



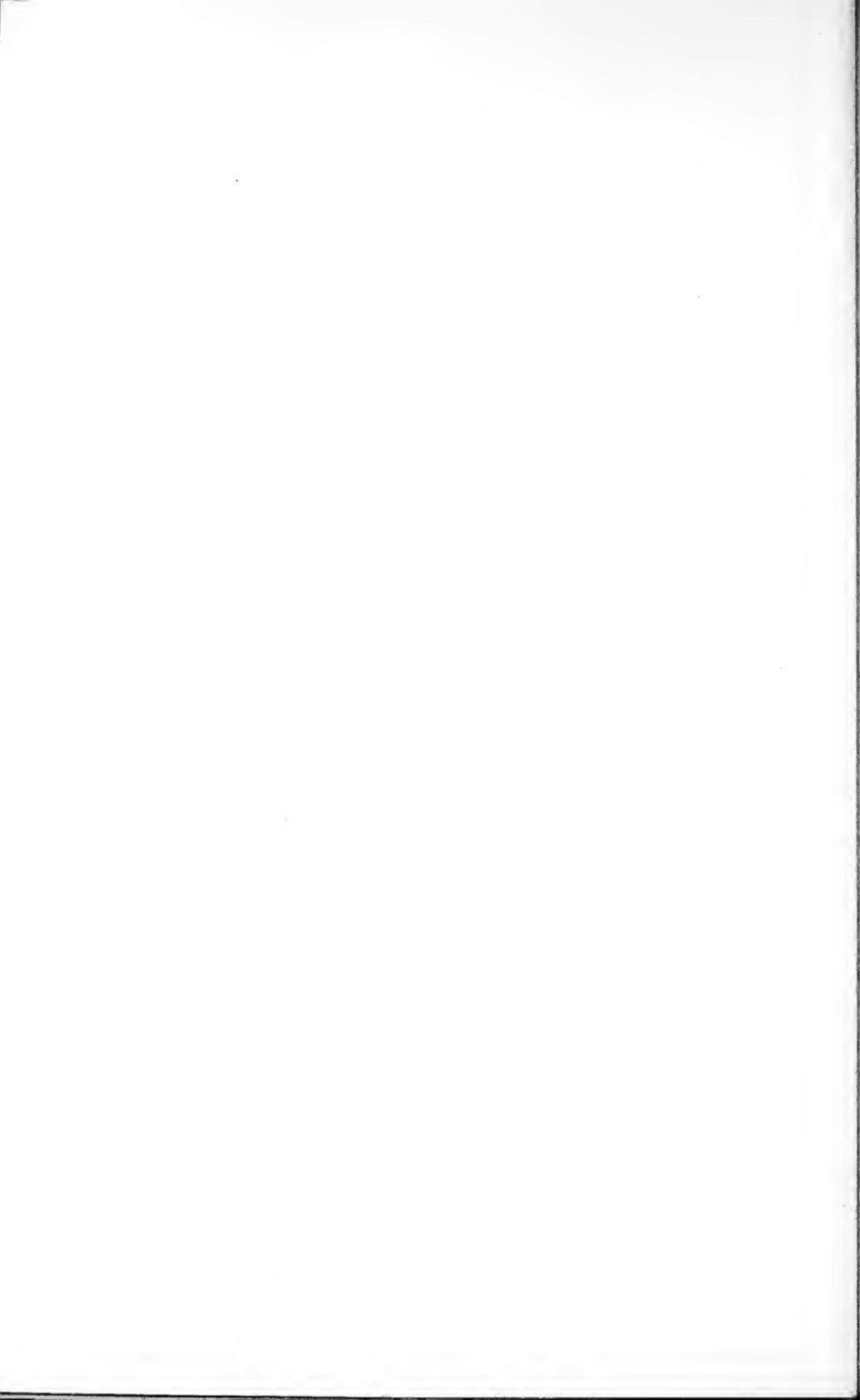
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HAMLET IS EVERYMAN

by

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For some in part ascertainable reasons Shakespeare got inside his plot situations. That is, he understood the issues involved. This makes of him possibly the world's greatest dramatist, for, as Aristotle said, drama is concerned with event. Shakespeare has something else of a fundamental nature. He felt the significance of the issues that arise from event in terms of human values. Another way of saying this is that Shakespeare got inside his characters, understood as they did and felt. This is the quality that makes Shakespeare the greatest of dramatists. He was also a great poet and a great man. It was natural for him to understand sympathetically individual as well as general reactions to the infinitely varied problems of existence -- success or failure, happiness or misery, sin or righteousness, and even life or death. His dramatic and poetic genius was to speak out of the thoughts and feelings of his characters.

