

Hamlet and the Mouse-Trap

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HAMLET AND THE MOUSE-TRAP

Ils disputèrent quinze jours de suite, et, au bout de quinze jours, ils étaient aussi avancés que le premier; mais enfin ils parlaient, ils se communiquaient des idées, ils se consolait.—*Candide*.

I

SOME twenty years ago, in an analysis of the Play-Scene, I remarked that it was extraordinary that so important a part of *Hamlet* had received so little attention. Oddly enough, interest in this scene was just beginning in good earnest, and much important criticism and lively controversy have followed in the intervening years. We might hope, then, that at the present day we should be clearer in our minds, and that the scholar, the actor, the stage-manager, and the "general reader" would now be happily in accord.

Unfortunately, no such result has been attained. Three principal interpretations of the scene are still in the field, each of which has distinguished support. The two most striking and novel of these are due respectively to Dr. W. W. Greg and Professor Dover Wilson, whose eminence in Shakespearean studies needs no emphasis. Although far from being in agreement, these scholars are genial antagonists, fond of presenting each other with complimentary bouquets, not less fragrant for the thorns beneath the roses. Greg's¹ theory first appeared in 1917. Two years later, after receiving some vigorous criticism, he replied, and in 1936, in an open letter to Wilson, "affectionately but unrepentantly" returned to the attack. His adversary has been equally affectionate and equally unrepentant, and far more loquacious. He has set forth his views in different places, but the substance of them may be read in his entertaining volume, *What Happens in Hamlet* (1935), dedicated to Greg. A revised edition with additional material has recently (1937) been issued. He has also prepared for the "New Cambridge Shakespeare" an edition of *Hamlet*, with stage directions and emendations of the text in accordance with his views, and he has been fortunate in having these views embodied in actual performance on the stage.²

Contrasting with these is what may be termed the traditional interpretation, which has been stated in various ways in recent years, though without the controversial ardor which animates more radical theories. It has been presented, to take an example from each of three different

¹ As I shall have to refer often to Dr. Greg and to Professor Wilson, I am taking the liberty of generally omitting their titles.

² Bibliography of Greg's and Wilson's publications is given below. My article, "The Play-Scene in *Hamlet*," appeared in the *JEGP*, xviii (1919), 1-22.

countries, by Dr. Joseph Quincy Adams, Professor L. L. Schücking, and Mr. Harley Granville-Barker, in analyses of the entire play which differ from each other in minor respects.³ In 1919, in the article of my own to which I have already referred, the scene was explained along conservative lines, and in greater detail.

Under these circumstances, there seems to be excuse for adding another to the legion of monographs on *Hamlet*. The importance of the Play-Scene as the keystone to the arch of the drama as a whole, and the necessity of understanding this scene, are now, apparently, fully realized. Thus Wilson says, in introducing *What Happens in Hamlet*, "Did Claudius see the dumb-show, and if not, why not? It is just because I think the posing of that problem a turning-point in the history of Shakespearean criticism that I have written this book." The most effective demonstration of the correctness of the more conservative interpretation, however ungracious this demonstration may seem, is destructive criticism of Wilson's theories, and of those set forth by Greg. The whole question, however, is much broader than dispute over matters of detail. Decision must depend as much upon critical methods as upon textual exegesis—not upon methods which are novel, but those which have long since stood their test. I shall have to apologize in advance, then, for restating some principles already familiar to the reader. We shall never settle the difficulties of the Play-Scene until we can agree about the proper ways to approach it. Moreover, there is less need for detailed examination of the text if, as I believe, the basis of Greg's and of Wilson's arguments in regard to the dumb-show is unsound. If that goes to pieces, little is left of their subsequent reconstructions. While it will be necessary to discuss some points minutely, I hope that much of the criticism of criticism, always tedious and confusing to the reader, may be avoided.

Wilson's hypotheses have gained greater approval than Greg's, and a wider audience, not confined to specialists. But an understanding of what Greg has written is very necessary, because of his distinction as a scholar, the illuminating suggestions which he has made, and Wilson's dependence in part upon his work. In one sense, Greg's theory hardly needs refutation; many of its points have been destructively criticized, it is too revolutionary to carry conviction, and though he has again

³ Joseph Quincy Adams, edition of the play (Boston and New York, 1929), 261 ff.; Levin L. Schücking, *Der Sinn des Hamlet* (Leipzig, 1935), translated by Graham Rawson as "The Meaning of *Hamlet*" (London, 1937); Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Third Series, *Hamlet* (London, 1937). Granville-Barker records his "total disagreement" with Wilson's interpretation of the Play-Scene (p. 97). I did not read his book until after the present paper was written, and I find that in two or three places he has anticipated my objections.

entered the fray after nearly twenty years, he is not over-serious about the whole business. "I am not surprised," he says to Wilson, "that you should remark: 'Whether you actually believed in your theory I have never been able to discover'—for I have never discovered it myself. However, you have challenged me to defend it: so, have at you!"⁴ He seems, then, more interested in an elaborate display of fencing than in slaying his adversary. His original argument is a closely reasoned piece of logic, based, as I think, upon a false premise. When he sees the conclusion to which it has led him, he apparently hesitates. What shall we say? We must not take mere dialectics too seriously. But his work cannot be ignored, and the best way to treat it seems to be to meet his arguments when necessary, leaving him to decide how far he will continue to defend them. I am not so much concerned here with details as with his general approach. Those who wish detailed criticism may read Wilson's extended comments, which will not be found lacking in conviction.

I would especially emphasize the importance of the play within the play for the actor and the stage director. Here is one of the big set-scenes of *Hamlet*, falling, as such scenes often do, midway in the third act; yet while the main issue, the testing of Claudius, has been made to stand out clearly, the subtler points have rarely, I think, been fully realized. The text has been cut and the action arranged in a variety of ways. The dumb-show has frequently been omitted altogether,⁵ yet it is in both Quartos and in the Folio, and it is intimately bound up with the dialogue. Shakespeare must have written it (or retained it from the old play which he was revising) with a purpose, and it is certainly our business to find out what that purpose was. In these matters the scholar and the critic may be of assistance, for though they may learn much from study of effects in actual production, they may also give valuable help to the players themselves. At the end of the present paper I have added, for those whose place is in the theatre, a summary of the results of the following discussion.

As Dr. Greg and Professor Wilson have not hesitated to attack those who have differed from them, they will not take sharp criticism amiss. Each has, in any case, contributed much to our knowledge of the scene.

⁴ *MLR*, xxxi (1936), 145.

⁵ Sometimes with strange results. In the stage version used by John Gielgud, Ophelia says, as soon as the Prologue enters, "What means this, my lord?" and Hamlet answers, "Marry, this is miching mallecho; it means mischief," all of which applies in the uncut text to the dumb-show, and is inapplicable as following the entrance of the Prologue. See Rosamond Gilder, *John Gielgud's Hamlet, a record of performance* (New York, 1937), p. 164. Miss Gilder's work in giving an exact description of the acting and settings of this performance is much to be commended; it would be extremely useful to have such records of all the more important productions of the play.

The latter has stated, as the aim of his own studies, "the clearer understanding of Shakespeare's purposes and the better playing of *Hamlet*." With that modest and sensible proposal all who write on this thorny subject will agree.

II

We will first review the newer theories, which ought, at the outset, to be clearly in the reader's mind. Only the main outlines are here given, in order that matters of secondary importance may not prove confusing. I am aware that there is danger in summaries; I shall, as far as possible, quote the actual phraseology of the writers. To do them complete justice their arguments should of course be read in full.

