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978-0-521-09109-1 - What Happens in Hamlet
J. Dover Wilson
Excerpt
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I

THE ROAD TO ELSINORE

—But what in faith make you from Wittenberg?
—A truant disposition, good my lord.

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[More information](#)

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THE ROAD TO ELSINORE

being an epistle dedicatory to

WALTER WILSON GREG

My dear Greg,

You will not agree with this book; I am not at all sure you will like it; but it is yours, whether you like it or not. And I dedicate it to you, without asking your permission, as a trifling retaliation for the spell you put upon me (without asking my permission) eighteen years ago, a spell which changed the whole tenor of my existence, and still dominates it in part. You may have guessed something of this, but you cannot know it all; and as the story of how you forced yourself into my life will explain to others the origin and purpose of this book, you must bear with the telling of it.

It begins some time in the November of 1917. The exact date escapes me, but the occasion retains the sharp outlines and fresh colours of an intensely felt experience. All unconscious of impending fate, I was at the time an inspector of the Board of Education stationed in Leeds, and one of those few fortunate but unhappy men of military age whom a government department even in the fourth year of hostilities had not yet "released" for war service. My chiefs, however, arranged for me to carry on, or attempt to carry on, two men's jobs in educational administration, and permitted me

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*An epistle dedicatory*

3

also, as a kind of salve for a sick conscience, to undertake inspection duty for the Ministry of Munitions. There were no week-ends in such a life, and no time off, except that spent in getting from place to place by rail. Yet there was little—too little—to occupy the mind; for the problems I had to cope with were largely those of routine and reporting. I read, of course, in the train, except when it was too packed for one to turn over the leaves of a book; but I found it difficult to concentrate upon anything unconnected with the War. And though Bridges's *Spirit of Man*, Hardy's *Dynasts* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, together with fitful and unsuccessful attempts to learn Russian, kept the mind alive for weeks at a time, the hours of travel were mostly occupied in reading the newspapers and in poring over those endless vermicular diagrams in *Land and Water*—you will recall them no doubt only too well—by means of which Belloc deceived himself and us into believing that we were following what was happening on the various fronts. In short, though I did not know it, my spiritual condition was critical, not to say dangerous, a condition in which a man becomes converted, falls in love, or gives way to a mania for wild speculation. In a sense all three destinies awaited me.

After the usual week's knocking about Lancashire or the West Riding I reached home one Saturday evening to find an urgent telephone message awaiting me from Alan Barlow, my chief at the Ministry of Munitions, instructing me to proceed by the first train to Sunderland, where some trouble had arisen with local trade-union officials. It was too late to catch the only remaining express of the day, but there was a slow train in about an hour's time; so I swallowed a meal,

I-2

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

The Road to Elsinore

thrust into my bag the correspondence that had silted up during my absence, and set off back to the station, resigned to a long journey lasting until after midnight. Stopping trains, you will remember, had one advantage in those days; they were emptier than quick ones: and I actually found a compartment to myself. With four hours in front of me and room to spread my papers I ought no doubt to have written official minutes. But I was tired, and turned instead to look through my private letters.

Among them was a square envelope containing the latest issue of *The Modern Language Review*, that for October 1917. You were one of the Advisory Board which founded that excellent periodical. But other readers may be unhappily ignorant of it. I had, therefore, better quote its sub-title, "A quarterly journal devoted to the study of medieval and modern literature and philology", which should be enough to explain its scope; and I may add that at this time it was the only learned review in England to deal with English language and literature, and that this department of it was then under the able editorship of Moore Smith of Sheffield University. A sober kind of publication to fill a man with a sort of insanity for many weeks! But this was no ordinary number, for it opened with an article by you that might have thrown any mind off its balance, an article ominously entitled "Hamlet's Hallucination", in which you launched an attack upon the orthodox interpretation of the play, that for sheer audacity, close-knit reasoning and specious paralogism must be unique in the history of Shakespearian criticism.

