

HOW HE PORTRAYED THE FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY

In "Coriolanus" Are All the Arguments for and Against It, Especially Against

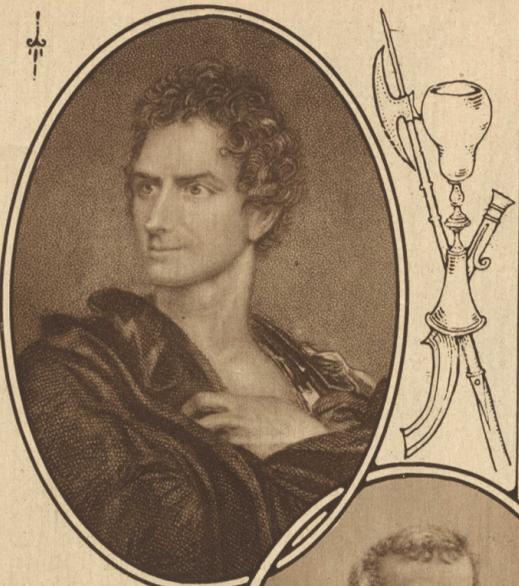
From William Hazlitt's "Characters of Shakespeare's Plays."

SHAKESPEARE has in this play shown himself well versed in history and state affairs. "Coriolanus" is a storehouse of political commonplaces. Any one who studies it may save himself the trouble of reading Burke's "Reflections," or Paine's "Rights of Man," or the Debates in Both Houses of Parliament since the French Revolution, or our own. The arguments for and against aristocracy or democracy, on the privileges of the few and the claims of the many, on liberty and slavery, power and the abuse of it, peace and war, are here very ably handled, with the spirit of a poet and the acuteness of a philosopher. Shakespeare himself seems to have had a leaning to the arbitrary side of the question, perhaps from some feeling of contempt for his own origin, and to have spared no occasion of baiting the rabble. What he says of them is very true; what he says of their betters is also very true, though he dwells less upon it. The cause of the people is indeed but ill-calculated as a subject for poetry; it admits of rhetoric, which goes into argument and explanation, but it presents no immediate or distinct images to the mind, "no jutting, frieze, buttress, or coign of vantage" for poetry "to make its pendent and pre-ordained cradle in." The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power. The imagination is an exaggerating and exclusive faculty; it takes from one thing to add to another; it accumulates circumstances together to give the greatest possible effect to a favorite object. The understanding is a dividing and measuring faculty; it judges of things, not according to their immediate impression on the mind, but according to their relations to one another.

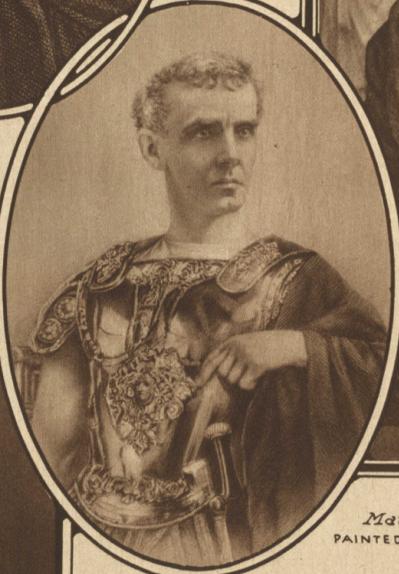
The one is a monopolizing faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of present excitement by inequality and disproportion; the other is a distributive faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of ultimate good by justice and proportion. The one is an aristocratical, the other a republican faculty. The principle of poetry is a very anti-leveling principle. It aims at effect, it exists by contrast. It admits of no medium. It is everything by excess. It rises above the ordinary standard of sufferings and crimes. It presents an imposing appearance. It shows its head turreted, crowned, and crested. It carries noise, and behind it, it leaves tears. It has its altars and its victims, sacrifices, human sacrifices. Kings, priests, nobles are its train-bearers; tyrants and slaves its executioners. "Carnage is its daughter." Poetry is right-royal. It puts the individual before the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right. A lion hunting a flock of sheep or herd of wild asses is a more poetical object than his prey; and we even take part with the lordly beasts, because our vanity or some other feeling makes us disposed to place ourselves in the situation of the strongest party. So we feel some concern for the poor citizens of Rome when they meet together to compare their wants and grievances, till Coriolanus comes in, and with blows and big words drives this set of "poor rats" this rascal scum, to their homes and beggary before him. There is nothing heroic in a multitude of miserable rascals wishing not to be starved, or complaining that they are like to be so; but when a single man comes forward to brave their cries, and to make them submit to the last indignities, from mere pride and self-will, or admiration of his prowess, is immediately coupled with contempt for their pusillanimity. The influence of power is stronger than the plea of necessity. The tame submission to usurped authority, or even the natural resistance to it, has nothing to excite or flatter the imagination; it is the assumption of a right to insult or oppress others, that carries an imposing air of superiority with it. We had rather be the oppressor than the oppressed.