Ability to enter feelingly and understandingly into people and plots and to make them one's own is no recondite or exceptional matter, for to do so is

a natural human instinct and tendency. All people do these things in proportion to their apperceptive ability and to their ability to feel and act for others. Many writers besides Shakespeare have had these feelings and have exploited these ideas, and more would have sought to do so had they not been restrained by forms, rules, techniques, false theories and artificial classifications. The Renaissance was to some degree free from slavery to literary criticism and scientific method, so that Shakespeare was relatively at liberty to follow with his genius the broad highway of nature -- that highway traveled by all sorts and conditions of men.

If these things are true about Shakespeare and if, as is often said, Hamlet is his most broadly significant work, no narrow hypothesis will account for the play and its chief character. Simply scores of attempts have been made to account for Hamlet, the character -- to pluck out the heart of his mystery. Goethe found the play representative of "the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it -- an oak-tree planted in a costly jar." Coleridge saw in Hamlet "an overbalance in the contemplative faculty, one who vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve." The popular belief, probably ineradicable, is that Hamlet was an arch-procrastinator. If a runner on second hesitates too long about the enterprise of stealing third, the sports-writer calls him a Hamlet. In Sir Laurence Olivier's film version of Hamlet there is at the beginning a great voice from nowhere in particular that resounds through the theater with the words: "This is the story of a man who could not make up his mind." The film then shows a peculiarly active and perspicacious youth who carries out from scratch and in spite of errors and overwhelming difficulties a great enterprise. Of course Hamlet delays from uncertainty, and in order to spur himself on accuses himself of procrastination,

but the point is that those are just the things that you and I do. They are merely human, and I do not think that either you or I are free from the liability to make mistakes. However it may be in the popular mind, and however ingeniously Hamlet may be pigeon-holed, the fact remains that he keeps hopping out of the pigeonholes and indicting us on the grave charge of being human beings and not supermen.

In view of the situation described, it would seem that nothing but a generalization about Hamlet on the broadest possible basis will give us satisfaction, and I have one to propose. I do not know how the concept of man as man is. I mean the concept of man, not as youth or age, king or commoner, or the practitioner of any particular trade or profession, but just as man. It must be very old, but not the oldest, for it includes all its specialties. It perhaps is a product of the thoughtful mind of the Middle Ages. From it seems to come the concept of man as Everyman, Humanum Genus, Mankind, Anthropos, and the pilgrim in Le pelérinage de la vie humaine. I do not know a broader concept, and I propose that we consider the character and career of Hamlet as Everyman.

Hamlet has grown up under the finest princely culture known to the Renaissance and is a university student at the University of Wittenberg. Just before the play opens he has been summoned home to Elsinore by the death of his father. He finds that his uncle Claudius has usurped the kingship and that his mother has made a forbidden marriage with his uncle and has done so with indecent haste. The effect of this on Hamlet is shock as expressed in his first soliloquy (I, ii, ll. 129-259):

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew! ...

That it should come to this!



other and are both unfaithful. The shock destroys him. He returns to school but no longer studies. He refuses to participate in the enterprise of life and finally sits in the cafe drinking and, when his glass is empty, he merely says, "Garcon, un bock." Hamlet's first state of mind may be described as one of shock and helplessness.

