

... We will say no more. Kean! Kean! have a carefulness of thy health, an innursed respect for thy own genius, a pity for us in these cold and enfeebling times! Cheer us a little in the failure of our days! For romance lives but in books. The goblin is driven from the heath, and the rainbow is robbed of its mystery!⁶

FRANÇOIS GUIZOT

From 'On the Life and Works of Shakspeare' (1821)⁷
 Voltaire was the first person in France who spoke of Shakspeare's genius; and although he spoke of him merely as a barbarian genius, the French public were of opinion that Voltaire had said too much in his favour. Indeed, they thought it nothing less than profanation to apply the words genius and glory to dramas which they considered as crude as they were coarse.

At the present day, all controversy regarding Shakspeare's genius and glory has come to an end. No one ventures any longer to dispute them; but a greater question has arisen, namely, whether Shakspeare's dramatic system is not far superior to that of Voltaire.

This question I do not presume to decide. I merely say that it is now open for discussion. We have been led to it by the onward progress of ideas. I shall endeavour to point out the causes which have brought it about; but at present I insist merely upon the fact itself, and deduce from it one simple consequence, that literary criticism has changed its ground, and can no longer remain restricted to the limits within which it was formerly confined.

Literature does not escape from the revolutions of the human mind; it is compelled to follow it in its course - to transport itself beneath the horizon under which it is conveyed; to gain elevation and extension with the ideas which occupy its notice, and to consider the questions which it discusses under the new aspects and novel circumstances in which they are placed by the new state of thought and of society.

My readers will not, therefore, be surprised that, in order properly to appreciate Shakspeare, I find it necessary to make some preliminary researches into the nature of dramatic poetry