

STUDIES IN *HAMLET*, 1901–1955

BY

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The criticism of *Hamlet* is marked by its extent, its variety and its frequent aggressiveness. A. A. Raven's *A Hamlet Bibliography and Reference Guide 1877–1935* (Chicago, 1936) listed 2167 items: in the last twenty years the tide has not slackened. The Prince has been seen as too sensitive for the rough world, as given to metaphysical speculation, as shocked out of normality by incest and murder, as an effective stage-figure resistant to psychological probing, as a man of sanguine temperament falling into melancholy adust, as the victim of an Oedipus complex, and as an altogether vigorous and right-thinking young man who would stir no suspicion in the mind of an immigration officer. The play presents itself to some as good craftsman's work; to others it is a palimpsest, with fragments of sources and early drafts unsatisfactorily showing themselves in the final version. For most critics the Prince dominates the play and their interest, but some would have us give at least comparable importance to other figures or would remind us that a dramatic poem exists primarily as a pattern of words. And it is possible, but rare, to be modest and tentative in writing of this play: more frequently we are offered a 'solution' which is, for good and all, to pluck out the play's heart and banish its mystery. Because of the vast extent of this critical writing, it can happen that such a 'solution' is an old acquaintance innocently offered as new. The extreme divergence of critical opinion may suggest a flaw in the play, that the dramatist did not come to a full awareness, or at least a full dramatic realization, of his central idea. After all, many of the critics of *Hamlet* have been men of deep understanding and great scholarship. But the aggressiveness of the critics, fantastic though it may sometimes appear, surely hints at the play's strength. We do not feel passionately committed unless our chosen cause seems important. The play lives in our minds as it does in the theatre. It inevitably becomes a starting-point for speculation and fantasy; it is a datum which we are compelled to incorporate within our private view of the world.

In this century the criticism of the play has had to endeavour to keep pace with textual study. Although we cannot claim to have reached a general agreement on the nature and provenance of the First Quarto, the dominant view since the appearance of G. I. Duthie's *The 'Bad' Quarto of Hamlet* (1941) has been that it is a memorial reconstruction derived, via a process of stage-abridgement, from the full text that lies behind the Second Quarto. Consequently all those critical studies that use the First Quarto as evidence of Shakespeare's first intentions in the writing of the play have now a somewhat old-fashioned air. Similarly, in recent years *Der bestrafte Brudermord* has rarely been seen as a straightforward derivative of the *Ur-Hamlet*. Yet critical studies that are partially dependent on out-moded textual theories cannot be dismissed from present-day consideration: though their explanations of how the full text came into existence may be suspect, their interpretations depend primarily on the impact that that text has made. In details here and there their arguments may have little importance for us, but we cannot for that reason reject their views as wholes.

In a short survey it is clearly impossible to do more than observe some of the more interesting

features of the great landscape. Some few pieces of writing—*Shakespearean Tragedy, Art and Artifice in Shakespeare*, the commentary in J. Q. Adams's edition of the play, *What Happens in Hamlet*, Granville-Barker's *Preface*, T. S. Eliot's essay, Ernest Jones's *Hamlet and Oedipus*, the section on the play in D. G. James's *The Dream of Learning*—need far more space than can here be given to them. And other books and articles, almost numberless, have contributed something to a fairly diligent reader's view of the play: of these only a selection can be mentioned, some for their merit, others for their perhaps significant eccentricity.

