Hamlet's Age and the Earl of Southampton

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-9143-6
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9143-1

To Mikkel and Simon, two brilliant actors who can certainly do justice to Hamlet (and bring him to justice as well).

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PREFACE

As Stuart M. Kurland quite correctly has observed, critics who look for topicality in Shakespearean drama have to tiptoe through the tulips and modestly aim to "inform, rather than determine (or supplant), interpretation."[1] In other words, they must not upset the "scholars of the impersonal school," to coin John Dover Wilson's phrase. Kurland quotes David Bevington who feels that although *Hamlet* offers a rich field for topicality, the play also "reveals perhaps most clearly the basic error of the lockpicking sleuth" and Leah S. Marcus who observes that "even for Renaissance specialists, [topicality] carries a faint but distinct odor of disreputability."

Writing about Shakespeare's sonnets, the eminent Samuel Schoenbaum advocates caution as well:

> If the persona of the sonnets addresses us with the resonance of authenticity, so do Shylock and Hamlet. Here as elsewhere, the biographer, in his eagerness for answers to the unanswerable, runs the risk of confusing the dancer with the dance.[2]

Schoenbaum's argument, however, although meant as a warning against reading autobiographical features into the sonnets, may also

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[1] Stuart M. Kurland, "*Hamlet* and the Scottish Succession?" *Studies in English Literature*, 34,2, 1994, p. 279

[2] Samuel Schoenbaum: *William Shakespeare, A Compact Documentary Life*, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 180

resemble a subtle invitation to look for crypto-portraits of real Elizabethans in the dramas. I actually believe that both of the characters Schoenbaum mentions, Shylock and Hamlet, to some extent had real-life models. Fear of disreputability should not deter anyone for the very simple reason that although lockpicking may lead us astray, we are most surely on a truer track than if we suppose that Shakespeare invented his characters out of thin air. No great writer of fiction ever worked like that.

I remember reading an old anecdote about a young and hopeful writer-to-be who submitted the script of his first novel to a publishing house. To appear professional, the young man had adorned his front page with the standard disclaimer, "Any resemblance to actual characters or events is entirely coincidental and unintentional." His submission was rejected, and, before returning the script, the editor had encircled the disclaimer and added, "This is exactly what's wrong with your novel."

Ernest Hemingway, for one, would agree with the editor in the anecdote, for, as he said, 'You invent fiction, but what you invent it out of is what counts. True fiction must come from everything you've ever known, ever seen, ever felt, ever learned."[3] Hemingway ought to know; Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* is an amalgam of three different women in Hemingway's life, just as Mark Twain's Huck Finn was based on an acquaintance from the author's boyhood, Tom Blankenship, and Tom Sawyer was a mix of one John Briggs, one Will Bowen and Twain himself. Writers of fiction, whether consciously so or not, draw on experiences with people they have known and put their faith in Dryden's maxim, "Art may err, but Nature cannot miss."

[3] A.E. Hotchner, *Papa Hemingway: A Personal Memoir*, Da Capo Press, 2009, p. 103

We have ample proof that Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights and poets deliberately penned crypto-portraits of real people in the hope that their characters would be perceived as such by their audiences (but not by the authorities who made laws against it). Besides, to dismiss topicality is to argue against Hamlet who flatly states in III.2 that the purpose of playing "both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." How should this be achieved without topical references?

The first part of this present volume attempts to outline the strange route by which the character of Hamlet achieved a kind of cultural apotheosis that gradually detached him from real life and propelled him into a remote sphere of unearthliness—at least in criticism. This must most decidedly be at variance with Shakespeare's idea. The task of the artist is to seize the specific and bless it with general significance, but in the case of the Danish prince, the general significance has turned out so general that the character may be—well, anything, really; a young lover, a political rebel, an oedipal basket case, a madman, a poet, a philosopher, an actor, a woman.