Greg sets forth an interpretation of the play which he thinks Shakespeare intended for those persons in the theatre who could perceive it.⁶

To the bulk of [Shakespeare's] audience *Hamlet* would be just another—and the greatest—of the Senecan revenge dramas. But may we not believe that for himself, as for other humaner minds among his contemporaries, such crude machinery would appear as a blot upon a noble piece of work? For such minds he would appear to have designed an alternative explanation, and as a warning of his real intention to have introduced the dumb-show.⁷

How does the dumb-show give warning? Greg thinks it is because the King "sat unmoved" through it, though if it reproduced his crime he must have known that his secret was betrayed.⁸ "The King, it will be observed, gives not the smallest sign of disturbance during or after the all-important dumb-show, and yet when the play comes to be acted his uneasiness quickly makes itself apparent."⁹ This creates a serious difficulty. "If the King could sit unmoved through the representation in pantomime of these events there is no imaginable reason why they should move him when acted with words."¹⁰ The conclusions are: "Claudius did not murder his brother by pouring poison into his ears," and "the Ghost's story was not a revelation, but a mere figment of Hamlet's brain."¹¹ The Ghosts in Shakespeare's plays are "the illusions of sleep or distemper," and the Ghost in *Hamlet* is of the same sort.¹² His speeches are "no more than the reflection of Hamlet's thoughts."¹³ The poisoning through the ears is described because it was already in Hamlet's mind,¹⁴ as a subconscious recollection from the *Murder of*

⁶ The best place to get Dr. Greg's theory is his paper, "Hamlet's Hallucination," *MLR*, xii (1917), 393-421. See also "Re-enter Ghost: A Reply to Mr. J. D. Wilson," *ibid.*, xiv (1919), 353-369, and "What Happens in *Hamlet*?" *ibid.*, xxxi (1936), 145-154, and "A Critical Mousetrap," pp. 179-180 of *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1916).

⁷ xii, 419.

⁸ xii, 397.

⁹ xii, 401.

¹⁰ xii, 398.

¹¹ xii, 401.

¹² xii, 395.

¹³ xii, 413.

¹⁴ xii, 416.

Gonzago, with which he had been familiar. The King rises and calls for lights, "convinced—not that his guilt has been discovered, but that Hamlet is a dangerous madman, who has designs on his life, and must, at all costs, be got quietly out of the country, and, if possible, out of the world."¹⁵ "The immediate object of the dumb-show is to prove to a critical audience that it is Hamlet's behaviour and not the King's that breaks up the court, while at the same time leaving Hamlet himself free to believe in the success of his plot."¹⁶

Wilson takes as his point of departure,¹⁷ as has already been noted, the difficulty emphasized by Greg, asking "Why does not Claudius show any signs of discomfiture at this dumb-show, which is a more complete representation of the circumstances of the murder than the play which follows it?"¹⁸ His solution is that proposed hesitatingly by Halliwell long ago: "Is it allowable to direct that the King and Queen should be whispering confidentially to each other during the dumb-show, and so escape a sight of it?"¹⁹ He thinks that Hamlet's remark, "Look you, how cheerfully my mother looks" directs the attention of the audience in the theatre to Gertrude, who joins Claudius and Polonius, who have, as he maintains, been in dispute about Hamlet's madness since the remark of Polonius, "O, ho! do you mark that?" "Each is arguing in support of his favourite theory . . . they are not watching the inner-stage at all; the play is nothing to them; their whole attention is concentrated upon the problem of Hamlet's madness."²⁰ The dumb-show is intended to make the spoken play clear to the audience. The King's question, "Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?" says Wilson, "makes it certain that the King cannot have seen the dumb-show, which is the argument of the play."²¹ He adopts from Greg the idea that the dumb-show was an unwelcome surprise to Hamlet, and further argues that the First Player was a rascal,²² that "miching mallecho" refers to this fellow's sneaking treachery in surreptitiously inserting the show into

¹⁵ XII, 406.

¹⁶ XII, 420, note.

¹⁷ References without title to Wilson's work in what follows are taken from *What Happens in Hamlet*, second edition (Cambridge, England, 1937). Those from his edition of the play (Cambridge, England, 1934) are preceded by "Ed." He had earlier published "The Parallel Plots in *Hamlet*," *MLR*, XIII (1918), 129-156; "The Play-Scene in *Hamlet* Restored," *Athenæum* (1918) July, 303-307; Aug., 344-349; Sept., 384-388; Nov., 462-467. Analyses of the contents of these articles will be found in the useful *Hamlet Bibliography and Reference Guide*, by Anton A. Raven (Chicago, 1936). Quotations from Shakespeare's text in the present article are from the Neilson edition, *The Cambridge Poets* (Boston and New York, 1906). ¹⁸ P. 139.

¹⁹ Furness, *Variorum*, I, 242. See also W. F. Trench, *Shakespeare's Hamlet, a New Commentary* (London, 1913), p. 159, note 2.

²⁰ P. 184.

²¹ P. 159.

²² Cf. p. 163.

the play, and that Hamlet's "The players cannot keep counsel, they'll tell all" voices his fear that they are going to spoil his carefully arranged plan. Hamlet's explanation that Lucianus is "nephew to the King" makes the court believe that the poisoner in the play signifies Hamlet and the sleeping king Claudius, which gives ample excuse to break up the performance. But "the plot of the interlude is [Claudius's] life's history. *Hamlet knows all!* Claudius is not safe; anything may happen. He pulls himself to his feet, and, squealing for light, he totters as fast as his trembling knees will carry him from the terrible, the threatening room. King Mouse has become a shambling, blinking paddock."²³

Other points in Wilson's analysis will be referred to later. The reader who wishes to know in advance the very different conclusions reached in the present article may be referred to the closing section.²⁴

III

Questions of antecedent probability confront us at the outset. Is it likely that the action of *Hamlet* is so obscure that it has been misunderstood until modern ingenuity has revealed it? A skilful dramatist makes the broad outlines of his plot plain to his audience, however much he may neglect details. Most of the difficulties which critics find in the Play-Scene²⁵ do not exist for spectators in the theatre. We must try to find explanations for real inconsistencies and obscurities, even if these are only apparent under close scrutiny, but this does not mean that in order to get rid of them it is best to make the scene into something new and strange. The dramatic effect of the whole, as it has been stamped on the minds of generations of playgoers, is guidance which cannot be neglected. When the long history of *Hamlet* criticism is reviewed, it is evident that characterization and motivation have given greater trouble than inconsistencies in the plot, which, though crude and melodramatic when reduced to its essentials, is nevertheless exceedingly effective theatrically. Even with mediocre acting the play "goes," as we all know. Both Greg and Wilson urge, however, that it will not work properly without their respective reconstructions. Thus Greg remarks that "the obvious interpretation of the action, which satisfies the generality, makes Shakespeare an astonishingly perverse bungler." But was Shakespeare not just as much of a bungler if he so failed to make the gist of his plot plain that it has taken three hundred years to discover what he really meant? Does an expert playwright work that way? I do not think that it will be maintained that Shakespeare was a bungler in the art of writing for the stage by the time that he revised the *Hamlet*-story.

²³ P. 195. ²⁴ See below, pp. 734-735.

²⁵ Cf. Wilson's eleven points (not fourteen), p. 139.

Can we believe that he meant a part of his audience to understand *Hamlet* in a way which knocks its traditional and accepted outlines completely to pieces?

Wilson goes to work in a different fashion. He does not advocate two interpretations, one for the pit and another for the galleries, and he does not destroy the main structure of the plot. But the cumulative effect of constant warping of the text,²⁶ and of forcing incidents into a new significance, is almost as great. Of the Play-Scene he says, in effect: You think that Claudius witnesses the dumb-show? Not at all; he is too busy discussing Hamlet's madness to pay any attention to it. You think that the players are doing what they can to carry out the Prince's intentions, after his kind and friendly treatment of them? Not at all; the First Player, a rascally fellow, nearly wrecks his plans. You think that "miching mallecho" refers to the plot of the *Murder of Gonzago*? Not at all; it refers to the iniquity of the actors. So with questions elsewhere in the play—the treatment of the supernatural, the "usurpation" of Claudius, the ambitions of Hamlet, the interpretation of the "Nunnery-Scene"—Wilson is convinced that he has found the true solutions. "Restoration along these lines, I believe, makes the plot of *Hamlet* work properly for the first time since Shakespeare's day."²⁷

²⁶ As, for example, in the following passage. When Laertes returns, the King tells him that "he which hath your noble father slain pursued my life," and Laertes assents:

It well appears. But tell me
Why you proceeded not against these feats,
So crimeful and so capital in nature,
As by your safety, wisdom, all things else,
You mainly were stirr'd up.

