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CHAPTER I

THE RAISING OF THE PROBLEM

It would be extremely interesting to know exactly how an ordinarily well-educated and intelligent Elizabethan was impressed by the play of *Hamlet*. We can be fairly certain that he was impressed. We are left to infer that he was impressed in much the same way as the ordinarily well-educated and intelligent Englishman of to-day is impressed. But at least two allowances must be made. In the first place, he would have possessed, when he visited the theatre to see the play, an equipment which his fellow of to-day usually has not. In the second place, he would have visited the theatre unimpeded by an equipment which his fellow of to-day usually takes with him. He would have gone prepared to see a play with the structure, contents, or at least general drift of which he was already fairly familiar from a previous play (or previous plays) of the same name. For we cannot too frequently remind ourselves that *Hamlet* did not emerge from the void, that it was not a novelty: or if a novelty (for of course it was that) that it was a novel variation of a theme that had been tried before more than once, a theme that was apparently well known to the play-going public. Our *Hamlet* was possibly not even Shakespeare's first trial of the subject, but (it would seem) a second attempt at least. It seems likely that Shakespeare to some extent allowed for this fore-

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knowledge of his theme on the part of his public; but this is a matter that we may take up again. At present, the point seems worth making that the story was familiar to an Elizabethan audience in a way in which to a modern audience it is not. *Hamlet*, to that audience, did not stand quite by itself; it had had forerunners; and no criticism is sound which does not take into account the possible consequences of this fact.

But we ourselves (or many of us) enjoy or suffer from another kind of foreknowledge, a foreknowledge in which the Elizabethan had no share. I mean, of course, the foreknowledge conferred by the criticisms and interpretations that now, for a century or so, have been gathering round the play. *Hamlet* is now thickly encrusted with them, so that it is a little difficult to get a direct sight of it. We have a number of *Hamlet* traditions. We have, without knowing it, been brought up Coleridgeans, or have unconsciously acquired a Goethean bent. The very word *Hamlet* now carries added connotations. The play has taken colour from every source, has been tinged by its passage through many minds. It is now very much more than itself.

All this may be, in a sense, to the good: or some of it. There are criticisms of *Hamlet*, no doubt, that we could spare: the play has inspired others that in themselves are a creation, that we would not, almost for their own sake, willingly let die. But it is all rather confusing. That is why it seems good that, periodically, we should attempt to take bearings. The discussion, after all, has progressed, if after the fashion of a spiral. Certain famous judg-

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ments of the play have been shown, almost to demonstration, and sometimes repeatedly, inadequate. It is well that this should be realised and that such judgments should be allowed to rest. The outlook has veered and shifted. It is useful to note in what directions. The following survey may perhaps serve to suggest, if only roughly and diagrammatically (and always from an unavoidably personal point of view) something of the present situation.

And, first, it is not without interest to glance at the raising of the problem. We do not know whether *Hamlet* perplexed the first audiences or not. We do know that we are unable to find any records of perplexity until more than a century after the performance of the play. We need not, perhaps, attach great significance to such a failure. But it is interesting to observe that the first commentators were not unduly worried by what puzzled them. Sir Thomas Hanmer, writing in 1736, noticed some difficulties. It is worth while noting what his difficulties were. They were the big problems, or what were to become the big problems. Usually it is an absence of apparent or sufficient motivation that he observes. Thus, why did Hamlet feign madness? Hanmer could not find that this was justified in Shakespeare's play and, in a very shrewd and noteworthy phrase, thought this "conforming to the groundwork of his plot" injudicious. Hanmer, again, was struck by what was to become the problem of problems. "There appears no reason at all in nature", he observed, "why this young Prince did not put the usurper to death as soon as