The second part of *Hamlet's Age and the Earl of Southampton* investigates Hamlet as a crypto-portrait of the only personal patron whom we know Shakespeare had. I presented the theory in my doctoral dissertation, *Staging Shakespeare's Hamlet*,[4] and while preparing this in 2003, I discussed the matter with Professor Ingeborg Nixon who mildly objected, "I've never considered Southampton particularly bright." Far from dissuading me, Nixon's opinion left me wondering why exactly it is

[4] Lars Kaaber, *Staging Shakespeare's Hamlet*, Edwin Mellen Press, 2005

that we think of Hamlet as particularly bright. Nevertheless, I responded to my professor's advice to the extent of relegating my Southampton theory to an appendix. Now, however, after having reflected on the matter for more than a decade, I intrepidly perform an appendectomy and present the theory in an individual publication.

My thanks to Vibeke Geyer and Siff Pors for going carefully through the script with keen eyes and red pens, to Mogens Christensen who assisted me in my research on Renaissance universities, and to Nikolaj Olsen who helped me when I had to scour up my old Latin that hath lain long rusting.

All act, scene and line numbers refer to Harold Jenkins (ed.), *Hamlet*, the Arden Shakespeare edition, Methuen & Co., 1982

PART I

HAMLET'S AGE

"Quarrel in a Straw"

The Origin of the Debate

As a rule, we willingly apply the suspension of disbelief in the theatre. We make allowances when for instance the penniless, starving artists in *La Boheme* are overweight as long as they sing well, and, at the other end of the scales, no one ever seems to have minded that the role of Peter Pan, the perpetual boy, has traditionally been performed by small, slender actresses. After all, theatre is an art because it is not reality, and as long as a performance works, details like age, looks or sex will hardly bother the audience. Nevertheless, the question of Prince Hamlet's exact age has been the topic of scholarly debates, and sometimes heated ones, for almost two and a half centuries.

In 1935, John Dover Wilson tried to settle the matter by stating that "Hamlet is the age his impersonator makes him."[1] This would indeed give us some scope. Richard Burbage was thirty-four when *Hamlet* opened in 1601; David Garrick, the star of British Theatre in the 18th century, played Hamlet from the age of twenty-five; John Philip Kemble was twenty-six when he first tackled the role; Edmund Kean was twenty-seven; John Gielgud thirty, Richard Burton thirty-nine; and Laurence Olivier was

[1] John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, Cambridge University Press, 1935, p. 27

forty-one when his *Hamlet* film premiered in 1948 (whereas Eileen Herlie, Hamlet's mother in the film, was thirty—eleven years her son's junior). Only a few Hamlets have gone down in history as obviously miscast due to age, such as William Henry West Betty, "Master Betty," the child prodigy who played Hamlet in 1805 when he was thirteen, and the illustrious Thomas Betterton who would not relinquish the role until 1709 when he was seventy-four.

In any case, age is a relative concept. Director and actor John Bell played Hamlet at age twenty-two, and he reports how he was desperately applying wrinkles to his face with a make-up pen when a co-actor in the dressing room asked him how old he intended to look. "Thirty!" Bell responded and applied even more wrinkles.[2] When you are twenty-two, thirty seems like the Grauballe Man.

For the time being, so much for Hamlet on the stage.

Hamlet in the study is an altogether different matter. Literary critics are a litigious and an opinionated breed and often impregnable to stage magic, even if they should venture out of their armchairs to attend a performance. Hamlet's age is an academic question but still an interesting one, not only because critics have wrangled over it for so long, but also because the answer—be it sixteen, eighteen or thirty—tends to launch a chain reaction that affects several aspects of the tragedy.

In Shakespeare's play, the Gravedigger (or Clown, as he is called in the play texts) seems unequivocally to give us Hamlet's age as thirty in Act V, scene 1 of the versions to which we usually adhere, the *First Folio* and *Quarto 2*. The Gravedigger states that he came to his trade on the day "that our last King Hamlet o'ercame Fortinbras" (V.1, 139-40). When

[2] John Bell, *On Shakespeare*, Allen & Unwin, 2011, p. 419

Hamlet pretends not to know the time of this event, the Gravedigger (probably unaware that he is addressing the Prince) adds that "It was the very day that young Hamlet was born" (V.1, 142-3) and follows this up with, "I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years" (V.1, 156-7). This seems conclusively to settle the matter: Hamlet is thirty. In order to exemplify the process of decomposition, the Gravedigger then turns up a skull "that hath lien i'th'earth three and twenty years" (V.1, 166-7) and states that, "This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the King's jester" (V.1, 174-5)—which occasions Hamlet to reminisce about Yorick whom he knew in his childhood. According to the authorised version of the play, Hamlet was seven when Yorick died twenty-three years ago.

