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COMMENTARIES
ON THE
HISTORICAL PLAYS
OF
SHAKSPEARE.

BY THE RIGHT HON.
THOMAS PEREGRINE COURTENAY.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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P R E F A C E.

THE greater part of the following Commentaries was published in the popular Miscellany* edited by Theodore Hook, whose approbation, as a man equally acute and amiable, is very gratifying to me: this preface contains the substance of the observations with which I introduced my papers to the public.

It was not without real diffidence that I attempted further comments upon Shakspeare. I do not affect to have discovered new beauties in that writer, nor can I boast of the power to place in a more striking light, those which have now for some ages delighted the readers of the English language. But it appeared

* New Monthly Magazine, June 1838 to March 1839; under the title of 'Shakspeare's Historical Plays considered historically.'

to me, that (after all the volumes which have been written) there are points of view in which a large portion of the works of Shakspeare are still to be considered.

The reader has, doubtless, heard it observed, that the youth of England take their religion from Milton, and their history from Shakspeare. Coleridge tells us, that the great Duke of Marlborough acknowledged that his principal acquaintance with English history was derived from the historical plays.* Lord Chatham is said to have made a similar avowal: and Southey has recently told us that his boyish knowledge of history came from the same source.† Coleridge quotes from Bishop Corbet, who wrote in the time of James the First, the proof, that, in his time, the middling classes were familiarly acquainted with these plays, and referred to them for English history.

I presume that Coleridge's allusion is to the *Iter Boreale*, a poetical description of the writer's tour through some of the northern and midland counties. Speaking of an innkeeper at Bosworth, he says:—

* Coleridge's Literary Remains, ii. 166.

† Works, i. viii.

“ Mine host was full of ale and history,
 And in the morn when he brought us nigh
 Where the two Roses join'd, you would suppose
 Chaucer ne'er made the romaunt of the Rose.
 Hear him. See you yon wood? There Richard lay
 With his whole army. Look the other way,
 And, lo! while Richmond in a bed of gorse
 Encamp'd himself all night, and all his force:
 Upon this hill they met. Why, he could tell
 The inch where Richmond stood, where Richard fell.
 Besides what of his knowledge he could say,
He had authentic notice from the play;
Which I might guess by marking up the ghosts
And policies not incident to hosts;
But chiefly by that one perspicuous thing,
Where he mistook a player for a king.
For when he would have said, King Richard died,
And call'd, a horse! a horse! he, Burbage cried.”†*

It is well known that Shakspeare is much read and highly estimated in Germany. I have, indeed, heard it affirmed by Germans, that they now set a higher value upon him than even we his country-

* A well-known actor. It has been conjectured from Corbet's lines that Shakspeare's plays were at this early period performed *in the country*; but it would appear, from the mention of Burbage, that mine host had seen 'Richard the Third' acted in London.

† Bishop Corbet's Poems by Gilcrist, p. 193.