

seems to me to be composed. There is an oak tree planted in a costly jar which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom. The roots expand; the jar is shivered. A lovely, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear, and must not cast away. All duties are holy for him; the present is too hard.

To my mind this view of Hamlet's character is not satisfactory. It does not seem to be borne out by the circumstances in which he is placed. He was no coward by nature. He could dare and could do great deeds. A rude public like that of ancient Denmark was not likely to esteem a dreamer, yet we hear of "the great love the general gender bear him." He was no recluse, but "the observed of all observers." He was a soldier even more than he was a scholar. He did not seem to know what fear means; even in the presence of the ghost he showed no sign of trepidation. Nowhere does he present the aspect of a man who is afraid to do what he wants to do. Something else beside fear, something other than either trepidation or irresolution must be sought for to explain his

frequent delays, his unwilling procrastination. I think we may find the key to what we seek partly in Hamlet himself, and partly in his surroundings, but of this more anon.

We must first clear our way by saying something about Hamlet's madness. If Hamlet were really mad—that is, so unhinged in his mind that he was only to a limited extent responsible for his words and actions after the terrible interview with his father's spirit, then we may at once give up all those nice distinctions as to his motives and his character, which have amused and divided the critics. The play becomes nothing more than a clever picture of a very interesting young man gone mad, and who in his madness has all licence allowed him to say most rude and improper things, and do most odd deeds at odd times. The border land between madness and sanity, like all scientific boundaries, is a shaded and a waving line. Perhaps we are all a little mad, and the difference between the sane and the lunatic is only one of degree. Be that as it may, we practically allow of almost any amount of eccentricity in a man's character so long as he is evidently responsible for his actions. That Hamlet was a very unusual and eccentric young man no one will doubt or deny, but that he was so far under the dominion of vagaries as to be beyond the dividing line of responsibility is quite another question. If Hamlet were sane we are justified in pushing our enquiries into his motives for all he says and does. If Hamlet were insane there is an end of the entire matter.

Now I for one agree with those who do not think Shakespeare ever intended us to think of Hamlet as really mad. I know that I have the greater number of medical experts against me in this opinion, but that only proves the cleverness of Hamlet's acting, and the skill of the author of the play, if other circumstances go to show that this madness was feigned. In spite of the penetrating force of the arguments of Dr. Conolly, in his "Study of Hamlet, 1863," and of Dr. Kellogg, in his book, "Shakespeare's Delineations of Insanity, Imbecility, and Suicide," New York, 1866, and many others, I still feel that we miss all the meaning of this play if we take it as nothing more than the record of the freaks of a clever man gone mad.

The strongest argument, and one which to me is conclusive in favor of the ordinary view of this question, is that which is afforded by a comparison of the earlier and later forms of Hamlet. This play, as is well known, exists in two very different editions. In 1602 there occurs an entry in the Stationers' Registry, by James Roberts, of a book called "The Revenge of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, as it was lately acted by the Lord Chamberlayne, his servants." As this was Shakespeare's company of players, there is little doubt that this was Shakespeare's tragedy. No copy of this edition is known to exist, and whether it was ever printed is doubtful. In the following year, 1603, was printed the shorter play in quarto, of which two copies have been preserved.

In 1604 the second quarto was published, "enlarged to almost as much again as it was." This is substantially the Hamlet as we have it, though not exactly, for when the folio of 1,623 was published the "Hamlet" in that volume contains some passages not in any of the quartos, and omits others. The first Q. contains 2,143 lines, the second Q. 3,719. There is little doubt that we have in the shorter play the first form of the tragedy, a genuine work of the poet, though it is left uncertain in our mind whether it be not itself an altered edition of a yet older work. The character of Hamlet in his moments of action is fully conceived in the earlier play. It is, as Knight says, the contemplative part of his nature which is elaborated in the perfect copy. In reference to Hamlet's madness we find a marked difference in what is said of the hero. In the first it is much more emphatically stated. In the second these statements are toned down as though Shakespeare wished to remove from his auditors the impression that Hamlet was really beside himself, an impression which his words and actions might well be supposed to warrant. In the later play Ophelia in Act 2, Scene 1, is represented as coming in to her father and saying—

"Alas, my lord, I have been so affrighted," in the earlier play she enlarged this one line into five, and said that he was actually bereft of his wits.

"My dear Father, such a change in nature,
So great an alteration in a Prince!
He is bereft of all the wealth he had:
The jewel that adorned his feature most
Is fished and stolen away—his wits bereft him."

"Again," to quote Knight, "in the next scene, when the king communicates his wishes to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he does not speak of Hamlet as merely put "from the understanding of himself," but in this first copy he says,

"Our dear Cousin Hamlet hath lost the very heart of all his sense."

In the description which Polonius gives of Hamlet's madness for Ophelia's love, the symptoms are made much stronger in the original copy.

"He straightway grew into a melancholy,
From that into a fast; then into distraction,
Then into a sadness; from that into a madness,
And so by continuance and weakness of the brain,
Into the frenzy which now possesses him.

"Frenzy, according to Barton, was the worst and the final stage of madness, when the aberration had become clamorous and continual, and Polonius tells us that Hamlet is not only the prey of melancholy and distraction, but, by continuance, of "frenzy." The later copy is much milder in its description of these symptoms—a sadness, a fast, a watch, a weakness, a lightness, a madness. Shakespeare did not, either in his first sketch or in his amended copy, intend his audience to believe that Hamlet was essentially mad, and he removed, therefore the strong expressions which might encourage that belief. With this opinion of Knight I feel bound to agree, as I find it strengthened by reference to the original story as told in Belleforest's collection of novels from which Shakespeare got the materials of his plot. There we read again and again "how Hamlet counterfeited the madman to escape the tyranny of his uncle." To work out the plot of this drama with a clever thoughtful sane man as its hero, taking on madness as a cloak, is a vastly more difficult literary performance than simply to draw for us a picture of the ravings of a demented scholar oppressed and tormented by circumstances. We believe Shakespeare attempted the more difficult task, and that he has succeeded all seem to agree, except those specialists who have been deceived by Shakespeare's marvellous success into thinking that the hero was actually beside himself.

If Hamlet then was not mad, and is there is no evidence that he was too weak by nature for the performance of a great task, how shall we solve the enigma of his character?

To this query I venture a double answer, one obtained from his own actions, and one from his surroundings. The best exponent of the first that I have found is in a recent writer in the *Contemporary Review*, and the best statement of the latter is in the works of the German critic Werder.