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Understanding "Hamlet"

LYSANDER KEMP¹

NO MASTERPIECE in our literature is subjected to so much scrutiny, and gives rise to so many theories and pronouncements, as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It has been "explained" as a case of the Oedipus complex and of the Orestes complex; it has been viewed in the crepuscular light of Elizabethan ideas of melancholy; it has been declared ultimately inexplicable because ultimately an artistic failure. But despite the labors of so many scholars, critics, and psychoanalysts, the problem of what happens in *Hamlet* has never been solved to the satisfaction of any majority of its readers.

It is rash to offer another interpretation—the interpretation, no less—in the face of a hundred distinguished failures. But the fact of the matter is, quite simply, that all the interpreters, without exception, have worked under a misunderstanding which is the direct cause of their failure. This misunderstanding, this false assumption, is that Claudius was guilty of the murder of his brother, King Hamlet. Claudius was *not* guilty of that murder. True, he used the occasion of his brother's death to acquire both his throne and his queen; and the latter acquisition was in those times incestuous, so that he was a sinner; but he was not a murderer. I repeat, he was *not* guilty of his brother's murder.

Preposterous? On the face of it, yes. But first let us consider the source of our information about King Hamlet's death. The source is, of course, the Ghost of the

murdered king (for he *was* murdered). By his own open admission, King Hamlet was fast asleep in his orchard when the crime was perpetrated! He begins his story, told to Hamlet his son on the battlements of Elsinore, "Sleeping within my orchard," describes with what quicksilver rapidity the poison worked, and concludes,

Thus was I sleeping by a brother's hand
Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched.

It is obvious that a man killed in his sleep, even though he later has the power to return from the grave, is not the most reliable of witnesses, for the simple fact that he is *not* a witness but merely the oblivious victim. His story and his false accusation are so powerfully expressed, under such awesome circumstances, that his son believes him at the moment of telling. Moreover, the Prince is so profoundly horrified by the sinful and hasty marriage and the lack of proper mourning that he is ready to believe almost anything about his uncle and his mother. We are not in the same emotional state and should not permit ourselves to be convinced so easily.

Why, then, does the Ghost accuse his brother? The answer is not difficult: he is even more horrified than Hamlet by the behavior of Gertrude and Claudius; his pride is deeply wounded; and, quite understandably, his anger is great. He knows he was murdered, and it is easy to assume that his lecherous brother must have committed the crime. Per-

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fectly reasonable—and perfectly mistaken. John Barrymore, who knew the play intimately from having performed it for so long, grew suspicious of the reliability of the Ghost, though he failed to carry his suspicions far enough. In *Good Night, Sweet Prince*, Fowler quotes him as saying:

The ghost, if I may be so impertinent as to have a personal opinion, actually is the God-damnedest bore since the ancient time when Job began to recite his catechism of clinical woes. Talks his head off. I am sure that Shakespeare modeled him after some unbearable bore back in Stratford, some town pest who got on everyone's nerves; the sort of stupid bastard whose wife was bound to cheat on him out of sheer ennui.

This is strongly stated; but in the main it is not unjust.

Before we go further, two other matters regarding Claudius' supposed guilt must be cleared up. The first is the apparent proof of his guilt in the play-within-a-play scene, when he convinces Hamlet that he is the murderer by rising and rushing out. The proof seems absolute to Hamlet, misled as he has been by the fictions of his father. It is fear, however, not guilt, which motivates Claudius here. He knows that Hamlet has behaved strangely and even dangerously for some time; he has attributed this to Hamlet's ambition to gain the throne that was snatched from him. Now, for the first time, Hamlet threatens him overtly. As Lucianus enters to pour the poison into the ear of the player-king, Hamlet remarks to Claudius, in words heavy with meaning, "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king." Not brother, but nephew. Hamlet is nephew to Claudius; the nephew murders the player-king; therefore, Hamlet means to murder King Claudius. And although Claudius is a brave man, this open and crazy threat, following up-

on the many examples of what he earlier called Hamlet's "turbulent and dangerous lunacy," unsettles him so much that he bolts off the stage. The Prince is now sure and elated; he is nonetheless mistaken.

The other matter that seems to prove Claudius guilty is the prayer scene, when Hamlet, on his way to visit his mother, finds the King alone and in prayer. Before Hamlet enters we hear the King say,

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder.

