



The Question of
HAMLET

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THE QUESTION OF *HAMLET*

PREFACE

THE core of this little book consists, with slight modifications and amplifications, of the Alexander Lectures as presented at the University of Toronto on March 18, 19, and 20, 1958. To the authorities of University College and especially to the head of the English Department, Professor A. S. P. Woodhouse, I feel profoundly indebted for the gracious hospitality with which these ideas and their proponent were entertained. Because the three successive lectures—now chapters—were directed toward a close re-reading of the play as a whole, relating its style and structure to other aspects more frequently discussed by scholars and critics, I have ventured to indicate some of the general points from which this interpretation takes its departure in my opening statement of presuppositions. By way of supplementation, I have appended three briefer and more specialized studies in *Hamlet*-problems, dealing with some particularities of theatrical convention, ethical argument, and *explication de texte*. They are reprinted, substantially as first published: the article on 'the antic disposition' from the *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, xciv (1958), the review of *Hamlet: Father and Son* from the *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vii, 1 (Winter, 1956), and the explication of the Player's speech from *The Kenyon Review*, xii, 2 (Spring, 1950). To the editors of those publications, I would express my thanks.

Though I have tried to make specific acknowledgements wherever they may be due, no one who is incautious enough to write anything about *Hamlet* can honestly say just how much he owes—or what, if anything, he does not owe—to the many previous writers on the subject. I can only say that I have taken advantage of the cumulative discussion, of which the outlines are traced by the Furness Variorum Edition, the *Hamlet Bibliography* of A. A. Raven (Chicago, 1936), the ninth volume of the *Shakespeare Survey*, and therein notably ‘Studies in *Hamlet*, 1901–1955’ by Clifford Leech. Nor should I fail to acknowledge how often the spoken word—from the lips of actors, teachers, colleagues, or students—tends to affect one’s own impressions of a work so endlessly debatable. The text from which I quote, and to which I would constantly refer the reader, is the annotated edition of George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, 1939). However, I have parted from my revered teacher, and followed a prevailing trend among later editors and commentators, in one particular reading: ‘sullied’ for ‘solid’ in the first line of Hamlet’s First Soliloquy. Because the soliloquies are most conveniently designated by their numerical sequence, and because certain episodes are conventionally referred to by certain names, it may facilitate cross-reference to have at hand the following tabulations:

First Soliloquy: I. ii. 129–59

Second Soliloquy: I. v. 92–112

Third Soliloquy: II. ii. 575–673

Fourth Soliloquy: III. i. 56–88

Fifth Soliloquy: III. ii. 406–17

Sixth Soliloquy: III. iii. 73–96

Seventh Soliloquy: IV. iv. 37–66

Council Scene: I. ii.	1-128
Fishmonger Scene: II. ii.	171-224
Schoolfellow Scene: II. ii.	225-385
Nunnery Scene: III. i.	88-169
Play Scene: III. ii.	95-281
Prayer Scene: III. iii.	36-98
Closet Scene: III. iv.	1-52
Portrait Scene: III. iv.	53-217
Graveyard Scene: V. i.	1-245

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THE QUESTION OF HAMLET

PRESUPPOSITIONS

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WHEN Hamlet points out a cloud to Polonius, he points the way that criticism has taken. Polonius, with his hyphenated categories, his readiness to crack the wind of a poor phrase, his objection to certain adjectives and his fondness for others, is a typical critic. His response to what might be called Hamlet's ink-blot test—his agreement that the cloud resembles now a weasel, then a camel, and again a whale—succinctly foreshadows the process of interpreting the play. For there can be no doubt that it has clouded our mental horizons with its peculiar sense of obscurity or of anxiety, and has inspired its interpreters to discern an unending succession of shapes. It is quite probable that no other play has ever been so fully discussed or so frequently acted. And if, as Charles Lamb reminds us, every actor has aspired to the titular part, then perhaps any professor of English literature may be forgiven for presuming to set down a few comments of his own. Obviously, no single commentary could pretend to encompass the subject at this stage, or to decide once for all between alternatives which are conditioned to provoke further debate. *Hamlet*, like the major problems of human experience, has been surrounded with a whole library. Over the sixty-year period following the two-volume Variorum Edition of 1877, and covered by the *Hamlet Bibliography* of A. A. Raven, it is computed that twelve days have not passed without witnessing the publication of some

additional item of Hamletiana. Current listings would seem to show that this rate of incidence has not declined; on the contrary, there seems to be an increase in the number of monographic studies concentrating on *Hamlet*, such as the present undertaking.