Professor Wilson asks what these feats were, which clearly involved the person of Claudius, and finds that Hamlet himself hinted to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he might take to assassination. Rosencrantz observes that Hamlet does not lack advancement, since he has the voice of the King himself for the succession, and Hamlet replies: "Ay, but 'While the grass grows'—the proverb is something musty." "In short," says Wilson, "the heir to the throne does not propose to wait his turn, but to anticipate the course of nature by action. It is Hamlet, then, and not Claudius, who first broaches the subject of assassination, and of ambition as the motive therefor" (p. 168).

This is certainly a "warping" of the meaning of the text. It is, of course, highly improbable that Hamlet would give away a plan so dangerous as this to the friends whom he does not trust, and least of all at this point—his next move is to call for the recorder, and expose their designs on him. And the proverb "Whylst grass doth growe, oft sterves the seely steede" (to cite one of its forms) does not mean that the horse is going to kick his master to death. Malone explained it correctly: "Hamlet means to intimate that whilst he is waiting for the succession to the throne of Denmark, he may himself be taken off by death." (Quoted by Furness, *New Variorum*, I, 267.) For other illustrations of high-handed treatment of the text, observe Wilson's remarks about the "usurpation" of Claudius (p. 717 below, note 32), the significance of the prologue and of the "miching mallecho" speech (pp. 729, 732 below). ²⁷ Ed. lix.

Inconsistencies and contradictions have of course long been perceived in the action, and the criticism of *Hamlet* is marked by the whitening skeletons of those who have vainly attempted to explain them away. The old idea that *Hamlet* is a complete and perfect chrysolite dies hard. Investigations of the last half-century into the history of the material, its development under Shakespeare's hand, and comparison with his methods of working with sources in other plays, have not yet given that idea its quietus. Contradictions resulting from the refashioning of old and popular material are partly responsible for the eternal debates as to whether Hamlet was mad, or why he delayed revenge, or what his relations with Ophelia were. But critics, remembering that they are dealing with the greatest of English tragedies, have been loth to admit such inconsistencies. Thus Professor Trench, writing some twenty-five years ago, assumed at the outset that Shakespeare's characterization is without flaw: "What is perfectly reasonable to object to is the suggestion that there are defects in the psychology."²⁸ And it is extraordinary how little the history of the play is taken into account in *Hamlet* criticism today. Everyone concedes that Shakespeare was working on the basis of an old play of the revenge type; and resemblances to the *Spanish Tragedy*, and recent research into the authorship,²⁹ indicate that it was probably written by Kyd. Contemporary references show that it was well known and popular, but by the turn of the century it must have seemed old-fashioned. In preparing a new play, Shakespeare was obviously not free to make radical alterations whenever he chose. He could not turn the plot inside out, or the characters upside down, any more than a modern dramatist, working on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, could make the bloodhounds bite Eliza on the ice, or transform Legree into a courteous philanthropist. Study of other plays shows that Shakespeare frequently retained crude and illogical plots, expending all the resources of his art upon making them plausible by superb characterization. It is idle to say that antecedent plots exercised no compulsion upon his genius, or that he did not often tolerate discrepancies in character and situation. The contrary has, I think, been sufficiently proved. Why, then, should we doubt that in *Hamlet* also he was, in Stoll's words, "making the best of a picturesque and exciting but irrational old plot"?³⁰ Since the old play has been lost, it might seem at first thought that we could say nothing about his revisions, but the matter is not as simple as that. Much in *Hamlet* which causes difficulty or seems at variance

²⁸ *Shakespeare's Hamlet: a New Commentary* (London, 1913), p. xii. Cf. p. 2. "The tragedy of *Hamlet* is a work perfect in conception and execution."

²⁹ V. Østerberg, *Studier over Hamlet-texterne*, 1 (Copenhagen, etc., 1920).

³⁰ *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare* (Cambridge, England, 1933), p. 100.

with Shakespeare's art is strikingly like the *Spanish Tragedy*. If we can get guidance from observing the Kyd tradition and its probable effect on Shakespeare, we shall be on far safer ground than if we ignore this, and rely on our own ingenuity.

These considerations have been emphasized so often in recent years that I hesitate to repeat them, but Professor Wilson gives me no alternative. He doubts that any "discrepancies arising out of revision . . . are to be set down to the intractability of the inherited plot." He is very scornful of "historical criticism," as representatives of which he cites Stoll, Schücking, and J. M. Robertson.

They ask, not "What is wrong with Hamlet?" but "What is wrong with *Hamlet*?" and the answer they give is that nearly everything is wrong. . . . They appear to have no aesthetic, or at least dramatic, principles whatever, but seek to explain and appraise everything in Shakespeare by reference to historical causes. . . . But before Shakespeare be dismissed from the rank of dramatist and degraded to that of a mere poetical decorator of other people's plays, a word or two may perhaps be found in his defence. . . . The main trouble with the "historical critics" is their ignorance of history and their lack of historical curiosity.³¹

By my troth, Captain, these are very bitter words. I am obliged to add that they seem to me unjustified. The "historical" critics have made mistakes, as all the brethren do, and they have sometimes pushed their methods too far, but I do not think it can be denied that they have contributed much to our knowledge. It does not seem fair to accuse them of dismissing Shakespeare from the rank of dramatist to that of decorator. "Historical criticism" is a somewhat ambiguous term. One might suppose that Professor Wilson employs it himself, when he pleads for study "in the light of Elizabethan politics and cosmology," but he defines it more narrowly³² as "explaining situations in Shakespeare by

³¹ Ed., xlv-l, *passim*.

³² In connection with his argument to prove Claudius a "usurper." It is not my purpose to discuss matters not affecting the Play-Scene, but this is perhaps relevant. I confess I do not understand the situation as he presents it to us. "The dejected air of the crown prince, the contrast between his black doublet and the bright costumes of the rest, his strange and (as it would seem) sulky conduct towards his uncle, above all the hypocritical and ingratiating address of the uncle to him, bore only one possible interpretation—usurpation; and that Hamlet never mentions the subject in his first soliloquy but reveals a far more horrible wrong must have seemed to the original audience one of the most effective dramatic strokes of the play" (Ed., liv). So the fact that Hamlet says nothing about usurpation after the court scene, but dwells on his mother's frailty and his father's death, indicates that usurpation was what was really weighing on his mind in that scene!

Again, we are reminded that the monarchy of Elizabeth and James was elective, but on the next page that "an elective throne in Shakespeare's Denmark is a critical mare's nest" (lv-lvi). Wilson is sure that Claudius was a usurper.

reference to his hypothetical sources." The methods of Stoll, Schücking, and Robertson are not identical, and with some of these one may differ. They do have this in common, however, with which one may agree: they take carefully into account what can be learned of the *Hamlet* material before Shakespeare worked with it. The old play is more than "hypothetical"; its existence is as certain as that of any lost play can be, and its character, even to some details, may be inferred with reasonable certainty. We know that Shakespeare was, in general, inclined to stick to his source; that he often did so when we feel that he might have departed from it; and that in *Hamlet* he had special reasons for not making alterations. To maintain that all this should be taken into account in judging his completed work may be "historical criticism," but it also seems common sense.

What shall we say of the view that Shakespeare intended the play to have two separate and irreconcilable meanings, one for the educated and the other for the uneducated? Again we are faced with a question of antecedent probability. Is there any real indication that Shakespeare was given to this sort of thing? Allegorical interpretations, which only sharper wits could discern, have found defenders. But there is no valid proof that the Essex business or the Scottish succession, for example, was in Shakespeare's mind when he wrote *Hamlet*. Greg assumes a sceptical and rationalistic view³³ of the supernatural, which it seems

The situation appears to be as follows. Shakespeare meant us to understand that the throne of Denmark was hereditary, but that the order of succession by descent might be set aside if the good of the country demanded it. Determination of this lay in the hands of the nobility; in that sense the throne was elective. On the death of his brother, Claudius persuaded the Danish nobles, headed by Polonius, to declare him king. He was a usurper only in the sense that Henry IV or Henry VII were usurpers. When they were established on the throne, and had the most powerful elements in the country behind them, they were legitimized. This general arrangement was true of the early Germanic kingdoms, in England as elsewhere, but Shakespeare's auditors had in all probability no interest in the historical situation in early Denmark. Steevens and Blackstone were wrong in emphasizing this as explaining the dramatist's procedure, though they were on the right track in explaining the general arrangement of the succession in the play. The line "Popp'd in between the election and my hopes" is conclusive. "Election" can only mean "choice." When a crowd of Danes, "in a riotous head" burst in upon Claudius, they cry, "Choose we! Laertes shall be king!" Notice that Hamlet does not say that Claudius came between him and his *rights*, only his *hopes*. The new king won his crown by despicable means, but he was careful to have it legally set upon his head. As Professor J. Q. Adams puts it, "Indeed, so successful is [Claudius] in the employment of these his two chief weapons, flattery and bribery, that he has secured from the politicians of the Court his election to the throne in spite of Hamlet's being the idol of the people of Denmark" (*loc.cit.*, p. 183).