This seems like a clear confession, substantiating beyond doubt the charge of the Ghost. But it is the only scene in the whole play which cannot, as it stands, be shown to substantiate, or at least to admit, the idea that Claudius was not the murderer; and the fact that it is the only such scene should make us suspicious of it. What happens if we move the stage direction, "*Enter Hamlet*," from the end of the King's soliloquy to the beginning? It will not be the first time that the text has been shuffled a bit. In discussing Hamlet's "Get thee to a nunnery" scene with Ophelia, Dover Wilson in *What Happens in Hamlet* asserts that in Act II, scene 2, Hamlet should enter as Polonius says "I'll loose my daughter to him," although the stage directions have him entering six lines later; whereas, in discussing the very same point, Dr. Frederic Wertham in *Dark Legend* not only asserts that the entrance cue is properly placed but that in the "nunnery" scene, contrary to stage tradition, Hamlet has no notion that he is being overheard. Therefore, let us take the very small liberty of suggesting that Hamlet enters at the *beginning* of the King's soliloquy. What happens is that

the scene gains in drama, in tension. Now that he has had time to think, Claudius has realized that Hamlet must have had more up his sleeve than a reckless and pointless threat; and remembering that Hamlet called the play his "Mouse-trap" and that King Hamlet died like the player-king in an orchard, he has rightly concluded that Hamlet thinks he murdered his own brother. Now, in the prayer scene, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave him, and then Polonius leaves him, and he is alone. At that moment, if we move up the stage direction, Hamlet enters with blood in his eye—the last words Hamlet spoke were:

Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.

True, these words were spoken regarding his mother, but Claudius has no way of knowing this. All he knows is that he is trapped alone with a bloodthirsty madman. Hamlet has not yet seen him. What shall he do? He is a quick-witted man: he drops to his knees, confesses to a murder he did not commit but which the madman *thinks* he committed, and pretends to pray forgiveness for his "crime." And the device works: after one hideous moment of tension, in which Hamlet holds his sword aloft, Claudius is saved because the Prince decides to wait until later for his revenge. I submit that, although this reading of the scene requires some slight tampering with the text, it requires much less than any other of the many attempts to explain the play. I submit that an explanation which requires the least tampering is an explanation which most deserves careful consideration.

So much, then, for the innocence of King Claudius. The big question still remains: Who *was* the murderer? I ask the

reader to give his attention to the final scene of the play and to these questions: Who, besides Fortinbras, is the only character of any significance to survive the holocaust? Who is the only living man able to give the world a version—*his* version—of what has been happening in Denmark? Who is the man who has been intrusted to inform Fortinbras that Hamlet named him for the throne? Who is the only man who may expect to have Fortinbras' confidence and to be rewarded with a high post? Horatio! Yes, Horatio, the "friend" of Hamlet; he is top dog now among the Danes. Are we to believe, really and truly believe—though we have believed it for so long—that he came out top dog by accident? I think we are not. I think we are not, simply because Horatio killed King Hamlet.

Preposterous? Again, on the face of it, yes. But preposterous only because we have been misreading the play for so long. First, what was the motive? The motive was to achieve high station in Denmark by killing Hamlet's father so that his good friend would become king; in other words, the motive was ambition. Is this a preposterous motive? Second, how did he commit the crime? He committed it exactly as the Ghost narrated—the poor Ghost was correct in every fact but the identity of his slayer. From that point on, Horatio could manipulate events very little, but he had created a situation which in the end played directly into his hands—his "good friend" Hamlet was dead but his new friend Fortinbras would satisfy his ambition.

It is not my intent to go into great detail to substantiate these statements. I wish only to point out a few items of fact that will show them true. The first is the fact that, although we are led to believe that Hamlet and Horatio were

both at Wittenberg for quite some time prior to the news of King Hamlet's death, Hamlet is not quick to recognize Horatio in Act I, scene 2. Horatio, entering with Marcellus and Bernardo, cries, "Hail to your lordship!" Hamlet answers abstractedly, "I am glad to see you well." Then, recognizing him, he says, "Horatio—" but adds "or I do forget myself." And Horatio has to assure him, "The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever." There is reason here to believe that Hamlet has not seen Horatio for a somewhat longer period than the few weeks since the King's death. We have every right to believe that Horatio absented himself from Wittenberg quite some time earlier, to plot and to execute King Hamlet's death. How else can we explain the near-miss in recognition? Then there is the item of Horatio's attitude toward the Ghost. In Scene I of the play he refuses to believe that the Ghost exists—of course, of course . . . because, if the Ghost exists, it may know who committed the murder and may reveal the murderer. That is, it may accuse Horatio himself. No wonder he indulges in wishful thinking; no wonder he pooh-poohs the stolid and unimaginative soldiers who declared they saw it. Then, when he sees it himself, he says, "It harrows me with fear and wonder," and we now know what he is wondering and what he fears. Moreover, he is under the painful necessity of informing Hamlet that the Ghost of his father has appeared at Elsinore. If he refuses to tell him, Marcellus will tell him anyhow, and the refusal will give added weight to what he fears the Ghost is going to say. But the situation is not hopeless—for one thing, he can attempt to convince Hamlet that the Ghost is an evil spirit. Out on the battlement he says to Hamlet:

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That beetles o'er his base into the sea,
And there assumes some other horrible form,
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason,
And draw you into madness? think of it. . . .

