the principles of character and action, with so cunning a hand yet with so careless an air, and, master of our feelings, submits himself so little to our judgment, that everything seems superior. We discern not his course, we see no connection of cause and effect, we are rapt in ignorant admiration, and claim no kindred with his abilities. All the incidents, all the parts, look like chance, whilst we feel and are sensible that the whole is design. His characters not only act and speak in strict conformity to nature, but in strict relation to us: just so much is shown as is requisite, just so much is impressed; he commands every passage to our heads and to our hearts, and moulds us as he pleases, and that with so much ease, that he never betrays his own exertions. We see these characters act from the mingled motives of passion, reason, interest, habit and complexion, in all their proportions, when they are supposed to know it not themselves: and we are made to acknowledge that their actions and sentiments are, from those motives, the necessary result. He at once blends and distinguishes everything: — everything is complicated, everything is plain. I restrain the further expressions of my admiration lest they should not seem applicable to man; but it is really astonishing that a mere human being, a part of humanity only, should perfectly comprehend the whole; and that he should possess such exquisite art, that whilst every woman and every child shall feel the whole effect, the learned Editors and Commentators should yet so very frequently mistake or seem ignorant of the cause. A sceptre or a straw are in his hands of equal efficacy: he needs no selection: he converts everything into excellence: nothing is too great, nothing is too base."

These are words of inspired discernment. Longinus speaks of the creative artist's capacity to rouse the reader and to lift him to great heights of exaltation. The sublime in Shakespeare has reached Morgann, and the words that issue from his lips are winged words — words vibrant with passion.

It is remarkable how, while being enthusiastic Morpan stops but a little short of what may be called Romantic idolatry. And it may be permissible to suggest that the basic sanity of 18th century thought helped him to maintain his poise even in moments of rapture. Incidentally, however, his dig at the editors of Shakespeare is all too clear ("..... the learned Editors and Commentators should yet so very frequently mistake......"). We shall now quote two passages, one from Coleridge and the other from Hazlitt, to show the striking affinity of Morpan's remarks with those of the two great Romantic critics. Thus from Coleridge:

"Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms; each exterior is the physiognomy of the being within, — its true image reflected and thrown out from the concave mirror: — and even such is the appropriate excellence of her chosen poet, of our own Shakespeare, — himself a nature humanised, a genial understanding directing self-consciously a power and an implicit wisdom deeper than our consciousness." 1

And the following is from Hazlitt:

"The striking peculiarity of Shakespeare's mind was its generic quality, its power of communication with all other minds — so that it contained a universe of thought and feeling within itself, and had no one peculiar bias or exclusive excellence more than another. He was just like any other man, but that he was like all other men. He was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself, but he was all that others were, or that they could become. He not only had in himself the germs of every faculty and feeling, but he could follow them by anticipation, intuitively, into all their conceivable ramifications, through every change of fortune or conflict of passion, or turn of thought. He had 'a mind reflecting ages past' and present: — all the people that ever lived are there. There was no respect of persons with him. His genius shone equally on the evil and on the good, on the wise and the foolish, the monarch and the beggar." 2

It does not really need pointing out how strikingly Morpan, strictly not a man of literature, has anticipated not only the viewpoints but almost the language of his

Romantic successors. And yet the supple elegance and the wide-ranging suggestivity of Morgann's words remain unmatched. And surely this is no small achievement.

Let us for a brief while return to Morgann's findings on Shakespeare's treatment of Falstaff. Morgann sees clearly that Shakespeare just could not have allowed Falstaff to go on with his pranks, however enjoyable, for any indefinite length of time, that he had to drop the curtain not only before the eyes, "but over the minds of the spectators", so that there might be left nothing for their examination and curiosity. Morgann fully approves of the device that Shakespeare employs in this regard. And here again the critic gives evidence of the warmth of his heart and his fine judgment.

"He (Falstaff) was not involved in the fortune of the play; he was engaged in no action which, as to him, was to be completed; he had reference to no system, he was attracted to no centre; he passes thro' the Play as a lawless meteor, and we wish to know what course he is afterwards likely to take: He is detected and disgraced, it is true; but he lives by detection, and thrives on disgrace; and we are desirous to see him detected and disgraced again. The Fleet might be no bad scene for further amusement: he carries all within him, and what matter where, if he be still the same, possessing the same force of mind, the same wit, and the same incongruity. This, Shakespeare was fully sensible of, and knew that this character could not be completely dismissed but by death." 1

What, then, would be our estimate of Morgann? The survey that we have made will lead one irresistibly to the conclusion that Falstaff was but the occasion while Shakespeare was the real subject, and hence to see the justice of Nichol Smith's observation (quoted at the top) that "no title' could have been more misleading in its modesty." While his character criticism opened up a new channel of investigation of Shakespeare, besides being intrinsically valuable by reason of the discovery of the real greatness

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of Shakespeare's characters, his comments on Shakespeare's mind and genius have extraordinary merit and freshness about them as they reveal his intuitive understanding of the great Elizabethan. The trend in modern Shakespeare criticism is not to speak in terms of Shakespeare's shortcomings or blemishes, but to justify or account for what would appear to be defects of art in relation to the whole design. Viewed from this angle Morgan would almost look like a modernist. At least he is distinctly ahead of such representative 18th century critics as Pope and Johnson. The temper and spirit of his criticism are essentially different. In him the spirit of fault-finding gives way to that of eager imaginative appreciation. It may be noted here that this kind of appreciation was in fact started by Dryden in whom however it was mixed with the spirit of fault-finding. Morgan avoids fault-finding and develops the Longinian vein in Dryden's criticism to a point where it just stops short of romantic exuberance. When all is said, his is pre-eminently enthusiastic criticism. And judged from this angle, he is again a fore-runner of the Romantic school of criticism. Before we conclude, let us pause to hear Morgan speak on poetry which evidently means Shakespeare's poetry:

"Poetry delights in surprise, conceals her steps, seizes at once upon the heart, and obtains the sublime of things without betraying the rounds of her ascent: True Poesy is magic, not nature."

So poetry is magic, and he was held by the magic of Shakespeare's poetry. Would it really be going too far to suggest that Morgan's prose itself has a touch of magic about it? And as we listen to the words quoted above, do

1. Incidentally, this 'magic' of Shakespeare's poetry was referred to again and again by previous critics. We have already traced this aspect of the Shakespeare criticism of the time. The following two lines from Dryden may bear repetition:

"But Shakespeare's magic could not copied be
Within that circle none durst walk but he."
we not have at times the illusion that we are perhaps
listening to an impassioned Shelley born before his
time? Indeed, Morgana's temper is a shade romantic,
while never renouncing its central poise, which lends a
peculiar dignity to the fervour of his observations.

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