



HAMLET ENTER CRITIC



HAMLET

Enter Critic

Edited by

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and

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APPLETON-CENTURY-CROFTS

NEW YORK

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624-4

Library of Congress Card number:

60-8405

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

E-76898

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

To St. Martin's Press, for permission to reprint A. C. Bradley's Shakespearean Tragedy.

To Browne & Nolan Ltd., for permission to reprint Thomas M. Kettle's "A New Way of Misunderstanding *Hamlet*" in *The Day's Burden*.

Preface

Hamlet: Enter Critic cues the critic onstage. In the theater of his mind, the student is invited to witness and to judge a series of performances by critics who, from the time of Samuel Johnson to the time of Sir Laurence Olivier, interpret the puzzles and pleasures of *Hamlet*.

Hamlet: Enter Critic is designed to serve the student in two ways. As a controlled selection of critical material about *Hamlet*, it presents the beginning student with a small library in which he can conduct research about a perdurable and controversial literary work. It also presents the advanced student of *Hamlet* with supplementary reading material. It allows the instructor to discuss the techniques of documenting and organizing the research paper through material the entire class knows—the basic document remains the same for each student. Consequently, not only is the instructor better able to judge student progress and performance, but the student can learn from his fellow as he cannot when each member of the class concentrates on a different subject.

The critical selections are arranged alphabetically, so that the student must find and order the material pertinent to his own paper. To arrange the selections chronologically, for example, is to impose a prior pattern and so to editorialize for the student. The present arrangement does not give the student direction; it forces him to seek out and evaluate critical information on his own.

Whether one is dismayed or encouraged by the incredibly large corpus of *Hamlet* criticism (nearly 2000 items were published about *Hamlet* between 1877 and 1935 alone), that corpus is one indication of the varied, persistent, and profound response *Hamlet* has excited and continues to excite in us. That is why it is an apt choice for our intention: to provide the student with divergent and even contradictory solutions to a particular problem. Some selections were deliberately chosen because they are far-fetched by responsible critical standards. Such selections, we hope, will provoke the student to a reasoned re-

jection of his own. Out of controversy, out of a multiple focus, critical thinking is more likely to issue.

Therefore, by its subject matter and organization, *Hamlet: Enter Critic* involves the student in material which encourages the use of his critical intelligence. Furthermore, in his concentration upon the seemingly infinite responses to Hamlet, the student may discover or rediscover that literature is alive: it has been, it is, and it will continue to be.

For particular help in the preparation of this volume we should like to thank Mrs. Betty Addington, Mr. Robert T. Willard, Mr. Donald Cam of the New York Public Library, and Professor Warren Susman.

C. S.

E. W.

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Selections

Die Shakespearomanie

By Roderich Benedix

Roderich Benedix, from *Die Shakespearomanie* (Stuttgart, 1873), in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare*, IV. *Hamlet*, vol. II. Appendix. Horace Howard Furness, ed. (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1877).*

ALL THESE ingenious theories of numberless critics for solving the mystery of Hamlet's character are wholly superfluous; the inexplicable mystery is simply due to Shakespeare's having fallen into a couple of gross faults of composition.

These faults of composition furnish us with the key by which we may explain this mysterious unintelligibility of Hamlet. Take out these, and his character is as plain and simple as any other.

These faults are pre-eminently a series of unusual, superfluous episodes, which have not the slightest influence on the action of the tragedy, nay, have scarcely any connection, or none, with it, and which must be pronounced, without qualification, faults.

There is, first, the despatch of an embassy to Norway, and its return. Neither the purpose nor the result of this proceeding has the slightest interest for us. But weeks, perhaps months, pass before the return, which we have to wait for, of this embassy.

The second episode is the journey of Laertes to Paris, with which the third is connected, the sending of Reynaldo after Laertes. All the long-winded instructions given by Polonius to Laertes and Reynaldo are wholly devoid of any dramatic character; they have not the remotest relation to the action of the piece, and accordingly

* Throughout the text, numbers in brackets indicate pagination in original source.

they leave us perfectly indifferent. Until the return of Laertes, months must pass away. And this return we have also to wait for.

The fourth episode is the journey of Fortinbras through Denmark to Poland. As this is not possible without ships, months must go by before he returns. And this return also we have to wait for.

The fifth episode is the embarking of Hamlet for England, which comes in just when the action promises to be lively, and is tending towards a conclusion. This departure of Hamlet is flung, like a drag-chain, right around the action. And we have to wait for Hamlet's return also. We thus see four persons travel away out of the piece, and not till late do they come back again. These journeys are wholly superfluous episodes.