BRADLEY AND HIS SUCCESSION

Before the appearance of *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), the dominant influences on the English views of *Hamlet* were those of Goethe (who symbolized the Prince as a china vase in which an oak disastrously grew), of Coleridge (who found him metaphysically given and unfit for action), and of Karl Werder (for whom Hamlet was an active person charged not merely with killing Claudius but with making his guilt plain to Denmark). Werder's views were published in his *Vorlesungen über Hamlet* (1875), but this book did not appear in English translation until 1907, when it was given the unfortunate title *The Heart of Hamlet's Mystery*. Meanwhile his arguments had been ably summarized and, on the whole, gently disposed of both by Bradley and by A. H. Tolman in *The Views about Hamlet and Other Essays* (Boston and New York, 1904). Tolman's essay, which is independent of Bradley, gives an excellent account of the state of *Hamlet*-criticism at the beginning of this century, and adds a number of judicious observations: in particular, he shows that Werder's view lacks warrant in the text and clashes with the evidence of the soliloquies, he sees the mouse-trap as "hardly more than a plausible excuse for doing nothing", he illustrates anti-revenge feelings in Shakespeare's time from Belleforest's version of the story and from Bacon's essay on revenge, and he shows that disputes concerning Hamlet's 'madness' depend largely on terminology. But Tolman's essay has exerted little influence, while Werder is the progenitor of an apparently unfinished line of interpreters: he attracts doubtless through his dogmatism, his insistence on the simple vigour of the hero and on the thorough healthiness of the play's atmosphere. He denies that Hamlet delayed, he finds it natural that the Ghost's word should need confirmation, he ingeniously shows that Hamlet followed simple prudence in denying shriving-time to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. His efforts to re-interpret some of the soliloquies exhibit a mountain in labour.

For Bradley Hamlet was not the simple person that Werder made him, but he had not the giant-stature of Shakespeare's later tragic heroes. He was not constitutionally unfitted for action, for Bradley does not quarrel with the descriptions given by Ophelia and Fortinbras. He was inhibited by nervous shock and did not himself understand his delay. He could literally forget his duty of revenge and be as eager that the player should speak his words aright as he was that Horatio should scrutinize the reaction of Claudius. His assumption of an antic disposition was perhaps in part due to a fear of real distraction, in part a means of gaining a psychologically necessary freedom. He quietened his conscience by cultivating a doubt of the Ghost's word. On his return from England there was "a slight thinning of the dark cloud of melancholy", a fatalistic acceptance of the ways of Providence, a rather greater consciousness of his own power, but there was no stronger determination in him, no evidence that he would bring himself nearer

to the act of revenge. Bradley found no reason to take at their face-value all of Hamlet's words in the prayer-scene (for by that point the character's inhibition has been made plain to us), but had no doubt of Gertrude's adultery (for the Ghost's words seem explicit enough). Critics who have parted company with Bradley have accused him of giving a too preponderant attention to the character of the hero, of treating the play like a nineteenth-century novel, of neglecting its poetry, and of being insufficiently versed in Elizabethan thought and stage-conditions. There is something to be said for each of these objections, yet no other account of the play has been so inclusive as his, so dependent on a scrutiny of detail and yet directed all the time towards the emergence of a tragic idea. At times he could admit puzzlement, as in the matter of Hamlet's relations with Ophelia. His views on many points must be subject to modification, have been provocative of further enquiry, but it is a rash man who rejects them out of hand. He saw *Hamlet* as one of four plays by Shakespeare that were comparable in authority with Greek tragedy, as a product of a deep consideration of the nature of things. The play has become smaller in the hands of some of Bradley's successors, so small that we must sometimes wonder at its power to make demands on us.

The influence of Bradley was very strong on W. F. Trench's *Shakespeare's Hamlet: A New Commentary with a Chapter on First Principles* (1913), yet Trench saw his book as an attack on Bradley's views. He wished to set up a more Coleridgean Prince, and saw Ophelia's and Fortinbras's words as respectively delusional and courtly. Nevertheless, Trench frequently exhibits the kind of analysis of behaviour, the kind of conjecture about what happens off-stage and outside the play's time of action, where Bradley is at his most vulnerable. He believes that Hamlet changed his mind about adding a dozen or sixteen lines to *The Murder of Gonzago*: in "O what a rogue" he decided to write a wholly new play, and in III, ii he used the name "Gonzago" in reference to the Player-King because he thought his mention of the poisoning had come too quickly. Similarly Trench suggests that Gertrude's account of Ophelia's death was sheer fiction, invented out of fear of Laertes. He seriously challenges Bradley's "disconcerting suggestions" concerning the whereabouts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern before they were fetched to Elsinore. Yet there are good things in the book: Trench notes that Hamlet's moralizing in the closet-scene is spoken with the dead Polonius in the audience's view, and that there is something of arrogance and complacency in Hamlet's words here; he sees the irony in Hamlet's finding the leisure to fence so soon after proclaiming "The interim is mine"; and despite his generally Coleridgean view he sees Hamlet's *hamartia* in a readiness to "let himself go"—into the violent and the grotesque and the thought of suicide. Generally Coleridgean too is Stopford Brooke's account of the play in *Ten More Plays of Shakespeare* (1913), yet he could see that Hamlet was no remarkable philosopher: his thoughts, far from being of "exceptional range or excellence", are "the ordinary thoughts of his time in a cultivated youth with a turn for philosophy". For Stopford Brooke, in fact, Hamlet was distinguished from a host of men only by the beauty and authority of his utterance. This modification of Coleridge is useful, but Brooke's view of the play is a partial one. Denying even the verge of madness to the hero, he confesses himself puzzled by the treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which he can see only as "a blot on the play".

