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BY

J. DOVER WILSON



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PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

Since the second edition of this essay was added in 1937 to the ever-flowing, ever-increasing, stream of books and articles about the play, the two most memorable in my view to appear are *On Hamlet*, 1948, by Don Salvador de Madariaga and *Hamlet and Oedipus*, 1949, by Dr Ernest Jones, both exceedingly readable and attractive volumes. The stimulus I derived from the first was indeed so powerful that I was driven to re-think the play scene by scene and to re-affirm the traditional conception of the Prince's character in the form of a review which by the courtesy of Professor Sisson is reprinted with one slight alteration as Appendix F below. The other, an expansion of Dr Jones's famous article in *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis*, 1923, is no less brilliant. Yet though I read it to the last page with the willing suspension of disbelief that the charm and persuasiveness of his style must impose on any but an obdurate reader, the objection expressed in my Introduction to *Hamlet* 1934 remained unshaken: viz. that to abstract one figure from an elaborate dramatic composition and study it as a case in the psychoanalytical clinic is to attempt something at once wrong in method and futile in aim. And when he gathered (p. 43) from these pages that I believed "personality" in *Hamlet* to be "consistent" I realized that my chapter vi had been written in vain, as far as he was concerned, and that we must go our several ways each convinced he is being misunderstood by the other.

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The text of the first edition once again remains unaltered apart from the new appendix just spoken of, the correction of one or two misprints observed since 1937 and the rewording of a brief passage on pp. 111–12 which second thoughts have led me to modify.

J. D. W.

July 1950

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Since the appearance of this book in the autumn of 1935, Dr Harley Granville-Barker, to give him the description we are proud of in Edinburgh, has published his long and eagerly awaited *Preface to Hamlet* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1937)—a major event in the history of Shakespearian criticism, with which every wise reader of what follows will make himself acquainted if he has not already done so. Of his subtle sympathy and imaginative skill in interpretation it would be impertinence in me to speak.¹ But, though his references to these pages have been uniformly kind and generous, I shall, I suppose, be expected to say something on the three main points upon which we differ, viz. Osric's part in the fencing-match, the dramatic setting of the dumb-show, and Hamlet's entry in the Fishmonger scene. His views about the first may perhaps have been modified since he wrote by Mr A. H. J. Knight's discovery² that, according to the seventeenth-century stage-tradition preserved in *Der bestrafte Brudermord*, Osric was represented as an accomplice in the plot against Hamlet, as I contend he should be. The other two matters are more serious, since they turn upon what is effective, or even possible, in the theatre, a sphere in which Dr Granville-Barker moves by sovereign right as actor, dramatist and one of the greatest producers alive, while I am

¹ To take stock of all the fresh light he has thrown upon the play would require the re-writing of this book. I have, however, drawn attention to a few points of contact in the Notes at the end of the volume.

² Vide *The Modern Language Review*, July 1936, pp. 385-91.

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only an academic scribe on the wrong side of the curtain. But I knew his opinion before I went to press, and deliberately took my life in my hand when I dared to set up my judgment against his. The odds are desperate; but I have found unexpected allies in the theatre itself, as will presently appear, while it was encouraging to learn from Mr Esme Percy that on one of the two technical points contested by Dr Granville-Barker I had the support of no less a person than the late Mr William Poel, who was giving Hamlet the earlier entry in act 2 scene 2 in a production as long ago as 1914.¹

By others also the book has been more kindly received than I expected or deserved. All I hoped was that it would provoke discussion, and this it has certainly succeeded in doing. My first antagonist, Dr W. W. Greg, replied to it in a delightful and characteristic essay entitled "What happens in *Hamlet*?"² in which generosity and scepticism were judiciously mingled. It drew from Mr J. P. Malleon a series of interesting letters in *The Times Literary Supplement*,³ challenging my views on the succession in Denmark, a challenge which I fenced with at the time and hope to take up more seriously at a later date. It prompted a number of articles⁴ in learned journals, like *The Modern Language Review* and *The Review of English Studies*, dealing—some critically and others in confirmation—with points I had raised. It was even, I am informed, publicly butchered on December 29, 1936, to make an American holiday, at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association, the

¹ Vide Mr Percy's letter in *The Times* of July 16, 1937.

² *The Modern Language Review*, April 1936.

³ Vide p. 321 (note on p. 38) *infra* for the dates.

⁴ References to most of these will be found in the Notes.

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Shakespeare section of which was invited to discuss a paper announced as

Wings over Elsinore;
or What Does NOT Happen in "Hamlet".

Most welcome of all to the author, it has found readers among actors and producers, amateur and professional, and its ideas have been utilized by more than one company in public performances, sometimes even—could tribute be more delicate?—when its spokesmen were openly deriding the book beyond the theatre walls.