The span of thirty years is also mentioned in *The Murder of Gonzago*, the Play within the Play which Hamlet requests for the court performance in Act III. In this the Player King states that "Full thirty time hath Phoebus' cart gone round […] And thirty dozen moons with borrow'd sheen/ About the world have times twelve thirties been/ Since love our hearts and Hymen did our hands/ Unite commutual in most sacred bands" (III.3, 150-5). On the day before the court performance, Hamlet asks the First Player to "study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" which he intends to insert in *The Murder of Gonzago*. It appears from III.2, 1-5 that he has indeed written some lines and even read them aloud to the actors ("Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you"), but Shakespeare does not specify which lines Hamlet has added. It may be the speech in which Lucianus poisons the sleeping king ("Thoughts black, hands apt," etc.) as A.C. Bradley and John Dover Wilson suppose.[3] This would be consistent with Hamlet's words to Horatio that King Claudius'

[3] A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, (1904), St. Martin's Press, New York, 1992, p. 111; Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, p. 194

"occulted guilt" will "itself unkennel in *one speech*" (III.2, 80-1), as well as with Hamlet's observation after the performance that the King reacted "Upon the talk of poisoning" (III.2, 283). However, the King seems rather to react upon Hamlet's commentary to the play, and there is a chance that the extra lines may be the ones describing the length of the Player King's marriage. If these are not the lines he penned himself, Hamlet may still have requested *The Murder of Gonzago* because the play opens with a reference to a royal couple who has been married for as long as his parents; it is upon this mention of a thirty-year-marriage and the Player Queen's hypocritical speech on fidelity that Hamlet comments "Wormwood, wormwood" (III.2, 176). In brief, Hamlet may have chosen *The Murder of Gonzago* because of its reference to thirty years and then added the lines about the poisoning, or he may have chosen the play because of the poisoning and inserted the mention of the thirty-year-marriage—we cannot know which. The murder in the Play within the Play is not committed by the king's brother but by his nephew; if Hamlet has rewritten the poisoning scene in order to make it resemble the murder of his father, why has he not clarified the analogy by letting the Player King be murdered by his brother? As it stands, Hamlet even adds in a running commentary that "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King" (III.2, 239), and, as Nigel Alexander observes, Claudius may perceive the performance as a murder threat from his nephew as well as a revelation of his own crime.[4]

If the court performance in Act III contains an intended mention of the length of Old Hamlet's marriage to Gertrude, and if we assume that Gertrude gave birth to Hamlet in the first year of her marriage, then

[4] Nigel Alexander, *Poison, Play and Duel*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1971, p. 94

Hamlet would be approximately thirty years old. The performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* seems designed by Hamlet to catch not only the conscience of the King but also that of Queen Gertrude, as Hibbard observes.[5] In fact, Hamlet seems more focused on his mother's inconstancy than on his uncle's crime, which becomes abundantly clear after Claudius has responded to the play as expected: although the king's guilt must by then be considered adequately unkennelled, Hamlet deliberately misses his best opportunity to avenge his father and hurries instead to Gertrude's closet to lecture his mother on marriage vows and fidelity.

Even if Hamlet does not choose *The Murder of Gonzago* for its reference to thirty years or added this reference to the existing play, Shakespeare must have had some reason for stipulating this time span so persistently in the Play within the Play.[6]

To sum up, the authorised version of *Hamlet* contains specific references to the Prince's age as thirty in Act V and a hint at this age in Act III if the relevance of the Play within the Play is accepted as a clue. However, the matter was not allowed to rest there. The Pandora's Box of the-true-age-of-Hamlet was cautiously, and perhaps unintentionally, prised open by George Steevens in 1778. Like other critics in the Neoclassical Period, Steevens was not altogether favourably disposed to Hamlet's character. As Steevens saw him, the Prince "cannot be said to have pursued his ends by very warrantable means"[7] but resembles Beaumont

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[5] G. R. Hibbard (ed.), *Hamlet*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 58

[6] As Furnival suggests, there is the further possibility that, since the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* is interrupted, we never get to Hamlet's lines at all. (Furnival quoted in Furness: *Variorum* I, p. 249).