Bradley is the strongest influence on J. Q. Adams's commentary in his edition (Cambridge, Mass., 1929). The antic disposition, he says, supplied Hamlet with "a surrogate form of activity",

it offered the opportunity of humour, a useful antidote to grief, and it was a safety-valve for pent-up feelings. Hamlet felt no doubt of the Ghost until he spoke the words “About, my brain!” in his soliloquy at the end of Act II. The interposition of “To be, or not to be” in III, i demonstrates that for Hamlet the play is not truly “the thing”. His sparing of the King in the prayer-scene is another unconscious subterfuge, but Adams makes the illuminating comment that Hamlet’s desire for Claudius’s damnation is in contrast to Othello’s “I would not kill thy soul”. Yet with all this there is an echo of Werder when Adams says that Hamlet must kill Claudius “with safety to himself”, justifying the deed to the court and Denmark and not involving his mother in the disclosure. The Ophelia scenes are rather sentimentally presented, and there is an over-emphasis on Hamlet’s healthier state of mind towards the end of the play: in claiming “How all occasions” as evidence of this, Adams overlooks the final, characteristic stress on “thoughts”. He sees indeed that Hamlet’s attitude to the dead Polonius gives the lie to a sentimental interpretation of the character, though he is inclined to minimize Hamlet’s brutality here and elsewhere as well as his obscenities in the play-scene. Some oddities of interpretation include the suggestions that, when Hamlet says “We’ll teach you to drink deep ere you depart”, he is enthusiastically promising his friend ‘a gay time’, and that Hamlet sees Claudius as a possible seducer of Ophelia. Like Trench, Adams believes that Hamlet’s plans for the play-scene were considerably revised towards the end of “O what a rogue”. One does not feel that Adams’s view of the play is, like Bradley’s, of one piece: rather, he has been sensitive in many points of detail and his account derives strength from its secure placing in the Bradley tradition.

H. B. Charlton is, of course, a militant Bradleian, as is evident in his interpretation of *Hamlet* in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1948). He effectively dismisses the idea that Hamlet needed to test the Ghost’s word, and sees the Second Quarto placing of “To be, or not to be” as “a master-dramatist’s revision”. He notes that, when Hamlet’s feelings are excited, he is given to exaggeration and to generalizing from a single particular (“Frailty, thy name is woman”), but, when his mind dwells on generalities, he forgets his own situation (“No traveller returns”). Charlton anticipates D. G. James in suggesting that the world of *Hamlet* shows “the critical inquisitiveness and the accompanying part sceptical, part agnostic forms of the modern mind”. As far as it goes, Charlton’s account of the play is acceptable, but we may wonder if he—or Bradley, for that matter—has sufficiently demonstrated why Hamlet’s experiences have inhibited him from performing the act that he repeatedly purposes. Charlton is content, it appears, with the simple assertion that they do: he will have no dealings with Freudian conjecture.