Of these performances the most notable were those given by Mr Michael MacOwan at the Westminster Theatre in July last. Having produced Dr Granville-Barker's *Waste* a year ago, he decided, with fine impartiality and a courage I cannot too much admire, to try out the notions set forth in this book. Accordingly, he put on *Hamlet*, with Mr Christopher Oldham as the Prince of Denmark, for a limited number of nights. It ran for a fortnight; was well attended, considering the time of year; and gave rise to an entertaining silly-season correspondence in the columns of *The Times*. Unhappily for myself, I was accidentally prevented from seeing anything of it except the first half of the dress-rehearsal.¹ But even had I been present at every performance, my opinion of the experiment would, of course, be valueless to anyone but myself. I was kept posted, however, with news of the play by Mr Harold Child, who saw it twice and took a prominent part in the public debate with which the untiring producer

¹ After which I was—not poisoned by Lucianus for sacrilege, as Mr Michael Innes, author of *Hamlet, Revenge*, might perhaps surmise, but—obliged to leave England for the continent.

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crowned his endeavours. As will be seen from the open letter that follows this preface, Mr Child has now been good enough to place his impressions on record. He is not, he says, the ideal witness. That, I suppose, would be an intelligent person who, ignorant not only of this ephemeral commentary but even of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* itself, yet found nothing in the Westminster production either forced or bewildering. Sixty-seven years after the Education Act of 1870, it would be difficult to discover anyone in this country who could witness *Hamlet* without previous knowledge of the play. But, in such a case, where ignorance is unobtainable, the best alternative is as much knowledge of the theatre, modern and Elizabethan, as much critical acumen and as much playgoing experience as may be found in one individual. Believing as I do that there are very few Englishmen who possess these qualities in fuller measure than Mr Child, I count myself exceedingly fortunate in having secured a verdict from him.

My book was written, however, not to prove a case or to win support for its suggestions, but to raise issues which will, I hope, after further discussion and experiment in the theatre, lead to the clearer understanding of Shakespeare's purposes and the better playing of *Hamlet*. If it does that, it will have fulfilled its aim, even if every notion within its covers prove to be unworkable on the stage. For it is with the stage that the final decision rests.

There the action lies

In his true nature,

provided it be directed by a practical and practising producer, possessing a competent knowledge of Elizabethan

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stage-conditions and of the character of Elizabethan play-books. Without such knowledge, the man of the theatre, however accomplished be his production of modern plays, is a blind guide so far as Shakespeare is concerned. Scarcely less dangerous, on questions of stage-technique, is the judgment of the man of the study who lacks direct theatrical experience, however learned a scholar he may be. To show my readers the kind of danger that threatens them from this quarter, in other words from this book, let me conclude by quoting a critic who is at once man of the theatre and man of the study, Mr Allardyce Nicoll, Professor of the History of Drama and Dramatic Criticism, and Chairman of the Department of Drama, at the University of Yale. The criticism in question, which may be read at length in the current number of *The Year's Work in English Studies*, is chiefly concerned with the two points of stage-technique on which, as already stated, I find myself, greatly daring, in opposition to Dr Granville-Barker. In regard to my suggested setting for the dumb-show, Mr Nicoll writes:

On paper, Wilson's defence of this interpretation is convincing; but *Hamlet* is not a mere collection of words set in lines upon paper sheets—it is a play, and as a play must be construed. So considered, it is evident that no spectator ignorant of the *Hamlet* theme could possibly follow so tortuous a dramatic procedure.

His objection to an earlier entrance for Hamlet in the Fish-monger scene is similar:

Again the paper argument is convincing, but its manipulation on the stage leaves us confident that, had Shakespeare so intended

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it, he would have made his purpose clearer in actual words. Much may be allusive and suggestive in these plays, but rarely does Shakespeare fail to provide clues to the interpretation of such scenes as those described.

And he takes his stand upon the results of an actual stage-experiment, that of the Marlowe Society's production at Cambridge in the summer of 1936:

Were proof needed of the impossibility of this interpretation, the performance of the play by the Marlowe Society would provide it. There the Wilson procedure was followed; but, even to those familiar with *What Happens in 'Hamlet'* the points could not adequately be conveyed by actors to audience.

What is to be said in reply to this crushing pronouncement? Nothing by me. For, though I was present at that Cambridge performance, and could a tale unfold, my evidence is justly nonsuited. And so I leave the case in Mr Child's hands. But, gentle reader, you have been warned!