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possible", for the young man was represented as very brave and careless of his own life. "The case, indeed, is this," he goes on, "had Hamlet gone naturally to work, there would have been an end of the play. The poet, therefore, was obliged to delay his hero's revenge; but then he should have contrived some good reason for it." Such are the modest observations of one of our early critics of *Hamlet*. Naïve perhaps they are; but it is by no means certain, for all the wealth of later speculation, that we have got very far beyond them. The same quality of trenchant, if rather prosaic, commonsense, appears in the comments of Dr Johnson some thirty years later. It is interesting to note that he too was impressed by the imperfect motivation of the madness: "of the feigned madness of Hamlet there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not have done with the reputation of sanity". This may not be strictly true. Later critics point out that the feigned madness at least was of service to Hamlet in that it allowed him when nearly beside himself to behave like a madman without causing surprise. This subtlety of understanding escaped Dr Johnson: and this fact again is worth noting. At all events it is remarkable that he and Hanmer both accept the difficulties very philosophically: they are there, and it is a pity, but no writer is perfect everywhere, and there seems not much more to be said. But how much more was to be said!

It was towards the end of the eighteenth century that the *Hamlet* problem, as a problem, began to emerge. In fact, by 1784, some ten years before Goethe wrote, and

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some twenty years before Coleridge, it had been defined clearly in its main aspects and some of the leading theories had been suggested. Henry Mackenzie (1780) was the first to lay notable stress, not only on what seemed to him the doubts and hesitations, but also on what he regarded as the "weaknesses" of Hamlet. Much of Goethe's account is anticipated in Mackenzie's. Hamlet is the "sweet Prince, the delicacy of whose feelings a milder planet should have ruled, whose gentle virtues should have bloomed through a life of felicity and usefulness". Here is one main view of Hamlet's character already sufficiently indicated. Even more interesting were some comments by Richardson, four years later. Richardson makes one of the first attempts to explore deeply into the roots of Hamlet's trouble and could have given a lesson to many a later critic in judicious emphasis. Whence does Hamlet's despondency spring? Not from the death of his father, for, says Richardson, "that was a natural evil and as such he endures it". From political disappointments? Only negligibly, since "that he is excluded from succeeding immediately to the royalty seems to affect him slightly, for to vehement and vain ambition he appears superior. He is moved by finer principles, by an exquisite sense of virtue, of moral beauty and turpitude". Then Richardson, taking the mere text as his guide, makes for the core of the matter. "The impropriety of Gertrude's behaviour, her ingratitude to the memory of her former husband and the depravity she discovers in the choice of a successor, afflict his soul and cast him into utter agony.

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Here then is the principle and spring of all his actions." Richardson deserves commendation for this. He anticipates, as well, all the critics down to Bradley, in his view of the feigned madness and its motive. Hamlet, in Richardson's interpretation, is, to his own knowledge, on the brink of madness. "Knowing that he must appear incoherent and inconsistent, he is not unwilling to have it believed that his reason is somewhat deranged, and that the strangeness of his conduct admits of no other explanation." Richardson, finally, is the discoverer of excessive sensibility as the cause of Hamlet's indecision. His account of the sparing by Hamlet of the King at prayer might have set the traditional treatment. "The sentiments that Hamlet expresses when he finds Claudius at prayer are not, I will venture to affirm, his real ones. There is nothing in his whole character to justify such savage enormity." How, then, is the episode to be explained? Ingeniously, on the lines which were to become orthodox, Richardson reconstructs the event. Do we not ourselves, he very plausibly asks, often allege false motives for our behaviour? Do we not sometimes do so almost without our knowledge? Apply all this to Hamlet. Really, he is withheld "by the ascendant of a gentle disposition, by the scruples, and perhaps weakness, of extreme sensibility". But his sense of duty will not allow him to acknowledge the truth even to himself. "He alleges, as direct causes of his delay, motives that could never influence his conduct and thus exhibits a most exquisite picture of self-deceit." Richardson sums up the whole tragedy: "[Hamlet's] original constitution

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renders him unequal to the contest". How much later criticism is already implicit in such comments!