Whether you actually believed in your own theory I have never been able to discover. But it was first-rate sport; and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*An epistle dedicatory*

5

you certainly put a brazen face upon it. Evidently what started you off was a remarkable point in connection with the dumb-show in the play scene, which earlier critics seem to have almost completely ignored. How comes it, you asked, that Claudius, who brings the Gonzago play to a sudden end "upon the talk of the poisoning", sits totally unmoved through the same scene when enacted in dumb-show a few minutes earlier? And you went on to point out that if the King's insensibility to the dumb-show is strange, there are circumstances scarcely less strange about the actors' play itself. Hamlet's adaptation extends to the insertion of "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines". How was it that the players had in their repertory a drama which was in effect "a minutely applicable representation of the affairs of the Danish court and of the alleged murder of the late king"? To assume that they had such a play was, surely, to make "impossible demands upon the credulity of the audience". The conclusions which you drew from these anomalies were startling and at first blush overwhelming. Forgive me if I briefly summarise them for the sake of others:

(1) The King does not blench at the dumb-show for the simple reason that he does not recognise his own crime either in that or in the Gonzago play itself, which is a mere verbal repetition of it.

(2) The information which the Ghost gives to Hamlet is, therefore, an incorrect version of what took place.

(3) Consequently the Ghost's speech must be interpreted as nothing but a figment of Hamlet's overwrought brain.

(4) And finally, the essential feature of the story (the poisoning through the ears of the victim) could only have

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

The Road to Elsinore

taken root in Hamlet's mind through a subconscious memory of the very play which he afterwards employed "to catch the conscience of the king".

This bald summary does serious wrong to your brilliant exposition. A dozen "buts" rise at once to the lips. You had foreseen them all, or nearly all, and had a reply to each, always suggestive and generally on the face of it convincing. Why had Shakespeare, deliberately it seems, deceived us in this way for three centuries? You declared that Shakespeare is not likely to have himself believed in ghosts, that the Ghost in *Hamlet* is the only specimen in the plays for whose objective reality there is even plausible evidence, and that in this case Shakespeare allowed for a double interpretation—the groundlings should have the ghost they had paid for, while the "judicious", who sat on the stage or in the "lords' room", should have the subtle additional entertainment of knowing that the Ghost was really a hallucination. Or again, why did Claudius break up the gathering in the play scene, if not because his conscience had been caught? You came forward with a highly interesting exposition of the whole scene, worked out in great detail, to show that it was Hamlet's insufferable conduct and not the play at all which left the King so "marvellous distempered", and could point to the attitude of the whole court after the scene is over as evidence of this. Once more, if Hamlet was under the spell of his own imagination during his interview with the Ghost, what of its previous appearances, what of Marcellus, Barnardo and Horatio the doughty sceptic? You attempted to discredit the Ghost by putting all the persons who saw it through a sort of cross-examination, with the object of

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J. Dover Wilson
Excerpt
[More information](#)

An epistle dedicatory

7

proving their credulity or unreliability. This was, I think, the weakest part of your case. Yet even here Hamlet's own indisputable and recurring doubts about the Ghost, doubts which have been strangely minimised by the critics and of which even you might have made more than you did, furnished what seemed strong corroborative evidence.

I must have read the article half a dozen times before reaching Sunderland, and from the first realised that I had been born to answer it. What the answer should be was far less clear. At that time I knew no more about *Hamlet* than the average reader. But your theory raged "like the hectic in my blood", and my first anxiety was lest some one should slip in and cross swords before I could have at you. I forgot *Land and Water*, the Ministry of Munitions, the War itself. All Europe and America would, I felt, shortly be reading the October number of *The Modern Language Review*, and I must stake out a claim without delay. Accordingly, on my way to the hotel, I dropped into a pillar-box a postcard to the editor bearing the following words:

Greg's article devilish ingenious, but damnably wrong. Will you accept a rejoinder?

You will see from this that I was in a state of some considerable excitement.

In due course a favourable reply came from Sheffield. But long before that I was at work. I wrote in trains, on draughty railway stations, at the back of class-rooms, and in the august but sordid local offices of the Ministry of Munitions. I could not stop writing, and I wrote in a ferment, which I look back

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

The Road to Elsinore

upon as a highly pleasurable experience. Official duties were not I hope neglected; but at last I had something to occupy the mind, a pastime for the train, an escape from the overwhelming war-time issues in which I had no partnership and which I could do nothing either to solve or to alleviate.