The Ghost appears and reveals to Hamlet that his father has been murdered by his uncle and calls upon him to carry through a just revenge. It is not a personal revenge but one that is demanded of him as his father's son and as the true heir to the crown of Denmark. There is no other way to punish the crime and to save the kingdom. His first state is one of uncertainty. He has only his resolution: (I, v, 82-105)

O, all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?  
 And shall I couple hell? O, fie! Hold, my heart,  
 And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,  
 But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee!  
 Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat  
 In this distracted globe. Remember thee!  
 Yea, from the table of my memory  
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records, (Ophelia  
 banished)  
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
 That youth and observation copied there, (Witten-  
 berg gone)  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,  
 Unmix'd with baser matter. Yes, yes, by heaven!  
 O most pernicious woman!

In such a situation Hamlet is beset by doubts. He even suspects that the ghost may be an emissary of the devil attempting to entrap his soul. The visit of the traveling players offers an occasion for action, and Hamlet embraces it uncertainly and as best he can. He forms a plan with the aid of the

players by means of which he may test the guilt of the King. This is a clever and sound plan and not a mere device, since it rests on the belief that truth is irresistible and must be believed. He knows that Claudius confronted by the image of his actual deed will betray his guilt. (II, ii, ll. 617-634)

I have heard

That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
 Have by the very cunning of the scene  
 Been struck so to the soul that presently  
 They have proclaim'd their malefactions;  
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players  
 Play something like the murder of my father  
 Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;  
 I'll tent him to the quick. If he but blench,  
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seen  
 May be the devil; and the devil hath power  
 To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
 As he is very potent with such spirits,  
 Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds  
 More relative than this. The play's the thing  
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

Note that Hamlet has been brought to that practical action by means of self-reproaches. It seems to have been a habit of his to abuse himself and urge himself on to action. To do this is certainly my habit, you will I am sure admit that it is your habit, and I think we may say that self-reproach is the general habit of sensitive humanity.

In the meantime, doubt still hangs upon Hamlet, and he is uncertain whether the plan is worth trying or not and whether he can accomplish anything at all. In these circumstances he utters his most famous soliloquy. In this he marks for all mankind what Carlyle called the Center of Indifference. It has

impressed the feelings of humanity so well that it is perhaps the most widely known passage in all Shakespearc. (III, i, 56-88)

To be, or not to be; that is the question.  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 And by opposing end them. To die; to sleep;  
 No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wished.

This soliloquy is a profound assessment of the value of life itself -- whether it is worth while to participate in it.

The plan, however, succeeds, and Hamlet soon has a chance to kill the King while he is at prayer. Hamlet has been much censured for not doing this, and the failure has been set down to him as tragic guilt. I think this is an erroneous criticism and that the play tells us that it is. (III, iv, 73-96)  
 The King is praying but is not having much luck in appeasing the Lord, but Hamlet does not know this:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying.  
 And now I'll do't. -- And so he goes to heaven;  
 And so am I reveng'd. That would be scann'd.  
 A villain kills my father, and for that,  
 I, his sole son, do that same villain send  
 To heaven.  
 Oh, this is hire and salary, not revenge.  
 He took my father grossly, full of bread,  
 With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;  
 And how his audit stands who knows save Heaven? ...  
 Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent.  
 When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
 Or in the incestuous pleasures of his bed, ...  
 or about some act

That has no relish of salvation in't,--  
 Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
 And that his soul may be damn'd and black  
 As hell whereto he goes.

This is not hatred and mere ferocity. It is an attempt to equalize the revenge with the wrong committed. Justice demanded that the rectification should be equal to the injury. It is one of the most ancient of legal principles. Let me make this clear to you by means of the story of Cutwolfe in Nashe's novel "Jack Wilton."

Cutwolfe's brother has been murdered and given no chance to make his peace with heaven, and the duty of vengeance has fallen upon Cutwolfe. He pursues his victim from city to city and finally confronts him, loaded pistol in hand, in an upper-chamber in Rome. His enemy begs for his life, and Cutwolfe tells him that, if he will curse God and renounce salvation, his life will be spared. The poor wretch does this and, when he has cursed God and abjured salvation, Cutwolfe fires the pistol into his mouth, so that he can never utter a plea for salvation. This unpleasant story will at least make clear the Renaissance doctrine of revenge.

