HORATIO'S HAMLET

BY J. DUNCAN SPAETH

Thou liv'st. Report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.

THESE words of dying Hamlet suggest that he, or better his
creator, foresaw the varying judgments that posterity would
pass upon his character and his cause. These conflicting judg-
ments, stained with the variation of each soil through which the mind
of literary or theatrical interpreter has passed, have left and still leave
dissenters vexed and unsatisfied. The truth is, there are varying judg-
ments because the play itself portrays various, variable, and some-
times seemingly inconsistent Hamlets, presenting the facets of his
complex personality as reflected in the mirror which the other char-
acters of the play hold up to his nature. The enigma of his behavior,
the puzzle of his "meaning" is complicated by the change,—"trans-
formation" Claudius calls it—resulting from the revelation made by
the ghost. Not only is he a different Hamlet in different situations,
and in the presence of such different characters as Ophelia, his mother,
Polonius, Claudius, but for a large part of his time his words and acts
are calculated mystifications, intended not to reveal but to conceal his
true self. We must accordingly distinguish between Hamlet masked,
and Hamlet unmasked: between Polonius's Hamlet, Ophelia's
Hamlet, Gertrude's Hamlet, the Players' Hamlet, Osric's Hamlet,
Hamlet's Hamlet of the soliloquies, and Horatio's Hamlet.

Though there were depths and doubts, dark and devious passages
in Hamlet's nature that plain straight-forward Horatio could never
trace or fathom, the dying words of Hamlet indicate that Shakes-
peare intends us, if not to understand Hamlet as mirrored by Horatio,
(Horatio is no psycho-analyst) at least to judge him and his cause
aright in the defense delivered by his friend. In Horatio's Hamlet
there are none of the inconsistencies of conduct, the perplexing contradictions that result from his antic disposition that have left vestigial traces elsewhere in the play. Moreover Horatio's Hamlet is the Hamlet that wins our sympathy at the close, and Hamlet's last words to Horatio atone for his precedent cynicisms, his fits of irresolution, his paroxysms of futile frenzy, and prevent them from doing our ear that violence to make it truster of his own report against himself. In the old tale there is an unnamed foster-brother, who warns Hamlet of the plot of the King to entrap him by the seductions of a fair lady in love with him. Saxo calls him "collacteus," (fellow-nursling), "a cujus animo nondum sociae educationis respectus exciderat." Elton's translation "a foster-brother—who had not ceased to have regard for their common nurture," blurs the "recollection of a common education," emphasized by Shakespeare in developing this slight hint into a dramatic and perennially moving portrayal of a friendship begun in college days and outlasting the whips and scorns of time.

Shakespeare's Horatio does not seem to have known Ophelia, although in Saxo the "fair lady," like Horatio himself, was no stranger to Hamlet, and he was conciliated (sic) by the "vetus educationis societas," the old comradeship of schooldays. The "concubitus," in a remote fen, that Saxo reports is in itself no proof of previous coeducational cohabitations, or of the intimate relations between Ophelia and Hamlet that Señor Madariaga assumes as necessary to his interpretation of Hamlet. Horatio mentions Ophelia only once, and we are left in doubt whether he knew her. When a gentleman informs the Queen that Ophelia is distract, Horatio says: IV, v, 14.

"Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds.

In the grave-yard scene when Hamlet leaps into Ophelia's grave, Horatio restrains him, V, i, 259, "Good my Lord, be quiet," perhaps a reminiscence of his office as Hamlet's monitor, "officium monitoris" in Saxo. Hamlet who reveals his most intimate thoughts to Horatio, discusses with him all his secret plans, and begs Horatio to report him and his cause aright after he is gone, never once mentions Ophelia to his friend. It has often been remarked that Ophelia does not occupy Hamlet's thoughts in his soliloquies. The absence of any
mention of her in his intimate confidences to Horatio is equally remarkable. In their conversations there is no evidence of Hamlet's disillusionment in love, or his violent revulsion against sex, which appear in his soliloquies and in his conduct and remarks to Ophelia, to Polonius, and to his mother.

In our attempt to realize Shakespeare's intention, his "meaning" in the Hamlet-Horatio relationship, let us briefly review the scenes that throw light upon it.

1) Horatio accosts the Ghost (I, i, 40-175).