[7] Joseph Ritson, *Remarks, critical and illustrative, on the text and notes of the last edition of Shakspeare*, J. Johnson, 1783, p. 216

and Fletcher's Maximus in *Valentinian* who is condemned by his crooked ways though his cause was just—but then Steevens added:

> The late Dr Akinside once observed to me, that the conduct of Hamlet was every way unnatural and indefensible unless he were to be regarded as a young man whose intellects were in some degree impaired by his own misfortunes.[8]

In Edmund Malone's 1780 *Supplement to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays Published in 1778 by Samuel Johnson and George Steevens*, Solicitor-General William Blackstone observed—just as discreetly as Steevens—that in the Graveyard Scene in Act V

> It appears that Hamlet was then thirty years old, and knew Yorick well, who had been dead twenty-three years. And yet in the beginning of the play he is spoken of as a very young man, one that designed to go back to school, i.e. to the University of Wittenberg.[9]

Blackstone concluded that "the poet in the Fifth Act had forgot what he wrote in the First."

These are serious charges against Shakespeare, of course, but not uncommon in Blackstone's day when Shakespeare was not yet deified in popular culture. In the 18th century, he was still considered merely an exceptional though fallible dramatist from the rough and ready Renaissance. The two cautious comments from Steevens and Blackstone

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[8] Ibid., p. 216

[9] Printed in Edmond Malone, *The Plays and Poems of William Shakspeare, with the Corrections and Illustrations of Various Commentators*, vol. VII, F.C. & J. Rivington, London, 1821, p. 473

would soon grow into a storm of conjectures about Hamlet's age, but before we venture that far we need to examine what may have given Blackstone the impression that Prince Hamlet is "a very young man" in the beginning of the play.

Hamlet is indeed called "young" on various occasions, but the adjective may often be perceived in the distinctive rather than in the descriptive sense, simply to tell the Prince apart from his father, Old Hamlet. This may be the case when the Prince is first mentioned by Horatio who resolves to impart the sighting of the ghost "unto young Hamlet" (I.1, 175) and also when the Gravedigger mentions "young Hamlet" in V.1, 43 (although he himself has just established that the Prince is thirty). "Young" in the distinctive sense also applies to Fortinbras whose father, Old Fortinbras, was slain by Old Hamlet thirty years earlier according to Act V.1. Although over thirty, Fortinbras junior is called 'young' by Horatio in I.1, 98; again by Claudius in I.2, 17 and I.2, 28; and finally by Osric in V.2, 354.

However, "young" can hardly be taken as merely a distinctive adjective when Polonius warns Ophelia against Hamlet's amorous advances ("Believe so much in him, that he is *young*" I.4, 124), especially not since Laertes has just advised his sister to hold Hamlet's favour "a fashion and a toy in blood/A violet in the *youth* of primy nature" (I.3, 6-7). These statements, when taken together, do seem to infer that Hamlet is a young and hot-blooded prince on the prowl. Laertes' statement is the more valid indication of the two, since we must assume that Laertes is himself a young man. Polonius and Claudius (who refers to his stepson as "this mad *young* man" in IV.1, 19) belong to the older generation and are likely to refer to a thirty-year-old, unestablished man as "young." This may also be the case with the Ghost who mentions Hamlet's "*young* blood" (I.5, 16)

and calls him "noble *youth*" (I.5, 38). As already mentioned, age is a relative matter.

