HAMLET

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Hamlet by William Shakespeare & Edwin Booth

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE & EDWIN BOOTH

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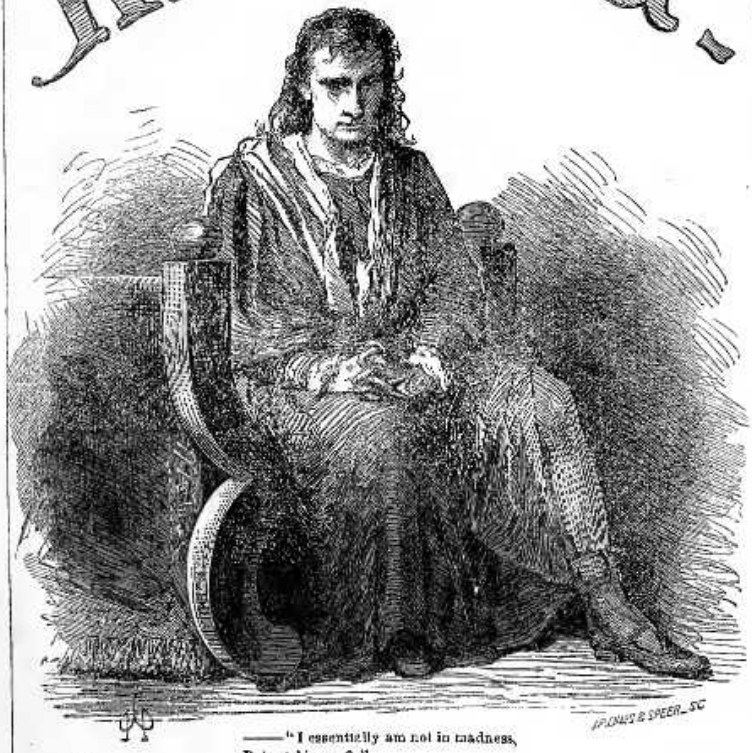

——"I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft."

AS PERFORMED BY

Edwin Booth

HAMLET.

The Essay on Hamlet, by the celebrated German critic Gervinus, contains, perhaps, the most complete and accurate history of the play, and the most close and searching analysis of the character which has appeared.

As we believe no translation of it has yet been published, the one we now offer which—with the exception of a very few additions and omissions—strictly follows the text, may not be uninteresting.

The story of Hamlet originally appeared in Saxo Grammaticus, though in a crude and unpolished form. We next find it in a more finished and refined state in "Belleforest's Novels," published in 1564, and subsequently in an English work taken from them and published in 1608, entitled the history of Hamblett. In the story as here narrated, Horvendile is killed by his brother Fengon, who grasps possession at the same time of both his empire and his wife. Hamblett's counterfeited madness is the center of the story, and the many enigmas, difficult of solution, in which it abounds, was its main charm for the Northern taste. As thus told the tale ends with Hamlet's successful revenge and his becoming king. Indeed, the scene in which Hamlet induces his mother to return to the paths of virtue, during which he takes the life of a listener behind the screen, and that in which, going to England, he lays a trap for the ambassadors, are the only ones which, in any way, contributed material to Shakespeare in the diverging conception with which he treats the tale. The figures of Laertes and Ophelia are nowhere to be found in the original story, though there is one of a maiden, quite disconnected with the principal action, who, having been brought up with Hamlet from childhood, yields to him the last favor a woman grants, and promises, with solemnity, to reveal to the world nothing of what has passed. This trait in the story is raw, rough and incapable of use, and all the others are of a similar character. Yet though this beautiful drama of Shakespeare took its rise from so poor and primitive a source, it has become more identified with his name than any other which has sprung from the fountain of his genius. When you speak of Shakespeare you speak of Hamlet. In Hamlet are presented the most contradictory sides of his heart and of his mind. Equally in originality of thought, as in the popularity of its tone, it surpasses all his other works. It is nature's own text, taken from life, and almost every line is a mine of precious wisdom. It possesses, too, the peculiar charm which belongs to it, in common with Henry IV., of giving more intuition into the character of Shakespeare, and letting more light upon his inner nature than any other of his plays. Full of that spirit of prophecy, which is near divine, it anticipated time and looked far into the future only to be thoroughly comprehended, after the lapse of two or three centuries. It is not only as a household word now, wherever the English tongue is spoken, but has penetrated modern German life with an intensity of depth only equaled in German literature by Goethe's Faust.

