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محاضرات مادة المسرح الشكسبيري (شكسبير هاملت)

WHAT was Shakespeare's conception of Hamlet? That is the question. It is one which inevitably resolves itself into a reconstruction of the materials at his disposal, the dramatic problems with which he had to deal, and the means whereby he sought to satisfy contemporary dramatic taste. For such a reconstruction modern scholarship provides abundant information about both the theatrical practices and intellectual interests of the time and Shakespeare's habits as a craftsman. In particular should be noted his exceptional preoccupation with character portrayal and the scrupulous motivation of action; his conformity with changing theatrical fashion, yet at the same time his reluctance to pioneer in experiment; his sensitive, if sketchy, acquaintance with matters of contemporary interest; and his success as a skilled and inspired adapter rather than as an innovator. In the application of this knowledge two principles are fundamental. First, Hamlet must not be viewed in isolation, but in close conjunction with the theatrical environment which produced it. Second, Shakespeare must be recognized as primarily a practical playwright, a business man of the theater with obligations to fulfill, specific theatrical conditions to meet, and an audience to divert. For the rest, it is a pleasant exercise for the recreative imagination to try to think oneself into Shakespeare's mind, to face the problem of Hamlet as he faced it, and to trace the solution as he must have found it.

Shakespeare's Hamlet is a philosophical melodrama. Theatrically it is one of his most spectacular plays. For all its discursiveness it is crammed with action of the most sensational sort. Ghosts walk and cry "Revenge 1" Murder is foully done. Conspirators plot and counterplot. Two characters go mad. A queen is terrified nearly to death. A play breaks up in a nearriot. An insurrection batters the palace gates. A brawl desecrates a suicide's grave. A duel explodes into murder and general butchery. There are poison, incest, war, and debauchery. This is not closet drama for the philosopher's study; it is blood and thunder for the popular stage.

Nevertheless, Hamlet is also one of Shakespeare's most thoughtful plays. Permeated with moralizing and philosophical speculation, it presents in its central character a most elaborate psychological study. As for the reader these are unquestionably the most enduring elements, so to the elucidation of these criticism has devoted most of its attention.

Indeed, not infrequently is it implied that the play exists for the express purpose of expounding Shakespeare's views on life and death, or that the play is primarily a peg upon which to hang the character of Hamlet. Such a view, however, scarcely squares with the known practice of Shakespeare, or, for that matter, of any successful playwright. The one play of the period which openly advertised itself as a philosophical character study—Chapman's *Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*—was an inglorious failure. Contrast with this the extraordinary popularity of Hamlet, and one may see how much of it depends upon the scrupulous subordination of those very philosophical elements which make Chapman's play so insufferably dull to the modern reader. To Shakespeare, doubtless, both character study and philosophical speculation were distinctly subsidiary to plot and stage business; and in the excised version, which must have been necessary for stage presentation, they probably interfered little with the more congenial business of swift melodrama.' As a stage piece Hamlet is composed of certain definite elements. It presents the story of a dispossessed prince, who, summoned to avenge his father's murder, eventually carries out the commission and in doing so loses his own life. There is a ghost to demand revenge and thus prompt the action. There is a play within the play used to verify the murderer's guilt; an attempt to betray Hamlet by means of his personal friends

and a woman whom he loves; a plot against his life, which he foils; a scene in which Hamlet violently charges his mother with her perfidy and causes in her a change of heart. There is Hamlet's slaying of a meddling counsellor, and the subsequent madness and suicide of his daughter; a grave-yard scene marked by melancholy meditation; and finally a fencing match which develops into a trap and involves a general slaughter. These are the salient features of the story.