On the other hand, three places in the text before the Graveyard Scene in Act V may suggest that Hamlet's salad days are over. After his encounter with the Ghost at the end of the first act, Hamlet states that he will "wipe away all trivial fond records […] That *youth* and observation copied there" (I.5, 99-101), and in Act II, Claudius says that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been "of so *young days* brought up with him" and that they are "so neighbour'd to his *youth* and havior" (II.2, 11-2; in *Quarto 1* this is, "you being so neere in loue, *euen* from his youth"). Hamlet's youth, or at least his early youth, appears here to be spoken of as a thing of the past. The last indication that Hamlet is no longer in his "primy nature" comes with Ophelia's lament that Hamlet's "feature of *blown youth*" is "blasted with ecstasy" (III.1, 160-1). "Blown" here means "in bloom, mature," a later stage than "budding youth."

Overriding all other arguments is the general impression that Hamlet, when we first meet him in I.2, comes straight from his studies at the University of Wittenberg to attend his father's funeral. This seems to be what made Blackstone envision a very young Hamlet ("one that designed to go back to school"). In 1874, philologist Frederick James Furnivall stated that "we know how early, in olden time, young men of rank were put to arms; how early, if they went to a University, they left it for training in Camp and Court […] Hamlet, at a University, could hardly have passed twenty." Furnivall reached the same conclusion as Blackstone and surmised that "when Shakespeare began the play he conceived Hamlet as quite a young man, but as the play grew, as greater weight of reflection, of

insight into character, of knowledge of life, &c., were wanted, Shakespeare necessarily and naturally made Hamlet a formed man."[10]

After Steevens and Blackstone, the matter stayed for a decade and a half in the academic circles where it belonged, but then, in 1796, Goethe wrote his Bildungsroman *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* which would soon disseminate the perception of a very young Prince Hamlet to a far greater audience than just literary scholars.

"A Tender and Delicate Prince"

The Romantic Influence on Hamlet

Stage-struck since early youth, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe embarked on his literary career in 1773 with the drama *Götz von Berlichingen* which failed to run for long because its huge cast and numerous scene changes made the play too cumbersome and expensive to produce. Goethe swiftly retaliated in 1774 with *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, an epistolary *Sturm und Drang* novel with a lovesick young hero loosely based on Goethe himself as well as on Hamlet, if T. S. Eliot is not mistaken.[11] Unlike Hamlet, however, Werther goes through with his plan of self-slaughter when he borrows two pistols from the husband of the girl he loves but cannot get. Notwithstanding the advantages of two weapons and the proximity of his target, Werther bungles his shot and it takes him twelve hours to die.

To call *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* a success would be a colossal understatement; the novel launched an unprecedented craze all over Europe. Hopeless love came into fashion and, like Hotspur in *Henry*

[10] Furnivall quoted in Furness: *Variorum* I, p. 391
[11] Thomas Stearnes Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (1920), Dover Publications, NY, 1998, p. 55

IV, Werther became "the glass wherein the noble youth did dress themselves," quite literally: the clothes which Werther wore when he shot himself—yellow vest and trousers, blue dress-coat, brown boots—swept the continent in a sartorial revolution. Reportedly, droves of young men with *weltschmerz* turned to suicide in the hope of achieving an end as romantic as Goethe's fictitious hero, and the novel was banned in Leipzig and Copenhagen to prevent further copycat deaths. [12] Few literary works can match the cultural impact of Goethe's *Werther*.

It took Goethe twenty-two years to complete his next novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796). The character of Wilhelm Meister is in some respects a copy of Werther, but Goethe had done with suicides, so nothing quite as alarming befalls the hero of his second novel. In fact, the true drama in the somewhat rambling plot of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* is found in the part of the novel dealing directly with drama when young Wilhelm, against his father's wishes, joins an acting troupe.

Goethe had been the managing director of the theatre in Weimar since 1791, and he pursued this task by making up copious rules of how to cross the stage (always diagonally, since this is pleasing to the eye of the spectator); how never to turn one's face away from the audience whilst speaking; how to avoid dialects, how never to wear boots at rehearsals, etc.[13] In *Wilhelm Meister*, Goethe combined his love of the stage with a tragic, long-suffering central character, although vicariously so: Wilhelm Meister endlessly discusses Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the play as well as its protagonist, with whoever cares to listen. Goethe attributed his

[12] Wolfgang Leppmann, *The German Image of Goethe*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1961, p. 16
[13] Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (eds.), *Actors on Acting*, Three Rivers Press, NY, 1949, p. 269ff.

interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to his own eponymous hero but nothing indicates that he did not subscribe lock, stock and barrel to Wilhelm's views.