There was another play of Hamlet, written between the two before-mentioned tales in 1560, in which the feature of Hamlet's revenge was made very prominent and fully treated. There was also, according to a letter of Philip Nash, published in a preface to one of Robert Greene's works, a drama of Hamlet, well spiced with sentences from Seneca, which ap-

peared in 1587, and was played in 1594, in the theatre of Newington Butts. The date of Shakespeare's Hamlet is fixed by Dyce and Collier at 1600–1602. Frequent allusions to Cæsar make it evident that it must have occupied Shakespeare's mind about the same time as his Julius Cæsar did. There is an old edition in quarto, dated 1603, which differs widely from that now adopted even so far as to change the names of Polonius and his son into Corambis and Montana. The Hamlet of 1603 contains all the *action* of the piece but not the workings of the inner nature, which are its greatest beauties. For instance, the charming contrast of character between Hamlet and Horatio finds no picturing in this edition.

All those delicate and conflicting phases of feeling in the king's prayer in act third—which gives the best clue to the understanding of the play, and which is alone introduced by Mr. Edwin Booth, of all modern representatives of the character—are also omitted. So also is the entire scene where Hamlet meets Fortinbras' troops, and the entire soliloquy containing the key to the piece. Were all these omissions made by some piratical copyist there would have been method in it; but it is much more probable that Shakespeare—as the enigma of the drama remained for a long period a sealed book to the many who desired to unravel it—intended, in this last version, to throw out some clearer inklings of his own inner conception.

Since Goethe so beautifully and clearly solved the mystery in his "Wilhelm Meister," one wonders how it could ever have existed. In none of Shakespeare's works is the intention more clearly marked, though in none except, perhaps, his Sonnets, has it been so misinterpreted. Voltaire's delectable notions of the play and character of Hamlet are well known. Malone's are not much more profound. He found the disguised madness theory led to nothing. Others, as Akenside, held that Shakespeare made Hamlet a real madman. It is well known that in our days even Tieck held a similar idea. Dr. Johnson could not find sufficient reason for Hamlet's pretended madness. He called Hamlet more an instrument than a free-acting being, never endeavoring to punish the guilty king, who fell a victim finally through mere accidental circumstances, and not through any pre-intended purpose of a son sworn to revenge his father. All Voltaire's exposition of what he calls the want of design in Hamlet fell worthless to the earth when Goethe showed, by invincible argument, the true and strong logic of the piece. All the faults found by Johnson and Malone sprang into virtues when Goethe showed Shakespeare's intention to picture Hamlet as a man who, staggering under the weight of a task solemnly imposed on him, and yet too weighty for his nature to sustain, loses his center of gravity and grows giddy, as Horatio describes, whenever he mentally nears the dizzy height of the steep deed he has sworn to execute. In Goethe's own language, "Shakespeare paints *a soul*, on which a deed has been imposed which is too much for it." That this was the intention of the poet is clearly manifest throughout the entire piece. Let us take this idea and the action of the piece as it recurs, and bring both accurately together.

At the opening of the panorama we find a noble king of Denmark, a man described as without his equal, of divine form and majesty, who is murdered by his brother, who, too, robs his nephew of his heritage and then marries his mother, his murdered brother's wife, whom he had seduced during her husband's life by flatteries and gifts. The bloated, puffy form of this Claudius, whom Hamlet calls frog, cat, peacock, a lusty, vain brute, whose business was to gamble and drink, give little clue to his character. It is only the restless peering into everything, and the uneasy conscience which makes him regard with suspicion everybody and everything that is done about him, and surround himself with a pack of tools, that, under the smiling mask, betray the knave. Next we see the spirit of the murdered hero rise from the grave and conjure his son, if he has nature in him, not to leave his death unavenged; not to become blunt to so unnatural a crime, like some fat weed on

Lethe's shore. A slave of fate, wandering in the tortures of purgatory, makes this solemn and fearful appeal to Hamlet's heart. Revenge, in those days, was a duty to be fulfilled without warning. In addition to this call to revenge, Hamlet had just motives for inflicting punishment, being defrauded of the throne and being also Chief Judge of the kingdom.

