

NEW ILLUSTRATIONS
OF THE
LIFE, STUDIES, AND WRITINGS
OF
SHAKESPEARE.

SUPPLEMENTARY TO ALL THE EDITIONS.

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OF THE PUBLIC RECORDS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

The West yet glimmers with some streaks of day.—MACBETH, Act III. Sc. 3.

VOLUME THE SECOND.



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III.

THE ENGLISH HISTORIES.

THE ENGLISH HISTORIES.

IN the original arrangement of the Dramatic Writings of Shakespeare there are ten Plays, which are designated neither Comedies nor Tragedies, but Histories; a species of dramatic composition which few poets have attempted, and in which very few except Shakespeare can be said to have had much success. It seems as if in the Elizabethan age there was a complete series of English Histories, beginning with the Conquest and continued to the very reign in which they were acted; by means of which there was what may be called popular instruction in English History given to the multitude in a manner the most attractive, while, at least when in the hands of Shakespeare, there was a grace and spirit given to veritable characters and events, and in the main no shocking departures from the actual truth of history, which made them an acceptable offering to the more cultivated and better informed parts of the community.

The play of *King Henry the Eighth* is hardly to be accounted part of the series. It was produced, as I mean to shew, on a special occasion and for a special purpose. *King John* also seems of a somewhat different cast from those which are obviously in series and, with hardly any break, consecutive. Without going into the question of the share which other poets of the time had in all or any of the historical plays classed as Shakespeare's, we have the history of nearly a century in these plays, commencing with the reign of King

Richard the Second and ending with the Battle of Bosworth, the conclusion of what in the Poet's age would be accounted the heroic period of English history.

It need not be observed how many are the bold spirits of those troubled times to whom the Poet's pen has given a deathless life : how the Cliffords, the Talbots, and the Nevilles, value their nobility and splendid descent the more, because the names and deeds of their ancestors are here married to immortal verse. A line from Shakespeare in which an historical name is found is a perfect treasure to those who descend from him, and is eagerly seized upon by the patient investigator of genealogical sequences to give life and animation to his story. It is like the Garter : those who have it stand prominently forth before the already illustrious class to which they belong.

Shakespeare is in the main an historian who takes a just view of the characters of whom he has to speak. Perhaps it might be said that no writer of history has presented more faithful delineations of historical personages. After all the labour which has been bestowed upon the question, the Prince of Wales remains the same unbridled youth who kept company with Falstaff and Poins. After all the attempts to give a different colouring to the character of Gloucester, he still remains the same ambitious, murderous, and unnatural person which Shakespeare has presented to us. The same may be said of characters less prominent or less fully delineated. Shakespeare is usually borne out in his delineations by what can be collected concerning them from the pages of the chroniclers, or from those of men who have written on English history in a more philosophic spirit. No doubt there has been more of generalization applied to the struggles of the fifteenth century, and by the philosopher may have been discerned the influence of the jealousy of the legitimate and