THE TEXT

During this century there have been two authoritative brief statements on the development of *Hamlet* textual study. These have inevitably come from E. K. Chambers in *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (1930) and from W. W. Greg in *The Editorial Problem in Shakespeare* (1942). Preceding Chambers there was the work of A. W. Pollard and J. Dover Wilson on the Bad Quartos in general, which in relation to *Hamlet* assumed a peculiarly elaborate form in Wilson’s *The Copy of ‘Hamlet’ 1603 and The ‘Hamlet’ Transcript 1593* (1918): here the theory of First Quarto provenance was that the actor of “Voltemar” (who also played other

small parts) made some use of a transcript, made for provincial performance, of a manuscript that Shakespeare had partially revised from the *Ur-Hamlet* or from an intermediate revision: “Voltemar” also had his own written part in his possession. Among rival theories may be noted those of F. G. Hubbard in his edition of the First Quarto (Madison, Wisconsin, 1920) and B. A. P. van Dam in *The Text of Shakespeare’s Hamlet* (1924). Hubbard believed that the First Quarto was a complete play, dramatically effective, and consistent within itself, although he admitted that it may not have been holding the stage at the time of publication. He did not attempt to explain the relationship between the two manuscript versions of the play that he assumed to lie behind the First and Second Quartos. Editing the First Quarto on the assumption that its corruptions were only a matter of misprinting, he produced a text that Chambers has described as “quite incredible”. Van Dam held to the view that the First Quarto was produced by stenography, but his evidence of anticipations and transpositions would today be seen to accord with a theory of memorial reconstruction. He had to explain the wide variations between the First and Second Quartos, and the First Quarto’s not infrequent echoes of other Shakespeare plays and *The Spanish Tragedy*, by the assumption that the players were not “part-perfect”. Yet he believed that the First Quarto could not have come from a pirate-actor, because such a man would have been in a position to avoid mistakes in proper names and correct miswritings and transpositions. The Second Quarto, he thought, was printed from Shakespeare’s manuscript after it had been used as a prompt-copy: van Dam needed to assume this because he believed that the Second Quarto contained actors’ interpolations, though he admitted that the text was too long for “an ordinary performance”. The Folio text was based on an intermittent collation of a late quarto with a transcript of the prompt-copy. In 1930, however, Chambers had little doubt that “the Second Quarto substantially represents the original text of the play, as written once and for all by Shakespeare” and that the First Quarto, the Folio version and *Der bestrafte Brudermord* are all derivatives from that: the First Quarto he saw as a reported text, with the possibility of contamination by the *Ur-Hamlet*; the Folio version was set up from a manuscript that had been used as a prompt-copy.

Dover Wilson in *The Manuscript of Shakespeare’s Hamlet and the Problems of its Transmission* (1934) was primarily concerned with the nature of the copy used for the Second Quarto and the Folio. This very full enquiry led to the conclusion that the Second Quarto was set up from Shakespeare’s autograph, which suffered at the hands of an inexpert compositor and a press-corrector who emended without reference to the manuscript: omissions were either inadvertent, dishonest (the compositor being anxious to have done), or tactful (in the “little eyases” passage): sometimes the First Quarto was consulted when the author’s handwriting was especially difficult (hence the appearance of ‘sallied flesh’, as in the First Quarto). The Folio version was based on a transcript of the prompt-copy, and was thus a text of less authority. Wilson argued that the light punctuation of the Second Quarto was Shakespeare’s own, and consequently that the Second Quarto phrasing of “What a piece of work is a man” should be accepted. This deduction was strenuously combated by Peter Alexander in his British Academy lecture *Shakespeare’s Punctuation* (1945), which led to controversy between Wilson and Alexander in *The Review of English Studies* (January and July, 1947). Alexander did not deny that the Second Quarto punctuation was Shakespeare’s, but suggested that it needs interpretation: “What a piece of work is a man” shows “commas with inversion” together with an omission of “external

punctuation” (i.e. stops at the end of a separable sense-unit) which Alexander finds not uncommon in Shakespeare texts. Wilson understandably replied that this kind of punctuation would defy a player’s or prompter’s power of interpretation, and suggested that the Folio-pointing was due to Burbage’s perverted reading of the lines. Yet, if we assume, as Wilson and Alexander do, that the Second Quarto punctuation is Shakespeare’s, someone did interpret it as meaning what Alexander claims it was intended to mean. Nevertheless, Alexander’s case would be much stronger if we could assume that this prose speech was set out in verse-lining in Shakespeare’s manuscript: we might then have no qualms about the possibility of “external punctuation” being omitted.