It only remains to add that, with the exception of a few trivial corrections, the text of this edition stands as it was in 1935. I have, however, added several pages of notes at the end of the volume, inserting asterisks in the text, which should guide the reader to them. Many of these notes relate to contributions from my critics or to help received from Dr Greg and Dr Granville-Barker; others to suggestive books, like Professor Trench's *Hamlet, a new commentary* and a French edition of the play by R. Travers, which appeared before mine but of which I was ignorant in 1935. I should

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like to say, too, that since then I have re-read Professor A. J. A. Waldock's brilliant little essay, and am now inclined to believe that this study owes more to it than I at first realised.

J. D. W.

September, 1937

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A LETTER BY MR HAROLD CHILD
ON SOME RECENT PRODUCTIONS
OF *HAMLET*

Dear Dover Wilson,

When the third edition of your New Shakespeare *Hamlet* is called for, the stage-history must include two or three productions which have given opportunities of seeing in action some or all of the suggestions which you make in *What Happens in "Hamlet"*. The performance at the Sloane School, Chelsea, in March 1933, before the publication of that book, has been already mentioned in the stage-history. To my regret, I did not see the Marlowe Society's production at Cambridge in August 1936; but this summer I have seen the production at the Westminster Theatre, and also Mr Iden Payne's production at the Memorial Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon, which closely resembles your notion of the action in several very important matters although it was stated by Mr Donald Wolfitt (see *The Times* of September 4, 1937) to owe these particulars to some other (unnamed) source. Mr Michael MacOwan's production at the Westminster Theatre was, as you know, an avowed attempt to give your well-proportioned thoughts their act. In answer to your request, I will try to set down my impressions of how your ideas worked out in practice. But I ought to say first that I do not consider myself a very good judge, because *I knew what to look for*. Your Ideal Spectator for this purpose would be a very thorough and intelligent Shakespearian who knew *Hamlet* well but (to his shame) had not read *What Happens in "Hamlet"*—if anyone could be said to know *Hamlet* well without having read your book.

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On one or two topics the Westminster Theatre production left no doubt. The play gains greatly in substance and in coherence by making clear your points about incest, about usurpation, and about the several attitudes to the Ghost—especially if Hamlet takes so much care as Mr Christopher Oldham did, in the course of a performance of exceptional intelligence and beauty, to show that when Hamlet asks “Shall I couple hell?” he knows what he is saying and means it. In both productions, also, the sour Protestant doctor is a grimly dramatic figure, besides helping to explain Laertes’s outburst and so leading up to Hamlet’s. And in both versions the rapier-and-dagger fight (at the Westminster Theatre a really terrifying affair) was perfectly easy to follow and raised no difficulties. At Stratford in particular it was made clear that Osric (though the character was cut down almost to nothing) was in the plot.

Certain points depend more, I fancy, upon the individual actors than upon the producer; though it is obvious that the actors have a better chance in a complete version of the play, as at the Westminster Theatre, than in an abbreviated version. It is in Hamlet’s hands, for the most part, to make it clear—or not to make it clear—that his antic disposition is put on, indeed, and used for particular ends, but that Hamlet is also, up to a point, mad. The actor, in effect, can express in performance all that your readers will find on pp. 91–93 of this book. The Westminster Hamlet showed less “emotional instability” than the Stratford Hamlet (Mr Donald Wolfit), being altogether quieter; but the mental state of his Hamlet was perhaps somewhat plainer to read. The long duel between Hamlet and Claudius, again, is a matter, as it seemed to me,

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for the actors; but the performances left me in no doubt that the course of it can be exhibited clearly to an audience that has not been primed before the curtain goes up.

Now for the two matters that have roused the most public interest. First, Hamlet's entrance in 2. 2. At Stratford Hamlet was able to enter up stage at "Within the centre", and, on overhearing the King and Polonius, to pass out of sight behind the thrones and to appear again farther down stage at "We will try it". The Westminster Theatre production was on a bare stage, so that Hamlet had nowhere to hide. But in both versions I found your idea convincing. It gave certainty and point to Hamlet's attack on Polonius, and prepared clearly for a dangerous mood that in the Nunnery Scene would not spare any slip that Ophelia might make. In fact, it seemed to give just the sort of "clue to the interpretation" of subsequent scenes which Allardyce Nicoll looks for in his very shrewd English Association criticism of *What Happens in "Hamlet"*.¹

Of the Play Scene it is not possible to be so sure, because the issue is not so simple. At the Westminster Theatre Horatio was placed at the O.P. corner of the Players' (slightly raised) stage; Hamlet and Ophelia were farther down stage on the same side; the King, the Queen and Polonius on the prompt side and rather farther up stage than Hamlet. From his place at the apex of this triangle Horatio could be plainly seen keeping his close watch on the King. At Stratford Horatio was on the same side as Hamlet, but a little farther down stage.