If, however, Hamlet *does* speak with the Ghost, and the Ghost *does* reveal his true slayer, Horatio may then claim that Hamlet has lost his mind. He tries to restrain Hamlet physically but fails; the Prince will talk with the Ghost. Therefore, Horatio motions the soldiers to follow, saying, "He waxes desperate with imagination." And when Hamlet returns from the interview and speaks excitedly, Horatio says, "These are but wild and whirling words, my lord." He is ready for the worst. Hamlet, however, gives no indication at that moment of what the Ghost has said, and so Horatio keeps mum and bides his time. Shortly he is informed by Hamlet that the Ghost said Claudius was the murderer. He breathes a sigh, not only of relief, but also of joy. His plan to put Hamlet on the throne and reap the benefits has gone askew with Claudius' usurpation, but the Ghost's befuddled version of the murder has put affairs back on the right track again: Hamlet now means to kill Claudius and take the throne, and Horatio can still win out. He has only to wait—to help Hamlet, encourage him to kill the king, and ultimately accept the rewards due a loyal "friend." At the very end, matters work out somewhat differently, for Hamlet too is killed. But Horatio has established himself so firmly that he may expect as much from Fortinbras as from the Prince; his wicked ambition will soon be achieved.

With these facts in mind, and with the notion that Claudius is the murderer

eradicated, we may now see how the events of the play fall readily into place. We no longer have to ask, "What happens in *Hamlet*?" Above all, we no longer have to puzzle over Hamlet's behavior or to wrestle with Freudian and other theories, for the Prince's delays and inconsistencies are now easily explicable. He *seems* to have utter proof of Claudius' guilt, but it is from sources that will not stand up in any court. For example, you cannot hail a Ghost before the judge. Hamlet quite justifiably becomes suspicious of the Ghost's story. Very well, he will test it—and does so in the play-within-a-play. But even after *that* "proof" he is still, at least subconsciously, in doubt: even when Claudius, in self-defense, is trying to do away with him, Hamlet is not wholly sure. He asks Horatio, in the very last scene of the play, if it is not now "perfect conscience" to kill the king. He could not ask this

question if, deep inside, he did not harbor a doubt, an uncertainty. Thus Hamlet's delays are clearly explained by the conflict between the apparent facts, which are not facts at all, and the promptings of his instincts or soul or subconscious, which are right. And the simplicity of the explanation is the measure of its superiority to the ingenious and fanciful theories hitherto proffered.

A final word: Although the play seems most depressing if read in this way—the hero dead because he operated under a delusion, the villain triumphant and ready to take the spoils of triumph—we must shun the compulsive desire for a happy ending, or at least an ending in which evil is roundly punished. The Hollywood movies, of which we have all seen too many, invariably punish the villain at the end. In life, unfortunately, it is not always so. Shakespeare was too great an artist to pretend that it is.

The Romantic Unity of "Kubla Khan"

RICHARD HARTER FOGLE¹

IN HIS valuable book on *Keats' Craftsmanship*, M. R. Ridley has cited *Kubla Khan* along with the "magic casements" passage of Keats's "Nightingale" ode as the very essence of "the distilled sorceries of Romanticism," and his statement is more or less typical. This concept of "romantic magic" has its sanction and is by no means to be discarded as pointless. In practice, however, it has had the unfortunate effect of discouraging critical analysis; and it likewise plays into the hands of those of our contemporaries who

incline to look upon Romantic poetry as a kind of moonlit mist, which dissolves at the touch of reality and reason.

The fascinating but uncritical study of Lowes, with its emphasis upon the irrational and the unconscious, and its untiring quest for sources, has had an equally unfortunate and discouraging influence. Only recently, with the work of Elisabeth Schneider and others who have pointed the way, has it become possible to think of *Kubla Khan* as other than a kind of magnificent freak and to treat it as an intelligible poem which lies open to critical examination. And the influence of Lowes still imposes upon

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