While not disputing Dover Wilson’s view of the provenance of the Second Quarto, T. M. Parrott and Hardin Craig in their edition of the Second Quarto (1938) argued that the Folio text could not have been derived from the prompt-book: it was too long, they suggested, to have been acted as it stood. They suggested, therefore, that it came from a transcript of Shakespeare’s manuscript which was made before the preparation of the prompt-book and was again transcribed for the Folio printers. This argument seems to depend too much on a rigid acceptance of the two-hour theory, and has probably been rendered unnecessary by more recent views of the provenance of the Folio text.

G. I. Duthie’s *The ‘Bad’ Quarto of Hamlet* (1941) returned to the provenance of the First Quarto. As Greg justly points out, this book “contains in fifty pages an admirable survey of recent research on Shakespeare’s text”. It presents the First Quarto as a memorial reconstruction of the full text, made for provincial performance by the actor who played Marcellus and perhaps Lucianus (as previously suggested by H. D. Gray in 1915), the part of Voltumar being available for transcription: when the actor’s memory failed, he wrote blank verse of his own made up of echoes from the full text and from other plays: occasionally he drew on the phraseology and other characteristics of the *Ur-Hamlet*, deriving from that source the names Corambis and Montano. *Der bestrafte Brudermord*, he believes, was derived from a further memorial reconstruction made for a continental tour by a company that included one or two who had acted the *Hamlet*-text used for the First Quarto: the reporters in this instance made some fresh use of the *Ur-Hamlet*. These views are, of course, speculative, but Duthie has in many instances provided plausible demonstrations of the First Quarto reporter’s patch-work. In any event, his theories have yet to be seriously challenged. Greg in *The Editorial Problem* cautiously approved Duthie’s views and accepted the autograph and prompt-book provenances of the Second Quarto and the Folio text, though he remarked, like Parrott and Craig, that the Folio text can hardly have been acted in its entirety.

Important new speculations concerning the text of *Hamlet* have recently been made. Miss Alice Walker in ‘The Textual Problem of *Hamlet*: A Reconsideration’ (*Review of English Studies*, October 1951) argues that the Second Quarto was printed from a corrected copy of the First Quarto as far as the end of Act 1, and that, as suggested by H. de Groot in *Hamlet, its Textual History* (Amsterdam, 1923), the Folio text was printed from a corrected copy of the Second Quarto. The manuscripts used to correct the printed copies were respectively Shakespeare’s autograph and a transcript of the prompt-book. This would explain the length of the Folio text, which would thus not be based on an acting-copy. It would explain the agreements of the First Quarto and the Second Quarto (for Act 1) and of the Second Quarto and the Folio in unusual

spellings and manifest errors. The obvious difficulty in this theory is that the Folio omits some two hundred lines of the Second Quarto, although it must, according to Miss Walker, have taken a good deal of material from the Second Quarto and not from the prompt-book: as appears more clearly in her book *Textual Problems of the First Folio* (1953), Miss Walker has to assume a measure of 'editing' in the Folio text, but it is difficult to see why that should have happened. This point has been taken up by Harold Jenkins in 'The Relation of the Second Quarto and the Folio Text of *Hamlet*' (*Studies in Bibliography*, 1955), who believes that only in some measure was a corrected Second Quarto the basis for the Folio text. He notes the Folio's many divergences from the Second Quarto, and suggests that the scribe who made a transcript for the printer may have had "a copy of the quarto at hand, or even open, in case of need" but that we cannot say how frequently he turned to it.