To all these weighty causes we must add many other ready incitements. His dead father was warmly loved and highly esteemed by the whole people of Denmark; every fool knows, as the grave-digger says, the year and date when he overcame Fortinbras. Toward the new king the people already feel bitterly on account of Polonius' death, and are ready to make Laertes their new ruler. Claudius, therefore, is not a man to be dreaded, except for the precautions which his own fear and conscience always gather around him. Young Hamlet, on the other hand, enjoys, in a golden degree, the good graces of the nation, which regards even his faults as so many virtues.

Even his mother, who fondly loves him, would become his ally in such a conflict. All these external opportunities are still further increased by the qualities themselves which Hamlet possesses. Ophelia thinks of him as a courtier, a scholar, and a soldier, in every way fitted and inclined to handle well his physical and mental weapons. He is but thirty years, also; an age at which the physical and mental strength is most abundant and most evenly balanced. To the carrying out, then, of the object committed to him by his father, and advocated by his own sense of personal wrong and public justice, nothing is wanting but a strong will. Even that Hamlet at first seems to possess. When he meets his father's ghost, he swears by Heaven to make his command his all-absorbing purpose, to efface everything else in his memory, and fly to revenge on the wings of thought, but even, at the very first soliloquy, it is apparent that this man, seemingly so resolved, has to bid his heart to halt, his nerves not to grow old so suddenly, but to bear him up, and sighs forth in the deepest woe, that the world is out of joint, and left to him to set it right. It is strange that he only speaks to Horatio of his secret after some lapse of time, and that to accomplish a business so near at hand, he adopts such roundabout methods, counterfeiting madness for a time, like Brutus, although he has no huge tyranny to overthrow. It is most singular, too, to see him constantly awakening the suspicions of those who have most cause to fear him, thus drawing the attention of the king, who is already disturbed by Hamlet's melancholy sadness. While enacting this rôle of a madman we see Hamlet disquieting the whole court, putting enigmas to his listeners, annoying the lady he loved, and even forgetting his purpose for two months. He seems to neglect his great object until a declaiming actor, in the second act, by a well-rendered representation of an imaginary passion, reminds him of his work; then he assails himself in harshest, though well-merited terms of reproach, calling himself John à Dreams, a dull, feelingless rascal, a coward who would submit to any insult; a man having the liver of a pigeon and no gall. But even all this self-reproach does not drive him to action. The player merely starts the idea in him to try the king's conscience by a spectacle. His hesitating mind has, by this time, arrived at a doubt whether the ghost of his father, whom he calls so emphatically before his friends an honorable ghost with so much pride, might not have been one of those devils which is supposed to prey on men of weakness and melancholy as himself. The play commences. Shakespeare intends Hamlet to be as much affected by it as the guilty king. For Gonzago, who plays the rôle of his father, says to him, in the name of his father's ghost, "what we do determine oft we break;" purpose is but the slave of memory, of vehement birth, but short duration; like the fruit, which, when green, clingeth to the tree, but when ripe, falls by its own weight. Resolutions taken in passion die with the passion which inspired them. Vehemence, either in joy or grief, destroys itself. The trial, through the means of the play, succeeds. Hamlet has the king closely watched by Horatio, in order to appear idle and indifferent himself. Both are certain of the king's