Horatio, a university student, above the superstitions of the vulgar, at first scoffs at Bernardo's story of the ghost that he and his fellow soldier claim to have seen: "Tush, tush, 'twill not appear." When it does, they say:

Thou art a scholar; speak to it.

But even Horatio trembles and looks pale when he sees the apparition:

I might not this believe
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes.

Straightway he decides to acquaint Hamlet with what they have seen:

As needful in our loves, fitting our duty.

Though above the soldiers in education, Horatio shows no sense of superiority but is at one with them in the equality of their common devotion and loyalty to Hamlet.

2) Horatio meets Hamlet and reports what he has seen (I, ii, 160-258).

Enter Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo.

Horatio: Hail to your lordship!
Hamlet: I am glad to see you well, Horatio!—or I do forget myself.
Horatio: The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.
Hamlet: Sir, my good friend; I'll change that name with you.
And what make you from Wittenberg, Horatio?
Horatio: A truant disposition, good my lord.
Hamlet: I would not hear your enemy say so,
Nor shall you do my ear that violence,
To make it truster of your own report
Against yourself: I know you are no truant.
But what is your affair in Elsinore?

Note that this conversation occurs immediately after Hamlet's soliloquy, "O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt" with its physical revulsion against the "carnal" infection of the world.

Fie on't! Oh fie, fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

Horatio's presence momentarily dispels Hamlet's morbid mood. Evidently Hamlet has not seen Horatio for sometime but he quickly recognizes him. "Horatio, or do I forget myself." They have been fellow-students at Wittenberg. Claudius has refused Hamlet permission to return.

For your intent
In going back to school in Wittenberg.
It is most retrograde to our desire.

Laertes, the man of the world, the gay courtier, goes to France. Hamlet, the student, goes to Germany to study at the University made famous by Martin Luther. No wonder the Germans have shown a special interest in explaining Hamlet's "Weltanschauung"! Did they not consider themselves responsible for his education?

Note also the emphasis on the "democracy" of a college friendship in this meeting between Hamlet and Horatio. Hamlet, a prince of the blood, rich and distinguished, (Ophelia's Renaissance prince); Horatio poor, with no revenue but his good spirits, a commoner with no influential connections, but both gentlemen and scholars! Horatio greets Hamlet by his title; "Hail to your lordship"; when he adds "My lord, and your poor servant ever," Hamlet replies "Sir, my good friend, I'll change that name with you." When Horatio, answering Hamlet's query: "what are you doing away from College," says "Taking cuts," Hamlet retorts: "I know you better, you are no truant," and this leads to the ensuing longer conversation about the
ghost, which is as important for the plot of the play, as the brief introductory interchange is for the characterization of Hamlet.

(Cf. Wordsworth Prelude IX, 225, when he praises “academic institutes.”)

And rules, that they held something up to view
Of a Republic, where all stood thus far
Upon equal ground, that we were brothers all
In honour, as in one community
Scholars and gentlemen.)

3) Hamlet, Horatio, and the Ghost Scenes (I, iv, and v). Horatio, carrying out his promise, watches with Hamlet and Marcellus at midnight on the platform, (I, iv, 1-38). Note that Horatio’s first concern is for Hamlet’s safety when the ghost beckons him to go away with it. “You shall not go, my lord; be ruled you shall not go.” And when Hamlet breaks away Horatio says: “He waxes desperate with imagination,” (I, iv, 87).

4) Hamlet’s meeting with Horatio after the Ghost’s disclosure (I, v, 112-191).

Hamlet’s first impulse is to keep the ghost’s revelation to himself; he repels with ironic riddling words Horatio’s “What news, my lord?” But Horatio’s evident hurt at his wild and whirling words, causes him to relent: “I’m sorry they offend you, heartily; Yes, faith, heartily.” He takes both Horatio and Marcellus into his confidence as “friends, scholars, soldiers” and though he does not reveal until later and to Horatio alone, what the ghost has told him,

For your desire to know what is between us,
O’er master it as you may. . .

he does confide to them his intention to put an antic disposition on and swears them never to betray that they are privy to his ruse.

. . . Let us go in together;
And still your finger on your lips, I pray.

As they stand back to give him precedence in leaving he says: “Nay, come, let’s go together.”
(These comments focus only the light thrown on Hamlet's relation to Horatio. There is, of course, much else, that Horatio never dreamed of in his philosophy.)