³³ He has somewhat modified his views, but if I understand him he still clings to his main points.

doubtful that an Elizabethan sitting in the playhouse would have held. The more advanced thinkers of the day were beginning to get away from the crude demonology of the age, but they were far from knowing that they cherished the "subconscious recollections" of modern psychology. To impose these upon the play, even for a part of the audience, strikes a note foreign to the time in which the play was written. For the cultivated playgoer of the present day it sets up as much of a handicap as the absurd experiment of clothing the actors in modern fashion—Hamlet in plus fours, Polonius in a tail coat, and so forth. Those who have advocated this remind us that the play goes well with the audience under such conditions. Of course it does; the old piece is so sturdy that it would take more than that to kill it. But to impose present-day conceptions of ghosts or fashions in dress upon an Elizabethan drama hurts it all the same.

Investigation of Elizabethan conceptions of the supernatural opens up a very large subject, which lies outside the scope of the present paper. But there is one point which it is well to keep in mind. Even if it be granted that an educated spectator in the Globe Theatre thought that ghosts were only stuff of the imagination—a very large concession—it does not follow that he would take them as such in a play. Nowadays, however enlightened we may be, we indulge in "a willing suspension of disbelief" when we read a ghost story. We do not apply our modern scepticism to the *Three Wishes* and the *Magic Fetich* when we read W. W. Jacobs's "The Monkey's Paw," or to vampires when we shudder at Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. We take the ghost as a ghost when we see *Hamlet* today, despite all our modernity. Would not an Elizabethan gentleman have done the same, despite all his enlightenment? I believe that he would, especially in a revenge play, where the ghost was a stage tradition. He was in the theatre for amusement, not to philosophize, and the dramatic tradition of the objectivity of ghosts was strong. Moreover, how could Shakespeare make it plain to him that he was to assume that the apparition existed only in Hamlet's brain, to abandon the obvious meaning of the play and make of it something quite different? If Shakespeare did try to do this he failed, for with all its subtlety and reflectiveness, *Hamlet* has never meant anything of the sort to us, who are more sceptical and better versed in psychology than our forefathers were. Consider an analogous case. We have been accustomed to accept *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* as romance, as stories of tribulation with a happy ending. But there is a fashionable theory that they are bitterly ironical. "In *All's Well that Ends Well*—supremely cynical title—. . . the self-torturing mood of the play, the bitter mood of 'I'll show you a happy ending,' is only too apparent." In a devastating

criticism of this point of view Professor R. W. Chambers asks, "But what about Shakespeare's audience? How did he convey to them his bitter intention of making a supremely cynical happy ending? How will they understand it?" I can only repeat my own disbelief in the theory that Professor Chambers attacks, and in the assumptions that underlie it. I do not think that Shakespeare worked in any such fashion. "He provided for the more intellectual spectators something which the groundlings, with their imperfect mentality and defective education, could not perceive, but this was an extension of the simpler meaning of his play, and not at variance with it."³⁴

In the discussion which follows we shall see how little textual interpretation can be considered apart and by itself. Questions of method rise disturbingly, no matter how much we knap them o' the coxcombs. Perhaps fundamental differences of opinion in regard to critical methods will always bar complete agreement on special and concrete cases, like the one which we are considering, but the careful investigation of these cases is surely one of the best ways to test the ultimate validity of the methods themselves.

IV

We may now proceed to examination of the play itself.

The first point which I would make is that both Greg and Wilson start from a false dilemma. If this dilemma does not exist, the elaborate structures which they have erected come crashing to the ground. Because there is no indication in the text that Claudius is affected by the dumb-show, Wilson believes that he does not see it, and Greg that it does not represent the circumstances of his crime. I maintain that there is no valid evidence that Claudius is not affected, and deeply so. His emotion, if he reveals it, is perceived only by Hamlet and Horatio, who are watching him, and not by the courtiers, who are intent on the stage. We are probably to think of the hall as being darkened ("Give me some light. Away!"), which further protects him.

Drama often depends on gesture and facial expression to make the story clear, but stage business is not always indicated in Shakespeare's plays; sometimes the actors must supply it. Absence of spoken words or of stage directions to indicate emotion does not mean that emotion is not supposed to exist or to be manifested. Consider, for example, the

³⁴ Quoted from W. W. Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (New York, 1931), p. 15. This whole question is discussed from various points of view and in detail in that book. The quotation from R. W. Chambers is from "The Jacobean Shakespeare and *Measure for Measure*," Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy (London, 1937), p. 29.

church scene in *Much Ado*. Hero, at the altar, is suddenly and brutally accused of unchastity. Is there any immediate indication of her feelings? No, and only after a considerable time has elapsed does she speak at all. Twenty-three lines stand between "There, Leonato, take her back again. Give not this rotten orange to your friend—" and Hero's cry, "And seem'd I ever otherwise to you?" It is a dreadful accusation. Does Hero stand like a wooden Indian all this time? Certainly not; her astonishment and dismay must of course appear in her face and bearing. For another instance, look at the opening scene of *King Lear*. After the terrible invective in which Lear disowns his daughter, ending with

The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbour'd, piti'd, and reliev'd,
As thou my sometime daughter—

Cordelia makes no response, and there is no stage direction to indicate her emotion. Indeed, she does not say anything for a hundred lines. But does she not feel the blow deeply? Does she not "blench" at her father's cruel words?

These instances are enough to show that because Claudius says nothing, and no stage direction tells us of his feelings, he is not necessarily unaffected by the dumb-show. No one can dogmatize as to how far he is able to conceal his dismay; I think it quite probable that Shakespeare did not mean that he should wholly conceal it. Hamlet is not going to stop the play yet, however; there is more to come, the "dozen or sixteen lines" for which the audience has been carefully warned to look in the spoken play, and the climax of the scene must not come at the beginning.

I do not see that there can be any question that Claudius realizes, as soon as the dumb-show is over, that Hamlet knows all about the murder. This has indeed been doubted.³⁵ But the dark chapter in the life of Claudius has all been laid bare in the dumb-show, which agrees closely, even to details, with the revelations of the Ghost and with Hamlet's own recollections. The affection of the Player Queen for her husband recalls Hamlet's "Why, she would hang on him," etc.; the "bank of flowers" in the dumb-show the Ghost's "sleeping within my orchard" (which of course means "garden"); the dropping of poison into the ears of the sleeper, common neither on the stage nor in actual Renaissance

³⁵ By Mr. E. L. Ferguson, who believes that the King could not, from the dumb-show, "be certain that Hamlet knew all his secret." See "The Play-Scene in 'Hamlet,'" *MLR*, xiv (1919), 370. So too Miss Alice Walker, " 'Miching Malicho' and the Play Scene in *Hamlet*," *MLR*, xxxi (1936), 514.

murder,³⁶ is a significant detail both in the ghost's speech and in the play; the Poisoner's removal of his victim's crown, and kissing it, suggests an ambition similar to that of Claudius; the wooing of the Player Queen "with gifts" is like the Ghost's "with witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts"; and finally the Player Queen, like Gertrude, accepts the murderer's love. What more could be necessary to indicate that after the dumb-show Claudius must realize that Hamlet knows all?

As I have already urged, the fact that Claudius is aware that his dreadful secret is discovered adds, for the spectators in the theatre, a new tension to the scene.³⁷ Will he "blench" later on, or will he succeed in braving the whole thing out? He knows that he is faced with very grave danger in allowing the play to proceed. He is in the presence of the whole court, where Hamlet, who has just indulged in very wild talk, may now at any moment blurt out a damning accusation. But what can he do? To stop the performance would indeed set tongues wagging. It will be wiser for him to temporize, to seize, if he can, a later occasion to extricate himself from the trap—as indeed he does succeed in doing, as far as the court is concerned. Meanwhile Shakespeare's audience watches the scene with heightened interest. Will the King, now fully on his guard, or Hamlet, win in the end?