The love of power in ourselves and admiration of it in others are both natural to man; the one makes him a tyrant, the

other a slave. Wrong dressed out in pride, pomp, and circumstance has more attraction than abstract right. Coriolanus complains of the fickleness of the people; yet the instant he cannot gratify his pride and obstinacy at their expense he turns his arms against his country. If his country was not worth defending, why did he build his pride on its defense? He is a conqueror and a hero; he conquers other countries, and makes this a plea for enslaving his own; and when he is prevented from doing so he leagues with the enemies to destroy his country. He rates the people "as if he were a god to punish, and not a man of their infirmity." He scoffs at one of their tribunes for maintaining their rights and franchises. "Mark you his absolute shall?" not marking his own absolute will to take everything from them; his impatience of the slightest opposition to his own pretensions being in proportion to their arrogance and absurdity. If the great and powerful had the beneficence and wisdom of gods, then all this would have been well; if with greater knowledge and care for their interest as they have for their own, if they were seated above the world, sympathizing with the welfare but not feeling the passions of men, receiving neither good nor hurt from them, but bestowing their benefits as free gifts on them, they might then rule over them like another Providence. But this is not the case. Coriolanus is unwilling that the Senate should show their "cares" for



Edmund Kean as Coriolanus (1820)

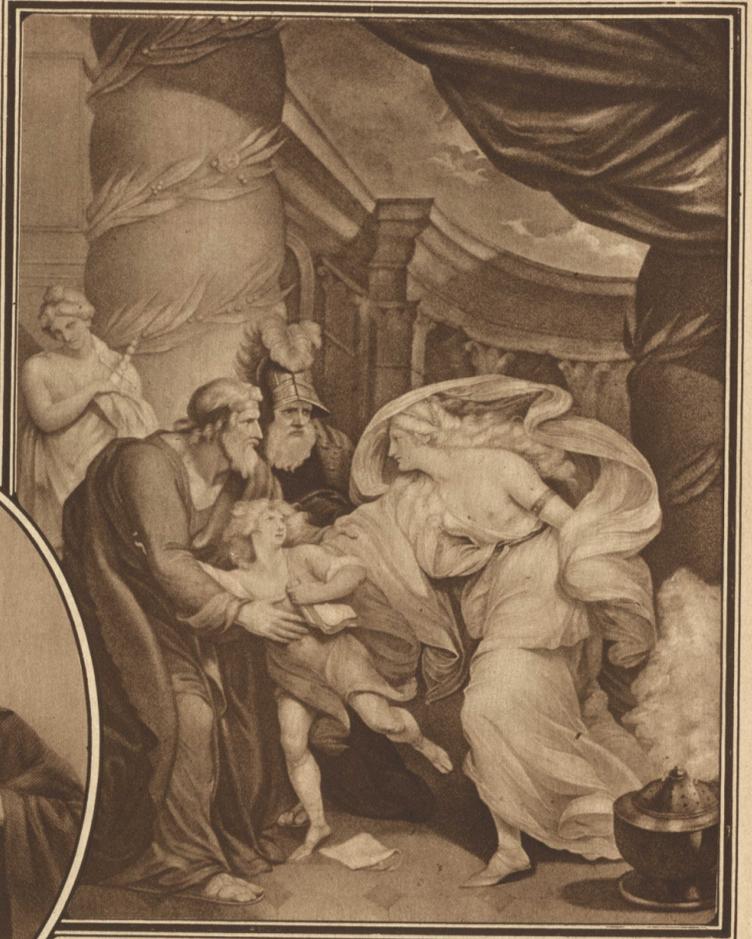


Lawrence Barrett as Cassius in Julius Caesar FROM THE COLLECTION OF EVERT JANSEN WENDELL

the people, lest their "cares" should be construed into "fears," to the subversion of all due authority; and he is no sooner disappointed in his schemes to deprive the people not only of the cares of the State, but of all power to redress themselves, than Volunna is made madly to exclaim:

Now the red pestilence strike all trades in Rome, And occupations perish.