But we are now on the threshold of the Great Age and I will only pause for two brief remarks. It is, of course, strange that a play should ever have become a problem. Musical compositions, paintings, poems, even novels might well be or contain problems. But a play depends so much for its effect on ready comprehensibility. That a play which had been so successful should have had to wait so long until its true import began to be discovered, surely literary or dramatic history can contain few queerer phenomena than this. Of course, the strangeness has often been noted—then, generally, ignored or explained away. It seems to me difficult to explain it quite away. It is rather far-fetched, in this instance, to speak of artists who in the joy of creation work more subtly than they know, or of evasive meanings secreted within a disguise of melodrama. Nor is it a question of intricacies of detail, that might naturally require a more leisurely appreciation than the theatre affords. We cannot too often remind ourselves that the problem of *Hamlet* is the problem of the very central action of the piece. The difficulty, in ultimate terms, is to know what the play is really about. This is what is so very strange, that it should be difficult, or should have become difficult, to grasp the central drift of a play that has always been popular and successful.

In the second place, it is interesting to observe the methods of attacking this problem already adopted by Mackenzie and Richardson. Richardson, in particular,

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it will be noticed, yielded a very free rein to his imagination. In his discussion, for example, of the prayer-scene, where Hamlet spares Claudius, that was his deliberate method, to use his imagination to reconstruct a mysterious incident in the play. As we have seen, he reconstructs the incident very cleverly and no later commentator who has used the same method has been able to add much of importance to Richardson's interpretation of this scene. Only, let us note the word *reconstruct*, which his procedure inevitably suggests. We know that in the law courts crimes are frequently reconstructed; evidence is compiled, imaginations are used, judges and juries bring to bear their experience of human nature. Now, of course, in an appreciation of a play we cannot dispense with our imaginations, nor are we, ordinarily, required to lay aside our knowledge of human nature. But surely we should not in general be under the necessity of compiling evidence. Perhaps occasionally we might even have to do that. There are scenes in Shakespeare, we know, which are, by his own or another's fault, imperfect. There is nothing to be done with the last scene of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, if we do anything with it, but to try to reconstruct it. Parts of *Antony and Cleopatra* require some piecing together. But we are not, here, obviously dealing with such a scene. The prayer-scene in *Hamlet* is not garbled or incomplete; nor is it in Shakespeare's "shorthand" style. It bears every mark of being exactly what Shakespeare wished it to be: it is eminently finished and entire. Why, then, should we be obliged to reconstruct it? Why should any event,

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in any well-written play, require to be reconstructed? It is already constructed. It carries (or should carry) its own meaning with it: for is not that precisely how drama differs from life? If dramas need to be put together as fragments of real life are put together in the law courts, why, it must occur to one, write dramas? Where is their advantage? It is fairly clear that this contradiction pervades a good deal of *Hamlet* commentary: it is produced by a radical fallacy in method.

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CHAPTER II

GOETHE AND COLERIDGE

I have chosen Goethe and Coleridge as roughly typical of the next period of *Hamlet* criticism. Each began a certain tradition of thought and to one or other tradition most of what is said and written about the play even to this day belongs. Yet each view has been shown, with finality, unsatisfactory and incomplete.

Goethe is the most celebrated exponent of what has been called the sentimental theory of the hero of the play. This is the view that Mackenzie had already enunciated. Goethe expanded it and added a striking and very misleading image. Wilhelm Meister tells how he found the key to the Prince's character in the couplet:

> The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right!

He goes on: "In these words, I imagine, is the key to Hamlet's whole procedure, and to me it is clear that Shakespeare sought to depict a great deed laid upon a soul unequal to the performance of it. In this view I find the piece composed throughout. Here is an oak-tree planted in a costly vase, which should have received into its bosom only lovely flowers; the roots spread out, the vase is shivered to pieces.

"A beautiful, pure, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks be-

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