ILLUSTRATION BY F. ROBERTS JOHNSON FOR THE VISION PRESS, LTD.,
EDITION OF SHAKESPEARE'S Hamlet
CURRENT FASHIONS IN HAMLET CRITICISM

By ROBERT M. SMITH

IT is inconceivable that Shakespeare's most popular tragedy should escape the current fashions of literary criticism. Possibly a review of these may serve to reveal how Shakespeare's Hamlet continues to mirror not only contending schools of criticism, but new patterns of meaning for our times.

Three fashions of Hamlet criticism are popular at the present writing: the Historical, the Psycho-analytic, and the Impressionistic or Symbolist.

THE HISTORICAL SCHOOL

In A History of Hamlet Criticism (1601-1821), Professor Paul S. Conklin traces the trends of opinion from the first appearance of the play upon the stage and in print through the first quarter of the Nineteenth Century. A loyal pupil of Stoll's training in Historical criticism, he bends every effort in his survey to demonstrate that there is one "orthodox" Hamlet, which everyone presumably must accept, or else be regarded as an unhistoric, idle, and vain babbler, namely, the Hamlet of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century up to 1770. This Hamlet, rooted in early stage tradition, is a malcontent Kydian avenger, a strong, eloquent, heroic prince, rather than as the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth depicted him, an unheroic dreamer, consumed with melancholy, who allowed his "native hue of resolution" to be "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." Steele reported in 1709 that Betterton played the part as "a young man of great expectation, vivacity, and enterprise."

Professor Conklin is troubled by the profusion of comments by Hanmer, some of them with historical perspective, others "hope-
lessly absolute" (p. 56); yet wishing to include Hanmer as, on the whole, sound and orthodox, he rather lamely concludes: "However it is reasonable to believe that Hanmer's real Hamlet was most likely the heroical youth." Guthrie and Goldsmith are censured for comments of a hopeless "literary" nature, a tendency which ripened into the "New Hamlet" of William Richardson foreshadowed by Francis Gentleman.

In 1774 Richardson wrote *A Philosophical Analysis of Some of Shakespeare's Remarkable Characters*, an approach that involves definite "psychologizing,"—and presents an unfortunate prince paralysed by conflicting emotions, held back by moral scruples from avenging his father. Goethe, in *Wilhelm Meister*, sentimentalizes Hamlet still further, and Mackenzie and Robertson add discoveries of diversity in Hamlet, so that he becomes "a strange new psychologized figure" (p. 76). Edmund Malone, however, was not infected by these romantic heresies, nor was the actor, John Philip Kemble. It was, however, a far different critical instinct that dominated at the end of the century; for then one particular brand of undramatic, unhistorical criticism gained the ascendancy and produced the "New Hamlet."

Turning for a glance at French and German criticism, Professor Conklin stresses Voltaire's tirade against the barbarity and indecorum of *Hamlet*, and the treatment of Goethe who, in spite of his great critical gifts, gave "an absolute and unhistorical interpretation, bearing the limitations that must follow in the wake of all such flagrant impressionism."

During the years in England from 1820-21 the literary remarks of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, and Hunt gave full expression to the Romantic Hamlet—paradoxically above all acting genius on the stage—interpretations that worry Professor Conklin because in his opinion they threaten the artistic and histrionic integrity of the play.

Granted all the truth of Professor Conklin's conscientious historical survey, we may regret that his book is conceived and written in so partisan a spirit for the purpose of establishing an orthodox Ham-
let—or the "right" Hamlet—the Hamlet of historical tradition. In inveighing against "the personal estimate" or impressionism, he is unaware that "the historic estimate" is not necessarily, as Matthew Arnold pointed out, "the right estimate." Disclaiming against a Romantic absolute, Professor Conklin embraces another, the absolute of Historical Relativism. Since the orthodox Hamlet is the 17th Century avenger and malcontent, must we hereafter dispense with the insights and the riches of Coleridge and of Goethe, of Hazlitt and of Lamb, of Bradley and Adams and all readers persuaded by the text that Hamlet discloses an inner life as vivid, compelling, and enthralling as his outward life? That is what Hamlet said about himself:

I have that within which passeth show
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

Moreover, the Hamlet of inner problems and conflicts cannot be minimized, nor ignored, without doing violence to the text. It is easy to interpret Hamlet as an heroic and intrepid prince, a man of action rather than of thought, if we reject the full meaning of Hamlet's soliloquies; and it is in discussion of the soliloquies that Professor Conklin's study is bare and inadequate. We dare not slight these when we realize, as we should, that it was not Richardson, nor Coleridge and the Romantics, but Shakespeare who created Hamlet as a man of moody reflection repeatedly upbraiding himself. It was Shakespeare, too, not Coleridge, who wrote the soliloquies and for the specific dramatic purpose, among other purposes, of giving adequate motive for Hamlet's delay. He wonderfully made the repeated delays convincing by introducing the numerous self-reflecting and reproachful soliloquies in which Hamlet calls himself:

A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like, John-a-Dreams, unpregnant of my cause.

Furthermore, in the interchange with his father's Ghost in Act III Hamlet acknowledges his tardiness and foresees that the Ghost has returned to whet his almost blunted purpose. The Historical School, however, continues to maintain that there is no delay from inner difficulties, that Hamlet strikes in time, but Hamlet knew better than they; for what he says about his repeated procrastination and his
inabilities to explain it refute every contention that Hamlet’s diffi-
culties are wholly external.

So it turns out in fact that the Romantic point of view must also have been historically Shakespeare’s. Shakespeare presented not a truncated Kydian man of action—but a comprehensive human being, a splendid prince, indeed, but full of inner perplexities. It is these very traits which the Historical School discards, that have endeared Hamlet to countless readers and spectators. Why should we trim him down to a mere “heroic figure”; why insist that the early historic stage presentation is the only “right” point of view? Though such attempts may have thrown Bradley into “the dark backward and abysm of time,” they have not prevailed to the exclusion of other points of view.

Certainly no one who has seen Maurice Evans’s full length rendi-
tion or his abbreviated G.I. *Hamlet* will have any doubts that the play is the most enthralling melodrama ever written for the stage. It fails, however, as does Sir Laurence Olivier’s screen version, by reducing or eliminating the reflective and philosophical sides of Hamlet. As Dr. McManaway says, Sir Laurence Olivier fails to reveal his thesis that Hamlet is “a man who could not make up his mind.” By curtailing or omitting the soliloquies we have just what the Historical School wishes—merely a melodramatic, heroic prince, but that was not the way Shakespeare wrote the play, or conceived the character of Hamlet, nor will such presentation satisfy for long an audience of Hamlet lovers. Granted that the G.I. *Hamlet* of Maurice Evans is wonderful theatre, who would forego, if he could, the Hamlet of Edwin Booth? Who would not go to see again Forbes Robertson or John Gielgud playing the whole Hamlet, or John Barrymore?

The Historical School prides itself on its “objectivity,” in oppo-
sition to the “subjectivity” of the Romantics. For example, Professor Draper entitles his ambitious and thorough study, *The Hamlet of Shakespeare's Audience* (1938); he throws valuable light by reinter-
preting the characters in the light of Elizabethan psychological and social traditions and conventions, and resorts to a multitude of contemporary books to illustrate them. His assumption, however, is that there is such a pattern as the Elizabethan mind. What we have,
of course, is Professor Draper's conception of the Elizabethan mind.

Louise C. Turner Forest in an equally learned and penetrating essay sounds a Caveat for Critics Invoking Elizabethan Psychology which is worth recalling to those of us reared in the Historical School:

Elizabethan popular psychology was simply every man's private synthesis of observations of human behaviour understood in the light of whatever selections from whatever authorities appealed to him and, therefore, the overminute studies of our modern historical critics miss the truth by too-ingenious learning, and in their too-precise analysis ignore the actual Elizabethan situation and practice; and on the other hand, by oversimplifying and disregarding the very serious contrarieties in it, have missed the real nature of the thing they were investigating, have come to quite wrong conclusions about it and have presented us with an Elizabethan psychology that never existed. . . . Indeed, so much erudite nonsense has been talked about "Elizabethan psychology" in the last quarter of a century that it has come to seem either mortal ignorance or scholarly apostasy to challenge it. We may no longer read the Elizabethans and Jacobean for their plain poetical meanings; any phrase that speaks, however faulty, of souls and deeds, or of thoughts and feelings, we must interpret literally in terms of a mastered sixteenth century jargon.2

These dubious simplifications of Elizabethan psychology and social convention also turn out to be "Subjectivist."