Misconceptions of the Play-Scene frequently arise from underestimating the courage and resourcefulness of the King.³⁸ As always, throughout the tragedy, he conducts himself with great skill, hoping somehow to win through in the end. He now has his crown, his ambition, and his queen; cannot he be pardoned and retain his offence? He never fails to meet each emergency resourcefully, or to present a brave face to the world. He is supple and ingratiating, a smiler, able to bend weaker spirits

³⁶ Mr. F. T. Bowers, in "The Audience and the Poisoners of Elizabethan Tragedy," *JEGP*, xxvi (1937), 501, notes only one parallel, and that not a "leperous distilment" but a powder, in Marlowe's *Edward II*, in which Lightborn says (Act v, Scene iv):

I learned in Naples how to poison flowers;
To strangle with a lawn thrust down the throat;
To pierce the windpipe with a needle's point;
Or whilst one is asleep, to take a quill
And blow a little powder in his ears.

³⁷ This was clearly seen by Mr. E. L. Ferguson, *loc. cit.*, who remarks, "The weakness of the views that I have criticized is that, failing to see in the dumb-show anything but a premature disclosure of the mouse-trap, they miss the intensity of the struggle in which the protagonists come to grips." (p. 379).

³⁸ A. C. Bradley made no such mistake. "King Claudius rarely gets from the audience the attention he deserves . . . As a king he is courteous and never undignified; he performs his ceremonial duties efficiently; and he takes good care of the national interests. He nowhere shows cowardice . . . He was not . . . stupid, but rather quick-witted and adroit." *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1905), pp. 168-170.

like Laertes and Gertrude to his will, and, despite the contemptible sides of his character, right royal externally. He is often represented in the theatre as a repulsive and undignified person, but this is, I think, a great mistake. We must not be misled by Hamlet's comments. He hates and despises him, and with good reason, but when he calls him a "paddock, a bat, a gib" [tomcat], or a "Vice of Kings" [buffoon], he is as little to be taken literally as when he calls the royal bed of Denmark a "nasty sty." His loathing finds vent in exaggerated metaphor. Wilson regards Claudius as "a shambling, blinking paddock" at the end of the Play-Scene, and thinks he has been caught "squealing." He also says, "[Claudius] rushes shrieking from the room when the murder is later repeated in dramatic form."³⁹ But what evidence is there that he "rushes" or "shrieks"? None whatever. Nor is the King a shambler or a blinker or a squealer. He retires abruptly, but without loss of dignity, from a situation rendered intolerable by Hamlet's febrile violence. To end a painful and disgraceful exhibition of madness, and of insults to him and his queen is, in the eyes of the court, fully justified. There are no indications later of suspicions among the Danish nobles; there is no conversation like that of Lennox and the Lord in *Macbeth*:

The gracious Duncan
Was pitied of Macbeth; marry, he was dead:
And the right-valiant Banquo walk'd too late.

Claudius both wins and loses. He keeps his crime from general knowledge, and finds out that he must get rid of Hamlet forthwith; but he loses in that Hamlet's doubts as to the Ghost's veracity are set at rest, and vengeance becomes more certain.

Greg and Wilson are fond of referring to those who believe that the King was able to stand the dumb-show, but not what comes later, as "second-toothers," or "the second-tooth school." As representatives of this benighted body Wilson cites Mr. Percy Simpson, the late Professor Dowden, and myself.⁴⁰ I am glad to be in such good company, and I

³⁹ Pp. 195, 150.

⁴⁰ P. 151. Percy Simpson, "Actors and Acting," *Shakespeare's England* (Oxford, 1916), II, 253: "Hamlet's object in 'The Murder of Gonzago' is to probe the King's conscience; so he imposes a double test, first this quick rehearsal of the bare events . . . then the prolonged strain of the fully acted scene." Edward Dowden, *Arden Shakespeare* (1899), p. 116, note: [The King's] suspicions would doubtless be aroused, and he would watch the play with keener interest, but he might suppose that the dumb-show presented, in English fashion, action which was not to be developed through dialogue. Hamlet would thus have a double opportunity of catching the conscience of the King." W. W. Lawrence, *JEGP*, XVIII (1919), 11: "We cannot see into Hamlet's mind . . . But it is perfectly possible that he considered that the dumb-show would . . . aid his plot, since this would give two shots at Claudius, the one sudden, the other a more slowly developed emotional attack."

can myself derive some innocent merriment from this term, but we must look a little further into its implications. Wilson makes short work of it. He thinks that the King's query addressed to Hamlet,

"Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?" makes it certain [sic] that the King cannot have seen the dumb-show, which *is* the argument of the play. . . . And "no offence"! Is it really credible for a moment that, if he had sat watching that detailed revelation of his crime in pantomime a minute or two earlier, he could have uttered those words—to Hamlet of all people?⁴¹

To this I reply that it is entirely credible, and in keeping with the whole situation. Claudius is alert for a chance to stop the play, but of course it must not be thought that he objects to a piece about a man who *poisons a king*, wins his widow, and seizes the crown. He must preserve his royal dignity, however, and not allow insults to him and his queen to go too far, though it may be dangerous to protest. The impudent references to second marriages give him his cue. The court may well suppose that the Prince, who has commanded the performance of the play, has seen to it that no "offence," no matter objectionable to the crown and government, shall be presented, but they have had every evidence that he is mad and irresponsible. Hamlet does not allow Claudius to divert the issue. "No, no, they do but jest, *poison* in jest. No offence i'the world." But both Wilson and Greg would have us believe that the King really wants to know if there is any offence in the play. Thus Wilson says, "The 'second-tooth' school will, of course, seek to explain this as acting; an explanation which I hope at this stage of the argument my readers will not find it easy to entertain"⁴²—dodging the point completely. Greg remarks, "Mr. Lawrence has to argue that here the King is playing a part. This seems to me inconceivable."⁴³ Why is it inconceivable? What, in Heaven's name, has Claudius been doing, from the beginning of the tragedy, but "acting"? Has he not been playing a part constantly, endeavoring to conceal his guilt from his wife, from Hamlet, from the court, and from his own better self? Has he not been plotting and smiling and fighting his conscience? He tells us himself that

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.

Yet we are told that it is inconceivable that he is dissimulating now!

Professor Wilson thinks that "the 'double tooth' theory will not work: not merely is it unsupported by any authority in the text, but the references in the text to the testing of the King are indisputably confied to the speech of the murderer."⁴⁴ This sounds convincing, but we cannot

⁴¹ P. 159. ⁴² P. 159, note. ⁴³ xrv, 362, note.

⁴⁴ P. 153. He obviously means "second tooth"; I fear he would not make a good dentist.

escape from the conclusion that the King *is* tested twice, and knows it, unless we assume that he does not see the dumb-show at all, or is innocent of the crime as there set forth—both very dubious solutions. There is no dodging the fact, either, that the pantomime must be a trying business for Claudius. But whether we are to suppose that Hamlet, in commanding the play, *intends* to make the dumb-show a test, is another question. There is no evidence that he “devised” it, as Dr. J. Q. Adams suggests,⁴⁵ or indeed that he is supposed to have added anything to the *Murder of Gonzago* but the “dozen or sixteen lines.” “Something like the murder of my father” well describes the plot of the Gonzago play. But though Hamlet did not devise the dumb-show, are we to imagine, if we indulge in speculation, that he is ignorant that it is part of the play? He has suggested the *Murder of Gonzago* for performance; he knows how to insert lines at a special place; when it is actually presented he names the characters and locates the action, so that Ophelia says he is as good as a chorus. Obviously he is very familiar with the piece; must he not know that the dumb-show precedes, and that it will give Claudius a shock? That the references to testing the King all point to the spoken play makes little difference. Attention must be directed to the climax of the scene, and the dramatic importance of the dumb-show does not lie in the testing of Claudius; as we shall see, it was needed for other reasons.