Shakespeare as is his manner emphasizes Horatio's Hamlet by way of dramatic contrast, with the Hamlet of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Like Horatio, they are boyhood friends and fellow-students of Hamlet, but while Horatio puts friendship above self-interest, they put self-interest and advancement at court, above friendship, crooking the pregnant hinges of the knee where thrift may follow fawning. Whereas Hamlet's conduct and conversation is like a suit whose wrinkles betray his own peculiar and personal form and habit, theirs is creased into conformity with convention. Hamlet is unpredictable. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are a perfectly predictable pair, unoriginal and uniform, true to type, and nothing else. They react alike and the same epithets apply equally to either.

King: Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern.
Queen: Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz.

(It wouldn't make any difference if you called them Rosenstern and Guildencrantz.)

We learn (II, ii, 1-40) that the King has sent for them to use them in discovering the reasons for Hamlet's strange behavior,—"transformation; so I call it," and "being of so young days brought up with [Hamlet]," thinks they may succeed where he has failed. The Queen testifies to Hamlet's friendly feelings toward them:

Good gentlemen, he hath much talk'd of you;
And sure I am two men there are not living
To whom he more adheres. (II, ii, 19-21)

This is the background Shakespeare provides for their first meeting with Hamlet (II, ii, 226.) immediately after his interview with Polonius whom he has dismissed as a tedious old fool. As in his meeting with Horatio, he counters their formal bows and salute,—"my honor'd lord!" "My most dear lord"—with a hearty handshake.
of friendship, "My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern? Ah Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do ye both." After some playful banter and bawdy repartee such as he never indulges in with Horatio, they offer to wait on him, and Hamlet replies: "No such matter. I will not sort you with the rest of my servants," and with a change of voice from jest to seriousness: "But in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?" When Rosencrantz replies: "To visit you, my lord; no other occasion," Hamlet retorts: "Come, deal justly with me . . . the good King and Queen have sent for you." —And he makes a last appeal to them to side with ingenuous youth against scheming age, to put honesty above policy, and friendship above feigning.

Hamlet: Let me conjure you by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love, and by what more dear a better proposer could charge you withal, be even and direct with me, whether you were sent for or no!

Rosencrantz (Aside to Guildenstern): What say you?

Hamlet (Aside): Nay, then, I have an eye of you.

If you love me, hold not off.

Guildenstern: My lord, we were sent for.

When they confess they were sent for to spy on him, he anticipates their attempt to pluck out the heart of his mystery by his famous speech: "I have of late—but wherefore I know not—[he knows very well] lost all my mirth" (II, ii, 297-324). The subject is suddenly changed by their announcement of the arrival of the players, a palpable piece of stitch work in the plot, for the purpose of preparing for a necessary question of the play to be later considered. When they report to the King their interview with Hamlet, (III, i, 1-15) the Queen asks "Did he receive you well?" and Rosencrantz replies: "Most like a gentleman." In his speech to Horatio (III, ii, 75) Hamlet praises friends who "are not a pipe for Fortune's finger to sound what stop she please." Shakespeare remembered the figure and dramatized it in the brief but thrilling scene (III, ii, 360-390) in which Hamlet finishes with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
6) Hamlet's Horatio. After Hamlet conceives the plan to catch the conscience of the King by the play (II, ii, 633), he confides it to Horatio, (III, ii, 50-92).

When half-friends go, the friend arrives:

*Exeunt* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

*Hamlet:* What ho! Horatio!

*Enter* Horatio.

*Horatio:* Here, sweet lord, at your service.

*Hamlet:* Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man as e'er my conversation cop'd withal!

*Horatio:* O, my dear lord,—

*Hamlet:* Nay, do not think I flatter,

For what advancement may I hope from thee

That no revenue hast but thy good spirits

To feed and clothe thee? Why should the poor be flatter'd?

No, let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp,

And crook the pregnant hinges of the knee

Where thrift may follow fawning. Dost thou hear?

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice

And could of men distinguish, her election

Hath seal'd thee for herself; for thou hast been

As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,

A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards

Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those

Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled,

That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger

To sound what stop she please. Give me that man

That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him

In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,

As I do thee.—Something too much of this.—

There is a play to-night before the King:

This is Hamlet's most significant speech to Horatio, and reveals Hamlet's real self, the sound core of his inmost being that he lets only Horatio see. The cutting of this passage, as is frequently done in the
theatre, destroys one of Shakespeare's main guides to the understanding of Hamlet. Horatio's Hamlet not only corrects Hamlet's Hamlet of the soliloquies, but Ophelia's Hamlet, as he was mirrored in her mind before and after the shock that cracked her mirror.