The chief flaw, however, in the historical method is a failure to realize that Shakespeare as a poetic genius and dramatic artist was not merely a mouthpiece of contemporary fashion, but drew upon his own imaginative understanding of human life and rewove everything he derived into his own incomparable patterns. These patterns the Psychoanalytic and the Symbolist Schools attempt to reveal.

II

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC SCHOOL

What G. W. Stonier in his article "The Dark Passage" (The New Statesman and The Nation, December 6, 1947) terms the most
influential school of Hamlet criticism since Bradley's, appeared in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) which was elaborated by his disciple, Dr. Ernest Jones, in his noted essay, "The Problem of Hamlet and the Oedipus Complex." The main theme of Hamlet, according to these psychoanalysts, is a highly elaborated and disguised account of a boy's love for his mother and consequent jealousy of and hatred towards his uncle. Hamlet, because he has a mother fixation, cannot fulfill the Ghost's command to kill Claudius, because the murder was a deed Hamlet himself had long harbored in his unconscious. The undertone of his feeling is built on an inner identification with an envy of his uncle's deeds, as revealed in his words, "unpregnant of my cause."

Dr. Jones's essay has now been made generally available in the first volume of the *Vision* series (1947), which contains a reprint of the Hamlet text with modern drawings by F. Roberts Johnson. Four of them, by kind permission of R. P. Friedman, are reproduced in this issue of the Bulletin with comments by the artist and poet, Cloyd M. Criswell. They "breathe out the sombre menace of the tragedy, 'the very witching time of night'."

Dr. Frederic Wertham, Senior Psychiatrist in the New York Hospitals, in a contribution entitled "The Matricidal Impulse," takes issue with the Freud-Jones interpretation. He restudied the play in the light not of "patricidal" drive but of consuming hostility against the mother. The matricidal theme can be demonstrated from the text far more plausibly than the patricidal theory. Hamlet is a version rather of the Orestes Complex—much more closely parallel to Orestes' murder of his mother, Clytemnestra, than to Oedipus. An astonishing case that came under the observation of Dr. Wertham, the Italian boy, Gino, who viciously stabbed his mother to death, led Dr. Wertham to write an extended analysis in his *The Dark Legend, A Study in Murder*, drawing graphic parallels from Hamlet and Orestes.

Against critics of the Historical School who inveigh against such "anachronism" and modern "psychologizing" and raise the objection that Hamlet is not and never was a living personality, Dr. Wertham answers: "Literature is not the opposite of human social life; it is an
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important part of it. The story of Hamlet may be fictitious, but its content is true."

Lest we cast aside too readily at this point the psychoanalytic approach to literature, we may well read Lionel Trilling's critical estimate of its values and limitations in "Freud and Literature." In reviewing the Freud-Jones interpretation of \textit{Hamlet}, he contends against its disparagers that "it is the only systematic account of the human mind which in point of subtlety and complexity, of interest and tragic power, deserves to stand beside the chaotic mass of psychological insights which literature has accumulated through the centuries."

The difficulty, however, with the psychological approach is to find agreement amid the profusion of psychiatrists; for, as Dr. Wertham concedes, "practically every functional mental disorder has been adduced at one period or another by psychiatrists as the solution of \textit{Hamlet}. He has been described as having a psychosis and recovering during the play; developing a psychosis during the play; as merely malingering; as malingering and insane as well; as malingering and becoming insane during the play; as suffering from: hysteria, neurasthenia, hystero-neurasthenia, compulsive neurosis, manic-depressive psychosis, mania feigned by a melancholic, melancholia, \textit{melancholia attonita}, melancholic monomania, schizophrenia, schizophrenia feigned by an introvert, dementia praecox, schizoid personality, psychopathic personality, degeneracy; as a déséquilibré."