What Hamlet “intended” brings us again to a question of method—how far we can legitimately go in inferring thoughts and purposes not stated in the text. Critics have already pointed out that while Hamlet is so real to us that we think of him as of a historical character, we must remember that he has no existence whatever outside the play. Mr. A. B. Walkley put it picturesquely, remarking that “to explain Hamlet, or any other stage character, by assuming him to be a real person, and speculating on that part of his life, which, on the same hypothesis, exists though we do not see it, is to offer an exact parallel in criticism to the exploit in histrionics of the actor who thought the right way of playing Othello was to black himself all over.”⁴⁶ This misapprehension has given rise to the absurd debate as to which lines Hamlet inserted into the play given before the court—as if he had really done it. Twenty years ago, in suggesting that the dumb-show might be thought by Hamlet to aid his plot, I reminded the reader that “we cannot look into Hamlet’s mind.” The exact point at which we must stop in deducing motives is obviously very hard to fix. Whether Shakespeare meant his audience to see in the dumb-show a part of Hamlet’s plan, I think it impossible

⁴⁵ *Loc. cit.*, p. 265.

⁴⁶ “Professor Bradley’s Hamlet,” *Drama and Life* (New York, 1908), p. 155. I quote from Raven’s bibliography.

to say. Certainly we cannot dogmatize, one way or the other. If Hamlet had been a real person, he might have taken up the matter in a business-like way with Horatio. But Shakespearean drama is often very far from business-like.

That Shakespeare again and again sacrifices the logic of a situation to dramatic effect has, of course, been repeatedly emphasized. Extreme cases are the conduct of the Duke in *Measure for Measure* and the Fifth Act of *All's Well*. We cannot anatomize the Play-Scene purely as if it were a transcript from real life. It is not; it is a selection of material put together for stage effect, but in such a way as to conceal this, and convey the illusion of reality. That there should be so close a correspondence between the Gonzago piece (including the dumb-show) in the repertory of the strolling players, and the circumstances of the murder of the elder Hamlet, is in the highest degree improbable.⁴⁷ It is often said that the dumb-show really hurts Hamlet's plot, because it serves to give the King warning. Of course it does; perhaps in real life Hamlet would have avoided this, but the dramatic value of the dumb-show outweighs it. The play is full of such illogicalities. By feigning madness, which puts Claudius on his guard, Hamlet weakens his chances for revenge. But such feigning is not only a plain inheritance from the older forms of the story; it is theatrically very striking. Hamlet even gives his hand away completely: "Those that are married already, *all but one*, shall live." But it puts ginger into the scene. So with the problem of Hamlet's delay; we have to look at it from the point of view of the stage, not of pure logic. "Delay in real life is one thing," says Waldock, "in a drama quite another."⁴⁸

The retort will be, I suppose, "Ah, yes, you explain things logically until logic breaks down, and then you fly to 'the influence of the source' or to 'dramatic effect.'" This is precisely what I think we should do. Shakespeare let the logic of the story control his play, but did not hesitate to violate it for either of these reasons. Dr. Greg says:

Mr. Lawrence falls back on what may be called the "second string" theory, but he seems to admit that Shakespeare sacrificed dramatic logic to theatrical effect, for he speaks of the dumb-show as from Hamlet's point of view "unwise," yet helping "the effectiveness of the scene."⁴⁹

I think every critic should do more than admit this—he should keep it constantly before him. I do not believe that Shakespeare was at all interested in producing, as we are so often asked to believe, a play that

⁴⁷ Wilson has well emphasized this, and shown the devices by which Shakespeare endeavors to diminish the effect of the coincidence. Cf. 143 f.

⁴⁸ A. J. A. Waldock, *Hamlet, a Study in Critical Method* (Cambridge, England, 1931), p. 79. ⁴⁹ *MLR*, xiv, 367, note.

was logically and psychologically consistent at all points; what he was striving for was to remake an old piece, which to some extent confined him, in such a way as to be at once effective on the stage and true to human experience. He knew that contradictions would be overlooked by his audience—just as in the theatre today, where spectators are far more critical, they often pass unnoticed. He knew that such artifices would be accepted, just as conventions such as the “aside” or speech in blank verse were accepted. Writers for the stage have often made mention of this. In the *Conversations with Eckermann*, Goethe, after pointing out why Rubens was justified in painting a landscape with the light coming from two different directions, observed that Shakespeare “regarded his plays as lively and moving scenes, that would pass rapidly upon the stage before the eyes and ears of the audience—not as affairs to be pinned down and examined in detail. His whole endeavor was to make his point and produce the impression at the moment.” In a current book Mr. Somerset Maugham, who certainly knows a good deal about the practical workings of the theatre, remarks that

only idolatry can refuse to see the great shortcomings in the conduct and sometimes in the characterization of Shakespeare’s plays; and this is very comprehensible since, as we know, he sacrificed everything to effective situation.⁵⁰

The importance of the actor’s interpretation in the Play-Scene is obvious. The King must not betray himself too far at the dumb-show, or the effect of the subsequent test by the spoken play will be lost. But he must show that he realizes that he is in a trap—the Mouse-Trap—for upon this depends the dramatic effect of what follows. Can he escape, or will Hamlet catch him? The important thing is that the audience in the theatre should get this point. How much of the King’s suppressed dismay shall Hamlet and Horatio discover? Not enough to convince them fully of his guilt—that is to come, as Wilson well insists, “upon the talk of the poisoning,” where it belongs, at the climax of the scene. The actors who play the King and Hamlet are dealing with a complicated and in some respects artificial action, not realistic any more than their acting of it. For of course it is just as much a mistake to suppose that an actor must be natural as that the play in which he is appearing is a record of the actual course of events. The best testimony to this double artificiality of the stage comes from an experienced actor; let Mr. George Arliss speak.

Of course, one can never be really, truly “natural” on the stage. Acting is a

⁵⁰ The quotation from Goethe is freely translated from the edition of the *Conversations with Eckermann* by H. H. Houben (Leipzig, 1909), p. 496; that from Somerset Maugham is taken from *The Summing-Up* (New York, 1938), p. 160.

bag of tricks. The thing to learn is how to be unnatural, and just how unnatural to be under given conditions. Many plays appear to be natural to the casual audience, but are in reality perfectly artificial from beginning to end. To play these naturally would be equivalent to an artist sticking real leaves on his painted canvas in order to suggest a natural tree. Half the fun and half the art of the actor is to play such pieces artificially while appearing to play them naturally.⁵¹

Since we are trying to divine Shakespeare's intentions, we ought to study the "bag of tricks" of the Elizabethan actor, not those of the player of today. Unfortunately Burbage and his brethren have not, like Mr. Arliss, revealed the mysteries of their craft, and attempts to deduce those mysteries from the text must to a considerable extent be speculative. The Shakespearean stage had obvious conventions—the soliloquy, the "aside," the descriptive speech doing duty for scenery, and so forth—which are seldom employed in the more realistic modern theatre; but subtler matters, not clearly indicated by the dramatist, as for instance now far emotion unaccompanied by speech was manifested, lead us upon dangerous ground. To conceive Elizabethan acting as too highly stylized is as bad as to over-stress its realism. We must not forget that Claudius is first and foremost a king in Elsinore, not an actor on the stage. Were it otherwise, the plays of Shakespeare would not have seemed to countless thousands of *readers*, ignorant of technical theatrical devices, as vivid transcripts of actual life. The task of the critic is to avoid undue insistence upon realism on the one hand and upon convention on the other, endeavoring, so far as he can, to preserve the balance achieved by Shakespeare himself.