In 'A Definitive Text of Shakespeare: Problems and Methods' (*Studies in Shakespeare*, Coral Gables, Florida, 1953) Fredson Bowers attacked Dover Wilson's belief that the Second Quarto was set up by a single inexpert compositor, "an untutored dolt working beyond his normal speed": Bowers saw no evidence that only one compositor worked on the text, and argued that the number of skeleton-formes suggested composition speed was ahead of press speed and that a need for haste was therefore unlikely. Following this up, J. R. Brown in 'The Compositors of *Hamlet* Q2 and *The Merchant of Venice*' (*Studies in Bibliography*, 1955) deduces from evidence of spellings that the same two compositors worked on the Second Quarto and on *The Merchant*, which was also printed by James Roberts. Consequently the 'omissions' in the Second Quarto must have been due either to the illegibility of the manuscript or to the fact that they are really later additions to the text. Bowers in 'The Printing of *Hamlet*, Q2' (*ibid.*) accepts Brown's argument, relates it to the evidence of varying running-titles, and gives further consideration to the two compositors' stints. Miss Walker in 'Collateral Substantive Texts (with special reference to *Hamlet*)' (*ibid.*) notes that, though we are moving towards a new eclecticism in the editing of *Hamlet* and certain other plays, we still need to make up our minds which is the more authoritative text, for readings in the Second Quarto and the Folio may be evenly balanced against one another and we also need as much information as possible about transmission in order to formulate coherent principles for emendation. It is clear that an editor of *Hamlet* to-day must be equipped with a sound aesthetic judgement as well as with a full acquaintance with recent bibliographical methods.

DOVER WILSON AND GRANVILLE-BARKER

What Happens in Hamlet (1935) has probably had more influence on stage-practice than any other book by a Shakespeare scholar. It is best known for its insistence on the Ghost as constituting a problem for Hamlet and a largely Protestant audience, its suggestion that Hamlet in II, ii overheard Polonius's plan to "loose" Ophelia to him, and its ingenious reconstruction of the staging of the mouse-trap with Claudius's attention momentarily diverted. But twenty years after its publication these do not seem the strongest parts of the book. Hamlet was the first character in an Elizabethan drama to doubt a ghost's veracity: the dramatic tradition, untroubled by religious controversy, used ghosts as a convenient means of bringing news. Wilson, relating the Ghost in *Hamlet* to contemporary religious notions, is forced to see it as

essentially a Catholic spirit. This has led to controversy between R. W. Battenhouse ('The Ghost in *Hamlet*: A Catholic "Linchpin"?', *Studies in Philology*, April 1951) and I. J. Semper ('The Ghost in *Hamlet*: Pagan or Christian?', *The Month*, April 1953), in which the mingled Christian and Senecan elements in the Ghost's constitution have become more evident. If Hamlet overheard Polonius's words about Ophelia, the audience would have to bear this in mind a long while. Wilson's view of the mouse-trap depends on the audience watching the dumb-show carefully, so that it will have in advance an easy grasp of the play's action, and simultaneously observing Claudius's inattention. Yet we must admit that this is more convincing than the view of Richard Flatter in *Hamlet's Father* (1949), that the dumb-show was acted on the upper-stage, out of sight of Claudius and Gertrude, who sat on their thrones on the inner-stage. The special value of Wilson's book to-day seems to consist in its wide-ranging ideas, its readiness to admit difficulty. He sees Hamlet as a man who delights in acting and in fooling his enemies, who behaves in a deranged fashion yet is ever conscious of it, who can convince himself but not us by his words in the prayer-scene, who in "How all occasions" achieves an unconsciously ironic conclusion by promising himself "bloody thoughts". T. S. Eliot's view of the play Wilson cannot bring himself to accept, finding Hamlet's awareness of Gertrude's incest cause enough for his behaviour, but, as in Bradley's case, we may wonder if this accounts for some of the peculiarities that Wilson has shrewdly observed. It is evident that this book is thoroughly in the Bradley tradition and, as such, can be an admirable guide to a producer. Nevertheless, some readers have fastened on a single point and made it, as Wilson does not, dominate the play: thus Bertram Joseph in *Conscience and the King: A Study of Hamlet* (1953) and Hugh Hunt in *Old Vic Prefaces: Shakespeare and the Producer* (1954), both manifestly indebted to Wilson, have been content to see Hamlet's delay as caused solely by his doubt of the Ghost.