Hamlet cannot in honor take the opportunity offered by the King at prayer but he takes the next opportunity and makes a mistake (III, iv, 31-32). Old Polonius is hidden behind the arras in order to overhear a conversation between Hamlet and the Queen and thus learn Hamlet's secret. She is frightened by Hamlet's violence and cries out for help. Polonius behind the arras cries, "What ho! help, help, help!" Hamlet thinks it is the King and kills Polonius through the curtain. His well known remark is: "How now! A rat? Dead for a ducat, dead!" And when Hamlet drags Polonius out from behind the arras he says:

Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!  
I took thee for thy better.

Hamlet makes a mistake, and I should like to caution you and myself against making mistakes, which are often costly.

This mistake puts Hamlet in great danger, the King seeks his life, and to that end Hamlet is sent to England. His attitude is known, and his task becomes much more difficult. On his way to England he meets Fortinbras in command of troops, and the spectacle of the efficiency of the gallant Fortinbras causes Hamlet to take stock of his own case and to compare himself bitterly with Fortinbras. He is at the very nadir of his fortunes, and he again berates himself: (IV, iv, 32-66)

How all occasions do inform against me,  
And spur my dull revenge! ...

Now, whether it be

Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple  
Of thinking too precisely on the event,--  
A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom  
And ever three parts coward,--I do not know  
Why yet I live to say, "This thing's to do,"  
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means  
To do't.

Hamlet, like all humanity when it strives to do something hard, lashes himself with his own tongue and keeps himself up to the mark, which is the only way for most of us to succeed. And please note that in this instance Hamlet succeeds:

O, from this time forth,  
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.

It is indeed true that from this time Hamlet never hesitates again.

Hamlet escapes from his enemies and returns to Elsinore. He is in great danger and becomes the object of a base plot by the King and Laertes to take his life by the use of a poisoned weapon in a fencing match. In the unfolding of that plot Hamlet's courage holds firm. He shows that he has learned and adopted the great moral principles of the Renaissance and, indeed, of all time. The Renaissance insisted that a man must act, but must not consider beyond ordinary prudence the consequence of his action. If that action was in line of duty it was in the hands of God. (V, ii, 71-74) Horatio says that the news of what has been done in England must shortly be made known to the King, and Hamlet replies,

It will be short; the interim is mine,  
And a man's life's no more than to say "One."

But the final expression of Hamlet's masterly resolution is to be found in a prose passage in a conversation with Horatio (V, ii, 218-236). Hamlet and Horatio are awaiting the appearance of the Court in order that the dishonest fencing match may be played between Hamlet and Laertes. Horatio says,

You will lose this wager, my lord.

Ham. I do not think so; since he went into France, I have been in continual practice. I shall win at the odds. But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart. But it is no matter.

Hor. Nay, good my lord,--

Ham. It is but foolery; but it is such a kind of gain-giving, as would perhaps trouble a woman.

Hor. If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.

Ham. Not a whit; we defy augury. There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come,

it will be now; if it, be not now, yet will it come; the readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

Hamlet goes calmly through the enterprise. He is given his death wound with a poisoned rapier, but with his last breath he slays the King.

In Hamlet I therefore see no special faults or eccentricities. His shortcomings seem honestly to be merely those of humanity, and his virtues those that God has implanted in all human hearts. His assignment to duty is a hard one, and he meets it with the typical qualifications of all mankind. I think therefore that a broad conception of him as Everyman is the best I know.

This idea has the effect of changing Hamlet from an Aristotelian to a stoical tragedy. And may I state that the concept underlying the play is as broad as human life and that no narrow hypothesis can explain it adequately?

## DESIDERATA

1. During the first half of the eighteenth century poems were often published in folio, that is, in the form of what we might call a large-sized pamphlet consisting of only a few leaves. Contemporary purchasers were likely to have a number of such pieces bound in a single volume. A remarkably choice volume of this kind has recently been acquired by the Fondren Library, and now awaits a sponsor among the Friends. The price of this little collection, \$63.00, is justified by its contents, all first editions dated 1725-1729--the seven parts of Young's series of satires called The Universal Passion, two other poems by Young, and two important early works by James Thomson, A Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton and Britannia. The last piece is so rare that in 1925 the Clarendon Press reprinted it in facsimile.

2. The Library also needs The American Bar Association Journal, 1953-1959.

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