guilt, who now appears alone trying to pray and repent. Every line of his soliloquy bears a comparison to the situation of Hamlet's own mind. The one owes repentance, the other revenge. The king is as willing to pray as Hamlet is to punish, neither being equal to their task. The one is too guilty to pray, the other too conscientious to kill. What is the good of mercy, says Claudius; what is the use of punishment unless the sin is brought before the world's eye. The double power of prayer consists in guarding against sin and in repenting when it is committed. The king tries to do penance, but he has not the heart to fulfill the first condition demanded by his conscience—to give up his wife and throne. On the other hand revenge is in the mind of Hamlet, but the power to avenge is wanting. Even while the king is contemplating his condition in this soliloquy Hamlet is close by him, the very opportunity he might wish for. It is the hour of midnight, when ghosts are supposed to appear; he is in the excited mood to fulfill the deed, but irresolute as ever he finds a new cause for deferring his purpose. He does not wish to send the praying murderer, who has killed his father, to Heaven in the blossom of his sin, and thus misses another opportunity to wait for yet another more terrible and effective. He departs, and the spared king rises to tell us that he was unable to pray. In this excited mood Hamlet rushes forth to his mother, flings daggers at her in every word, and unconsciously stabs the poor listening Polonius instead of the king. Thus he who was so conscientious to avenge murder becomes unwarily a murderer.

Hamlet sees in it a punishment for himself as well as for Polonius. The ghost appears again, and only seems bent on punishing Hamlet for not fulfilling his solemn promise. In spite of all this Hamlet remains idle. He meets young Fortinbras at this juncture—his very counterpart, who owes Denmark an old grudge, and would fight it against his uncle's will, but being unable to do so gives vent to his fiery temper in the Polack war.

Hamlet at once acknowledges the spirit of ambition in this young man who is fighting for a mere egg-shell, whilst he himself remains idle, spite of his good cause and the many golden opportunities of accomplishing it. Again he assails himself with harsh epithets, a beast made up of eating and sleeping, and so forth. It is by accident he returns so speedily from his voyage to Denmark. Even now he remains idle, although informed of the king's seeking his life. Every moment he expects the news from England that the ambassadors have died in his stead; he dreads an interview with the king, whom he fears, and his poor heart pales. His uncle's plot and cunning get the better of him, and it is only when mortally wounded, he, in exasperation, kills the murderer of his mother.

Another striking contrast of character is presented in Laertes. Hamlet kills Polonius. The latter's son, Laertes, a gallant gentleman, a bit of a modern hero, a fencer, and in every respect a finished cavalier of the French school, of a temper as choleric as Hamlet's is melancholy, flies back at once from distant Paris to Denmark to avenge his father's death. The precept given him by his father in regard to treating an adversary when once he has entered into a quarrel seem not to have left his memory. Revenge fills his whole soul, and his every nerve is ready for action before he knows the murderer. His only means of ascertaining who he is is through the stray whisperings here and there which reach him. He has no promptings of a noble ghost risen from the earth. Not having Hamlet's great means for executing vengeance, he endeavors to use the small means he has to good advantage. He is not the heir to the throne, but he incites a revolt, menacing even the king. He swears by all that's holy he despises damnation; nothing but his purpose clings to him. He would not spare the murderer in church; he does not hesitate to poison his weapons to reach his victim. All this Laertes is willing to do for a man like Polonius, who is nothing but a courtier, a tool in the king's hands, laughed at and ridiculed; whilst Hamlet hesitates to do the same for a father of whom the poet says: "Take him all in all, he was a man I ne'er