I believe that the whole of *The Murder of Gonzago*, dumb-show and all, was written to fit *Hamlet*; that it is a cleverly constructed "fake" play, or rather enough of one to give the setting necessary for the testing of Claudius. Whether Shakespeare owed all or only a portion of it to Kyd, or whoever wrote the older piece, must of course remain uncertain. It has been conjectured that what we have in his *Hamlet* was borrowed from an old Gonzago play, but there is no evidence that such a play ever existed. The dropping of poison into the ears may have been suggested by the murder of the Duke of Urbino by a Gonzaga in 1538, but this does not mean that a play was written on this subject, any more than that Hamlet's words "the story is extant, and writ in choice Italian" are to be taken as representing actual fact. The best evidence that *The Murder of Gonzago* was composed *ad hoc* is that its plot so closely resembles that of *Hamlet*. It is extremely improbable that this could be

⁵¹ From the introduction to William Gillette's "The Illusion of the First Time in Acting," *Publications of the Dramatic Museum of Columbia University*, Second Series (New York, 1915), p. 15.

due to accident. Wilson gets around the difficulty by maintaining that the *Hamlet* plot was altered to fit the hypothetically already existing Gonzago piece.⁵² This can be no more disproved than proved, but it does not seem probable that changes were made in the main action to fit an episode. There are, however, other reasons for thinking that *The Murder of Gonzago* as we have it is not part of a real play. Schücking remarks, "Clearly the piece is not only far from realistic but, strictly speaking, not a drama at all; and it is equally clear that no troupe of players would have acted it in this way."⁵³ When we examine it closely, the truth of this observation becomes very evident.

In putting a play within a play on the stage Shakespeare was faced with certain practical difficulties. Enough of the supposed drama must be given to make it serve its purpose in catching the conscience of the King and to make it seem like an actual performance. As a heavy rhetorical tragedy in the grand style it is set in designed contrast to the realism of the scene in the hall at Elsinore. The more archaic and super-theatrical it is, the better will be the illusion of acting before an audience who are themselves actors. But the spectators in the theatre must not be confused by more than is necessary to preserve this illusion; their interest must constantly be held to the struggle between Hamlet and the King, and not allowed to transfer itself to the mock-play.

These conditions are ingeniously met in *The Murder of Gonzago*, which contrasts sharply with the dialogue in the royal hall, highly realistic and *in prose*.⁵⁴ Neither the King, the Queen, Polonius, Ophelia, nor Hamlet himself (save in his mad snatches) ever speaks in verse. The Player King's long speech, "Purpose is but the slave to memory" etc., is a string of platitudes, of no dramatic significance, but in the style of slow-moving tragedy. The dumb-show and prologue serve to give the impression that a real play is beginning. The reason why the prologue is brief and says nothing is that no explanations are necessary or desirable, since Hamlet, in highly effective fashion, is to act as expositor. As Ophelia says, he is "as good as a chorus." Wilson thinks that "Shakespeare could not have penned a seemingly idiotic jingle like this [prologue] without some deliberate purpose in mind,"⁵⁵ but we need seek no further purpose than to have a prologue—any prologue—to sustain the effect of the progress of a real play. Since nothing more is required of it, it is as short as possible, but in what respect is it "idiotic"? Hamlet's constant interruptions, apart from their importance in the action, throw *The Murder of Gonzago* into the background, and keep it from developing independent dramatic interest.

⁵² Ed., xxiii.

⁵³ *The Meaning of Hamlet* (1937), p. 130. See note p. 710 above.

⁵⁴ See the excellent comments by Granville-Barker, pp. 98 ff.

⁵⁵ P. 158.

The dumb-show deserves special notice. It is certainly not, as has been suggested, a mere discarded relic of the piece upon which Shakespeare built, restored in the acting out of deference to the groundlings, or remaining in the prompt-book as an alternative to the spoken play.⁵⁶ The *Fratricide Punished* indicates that he did not originate it, but he kept it, and wove it indissolubly into his dialogue. Ophelia asks, "What means this [the dumb-show], my lord?", and then says, "Belike this *show* imports the argument of the play"—a hint to the audience as to how they are to take the pantomime.⁵⁷ It shows plain signs of having been written expressly for the fragment of a supposed play within the framework of *Hamlet*. Mr. B. R. Pearn, who has made a valuable study of dumb-shows in Shakespeare's time, points out⁵⁸ that the one in *Hamlet* is unique, for it "rehearses, without words, exactly the action which is immediately afterwards repeated in dialogue. . . . It can fall within none of the categories among which other dumb-shows can be classified." The reason why it is unique is that it is not a real dumb-show at all, but one constructed as a part of the mock-play in *Hamlet*. Its three functions are to make the plot of the spoken play clear, to increase the illusion that *The Murder of Gonzago* is a real play, and to reveal to Claudius, and before the spoken piece commences, that Hamlet knows the facts of the murder. As I have already urged, this increases greatly the dramatic tension. Much is to come; can the King endure it? This third function of the dumb-show was recognized independently by H. D. Gray and by E. L. Ferguson in the same year (1919) that my own analysis was published.⁵⁹ It is a less obvious function than the other two, but clear enough to the thoughtful reader or spectator.

⁵⁶ See W. J. Lawrence, "The Dumb Show in *Hamlet*," *Life and Letters*, v (Nov., 1930), 333-340; also in *Those Nut-Cracking Elizabethans* (London, 1935), p. 59 ff., and M. H. Dodds, "The Dumb Show in *Hamlet*," *Notes and Queries*, CLIX (Nov. 29, 1930), 386.

⁵⁷ Dr. Greg well remarked that there is no getting rid of the dumb-show. "Not only is the textual tradition unassailable, but the show is actually the subject of comment by Ophelia and Hamlet, a fact that proves it to be no mere oversight, no intrusion accidentally foisted into the text, but an integral, and presumably rational, part of the scene in which it occurs." *MLN*, xii, 398.

⁵⁸ "Dumb Show in Elizabethan Drama," *RES*, xi (1935), 403.

⁵⁹ H. D. Gray, "The Dumb-Show in *Hamlet*," *MP*, xvii (1919-20), 51 ff.; see especially p. 54. For Mr. Ferguson's article, see above, p. 721, note.

Dr. Greg says, "According to Mr. Lawrence, Shakespeare's reason for introducing the dumb-show was to inform the King that his secret was discovered and so make possible the contest of wills which he regards as the essence of the scene. This, so far as the play-scene is concerned, is an even more revolutionary interpretation than my own" (*MLR*, xiv, 367, note 4). The difference is that Dr. Greg's theory that the King was innocent of the crime as set forth before the court destroys completely the plot of *Hamlet* as usually understood; my view involves no radical change whatever, but provides further dramatic interest. I will leave readers to judge which is the more "revolutionary."

V

How will the theories which we have been examining stand the test of actual production on the stage? Much that appears convincing in the study will of course fail on the boards. Despite all its "literary" qualities, all its poetry and philosophy, *Hamlet* was written as a play, and interpretations of its action must primarily be judged by that standard.

To act this, or any piece, in two different ways, for two different levels of intelligence, is obviously very difficult. Dr. Greg's views have never been tried in a production of *Hamlet*, as far as I am aware; in any case, his "humaner minds" are as important as his actors. He thinks, however, that "it would be possible for the actors to give considerable help to the 'judicious' without running any danger of seriously confusing those who were content with the more naive interpretation."⁶⁰ The principal players would certainly have a job on their hands. We can imagine Shakespeare giving "Claudius" instructions, which, in modern idiom, would run something thus:

Now, my dear fellow, you have to act so that a part of your audience will believe that you did kill your brother by putting poison into his ears, and another part be convinced that you did not. When the dumb-show is presented, and you witness it, you must remember that to one part of your audience you are innocent, and betray no emotion, and to another that you are guilty, and repress your emotion with difficulty. You must so bear yourself, too, when the spoken play is in progress, that one part of your audience must think, at the end, when you leave the hall, that you realize that you have shown your guilt to Hamlet and Horatio, and another part that you are "convinced, not that your guilt has been discovered, but that Hamlet is a dangerous madman."⁶¹

No, I do not think that actor is to be envied.

Professor Wilson, too, has to hurdle large obstacles to make his reconstruction into drama. It is very strange indeed to find that Claudius, who is by this time always on his guard when Hamlet is present, and who knows that Hamlet has commanded the performance of this play, gives no attention to it when it begins. One would suppose him to be on the alert to discover what new madness is afoot. He is not the man to miss a trick. But we are told that "the play is nothing" to him, or to Polonius or Gertrude; they are too busy discussing Hamlet's madness. Claudius well knows how to bear himself in public; but he now turns his back on the beginning of the entertainment! Dr. Greg has a pungent comment. "Here is a court audience just assembled in the hall of state to witness a play staged by the Prince himself, and the three most important and central personages of the audience, at the first entry

⁶⁰ *MLR*, xiv, 355.