They cause the time of the action to be extended through many months, and to these episodes, and to them alone, is it due that Hamlet's slowness becomes such a mystery. When Hamlet, most urgently summoned as he is to avenge his father's death, wanders about for months without doing anything, it is indeed unintelligible, and, to speak politely, mysterious and profound. But strike out those five episodes, which have not the least connection with the essential action of the piece, and all becomes clear and simple. The action then takes only a few days, and of Hamlet's mysterious irresolution there is no trace. It is true he proceeds only hesitatingly, but for this there are very good reasons. . . . In order to do away with all doubt, Hamlet gets up the play. He obtains certainty, and immediately sets to work, stabbing Polonius, whom he mistakes for the King. Where now is the irresolution? The Ghost appears to him again, and now we look for him to proceed against the King, whereupon the poet shoves in the journey to England, and creates a new delay. The whole fourth act looks like an interpolation, introduced to make out five acts.^[351]

. . . Shakespeare is inconsequent in the delineation of character, and in *Hamlet* more than anywhere else. This inconsequence often appears strange enough, but as people do not venture to pronounce their idol inconsequent, they call his inconsequence, profundity. But let me mention some instances.

There is, in the first place, Hamlet's behavior to Ophelia. He has truly, ardently loved the maiden, but in his feigned madness he treats her shamefully. Here the poet has allowed himself to

make a blunder. In the story from which this drama is fashioned, there is an intriguing lady of the court who endeavors, at the instance of the King, to act the spy upon Hamlet. This person is probably the prototype of Ophelia. The poet has added the incident of Hamlet's being in love with Ophelia, and thus comes the false stroke in the drawing. Hamlet's behavior would have been perfectly justifiable towards the court lady, but it was not justifiable towards Ophelia.

The second false stroke is Hamlet's rage at the way in which the courtiers treat him. The *Shakespearomaniacs* have not failed to find this rage very fine, and to applaud the poet for the surpassing skill with which he has delineated the pitiable behavior of the court people. But how is it? Hamlet represents himself as crazy, and they treat him accordingly. They do not contradict him, they flatter him, give in to his wildest conceits. But does not every sensible person do the same when he has to deal with a madman? Who would excite an insane person, and drive him to acts of violence by contradiction? This groundless rage is most fully spoken out when he has killed Polonius . . . So is it also with Laertes. He first appears before us as a true and noble knight. In his demand of vengeance for his murdered father, he is seen in the finest light. And yet this noble person enters into a plot to allow, in a sham fight, the point of his rapier to be secretly sharpened, and poisons the point. Horrible baseness! Here is the greatest inconsequence in character-drawing that can possibly be. The delineation of character is certainly not the strong side of the piece. There is not a person in it, save Hamlet, who knows how to awaken in us any interest. The King is an unmitigated rascal, and we can find no passion in him that renders his rascality intelligible.

The Queen is one of the—well, least agreeable of women. Polonius, with his pedantic garrulity, is one of the prettiest figures that the poet has drawn. Only his verbosity is somewhat wearisome. Ophelia is a maiden not so very agreeable, but her madness has made the role a favorite one. In representing insanity, an actress can make use of all the tones which she has in her power; she can utter any trifles, and draw upon all the registers. Thus some impression may be made, and it is not particularly difficult. Horatio is a thoroughly agreeable, graceful person, one of the best of Shakespeare's characters. Here we have done. The remaining per-

sons of the piece belong to the supernumeraries, and are mostly very dull roles. In them the actor must be every inch an artist, if he would awaken in us the slightest interest.

. . . I will grant that the death of Polonius serves a dramatic purpose, inasmuch as it is the cause of Ophelia's madness, although it is not a sufficient cause. No girl ever becomes insane because her father dies, least of all Ophelia, whose relation to her father we know was rather formal, lacking all heartiness. Besides, insanity ^[352] is a physical evil. If we are to believe that it is due to psychological causes, they must be very strong and manifest. We can see how Gretchen, in *Faust*, becomes insane upon psychological grounds; but not Ophelia. Yet granting that it is so, why, I ask, does she become crazy and die? She is wholly guiltless. I ask still further, why does Hamlet die? What conceivable guilt has he incurred? The *Shakespearomaniacs* say, indeed, his weakness of will, his irresolution, was his fault, and he atones for it by dying. Without regard to the fact that weakness of will is a quality and no sin, I have shown that this is not in the character of Hamlet. In letting Hamlet perish, Shakespeare departs from the story upon which he constructed his drama. In that story Hamlet is a bold, energetic man, who comes back victorious from England, conquers the king and his party, and gains the throne. It is from this deviation from the original legend that the uncertainty, the inconsequence in Hamlet's character comes. It is one half the good, substantial hero of the old story, and the other half the creation of the poet. Shakespeare was not perfect master of his materials. That he lets Hamlet die without any necessity is simply unintelligible. No, there is not a syllable of poetic justice here. Fortinbras says at the conclusion: "O proud Death! What feast is toward," &c. This is the solution of the riddle. A banquet for death it was, suited to the steeled nerves of a public delighting in blood.

Notwithstanding all I have said, there is still much good in the piece. But as the *Shakespearomaniacs* seek out the good, and even endeavor to turn the bad into good, I seek, on the contrary, to set forth the bad. Of the poor economy of time, of the inconsequence of the characters, of the tediously long episodes, I have now spoken. But, apart from all these, the piece is badly constructed. The Ghost appears twice in the first act. Why? Once were enough. It has to speak to Hamlet only, therefore the first appear-

ance of it, as it is described at length in the second scene, is all the more superfluous.