One is released, by these very circumstances, from the obligation to be definitive or, on the other hand, from the endeavor to be wholly original. One is also obliged by them to acknowledge a comprehensive, though not always conscious, debt to innumerable predecessors, to all of those who have engaged in the argument up to the point at which we enter it. So much has already been said, so many extremes have been reached, that we cannot do much further harm. Can we add anything helpful to the discussion? 'Who is as the wise man?' asked Hamlet's skeptical predecessor, the preacher of Ecclesiastes, 'and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing?' A question not to be answered with undue facility. We shall be dealing, as we had better recognize, with the most problematic of problem plays. It has been described, in varying terms, as a poetic puzzle, as a dramatic sphinx, and as the Mona Lisa of literature. This has led most of its commentators to read it as if it were some sort of riddle—as if, by somehow plucking the heart of Hamlet's mystery, we should come to know what God and man is. Yet Hamlet expressly warns against such an approach, and keeps suggesting that there are reaches of thought which cannot be spanned by naturalistic or academic solutions. Insofar as he is concerned with knowledge, that is rather the object of a continuing quest than the substance of a final revelation. Thus an enigmatic atmosphere is of the essence, and we do more wisely to respect it than to explain it away. The tragedy may well include, among other things, the elements of a murder-mystery; but the suspense, in this case, does not end with the murderer's detection or indeed with the murdered man's revenge.

Philosophy, though it claims Hamlet's abiding concern, does not provide us with any key to his universe. Those who look for keys in a work of art have therefore tended to shift their ground to psychology. They have examined and re-examined the protagonist, diagnosing his melancholia and even treating him as the madman he feigns. With an unconscionable amount of casuistry, they have searched for motives between the lines and behind the scenes, divorcing his character from its context and moralizing over it. Now *Hamlet* without Hamlet would, of course, be altogether unthinkable; but Hamlet without *Hamlet* has been thought about all too much. The Prince of Denmark has been identified with many other personalities, none of them bearing much resemblance to any of the others. Gatherers of topical allusions have framed his portrait as that of James I, or else the Earl of Essex, or possibly Giordano Bruno. Imaginative writers have re-created him in the autobiographical image of a Wilhelm Meister or a Stephen Dedalus. The romantic legend of a weakling, too delicate for this world, culminated in the logical inference that Hamlet was a woman in disguise, which in turn gave critical warrant for Sarah Bernhardt to appear in the role. Freiligrath, the revolutionary poet, saw the fate of Germany symbolized in Hamlet's idealistic waverings. These, to Turgenev, seemed more characteristic of the Slavic temperament. Taine was more historically plausible, when he interpreted the characterization as a self-portrait of Shakespeare. But that would not serve to differentiate Hamlet from the playwright's other *dramatis personae*, all of them phases of himself, in a sense. It simply offered critics the opportunity to enlarge their personal repertoires by playing Shakespeare as well as Hamlet.

Coleridge, whose public pronouncements did more than anything else to crystallize the notion of Shakespeare's hero as an impractical dreamer, goes on to comment revealingly in his

Table-Talk: 'I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so.' This candid aside is typically subjective; few readers would have dared to say as much; but most of them have responded in much the same way; and hence the multiplicity of their responses. The clearer-sighted Hazlitt formulated the principle involved, when he remarked: 'It is *we* who are Hamlet.' His formula is borne out by the fact that others have arrived at it independently, under widely differing circumstances: for example, the Russian critic Belinski or the French poet, Max Jacob. It was given an incisive restatement, several years ago, in the lecture-pamphlet of C. S. Lewis, *Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem*. It offers a simple and cogent explanation for the infinite variety of Hamlets, if we assume they have all been formed in that mirror of introspection which Shakespeare holds up to every individual. Hamlet has a smack of each of us, if we may say so. This is not to deny that he exists as a *persona* in his own right, with a strikingly high degree of individuality, so that we continue to argue and speculate about him as we do about other Shakespearean characters and—for that matter—other human beings. But his existence seems to reach out and touch ours, somewhat more intimately and more intensively than the kind of emotional involvement that the drama usually excites. It is rather more like those feelings of empathy which stimulate us, when we are reading a novel, to share the attitudes and relive the experiences of our favorite character.