In Goethe's novel, Wilhelm Meister not only translates the entire play from English (since he is dissatisfied with Christoph Martin Wieland's 1766 translation) but also fills in bits and bobs carelessly left unexplained by the Bard. He is convinced that "Shakespeare himself would have arranged it so, had not his mind been too exclusively directed to the ruling interest, and perhaps misled by the novels which furnished him with his materials."[14] On this happy note, Meister turns Horatio into the son of the Danish viceroy in Norway, sent to Denmark on matters of state, and Meister's young Hamlet, apparently unmindful that a war with Norway is imminent in Act I of Shakespeare's play, tries to secure Norwegian military aid after divulging to Horatio the particulars of the covert coup d'état perpetrated by the nefarious King Claudius.[15] Meister moreover assesses that the Danish Prince must necessarily be fat and fair-haired, for, as he claims, "brown-complexioned people in their youth are seldom plump. And does not his wavering melancholy, his soft lamenting, his irresolute activity, accord with such a figure? From a dark-haired young man you would look for more decision and impetuosity."[16] Goethe's friendship with Johan Kaspar Lavater, the father of modern physiognomy, is all too detectable in Meister's observations.

Goethe characterises his plump Prince Hamlet as follows:

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[14] Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels*, (Thomas Carlyle's 1824 translation), Chapman and Hall, London, 1890, Book V, Chapter 4, p. 239
[15] Ibid., Book IV, Chapter 13, p. 200
[16] Ibid., Book V, Chapter 6, p. 241

> Soft, and from a noble stem, this royal flower had sprung up under the immediate influences of majesty: the idea of moral rectitude with that of princely elevation, the feeling of the good and dignified with the consciousness of high birth, had in him been unfolded simultaneously.[17]

Goethe's blooming prince has a wish to reign but only so "that good men might be good without obstruction,"[18] and yet he is not ignorant of the "false and changeful insects of a court".[19] The few quotes above sufficiently demonstrate the polarization of characters which was inherent to Romantic fiction but in fact alien to Shakespeare, as Dr Johnson observed in 1765:

> Other dramatists can only gain attention by hyperbolic or aggravated characters, by fabulous and unexampled excellence or depravity, as the writers of barbarous romances invigorated the reader by a giant or a dwarf; and he that should form his expectations of human affairs from the play, or from the tale, would be equally deceived.[20]

With the advent of the Romantic period, academically endorsed in 1797 by Friedrich Schlegel's *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*— the study in which Schlegel baptised the new era "Romantisch" ("novelistic") and hereby stressed the unrealistic aspects of the genre—the world was in for deception of the kind that Dr Johnson deplored. With Goethe in the vanguard, Romantic fiction would soon wallow in hyperbolic characters and fabulous, unexampled excellence or depravity.

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[17] Ibid., Book IV, Chapter 3, p. 178
[18] Ibid., Chapter 3, p. 178
[19] Ibid.
[20] Raleigh, Walter (ed.): *Johnson on Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, London, 1925, p. 14

In the case of *Hamlet*, the protagonist would be glorified and his opponents made much blacker than Shakespeare intended. The era was drowning in heroes (as Byron writes in *Don Juan*, "every year and month sends forth a new one"), and these heroes needed indefensible villains to set them off and make them shine.

Key passages in Goethe's portrayal of Hamlet spread with fiery speed and reached a wide audience in the decades following the Shakespeare Jubilee in 1769—just as Shakespeare was on the verge of becoming all the rage. With its penchant for all things medieval, the pre-Romantic Period saw *Hamlet* as set in the Middle Ages (in spite of Shakespeare's many allusions to coaches, cannons, rapiers and whatnot). Although void of ghosts and curses, Goethe's second novel has certain similarities with the immensely popular gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) which, as author Horace Walpole confessed in his preface to the second edition, draws on inspiration from Shakespeare.