⁶¹ I take the liberty of making Shakespeare quote Dr. Greg.

of the actors, actually fail to see anything of what passes under their very noses!"⁶² An important part of this reconstruction of the scene is that the First Player is a rascal, and that the troupe, by giving the dumb-show, go near to ruining Hamlet's plans. But why does not Shakespeare give us some hint in preparation for this, or some explanation of it? He concealed it so effectively that no one has hitherto perceived it; is this in accordance with his practice? It is all derived from two speeches: "We shall know by this fellow. The players cannot keep counsel, they'll tell all," i.e., "they will betray me"; and "this is miching mallecho; that means mischief," referring to the "skulking iniquity" of the players. Apart from the meaning of "miching mallecho," which Wilson interprets as is usual, these speeches have never given any trouble. But we are told we must give up their obvious and simple application to what is to come in the play. For what earthly reason should the strolling players act so? Hamlet received them with the greatest kindness, and told Polonius to see them "well bestowed"—and they play a dirty trick on him! What have they to gain by it? Certainly they have everything to lose by offending Hamlet; there is nothing to indicate what motive they could have in doing so.

As a practical dramatist, Shakespeare was fully aware of the desirability of making clear to his audience that such and such an event was happening, and often that it was going to happen. People sitting at a play will not grasp sudden and unmotivated shifts. They will not let their minds run counter to what they have already seen, without special notification. When Wilson expects them, from the evidence of two speeches, neither of which has ever seemed ambiguous, to gather that the players are rascals, or when Greg thinks his nobler spirits will regard the Ghost as a hallucination, when it has already been recognized as the late King by two hard-headed soldiers and the sceptical Horatio, the answer is—such expectations will not be fulfilled. The same holds true of the theory suggested by Greg and adopted by Wilson,⁶³ that the dumb-show was an unwelcome surprise to Hamlet. There is too little in the text to make this clear. Will by-play and inflections of the voice do it? Wilson tells us that Hamlet could not have allowed the dumb-show to stand in the play because of his disparaging remark about "inexpli-

⁶² *MLR*, XIV, 368.

⁶³ See Greg, *MLR*, XII, 404. He thinks the "miching mallecho" remark is "intentionally cryptic: if anything it suggests that the show was a surprise. Now if the dumb-show was unexpected on Hamlet's part, it must have been singularly unwelcome." I cannot see sufficient evidence in this speech that Hamlet was taken by surprise. Why should it not refer, as it has always been taken, to the "mischief" in the plot of the play? And Hamlet certainly knew all about that.

cable dumb-shows" to the Players. But this show is not inexplicable, it is plain as a pikestaff, and we have no warrant for assuming that Hamlet made cuts in *The Murder of Gonzago*. Wilson is also sure that Hamlet mistook the Prologue for a Presenter who would explain the dumb-show ("We shall know by this fellow"), that the prologue is another bit from the players' "box of tricks," and that Hamlet's question "Is this a prologue, or the posy of a ring?" "vents at once his scorn and his relief." The only scorn and relief is what we read into the speech. The point of the remark is that the prologue is so short that it could be engraved in a ring. Ophelia understands, for she replies, "'Tis brief, my lord." We must remember that Hamlet, though obviously very familiar with *The Murder of Gonzago*, and often willing to give advance information about it, can also, when it suits his purpose, pretend ignorance. ("If she should break it now!") The Play-Scene is Hamlet's great opportunity; he is not only in a state of high nervous tension over his plot, but he takes, as always, the keenest intellectual delight in deliberately deceiving those about him whom he cannot trust, and especially keeping Claudius in apprehension as to how much he really knows, and just what he is about. Again, Wilson thinks that Hamlet on "a sudden inspiration" identified himself with the Poisoner, that he "was obliged to furnish the court with some theory which would explain the Gonzago-play, account for the open discomfiture of his uncle which he hoped it would effect, and justify (or at any rate make explicable) the assassination which was to come after." So "Lucianus-Hamlet poisons Gonzago-Claudius before the assembled court!"⁶⁴ Sudden inspirations like this will not be comprehended by the audience without more explanation. What seems ingenious and convincing in the study may, as Wilson recognizes, fail completely to carry on the stage.⁶⁵

Precisely this point has been made by Professor Allardyce Nicoll, who has seen the play produced according to the conclusions in *What Happens in Hamlet*. With excellent sportsmanship, Professor Wilson, in the preface to the second edition, quotes this verdict against himself: "it is evident that no spectator ignorant of the *Hamlet* theme could possibly follow so tortuous a dramatic procedure. . . . Were proof needed of the impossibility of this interpretation, the performance of the play by the Marlowe Society would provide it."⁶⁶ As an offset to this the favorable testimony of Mr. Harold Child, contained in a letter prefixed to the second edition,⁶⁷ must also be considered. But is Mr. Child an impartial

⁶⁴ See for the theories mentioned in this paragraph Wilson, Chapter v, *passim*.

⁶⁵ Cf. Granville-Barker, *loc. cit.*, p. 97, note.

⁶⁶ Wilson, p. xi. Professor Nicoll's comments are taken from *The Year's Work in English Studies*, xvi (1935), 188. ⁶⁷ xiv-xviii.

critic? He himself very frankly says, "I ought to say first that I do not consider myself a very good judge, because *I knew what to look for*" (italics his). The only competent judge of whether these theories are practicable dramatically would be a man quite ignorant of them. If he could give us, when the play was over, their essential features as conveyed in action, we should have reasonable proof that they are dramatically sound.

VI

Such are the reasons why the older interpretation of the Play-Scene appears correct. Some points which are of especial importance in acting and stage production may be briefly emphasized.

The dumb-show should on no account be omitted. It is effective as explaining the action to come in the spoken piece, as heightening the illusion that a real play is being given, and as increasing the tension of the action. As soon as the dumb-show is over, Claudius realizes for the first time that Hamlet knows the facts of his father's death. At this point he may betray disquietude to the keen eyes of Hamlet and Horatio; the court, who are watching the stage, will not perceive it. Emotion in great crises is not always indicated in Shakespeare's plays by speech or stage directions. The theories that Claudius is innocent of the murder as represented, or that he does not see the dumb-show because he is occupied in discussing the madness of Hamlet, must be rejected. As the most conspicuous of the spectators, the King can hardly turn his back at the beginning of the performance, and knowing Hamlet for a dangerous person, who must be watched, he will not fail to observe keenly what is in the play commanded by the Prince. He must not be represented as stupid or cowardly, but alert, resourceful, and courageous. Care must be taken not to make him a "stage villain"; he must be gracious and regal, and not without some physical attractiveness, for he has won the love of the sensual Gertrude. After the dumb-show he is seeking a chance to stop the performance if he can do so without raising suspicion; his question to Hamlet as to whether there is "offence" in the play is a feeler in this direction. He is saved in the eyes of the court by Hamlet himself, whose uncontrolled excitement—madness, as they must think it—during the poisoning, following his insulting references to second marriage, gives Claudius ample excuse to call for lights and end a disgraceful situation by withdrawing. This he must do with dignity and offended majesty, not cowering or shambling. But he has betrayed himself to Hamlet and Horatio by "blenching" at the crime as enacted on the stage; the revelations of the Ghost are confirmed. The whole scene is a struggle between two desperate men. Hamlet, under cover of his

assumed madness, which at the very end approaches hysteria has the advantage; he takes savage pleasure in fooling Claudius to the top of his bent, now pretending ignorance of what is to come, and again interpreting the play in advance; now rousing him by insult and veiled threats, and again soothing him. *The Murder of Gonzago*, dumb-show and all, is not to be regarded as a real play, but as carefully arranged to give that impression. There is no evidence that the spectators are to suppose that Hamlet altered it, save by the insertion of the "dozen or sixteen lines," which are a stage fiction, and not identifiable. It looks as if Hamlet knew that the dumb-show was to be part of the play, but the extent of his knowledge and his intentions in regard to the performance, when not directly revealed in the text, cannot be fathomed. Absolute consistency in action and motivation is not to be expected in a highly sophisticated piece rebuilt from a crude tragedy of blood. In *Hamlet*, as elsewhere, Shakespeare occasionally sacrificed logic and probability to the authority of his source and to dramatic effect.

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