Moreover, I soon discovered that to reply to you was only the beginning of things. Your article raised problems which had never before been faced by critics of *Hamlet*, and these in turn led on to other problems of which you seemed unconscious. My attempt to demonstrate that your theories would not hold water was published in *The Modern Language Review* for April 1918.¹ But when I began to frame theories of my own to account for the apparent inconsistencies which you were the first writer to lay bare, I found myself pursuing such strange and unexpected paths that it was impossible to explore them fully in that rejoinder. I followed it up therefore, with four articles printed in *The Athenaeum*, during the summer and autumn of the same year, under the general title of "The Play-scene in *Hamlet* restored", portions of which expanded, pruned and rewritten have been incorporated in the present book.² This elaborate essay did not, however, touch upon the Ghost itself or Hamlet's doubts concerning it; and I began to take a course of reading in Elizabethan spiritualism in the hope of finding new light in that quarter. The results were set forth in a paper read before the Shakespeare Association, I think in 1919, and published some ten years

¹ To this you replied in October 1919, but before reading the *Athenaeum* articles.

² I am indebted to the editor of *The New Statesman and Nation* for his kind permission to make use of these articles.

Cambridge University Press
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 J. Dover Wilson
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

An epistle dedicatory

9

later, with a few alterations and additions, as an introduction to a reprint of one of the best known ghost-books of the period, Ludwig Lavater's *Of Ghostes and Spirites walking by Nyght* (1572), edited by Miss Yardley and myself for the same association. Of this paper also I shall make use in the following pages.¹ Yet the further I went in my investigations, the more the country seemed to open out. I became aware that the problems of the dumb-show and of the Ghost were by no means the only puzzles in *Hamlet*; there were dozens of others. And I came to see that the scientific thing to do was to attack all the problems at one and the same time, seeing that the solutions must hang together, if *Hamlet* was an artistic unity at all. I was already gathering materials for this comprehensive attack in 1919, when the whole enterprise had to be laid aside, and eventually postponed for an indefinite period, in deference to more urgent claims upon my scanty leisure. For in June of that year I was asked by the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press to undertake an edition of the complete works of Shakespeare in collaboration with Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch.

This digression—for so I envisaged it at first, little thinking how far afield it would take me²—was deliberately accepted as an aid to the elucidation of *Hamlet*. Here was an opportunity of learning something about Shakespeare; and the more I could learn the better equipped I might hope to be for tackling *Hamlet* when the time came. On the other hand,

¹ I owe thanks likewise to the Council of the Shakespeare Association for permission to avail myself of this.

² The miscalculation was not as insane as it might now appear, since the original proposals of the Syndics contemplated the appearance of six or seven volumes a year!

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[More information](#)

the new undertaking was itself a development from previous work upon *Hamlet*. Side by side with the dramatic studies just referred to, I had been carrying on investigations into the text of the play; for it soon became obvious that the textual criticism of *Hamlet* was as unsatisfactory as the aesthetic, and that until the textual foundations were properly laid, there could be no security for dramatic interpretation. Here too I was favoured by fortune. For just as your article on "Hamlet's Hallucination" set my feet on the road to Elsinore, so epoch-making books by A. W. Pollard, Edward Maunde Thompson and Percy Simpson on the bibliography, handwriting and punctuation of Shakespearian texts had appeared during the years immediately preceding the publication of that article; while you yourself began at once to check and supplement those bibliographical findings by criticisms and studies of your own. Thus I found new instruments of the utmost value to my hand when I began to work at the text of Shakespeare. I tried them first upon the "bad" quarto of *Hamlet* which some pirate procured for the printer in 1603, and A. W. Pollard after criticising and helping to rewrite my efforts in draft accepted a couple of articles, now long out of date, for *The Library* in 1918. This in turn, you may remember, led to a joint attack by Pollard and myself upon the problem of pirated Shakespearian quartos in general, and during 1919 we published a series of short articles in the *Literary Supplement* of *The Times*. I am proud to think that these articles, once more in turn, prompted you to undertake a far more solid and exhaustive enquiry into the nature of bad quartos in *Alcazar and Orlando*, 1923. It was they too which happened to catch the eye of A. R. Waller of the