Wilhelm Meister is aware that the Danish crown was not hereditary in the 7th century, but, in order to amass maximum sympathy for his hero, he tries to circumvent this fact by adding that "yet a longer possession of it by his father would have strengthened the pretensions of an only son, and secured his hopes of the succession."[21] Consequently, Goethe's Hamlet "now beholds himself excluded by his uncle, in spite of specious promises, most probably forever."[22] This is Goethe/Meister exacerbating Hamlet's actual situation. In Shakespeare, we have no reason to believe that Claudius' promise to Hamlet ("You are the most immediate to our throne", I.2, 109) is "specious," especially since Claudius has no other heir. Besides, Claudius, "bloat" and a heavy drinker, is not likely to keep a

[21] *Wilhelm Meister*, Book IV, chapter 13, p. 178
[22] Ibid.

successor waiting forever. He may well be modelled on the Danish King Frederik II who died of drink in 1588, fifty-four years old. At any rate, no one can predict in Act I that Hamlet will only survive his uncle by a few minutes.

More than anything, Goethe's Hamlet is tender, delicate and *young*, and the play, as Goethe or Meister reads it, presents:

> [T]he effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. In this view the whole piece seems to me to be composed. There is an oak-tree planted in a costly jar, which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom; the roots expand, the jar is shivered.[23]

After this follows Goethe's famous characterization of Hamlet as a "lovely, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, [who] sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away."[24]

Wilhelm Meister came most carefully upon its hour, just in time for the dawn of the Romantic Movement in an England already softened by the Age of Sensibility, and most critics, actors, readers and spectators were keen to trust Goethe's Meister when he stated, "I do not think that I have mixed aught foreign with the piece, or overcharged a single feature of it."[25] In fact, many critics, actors, readers and spectators still take Goethe's words for sterling. As Alexander Welsh states, from *Wilhelm Meister* "emerges the estimate of Hamlet's character that can still be felt in the criticism of Bradley or the theory of Freud, and in theatrical productions to

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

this day."[26] Fanciful as it is in every respect, Goethe's popular novel had a far greater impact on how the general public then perceived *Hamlet* than Dr Akinside's and Solicitor-General Blackstone's circumspect comments that Hamlet appears to be younger than thirty in the beginning of the tragedy.

By and by, Goethe's perception of Shakespeare's play solidified into a Hamlet myth which was loved of the distracted multitude but not in accord with Shakespeare's play. T.S. Eliot called Hamlet "the Mona Lisa of literature," and Jan Kott elaborated on this comparison by pointing out that the *Gioconda* smile has been separated from Da Vinci's painting which no longer contains only what the artist expressed in it but also everything that has been written about it.[27] As Welsh observes, when it comes to what has been written about *Hamlet,* the Romantics still appear to have the market cornered. Although neither Goethe nor any individual Romantic critic or painter may be held responsible, the misleading Hamlet icon—the one combining the young Prince holding a skull with "To be or not to be," although Shakespeare's text separates the soliloquy and the skull by two long acts—hails from this period known for its forceful imagery. By and large, the general view of the play remains the one concocted by Goethe.

"A Fiction, a Dream of Passion"

The Romantic Tale Unfolds

The extent to which the Romantic critics in the early 19th century felt justified in kidnapping Hamlet and holding him hostage in their own ideology is evident in Charles Lamb's statement from 1812 that

[26] Alexander Welsh, *Hamlet in His Modern Guises*, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 73
[27] Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Doubleday & Co., 1965, p. 47

Shakespeare should never be acted, since stage performance reduces and brings down "a fine vision to the standard of flesh and blood."[28] Lamb continues,

> It may seem a paradox, but I cannot help being of the opinion that the plays of Shakespeare are less calculated for performance on stage, than those of almost any other dramatist whatever. Their distinguished excellence is a reason that they should be so. There is so much in them, which comes not under the province of acting, with which eye, and tone, and gesture, have nothing to do.[29]

It is indeed a paradox to consider a playwright so exalted that his works should never be performed. Lamb opens his essay with a diatribe on actor David Garrick, and what gets Lamb's goat is the memorial plaque in Westminster Abbey proclaiming the late thespian to be Shakespeare's equal. All Garrick did, protests Lamb, was to recite Shakespeare's poetical images and conceptions.