This is but natural; it is but natural for a mother to have more regard for her son than for a whole city; but then the city should be left to take some care of itself. The care of the State cannot, we here see, be safely intrusted to maternal affection, or to the domestic charities of high life. The great have private feelings of their own, to which the interests of humanity and justice must courtesy. Their interests are so far from being the same as those of the community that they are in direct and necessary opposition to them; their power is at the expense of our weakness; their riches, of our poverty; their pride, of our degradation; their splendor, of our wretchedness; their tyranny, of our servitude. If they had the superior intelligence ascribed to them (which they have not) it would only render them so much more formidable, and from gods would convert them into devils. The whole dramatic moral of Corio-



Titus Andronicus, Act IV, Scene I. Marcus. Stand by me, Lucius; do not fear thine aunt PAINTED BY THOMAS KIRK FROM THE COLLECTION OF EMIL F. BIEBIGING

lanus is that those who have little shall have less, and that those who have much shall take all that others have left. The people are poor, therefore they ought to be starved. They are slaves, therefore they ought to be beaten. They are ignorant, therefore they ought not to be allowed to feel that they want food, or clothing, or rest; that they are enslaved, oppressed, and miserable. This is the logic of the imagination and the passions, which seek to aggrandize what excites admiration, and to heap contempt on misery; to raise power into tyranny, and to make tyranny absolute; to thrust down that which is low still lower, and to make wretches desperate; to exalt Magistrates into Kings, Kings into gods; to degrade subjects to the rank of slaves, and slaves to the condition of brutes. The history of mankind is a romance, a mask, a tragedy constructed upon the principles of poetical justice; it is a noble or royal hunt, in which what is sport to the few is death to the many, and in which the spectators halloo and encourage the strong to set upon the weak, and cry havoc in the chase, which they do not share in the spoil. We may depend upon it that what men delight to read in books they will put in practice in reality.

One of the most natural traits in this play is the difference of the interest taken in the success of Coriolanus by his wife and mother. The one is only anxious for his honor; the other is fearful for his life. Volunna—Methinks I hear hither your husband's name; Methinks I see him pluck Aufidius down by th' hair; Methinks I see him stamp thus—and call thus: Come on, ye cowards; ye were got in fear

Though you were born in Rome; his bloody brow With his mail'd hand then wiping, forth he goes Like to a harvest man, that's task'd to mow Or all, or lose his hire. Virgilia—His bloody brow! Oh, Jupiter, no blood. Volunna—Away, you fool; it more becomes a maid Than gilt his trophy. The breast of Hecuba When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier Than Hector's forehead, when it spit forth blood, At Grecian swords contending.

When she hears the trumpets that proclaim her son's return she says in the true spirit of a Roman matron: These are the ushers of Martius; before him He carries noise, and behind him he leaves tears. Death! that dark spirit, in's nery arm doth lie, Which being advanc'd, declines, and then men die.

Coriolanus himself is a complete character; his love of reputation, his contempt of popular opinion, his pride and modesty are consequences of each other. His pride consists in the inflexible sternness of his will; his love of glory in a determined desire to bear down all opposition and to exert the admiration both of friends and foes. His contempt for popular favor, his unwillingness to hear his own praises, spring from the same source. He cannot contradict the praises that are bestowed upon him; therefore he is impatient at hearing them. He would enforce the good opinion of others by his actions, but does not want their acknowledgments in words.

Pray now, no more; my mother, Who has a charter to extol her blood, When she does praise me, grieves me.



Troilus and Cressida, Act II, Scene II. Cassandra. Cry, Trojans, cry! practice your eyes with tears! PAINTED BY GEORGE ROMNEY

MALVOLIO AS CHARLES LAMB SAW THE PART PLAYED

"A Sort of Greatness" in Him, and a "Kind of Tragic Interest" in His Fall

From Charles Lamb's Essay "On Some of the Old Actors."

THE part of Malvolio has in my judgment been so often misunderstood, and the general merits of the actor who then played it so unduly appreciated, that I shall hope for pardon if I am a little prolix upon these points.

Of all the actors who flourished in my time—a melancholy phrase if taken aright, reader—Bensley had the most swell of soul, was greatest in the delivery of heroic conceptions, the emotions consequent upon the presentment of a great idea to the fancy.

The part of Malvolio in the "Twelfth Night" was performed by Bensley with a richness and a dignity which (to judge from some recent castings of that character) the very traditions must be worn out from the stage. No manager in those days would have dreamed of giving it to Mr. Haddley or Mr. Parsons; when Bensley was occasionally absent from the theatre John Kemble thought it no derogation to succeed to the part.

Malvolio is not essentially ludicrous. He becomes comic by accident. He is cold, austere, repelling; but dignified, consistent, and, for what appears, rather of an over-stretched morality. Maria describes him as a sort of Puritan; and he might have worn his gold chain with honor in one of our old Roundhead families, in the service of a Lambert or a Lady Fairfax.

speaks a generosity of birth and feeling. His dialect on all occasions is that of a gentleman and a man of education.