III

THE IMPRESSIONISTS AND SYMBOLISTS

Third are the Impressionists and Symbolists, who have recently become the most vocal of our Shakespeare critics. Deriving their inspiration principally from G. Wilson Knight's series of works, beginning with \textit{The Wheel of Fire} (1930), they believe, without regard to tradition, text or Elizabethan source materials, that Shakespeare was not of an age but for all time; and that the real meaning of his plays can be divined by tracing out by "insight" the underlying
patterns and poetic symbols. These so-called "New" Critics: Eliot, who long ago pronounced Hamlet "an artistic failure," Ransom, Tate, Cleanth Brooks in America, and L. C. Knights, F. R. Leavis and D. A. Traversi in England, have already been trenchantly dealt with in Oscar James Campbell's "Shakespeare and the 'New' Critics."6

Professor Campbell demonstrates that Shakespeare's imagination found expression in a "medley of metaphors," each one relevant only to some specific emotional situation rather than in an "integrated structure" or pattern for a whole play. Without reference to historical setting criticism is left wide open to endless preposterous vagaries. The free-ranging intuitions of G. Wilson Knight, for example, reduce the lovable Hamlet to the principle of Evil. Hamlet is the negative spirit of the Devil, Claudius, the wholesome positive principle of Good. Further degradation of Hamlet into a sort of contemptible Spaniard may be found in de Madariaga's On Hamlet (1948), reviewed in this issue.

Finally, to confound these Symbolists among themselves, comes another, Roy Walker, who in his address to the Shakespeare Club of Stratford, discovers symbols the very reverse of Knight's. Hamlet is the exact reflection of our own troubled times: Hamlet is the moral ideal, Claudius, the atom bomb!

"The only true 'Hamlet,' is one in which all the images are reconciled into significant harmony." To the philosophy of relative values the world seems tolerable enough: to the Prince inspired with more absolute criteria it is a prison.

We all know that the time is out of joint. While we talk of art and life, some of our fellows are making the night joint-labourer with the day, fashioning the weapons of atomic and bacteriological warfare, and we begin to accept that as 'normal,' as 'commonsense,' as one of the necessary 'uses of this world.' Our Western civilisation is terribly like the Elsinore of Claudius, and a great writer who died a few years ago, Max Plowman, said: "Hamlet is self-conscious man encompassed by a world of violence that demands of him the
traditional response of violence. The nations of Europe are now self-conscious entities surrounded by violence and individually incapable of imagination; our world, in fact, is the world of Hamlet; a world that has suffered injury and cries out for justice.”

Into this world, comes Shakespeare’s Hamlet, a spirit warning us that the threat is less from without than from within. We are summoned instead to the ordeal of imagination, promised that fidelity to what imagination perceives is redemption.

The world of Claudius is poisoned and doomed. Those who take their cue from the conscienceless rulers of this world are doomed also. Much youth and innocence will be destroyed by the poison and by the corruption of disciplines in themselves healthy and loyalties in themselves necessary. Over against this world is the vision ‘in the mind’s eye’ of a glory that was and is not. This vision is derided, persecuted, attacked on all sides, and may be destroyed altogether. Unavoidably it becomes corrupted fighting back with the world’s own weapons. Salvation lies in the effort to remain aware, to suffer the slings and arrows; out of such suffering nobly endured emerges a divine spontaneity: ‘The readiness is all.’

The Ghost is a symbol of a power greater than the usurper Claudius. . . . The Ghost is transformed in the eyes of the suffering hero from an armed warrior demanding revenge to a kindly father whose look moves his son to shed tears instead of blood.

Apparently there are as many symbolists disagreeing about the symbolic meaning of Hamlet as psychoanalysts about Hamlet’s complex. All readers continue to find themselves in Shakespeare’s universal tragedy.

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2PMLA, LXI, 3, September, 1946, pp. 651 ff.
3Journal of Criminal Psychopathology, II, 4, April, 1941.
4Duell, Sloan and Pearce, New York, 1941.
5The Kenyon Review, Spring, 1941.