The first essential is that the King, the Queen and Polonius

¹ *Supra*, pp. xi-xii.

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should make it clear beyond doubt that during the Dumb Show they are talking about Hamlet, and that it is Hamlet's latest and most daring exhibition of "idleness" which distracts their attention from a show in which they are not in any case much interested, being only present in order to please (or to watch) Hamlet. At the Westminster Theatre (this, I suspect, was rather a matter of the actor than of the producer) Polonius looked too much as if he were purposely blocking the King's view of the Dumb Show. When it was over, he went to his place at the prompt-side corner of the Players' stage, opposite Horatio's. At Stratford, Hamlet was so upset by the Dumb Show that in the course of it he sprang up, rushed across the stage and prevented the King from seeing the poisoning by thrusting the book of the play under his nose—a piece of business which certainly owes nothing to you.

Both productions—the Stratford rather more forcibly than the Westminster Theatre—made it plain that Hamlet was surprised and infuriated at the Dumb Show. At the Westminster Theatre, Horatio came down at "miching mallecho" to lay a restraining hand on Hamlet's shoulder, and Hamlet went a step or two up stage to meet him and spoke directly to him the line: "The players cannot keep counsel. They'll tell all." At Stratford, Hamlet, before rushing across to the King, showed his feelings very effectively by turning round towards Horatio (down stage) with a face of fury and dismay. In both performances my companion and I (both of us, I must once more remark, knowing what to look for) found it perfectly easy to watch Hamlet and Ophelia, Horatio, and the King-Queen-Polonius group, while still

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A Letter by Mr Harold Child

giving the Dumb Show all the attention that it needs. In both productions lines which hitherto had had no precise meaning sprang to life and dramatic purpose; and in both productions the kaleidoscopic lights of the Dumb Show and Prologue business seemed to make the poison-mousetrap-murder-nephew dialogue blaze like lightning. My own failure was to keep an eye on the courtiers. Mr MacOwan sat them on the floor with their backs to us, and facing the Players' stage. Mr Iden Payne's were grouped in the more usual manner on either side. Perhaps the newer grouping brings them more directly into the picture, and so does all that is really necessary by reminding the spectator that they, with their own notions and feelings, are part of that manifold and complex whole.

That, then, was my personal experience: that there is nothing in your interpretation of the play which the stage cannot express, and which audiences of average intelligence cannot take in; and it leaves no word nor act in the play without its definite meaning and use in the story.

Yours ever,

HAROLD CHILD

September, 1937

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

On the appearance of this, the last of three studies of *Hamlet* completed since August 1, 1933, I desire to express publicly my very grateful thanks to the Trustees of the Leverhulme Research Fellowships and to the Delegacy of King's College, University of London, for the year's liberty and peace which made that completion possible.

It would be tedious to catalogue here the innumerable books on *Hamlet* to which I, like most other students of the play, stand indebted. Two, however, must be named. I belong to the generation which, having lived for thirty years with Dr Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, find it difficult to look at *Hamlet* except through his eyes. It is the fashion in younger circles, I am told, to decry it; and it is, I suppose, inevitable that, with our growing appreciation of Shakespeare's craft on its theatrical side, Dr Bradley's general attitude towards the plays should become a little outmoded. I have myself made bold to criticise him here and there; for if one had nothing new to say, why write upon *Hamlet* at all? But many of the new views have been caught from critical outposts which he first established; and the farther I went in my exploration, the more careful I was to scrutinise every clue he had left behind on his. Above all, I am persuaded that on the side of character his patient insight has never before been equalled and is never likely to be surpassed.

The other book, an edition of *Hamlet* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929) with an elaborate commentary by Professor

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Preface

J. Q. Adams of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, came to my hands too late for me to make more than casual use of it. Very different in outlook from Dr Bradley, and sometimes voicing opinions from which I find myself in almost violent disagreement, Professor Adams is equipped with the full panoply of modern Elizabethan scholarship, anticipates me at several points, and has undoubtedly given us the most original commentary on *Hamlet* of our time, which when it comes to be better known in England is likely to provoke much discussion.

A few brief passages in the following book have already appeared in the Notes and Introduction to my edition of *Hamlet* ("The New Shakespeare") and in the monograph entitled *The Manuscript of Shakespeare's Hamlet* which preceded it. Quotations from and references to *Hamlet* are taken from my edition.

As its title implies, this study is mainly concerned with matters of plot and dramatic technique. It makes no pretence to furnish an aesthetic interpretation of the play as a whole, though I hope it may do something to ease the path of future interpreters, whether in the study or on the stage.

I am indebted to Mrs Murrie for help with the proofs and the General Index.

J. D. W.

June, 1935