bulk of his plays collectively, the editions were *not few :* compared with any known case, the copies sold of Shak­speare were quite as many as could be expected under the circumstances. Ten or fifteen times as much considera­tion went to the purchase of one great folio like Shakspeare, as would attend the purchase of a little volume like Waller or Donne. Without reviews, or newspapers, or advertise­ments to diffuse the knowledge of books, the progress of literature was necessarily slow, and its expansion narrow. But this is a topic which has always been treated unfairly, not with regard to Shakspeare only, but to Milton, as well as many others. The truth is, we have not facts enough to guide us ; for the number of editions often tells nothing accurately as to the number of copies. With respect to Shakspeare it is certain, that, had his masterpieces been gathered into small volumes, Shakspeare would have had a most extensive sale. As it was, there can be no doubt, that from his own generation, throughout the seventeenth century, and until the eighteenth began to accommodate, not any greater popularity in *him,* but a greater taste for reading in the public, his fame never ceased to be viewed as a national trophy of honour ; and the most illustrious men of the seventeenth century were no whit less fervent in their admiration than those of the eighteenth and the nineteenth, either as respected its strength and sincerity, or as respected its open profession.@@1

lt is therefore a false notion, that the general sympathy with the merits of Shakspeare ever beat with a languid or intermitting pulse. Undoubtedly, in times when the func­tions of critical journals and of newspapers were not at hand to diffuse or to strengthen the impressions which emanated from the capital, all opinions must have travelled slowly into the provinces. But even then, whilst the perfect or­gans of communication were wanting, indirect substitutes were supplied by the necessities of the times, or by the in­stincts of political zeal. Two channels especially lay open

between the great central organ of the national mind, and the remotest provinces. Parliaments were occasionally summoned (for the judges’ circuits were too brief to pro­duce much effect) ; and during their longest suspensions, the nobility, with large retinues, continually resorted to the court. But an intercourse more constant and more com­prehensive was maintained through the agency of the two universities. Already, in the time of James I., the growing importance of the gentry, and the consequent birth of a new interest in political questions, had begun to express it­self at Oxford, and still more so at Cambridge. Academic persons stationed themselves as sentinels at London, for the purpose of watching the court and the course of public af­fairs. These persons wrote letters, like those of the cele­brated Joseph Mede, which we find in Ellis’s Historical Collections, reporting to their fellow-collegians all the no­velties of public life as they arose, or personally carried down such reports, and thus conducted the general feelings at the centre into lesser centres, from which again they were diffused into the ten thousand parishes of England ; for (with a very few exceptions in favour of poor benefices, Welch or Cumbrian), every parish priest must unavoidably have spent his three years at one or other of the English universities. And by this mode of diffusion it is that we can explain the strength with which Shakspeare’s thoughts and diction impressed themselves from a very early period upon the national literature, and even more generally upon the national thinking and conversation.@@2

The question therefore revolves upon us in threefold dif­ficulty, How, having stepped thus prematurely into this in­heritance of fame, leaping, as it were, thus abruptly into the favour alike of princes and the enemies of princes, had it become possible that in his native place (honoured still more in the final testimonies of his preference when found­ing a family mansion), such a man’s history, and the per­sonal recollections which cling so affectionately to the great

@@@, The necessity of compression obliges us to omit many arguments and references by which we could demonstrate the fact, that Shakspeare’s reputation was always in a progressive state ; allowing only for the interruption of about seventeen years, which this poet, in common with all others, sustained, not so much from the state of war (which did not fully occupy four of those years), as from the triumph of a gloomy fanaticism. Deduct the twenty-three years of the seventeenth century which had elapsed before the first folio appeared, to this space add seventeen years of fanatical madness, during fourteen of which *all* dramatic entertainments were suppressed, the remainder is sixty years. And surely the sale of four editions of a vast folio in that space of time was an expres­sion of an abiding interest. *No other poet, except Spenser, continual to sell throughout the century.* Besides, in arguing the case of a *dramatic* poet, we must bear in mind, that although readers of learned books might be diffused over the face of the land, the readers of poetry would be chiefly concentred in the metropolis ; and such persons would have no need to buy what they heard at the theatres. But then comes the question, whether Shakspeare kept possession of the theatres. And we are really humiliated by the gross want of sense which has been shown, by Malone chiefly, but also by many others, in discussing this question. From the Re­storation to 1682, says Malone, no more than four plays of Shakspeare’s were performed by a principal company in London- “ Such was the lamentable taste of those times, that the plays of Fletcher, Jonson, and Shlrley, were much oftener exhibited than those of our author." What cant is this ! If that taste were “ lamentable," what are we to think of our own times, when plays a thousand times below those of Fletcher, or even of Shirley, continually displace Shakspeare ? Shakspeare would himself have exulted in find­ing that he gave way only to dramatists so excellent. And, as we have before observed, both then and now, it is the very familiarity with Shakspeare which often banishes him from audiences honestly in quest of relaxation and amusement. Novelty is the very soul of such relaxation ; but in our closets, when we are *not* unbending, when our minds are in a state of tension from intellectual cravings, then it is that we resort to Shakspeare ; and oftentimes those who honour him most, like ourselves, are the most impatient of seeing his divine scenes disfigured by unequal representation (good, perhaps, in a single personation, bad in all the rest) ; or to hear his divine thoughts mangled in the recitation ; or (which is worst of all) to hear them dishonoured and defeated by imperfect apprehen­sion in the audience, or by defective sympathy. Meantime, if one theatre played only four of Shakspeare’s dramas, another played at least seven. But the grossest folly of Malone is, in fancying the numerous alterations so many insults to Shakspeare, whereas they expressed as much homage to his memory as if the unaltered dramas had been retained. The substance *was* retained. The changes were merely concessions to the changing views of scenical propriety ; sometimes, no doubt, made with a simple view to the revolution effected by Davenant at the restoration, in bringing *scene,* (in the painter’s sense) upon the stage ; sometimes also with a view to the altered fashions of the audience during the suspensions of the action, or perhaps to the introduction of *after·pieces,* by which, of course, the time was abridged for the main performance. A volume might be written upon this subject. Meantime let us never be told, that a poet was losing, or bad lost his ground, who found in his lowest depression, amongst his almost idola­trous supporters, a great king distracted by civil wars, a mighty republican poet distracted by puritanical fanaticism, the greatest successor by far of that great poet, a papist and a bigoted royalist, and finally, the leading actor of the century, who gave and reflected the ruling impulses of his age.

@@, One of the profoundest tests by which we can measure the congeniality of an author with the national genius and temper, is the degree in which his thoughts or his phrases interweave themselves with our daily conversation, and pass into the currency of the language. *Few* *French author., if any, have imparted one phrase to the colloquial idiom ;* with respect to Shakspeare, a large dictionary might be made of such phrases as “ win golden opinions,” “ in my mind’s eye,” “ patience on a monument,” “ o’erstep the modesty of nature,’\* “ more honour'd in the breach than in the observance,” “ palmy state,” “ my poverty and not my will consents,’ and so forth, without end. This reinforcement of the general language, by aids from the mintage of Shakspeare, had already commenced in the seventeenth century.