shall look upon his like again." Thus stands the structure of this piece in perfect harmony before us. Every action aims at one center, all the most remote figures being in close relation to it. The action, as in the Merchant of Venice, is always, with Shakespeare, of secondary moment, being merely a deduction, the very center of his works leading to the source and secret causes in which such action took its birth. In spite of Hamlet's inaction we feel deeply interested in him, as a character, and anxious to inquire minutely into all the inward motives which produced such effect. Hamlet is pictured by his mother as fat and short-breathed, such as he was played by Burbage, and not at all in the splendor of a first lover as Garrick was accustomed to represent him. His temper is quiet, phlegmatic, without gall; his mother compares him to a turtle-dove sitting over her brood; he says to Laertes of himself that he is not passionate nor rash, but there is something dangerous about him to be feared. This very danger only appears, however, when he is cornered, and there is no escape. His timidity lies in a slow nature, hard to move. His cautiousness is over-great, he sees nothing but danger, and he believes in ghosts and goblins in contrast to Horatio, who does not believe but who is almost a skeptic. Hamlet is, so to say, moved by a constant ebb and flood of feelings. Now, the one prompts him to great deeds; then, the other sets in, obliterates the impression of the last and calms him down again to apathy. His weakness makes Hamlet cling to Horatio, who is cool and able to stand the shocks of fortune or misfortune. If Hamlet had been born under happier circumstances his satirical inclinations would have made him happy and merry, at times perhaps somewhat sentimental and fond of visiting solitudes and church-yards; but under the circumstances under which he was placed they made him melancholy and despairing. The actor who represents Hamlet should resist carefully the temptation to produce effects by emphasizing too much his merry jokes and puns in order to produce laughter, or to mark the change from tragic to comic too intensely Such might suit the pit but it would shock the critic who desires to see the picture presented in unbroken harmony to his mind. Hamlet's oddities in the church-yard scene should not alter the solemnity of the occasion. In his bitter woe he utters things which would create laughter in a comedy. You can apply to Hamlet, equally as well as to Richard II., Gonzago's words, That where joy exults the highest, grief laments the deepest. Hamlet is not unlike Prince Henry, but his love of abstract thinking and a natural bashfulness altered him and unfitted him for manly deeds. He is a philosopher, and not by any means proud, his favorite society being actors, and his friend Horatio, and his love Ophelia, far below him in station. He has a contempt for everything base, for politicians, lawyers and courtiers. His irresolution is not entirely weakness, but based on conscientiousness and virtue. He calls it himself three-quarters cowardice and one-quarter wisdom. He is a true scholar, having remained longer than was customary at the University, and yearned for it after he left. Much as he dislikes dissimulation in others in life, it gives him but little labor to assume it himself. After he killed Polonius he becomes a fatalist, believing himself a mere instrument in the hands of Providence in spite of all his purposes. Life becomes a burden to him, and he is constantly on the brink of suicide. His soliloquy "to be or not to be," is an evidence of this. Shakespeare intended to show in Hamlet, the difference between a great soul and a great character; between power of intellect and strength of action. He shows the necessity of educating the will to make it strong and ready for work.

Henry and Percy, ever ready to carry out their purpose, are true types of a life of action, whilst the heavenly, harmonious soul of Hamlet, forever remains idle. Hamlet has none of that ambition and spurring pride which drove Henry and Percy into action.

Unlike Alexander's ambition, for which the world was too small, Hamlet's would find accommodation in a nut-shell. Hamlet was centuries ahead of his time; a man full of the

loftiest sentiment and philosophy, living in an era full of barbarous customs and daring deeds. This continuous contrast of great and weak qualities which we find in Hamlet, belonging much, as it does, to the Germanic character as it is now, the poet anticipating it by centuries, has made him familiar in every household in Germany. The mirror-like similarity to the modern Germanic mind, is indeed astounding. One of the greatest modern German poets begins with these words: "Hamlet is Germany."

Great objections have been made to the Drama of Hamlet ending in the style in which it does, belonging rather to a barbarian age: but it seems to have been the intention of the poet to use this very wholesale slaughter as a punishment to Hamlet, being the consequence of his irresolution in sparing a little blood. Shakespeare himself explains this clearly. When the king asks Laertes whether it is written in his revenge to destroy all and everybody, friend, foe, guilty and not guilty ones, the spirit of revenge in Laertes, although little conscientious, is satisfied with punishing the guilty one. But conscientious Hamlet, by his unsettled purpose, creates in the end an awkward revenge which destroys them all. Consequently the ending of the piece is not an essential mistake of the poet, but represents, and is created by a moral fault of Hamlet's, and is a fit sequel to the character as carried all through the piece.