

**THE LIFE OF SHAKSPEARE; ENQUIRIES
INTO THE ORIGINALITY OF HIS
DRAMATIC PLOTS AND
CHARACTERS; AND ESSAYS ON THE
ANCIENT THEATRES AND THEATRICAL
USAGES; IN TWO VOLUMES, VOL. II**

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The Life of Shakspeare; Enquiries into the Originality of His Dramatic Plots and Characters; And Essays on the Ancient Theatres and Theatrical Usages; In Two Volumes, Vol. II by Augustine Skottowe

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AUGUSTINE SKOTTOWE

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To the dear Girls
With love from
C. Prince

1850

THE
LIFE
OF
SHAKSPEARE,
&c. &c.

VOL. II.

L. Gaskell
THE
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VOL. II.

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PATERNOSTER-ROW.

1824.

HAMLET.

1600.

THE French novelist, Belleforest, extracted from Saxo Grammaticus' History of Denmark the history of Amleth, and inserted it in the collection of novels published by him in the latter half of the sixteenth century; whence it was transfused into English, under the title of "The Hystorie of Hamblett," a small quarto volume printed in black-letter.

The history of Hamlet also formed the subject of a play which was acted previous to 1589; and arguing from the general course of Shakspeare's mind, that play influenced him during the composition of his own Hamlet. But unfortunately the old play is lost, and the only remaining subject for illustration is the black-letter quarto.

We learn from that authority, that the happiness of Horvendille, king of Denmark, excited

the envy of his brother Fengon ; who was, moreover, enflamed by love for Geruth, the queen. The villain paused not to commit a fratricide which placed him on the throne, and facilitated his union with the object of his guilty passion.

Hamlet, the son of Horvendille and Geruth, was quick in his perception of the danger to be apprehended from the murderer of his father, and sought safety in assuming the appearance of mental imbecility. The execution, however, of his project was imperfect : suspicion was excited ; and “they counselled to try and know, if possible, how to discover the intent and meaning of the young prince ; and they could find no better nor more fit invention to entrap him, than to set some fair and beautiful woman in a secret place, that with flattering speeches, and all the craftiest means she could, should purposely seek to allure his mind. To this end certain courtiers were appointed to lead Hamlet to a solitary place within the woods, where they brought the woman. And surely the poor prince at this assault had been in great danger, if a gentleman that in Horvendille’s time had been nourished with him, had not shown himself more affectioned to the bringing up he had received with Hamlet, than desirous to please the tyrant. This gentleman bore the courtiers company, making full ac-

count that the least show of perfect sense and wisdom that Hamlet should make, would be sufficient to cause him to lose his life; and therefore by certain signs he gave Hamlet intelligence into what danger he was likely to fall, if by any means he seemed to obey, or once like the wanton toys and vicious provocations of the gentlewoman sent thither by his uncle; which much abashed the prince, as then wholly being in affection to the lady." The result was that the prince deceived the courtiers, who "assured themselves that without doubt he was distraught of his senses."

The failure of this plot was succeeded by a new experiment. It was thought that an unrestrained expression of his natural feelings might be anticipated from Hamlet in an interview with his mother, and a proper knowledge of his real character and views could be obtained by one concealed under the arras for the purpose of overhearing the conversation. But the wariness of Hamlet was not inferior to the craft of his enemies. Entering the chamber with his customary air of folly, he began to crow like a cock, beating his arms against the hangings in imitation of that bird's action with his wings. Feeling something stir behind the arras, he cried "A rat! a rat!" and drawing his sword thrust it through

the concealed spy, whose body he cut in pieces and cast into a vault. Returning to the chamber, Hamlet replied, in an authoritative tone, to the lamentations of the queen who bewailed her son's unhappy loss of intellect, justly upbraiding her shameless licentiousness, and characterising in the worst of colours a woman who could wantonly embrace the brother and murderer of her husband.

Fengon now lived in daily apprehension of meeting the same fate that had overtaken the courtier spy; and resolving to get rid of Hamlet at once, despatched him with letters to the king of England containing secret solicitations to put the prince immediately to death. "But the subtle Danish prince (being at sea), whilst his companions slept, having read the letters, and knowing his uncle's great treason, with the wicked and villainous minds of the two courtiers that led him to the slaughter, razed out the letters that concerned his death, and instead thereof graved others, with commission to the king of England to hang his two companions; and not content to turn the death they had devised against him upon their own necks, wrote further, that king Fengon willed him to give his daughter to Hamlet in marriage." Every thing fell out as Hamlet desired; his attendants were

executed, and himself was betrothed to the English princess. After a twelvemonths' residence in the British court, he returned to Denmark, and revenged himself on his enemies; first intoxicating his uncle's courtiers, and then setting fire to the banquet-hall where their senses were absorbed in drunken sleep. He next rushed into the apartment of Fengon, and gave "him such a violent blowe upon the chine of his neck, that he cut his head clean from the shoulders." Hamlet now discarded the cloak of folly in which he had hitherto disguised his intellect, and, convening an assembly of the nobility, explained and justified his conduct. Pity for his misfortunes, and indignation at the cruelty of his oppressor, were the sentiments of every bosom; and the title and dignity of king were conferred on Hamlet by the unanimous voice of the assembly.

Devoid of interest itself, and entirely unconnected with the drama, the remainder of the Danish prince's history may well be spared; while an attempt is made to extract from more promising passages a clue to the interpretation of one of the most debated, and perhaps, after all, least understood, of Shakspeare's dramatic portraits.

The character of Hamlet, complicated, and apparently contradictory, will be divested of