7) Hamlet's Return to Denmark. Hamlet's letter to Horatio from the ship, announcing his return to Denmark (IV, vi, 12-33) and his account of his adventure with the pirates, and his alteration of the letter of Claudius, are essential to the plot, but add little to the characterization except as they confirm our estimate of Horatio as Hamlet's only trusted friend. Though Horatio heard Hamlet tell (V, ii, 46) how he had conjured the King of England to the bearers of the letters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "to sudden death, not shriving time allow'd," he tells the ambassador from England, after it is all over, (V, ii, 385), "He never gave commandment for their death." Was this an inadvertence on Shakespeare's part, or did he intend to represent Horatio as protecting Hamlet against dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds, ignorant of the truth and the real reasons responsible for an apparently wanton act of cruelty, as though Shakespeare were saying: "The old play made him do it, but I don't want you to believe it." Hamlet's last words to Horatio:

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Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;
Thou liv'st; report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.

Horatio: Never believe it:
I am more an antique Roman than a Dane;
Here's yet some liquor left.

Hamlet: As thou'rt a man,
Give me the cup. Let go! By heaven, I'll have't!
O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity a while
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.
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[March afar off, and shot within.]

What warlike noise is this?

Osric: Young Fortinbras, with conquest come from Poland,
To the ambassadors of England gives
This warlike volley.

Hamlet: O, I die, Horatio;
The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit.
I cannot live to hear the news from England
But I do prophesy th' election lights
On Fortinbras; he has my dying voice.
So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less,
Which have solicited—The rest is silence.

[Dies.]

Horatio: Now cracks a noble heart. Goodnight, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

At the close Hamlet speaks his last words to Horatio. It is as though Shakespeare said: "Remember Hamlet, as Horatio knew him." Horatio's Hamlet is Shakespeare's final bequest to the unsatisfied. His own most original contribution to the character of Hamlet which he inherited, is in the soliloquies that give us insights into fathomless deeps of human nature. The Hamlet of the soliloquies is the passionate thinker who fain would pierce the veil of seeming. The irony of fate makes him who knows not seeming put on the mask of seeming to penetrate the seeming of others. Shakespeare, master of characterization by contrast, sets the skepticism of Hamlet beside the dogmatism of Polonius, Hamlet's despair of attaining the Truth with Polonius' cocksureness that he can find it, though it were hid in the centre, as he contrasts the hesitation and vacillation of Hamlet with the impulsive forthrightness and haste of Laertes in avenging his father's death. Hamlet's problem is peculiarly the problem of the scholar, the thinker, the intellectual, the man of questioning analytic mind who looks before he leaps, who weighs before he concludes, who is conscious of the risk involved in all action, who knows he can change his mind but never his deed, whose self-scrutiny corrodes his self-confidence. It is interesting that the most brilliant modern exposition of Hamlet as the type of the skeptic paralyzed by doubt has been that of Ivan Turgenief (too little known) in which he contrasts Hamlet and Don Quixote as the eternal Human Types. And it is ironic that this indictment of Hamlet, a Scandinavian Nor-
die, as an impotent dreamer, should come from a Slavic genius. The doubter of the Hamlet type risks nothing and loses all. Faith is willingness to risk. Love is willingness to risk. Courage is willingness to risk. Hamlet's love is blighted, his faith in friends undermined, his courage not quenched but made to seem irrelevant. But from the last stage of utter spiritual desolation, reached by Macbeth when learning that Lady Macbeth was dead he cried: "She should have died hereafter,—Life's a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," Hamlet is saved by his love for Horatio. A retainer says to Lear: "Thou hast one daughter who redeems nature from the general curse that twain have brought her to." So Shakespeare says to Hamlet at the close: Thou hast one friend who redeems nature from the general curse that twain, the King and Gertrude, have brought her to.

To the very end this love and trust and faith refreshed his spirit, like a fountain in a dry land, and it is through this love at the close that Shakespeare touches in our hearts the springs of human affection, pity and awe, so that we say with Horatio as Hamlet's voice is hushed in death,

Now cracks a noble heart
Good night, Sweet Prince!

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THE F. ROBERTS JOHNSON HAMLET ILLUSTRATIONS

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