Granville-Barker's *Preface* (1937) also owes much to Dover Wilson. Like J. Q. Adams's scene-by-scene commentary, this preface lacks a clear line of argument, but it is of the first excellence on many points of detail. Granville-Barker saw that Shakespeare inevitably took over the pretended madness, but fused it with something else, making an "alloy of sanity and insanity, pretence and reality": only in this way could Hamlet's character be fully developed and revealed. There was cruelty too in the character, the cruelty of a sensitive mind, "ever tempted to shirk its battle against the strong" in order to triumph over the weak. When Hamlet doubts, it is because "he has lost for a while the will to believe". The heart of the play is seen as a sceptical element in the hero's character, but Granville-Barker does not show how this keeps Hamlet from action: he does not, as D. G. James does, suggest an ethical uncertainty in Hamlet. Among the many good things here we find that "the old worldling" Polonius is epitomized in the kind of verse he speaks, that the standard five-act division spoils many effects of contrast and juxtaposition that Shakespeare must have had in mind, and that the Second Quarto and Folio sequence of scenes represents probably a revision and certainly a better version than that of the First Quarto.

If at times one regrets the way in which later commentators have fastened on a single point of Wilson's and made too much of it, one may be more astonished at a simple attempt to put him right. Thus A. J. Green in 'The Cunning of the Scene' (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, October 1953) believes that the mouse-trap and its dumb-show must have gone exactly as Hamlet

intended, and the actors must all have played their parts brilliantly (despite “pox, leave thy damnable faces”), for Hamlet was a capable man of action who “cannot have planned carelessly”. *What Happens in Hamlet* will survive this.

THE ‘HISTORICAL’ SCHOOL

No one could accuse Dover Wilson or J. Q. Adams or Granville-Barker of being indifferent to the circumstances in which Shakespeare wrote, but their approach to *Hamlet* and other major plays of its time has been dependent on the belief that they are exceptional works, not to be totally ‘explained’ by reference to dramatic fashions and methods or common trends of thought. These things, however, are given a special stress by the critics that now concern us. The best of these remain conscious of *Hamlet*’s stature, and there are many who have helped to a fuller understanding of the play. We cannot say that this movement in *Hamlet*-criticism is a mere reaction to Bradley, for its presence is felt in the nineteenth century, yet there is no doubt that Bradley’s lack of concern with the Elizabethan playhouse provoked revolt and strengthened an existent tendency. John Corbin in *The Elizabethan Hamlet: A Study of the Sources, and of Shakespeare’s Environment, to show that the Mad Scenes had a Comic Aspect now Ignored* (1895) indicated his approach in his title, and suggested that Hamlet’s brutality was to be explained as a legacy from the *Ur-Hamlet*. But the ‘historical’ approach was further developed in C. M. Lewis’s *The Genesis of Hamlet* (New York, 1907). Lewis’s main thesis was that in the extant play we have an amalgam of Belleforest, Kyd and Shakespeare. It is not subject to æsthetic judgement because it is not an entity. If we want Shakespeare, we must subtract Belleforest and Kyd. Lewis is good on what may be called the ‘growingness’ of the play: he suggests that, as Shakespeare worked on it, he deepened Hamlet’s philosophic inclination, his hint of moral scruple, his agnosticism. But the book as a whole is unsatisfying because Lewis disregards the sense of unity that the play in performance can give, despite the problems that may arise as we afterwards brood. And he does not relate the growing complication to the mingling of the splendid and the pathological that is a general mark of Shakespeare’s work in the opening years of the seventeenth century. A. A. Jack’s *Young Hamlet: A Conjectural Resolution of some of the Difficulties in the Plotting of Shakespeare’s Play* (1950) was based on lectures given some fifty years before its publication. It resembles Lewis’s book in its view that Shakespeare began his version as a straightforward revenge-play, which through revision came to bear the weight of philosophic thought. Jack differed from Lewis in regretting that Shakespeare had not left his first draft untouched, but he had excellent things to say on the play’s emotional effect, seeing it—even in its final form—as primarily a theatre-play, not troubling the depths of our minds as the later tragedies do. J. M. Robertson’s *The Problem of “Hamlet”* (1919) and *“Hamlet” Once More* (1923) similarly present the play as a palimpsest: Kyd, it is suggested, wrote a two-part *Hamlet*; Shakespeare attempted to fit Kyd’s material into a single play; Kyd had already complicated things by imposing a Senecan ghost-revelation and the play-within-the-play on the old tale in which madness was assumed for safety’s sake; Shakespeare added a pessimism of his own, and a hero who shows the effect of “psychic shock” despite preserving the readiness for action that he had displayed in earlier versions.