We must not confound him with the eternal old, low steward of comedy. He is master of the household to a great Princess; a dignity probably conferred upon him for other respects than age or length of service. Olivia, at the first indication of his supposed madness, declares that she "would not have him miscarry for half of her dowry." Does this look as if the character was meant to appear little or insignificant? Once, indeed, she accuses him to his face—of what?—of being "sick of self-love," but with a gentleness and consideration which could not have been, if she had not thought that this particular infirmity shaded some virtues.

His rebuke to the knight, and his sottish revelers, is sensible and spirited; and when we take into consideration the unprotected condition of his mistress, and the strict regard with which her state of real or dissembled mourning would draw the eyes of the world upon her house affairs, Malvolio might feel the honor of the family in some sort in his keeping, as it appears not that Olivia had any more brothers, or kinsmen, to look to it—for Sir Toby had dropped all such nice respects at the buttery hatch. That Malvolio was meant to be represented as possessing estimable qualities, the expression of the Duke in his anxiety to have him reconciled almost infers, "Pursue him, and entreat him to a peace."

Even in his abused state of chains and darkness, a sort of greatness seems never to desert him. He argues highly and well with the supposed Sir Topas, and philosophizes gallantly upon his straw. There must have been some shadow of worth about the man; he must have been something more than a mere vapor—a thing of straw, or Jack in office—before Fabian and Maria could have ventured sending him upon a courting errand to Olivia. There was some consonancy (as he would say) in the undertaking, or the jest would have been too bold even for that house of misrule.

Act IV. TIMON OF ATHENS. Scene III.



M. KEMBLE in TIMON. London Printed for J. Bell British Library Strand Sept: 21: 1785.

Bensley, accordingly, threw over the part an air of Spanish loftiness. He looked, spoke, and moved like an old Castilian. He was starch, spruce, opinionated, but his superstructure of pride seemed bottomed upon a sense of worth. There was something in it beyond the coxcomb. It was big and swelling, but you could not be sure that it was hollow. You might wish to see it taken down, but you felt that it was upon an elevation.

He was magnificent from the outset; but when the decent sobrieties of the character began to give way and the poison of self-love, in his conceit of the Countess's affection, gradually began to work, you would have thought that the hero of La Mancha in person stood before you. How he went smiling to himself! with what ineffable carelessness would he twirl his gold chain! what a dream it was! you were infected with the illusion, and did not wish that it should be removed; you had no room for laughter! if an unseasonable reflection of morality intruded itself, it was a deep sense of the pitiable infirmity of man's nature that can lay him open to

such frenzies—but in truth you rather admired than pitied the lunacy while it lasted—you felt that an hour of such mistake was worth an age with the eyes open. Who would not wish to live but for a day in the conceit of such a lady's love as Olivia? Why, the Duke would have given his principality but for a quarter of a minute, sleeping or waking, to have been so deluded. The man seemed to tread upon air, to taste manna, to walk with his head in the clouds, to mate Hyperion.

Oh! shake not the castles of his pride—endure yet for a season bright moments of confidence—stand still ye watches of the element! that Malvolio may be still in fancy fair Olivia's lord—but fate and retribution say no—I hear the mischievous titter of Maria—the witty taunts of Sir Toby—the still more insupportable triumph of the foolish knight—the counterfeit Sir Topas is unmasked—and "thus the whirligig of time," as the true clown hath it, "brings in his revenges." I confess that I never saw the catastrophe of this character, while Bensley played it, without a kind of tragic interest.

A Polish View of Hamlet

Translated for The New York Times from "Hamlet," by Stanislaw Wisniewski

THE reason for the poor playing of Hamlet rests in the impossibility of interpreting this character. Is it possible to play the true Hamlet at all?

And what is this true Hamlet? Must he be a university student or a Prince seeking the crown?

Is Hamlet a philosopher who cares not for the crown and would not know how to make use of it in case it fell into his hands?

Or is he an artist, a thinker, an analyzer of human nature, a judge of human falsehood?

Was Hamlet destined to reform the world? Is he the only one worthy of taking over the reins of government held by unworthy persons?

Who is Hamlet? Is he a youngster, crushed in his bud by the death of his father and thrown in the midst of ill-wishers? Is he a youth, who understands

and feels the outrage perpetrated upon him and cannot demand his rights?

Or is he a man of action, who meets incumbrances and prevails over them, till he is exhausted before their ever-rising tide?

Is Hamlet a quick-tempered man, acting spasmodically, making endless mistakes, ever losing his path and direction?

Or is he void of the power of will, and this be his secret?

What is Hamlet? Is his function but to "Hamletize," philosophize, bombard with words, words, words, true, beautiful, and intelligent words?

Whoever played Hamlet interpreted him in his own way, whoever could not interpret him—failed.

Why? Because not one of these Hamlets represents and could be recognized in the complete, colossal Hamlet that has since the days of Shakespeare grown gigantic in the traditions of humanity.