We may spot an irony of fate in this; the Romantic Shakespeare mania spearheaded by Lamb was probably set in motion by Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee in September 1769. Five years and five months late for a timely celebration of the bicentenary of Shakespeare's birth, the Jubilee was far from an abject genuflection to the genius of the playwright. For one thing, Garrick's festivities included no performances of Shakespeare's plays. There were pageants, cannonades and concerts, but not so much as a sonnet was uttered. However, Garrick had penned several songs, the lyrics of which prove that he was no Shakespeare but also

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[28] Charles Lamb, "The Tragedies of Shakespeare," printed in *Essays of Elia*, Baudry's European Library, 1835, p. 350
[29] Ibid.

testify to the Bard's modest and mundane place in English culture at the time. The song "Warwickshire Lads," for instance, seems not to eulogise Shakespeare but to anticipate Gilbert & Sullivan. One stanza runs,

> Each shire has its different pleasures
> Each shire has its different treasures
> But to rare Warwickshire all must submit
> For the Wit of all wits was a Warwickshire Wit
> Warwickshire Wit,
> How he writ!
> The Wit of all wits was a Warwickshire Wit.

Another stanza includes a reference to Nicholas Rowe's rumour that Shakespeare poached deer in his youth and the next stanza exploits this impugnable myth by an extended metaphor praising him for "robbing nature." On the whole, the Jubilee was delectably down to earth. Too much so, in fact, for the Shakespeare scholars of the time. Dr Johnson never showed up, Steevens openly scorned the efforts to popularise Shakespeare, and several newspapers lampooned the festival.[30] What George Bernard Shaw called "Bardolatry" had to wait three decades for

[30] The funniest of the many parodies of Garrick's "Warwickshire Lads" is the one found in *The Cambridge Magazine* in October 1769:

> At Stratford-on-Avon what doings! Oh rare—
> What poetry, music, and dancing was there!
> All ye witlings so vain, go to Stratford to school;
> For Pindar himself to Garrick's a fool,
> All go to school,
> Garrick's a fool.
> And the fool of all fools is a Warwickshire fool!

(Quoted in Christian Deelman's delightful account, *The Great Shakespeare Jubilee*, 1964, Michael Joseph, London, p. 183)

the onslaught of Romanticism and for sentiments like that of Lamb who found it to be sacrilege when the Bard was debased by "those harlotry players"[31] with no feeling for their business.

With Lamb we see the emergence of the dichotomy between Shakespeare in the study and Shakespeare on the stage.[32] Lamb was backed in 1817 by Hazlitt who stated that, "We do not like to see our author's plays acted, and least of all *Hamlet*. There is no play that suffers more from being transferred to the stage. Hamlet himself hardly seems capable of being acted."[33] The opinion that the play has been "transferred" to the stage indicates the degree in which Hazlitt claimed Shakespeare as a fellow poet and no longer considered him a mere playwright.

Lamb's passionate resentment of any debasement of Shakespeare is all the more curious when we bethink that in 1807 Lamb and his sister Mary undertook to "translate" Shakespeare's plays into synopses in their *Tales from Shakespeare*. The Lambs' approach to *Hamlet* illustrates the consequences of the seismic shift in the popular view on the play after Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.

The Lambs intended to familiarise young people not only with Shakespeare's plays but also with his poetic language, for which reason "words introduced into our language since his time have been as far as possible avoided."[34] What the Lambs did not strive to avoid was inundating the plots with the Romantic view of the plays, albeit this view

[31] Lamb ends his essay by quoting Mistress Quickly from *I Henry IV*.
[32] Dr Johnson, too, preferred Shakespeare on the page rather than on the stage and occasionally expressed a disregard of actors and acting, but, to my knowledge, he never said that Shakespeare should not be acted at all.
[33] William Hazlitt, *The Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, 1817 (quoted in David Farley-Hills, *Critical Responses to Hamlet*, Vol. II, AMS Press, NY, 1996, p. 119)
[34] Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare: Famous Stories from the Great Comedies and Tragedies*, (1807), John C. Winston, Philadelphia, 1914, p. 5