E. E. Stoll has written often on *Hamlet*, but his two major contributions are in *Hamlet: An*

Historical and Comparative Study (Minnesota, 1919) and *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare: A Study in Dramatic Contrast and Illusion* (1933). In the earlier work he was anxious to present the Prince in a heroic light, and to insist on the ready intelligibility of the play to an Elizabethan audience. He saw “To be, or not to be” as a mere generalizing soliloquy, like the Duke’s words on death in *Measure for Measure*, like many speeches and choruses in Greek tragedy—having little or no relation to the context: the Greek analogue is hardly convincing, for Aristotle, rebuking irrelevance in choric passages, describes it as a quite recent development. Stoll justifiably refuses to see Hamlet as a merely pathological figure, and he gives an excellent account of the sheerly theatrical excitement of the last scene of the play. At one point he admits that Titus and Hieronimo, “like most Elizabethan revengers”, both feigned madness and were mad, and adds: “Even in *Hamlet* Shakespeare has not handled the situation so carefully as to preclude some question on this head.” This, of course, goes against the dominant thesis of his book, that *Hamlet* is the story of a simple hero. In *Art and Artifice* Stoll’s account of the tragic effect reminds us of the worlds of opera and epic: he is often illuminating in bringing out the dramatic orchestration by means of contrast, suspense, iteration; the idea of drama he presents depends on juxtapositions rather than processes. He is surely right to differentiate between tragic and philosophic writing, to see that in *Hamlet* there is “no piercing of the veil”, that we remain primarily in a world of particulars; yet it is strange that he does not see this world of particulars in more human terms, with contradictions and strife within the single dramatic figure. It is notable that he says nothing of Hamlet’s bawdy and brutal talk, and he is capable of strangely misunderstanding a play close to *Hamlet* in time and theme, when he says that Chapman’s Clermont delays merely for dramatic effect, “with no inner reason”. From Stoll we have learned much concerning Shakespeare’s artistry, but he has told us little of what the tragedies are about.

In *Character Problems in Shakespeare’s Plays: A Guide to the Better Understanding of the Dramatist* (1922), L. L. Schücking presents Shakespeare as taking over the action of the *Ur-Hamlet* and adding or developing Hamlet’s melancholy: there is thus, he considers, no point in talking of his delay. Hamlet’s pessimism, his antic disposition, his wish for Claudius’s damnation are due either to the original story or to his adherence to the fashionable melancholy type. In line with the general argument of this book, Schücking says we must believe Laertes on the nature of Hamlet’s love and Gertrude, not the Clown, on the manner of Ophelia’s death. Schücking’s *The Meaning of Hamlet* (1937) is less challenging, and provides a useful analysis of Hamlet’s behaviour. In particular it stresses the Renaissance and non-Christian element in the play. His British Academy lecture, *The Baroque Character of the Elizabethan Tragic Hero* (1938), develops the idea of Hamlet as a melancholy figure and links him with the violent exaggerations of baroque. This is a corrective to the straightforward blamelessness of Stoll’s Hamlet, but Schücking in one place admits that Shakespeare differs, in general, from his contemporaries in his ‘psychological realism’, his following of ‘Nature’: this should make Schücking readier than it does to see that Hamlet’s conduct has a way of hanging together, as that of a Marston hero does not. We are merely affronted when Antonio kills Julio; we are disturbed when Hamlet insults Ophelia. We look, therefore, for a special reason for Hamlet’s railings, and we are not content to see them as part of a baroque presentation of a melancholy man. Here as elsewhere Schücking observantly notes what is in the play, but for explanation of its presence offers us only large descriptive terms.