Small wonder, then, if we cannot make up our minds about Hamlet's problems, or if we draw back from Horatio's task of reporting them aright. The conflicts of opinion they have aroused may never be reconciled; yet the controversy in itself is a powerful testimonial to the endlessly dynamic quality of the work; and we may, at least, agree that Hamlet means so many things to so many men because he invites them to put themselves in his place. If we begin with this conception of

his character, we can safely proceed through it to the plot. That is the main thing, according to Aristotle, whose term for plot was the basis for our word *myth*. Here the distinctive feature seems to reside in a certain tension between the demands of the situation and the figure on whom they are made. Goethe may have overstressed the reluctant figure ('O cursed spite. . . !') and underemphasized the troublesome situation ('The time is out of joint.') However, he showed his usual sagacity in putting his finger on the line that sums up Hamlet's predicament; for Hamlet is, above all, a man in a plight, a mind resisting its body's destiny, a fighter against cosmic odds. This may be the case with all great tragic heroes, to some extent. If he stands out from the rest, it is partly because our identification with him seems more complete, but also because we are thereby enabled to face more directly the forces aligned against him. His position is a point of vantage from which we may look out with Shakespeare—and with the author whose reflective mood Shakespeare was dramatizing, Montaigne—upon 'this miserable human condition.' Hamlet is both the doubter and the doubt.

The central crux of the play, for some of its students, is not so much a schism in Hamlet's soul as a rift in Shakespeare's medium. T. S. Eliot, in his cavalier days, pronounced *Hamlet* 'most certainly an artistic failure,' on the grounds that it sought to communicate emotions which were in excess of the facts. Yet the facts are grim enough to constitute, for a recent existentialist writer, Jean Paris, 'the darkest story that any dramatist has ever conceived.' Since Mr. Eliot's topic was objectivity, he carefully avoided reading any emotions of his own into the text before him. 'No, I am not Prince Hamlet,' he could have said with J. Alfred Prufrock, 'nor was meant to be.' Abdicating, Mr. Eliot was thrown back upon the question-begging assumption that Shakespeare had some private purpose in view, which the intractable nature of his material kept him from satisfactorily

expressing. Such an argument moves from the subjectivity of the romantics toward a more realistic scholarship, and toward the awareness of sources and conventions that has been accumulating meanwhile. To reconsider the tragedy in their light is to be impressed by its mixture of elements: its harsh outlines and rich surfaces, Gothic clowns and classical allusions, Viking prowess and humanistic learning, medieval superstition and modern skepticism, crude melodrama and subtle meditation. But we push the analysis too far, if it leaves us with nothing more than a tangle of improbabilities, beautifully embellished and imperfectly rationalized. However it may have been elaborated, *Hamlet* comprises for us an esthetic unity. The disparity between its primitive and its civilized components, which is an integral part of its fabric, is equally vital to its significance.

Once we have accepted this premise, our appreciation can only be enhanced by an understanding of the traditions to which Shakespeare's genius has given definitive form. The far-flung myths that converge in the tale of Hamlet have their fragmentary monument in Schick's *Corpus Hamleticum*. Mythographers, notably Gilbert Murray, would trace them to deeper and darker origins among seasonal rites. Freudianism, groping beneath the levels of consciousness, would perceive a similar pattern engraved upon the infant psyche. Such considerations can be relevant, if they help to account for responsive chords which are struck in us beyond the range of more purely critical perceptions. All the information we could muster would hardly suffice to elucidate the reasons why so unique a masterpiece has exerted so universal an appeal. And we are precluded from making any genetic study of *Hamlet* itself through the disappearance of its immediate source, the earlier play deducible from contemporaneous echoes—bywords for madness and revenge—which scholars have labeled with the pedantic but picturesque name of *Ur-Hamlet*. How much Shakespeare borrowed, how