. . . Hamlet appears with the actors, and delivers a long lecture to them upon the art of speaking and acting. In this lecture Shakespeare, at all events, sets forth his own principles in regard to the player's art. But does this belong to a deep tragedy? And these very respectable principles Shakespeare has, as a poet, by his bombast and verbosity directly contradicted, for these characteristics of his must needs produce the very manner of delivery which he blames. . . .

In Act IV, the King and the Queen, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are on the stage. The Queen says at the beginning to the two latter: "Bestow this place on us a little while," whereupon they retire. After eight-and-twenty verses they are again called in, receive a commission, and go off again without speaking a word. This is clumsy. Are the actors puppets, drawn hither and thither by wires?

. . . The result of the fight between Hamlet and Laertes is brought about in the strangest manner. *In the heat of the fight* the combatants exchange weapons. Is this a conceivable possibility? When a man knows how to handle a weapon, he never in a fight lets it go. And had it been possible, would not Laertes have stopped the fight under one pretext or another, since he knew that the slightest wound from the poisoned rapier in the hand of Hamlet would be certain death?

. . . After Hamlet is dead, there are fifty more lines spoken; persons altogether unknown appear. I find this conclusion as clumsy as that of *Romeo and Juliet*. What do we care, after Hamlet's death, for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What, for English ambassadors? for Fortinbras? What is to us the succession to the throne in Denmark? We have concerned ourselves only with Hamlet. With his ^[353] death our interest is at an end. We do not want to know anything more.

It is true this drama has been a stock-piece on the German stage for a century. Its influence is easily explained. In the first place, the subject of it is very interesting. It had already been used by others before Shakespeare. In the second place, the chief character is a role unusually telling. Hamlet feigns madness, and so makes many striking and acute speeches, which are the chief charm

of the piece, and have always given especial pleasure. This poet pleases all the more, because the poet has so portrayed the other parts, the court people particularly, that they furnish food for Hamlet's satire. Furthermore, the piece has considerable dramatic effects. I reckon Hamlet's feigned madness among them, although it is too much spun out; Ophelia's insanity, on the other hand, is a more theatrical effect. Such purely theatrical effects are numerous in the piece, and have always charmed play-goers. Among these effects belong the three appearances of a ghost with the necessary, imposing accidents, a play upon the stage, a churchyard with graves and a burial, a fight and half a dozen corpses, and an abundance of fustian phrases withal.

That it is not piece itself particularly which impresses the public is evident from the fact, that for several decades the play has been given in different places in different shapes. Every one who has undertaken to alter the piece has picked out such parts as he considered especially effective, and left out other portions. . . . The fact that a piece has admitted of so many alterations shows how very loosely it is constructed.

. . . The tragic issue of a drama must be in the drama itself, in its essential necessity; there must be no other possible. *Richard III* and *Macbeth* must needs end tragically,—a reconciliation is in them not possible. In *Hamlet* no tragic issue is necessary.^[354]

The Impediment of Adipose

By E. Vale Blake

E. Vale Blake, "The Impediment of Adipose," *Popular Science Monthly*, XVII (May 1880).

FROM THE DAYS of Hippocrates, intelligent medical observers have noticed that an unusual accumulation of fat, far from adding to the strength of a person, was a source of physical weakness; and, to a certain extent, an outward

sign of incapacity; that it limited activity and shortened life. It is only in comparatively modern times that scientific experimentalists have ascertained precisely how the system generally, and the heart particularly, is affected either by the overloading or infiltration of superfluous fatty matter upon or in its muscular substance. In fact, it was not until the microscope was carefully applied to the investigation that the disease now known as "fatty degeneration" was really understood.^[60]

. . . our principal object in these pages is to show that a *redundance of adipose matter essentially weakens and impedes the power of the will*. We know that it disinclines to activity, produces shortness of breath, palpitation of the heart, and comparative weakness in proportion to size, and is often accompanied by anaemia. We can make this clearer, perhaps, by an illustration. The normal weight of a man five feet in height is 120 pounds; of a man five feet ten inches, 169 pounds. Now, suppose the latter really weighs 300 pounds by accumulation of fat, what results but that all this superfluous matter has to be supplied with capillaries, and these have to get blood from vessels only constructed to circulate the original quantity? No wonder is it that the circulation is enfeebled and impeded! By this increase of adipose there is no increase of propelling force. Hence, the overstrain upon the capillaries and the ensuing comparative weakness in the vital functions are explained, and also why external injuries are less easily repaired. . . .^[61]

But, to turn from the purely physical aspects of adipose, we wish to invite the reader's attention to a celebrated case of the impediment of adipose in affecting the mental character, and the action or inaction superinduced by this malady.

One of Shakespeare's famous characters—we should say perhaps his supreme portrait—is described thus with one dash of the pen:

He's fat and scant of breath!

The character of Hamlet has suffered such constant distortion at the hands of commentators, and has been made unintelligible and mysterious through a very natural but fatal oversight, namely, the habitual neglect of the annotators to take into account the physical organization of the Danish Prince—an oversight which the poet never made. He never failed to make the *physique* conform to the character.^[62]