

“An Understanding Simple and Unschool’d”:  
The “Immaturity” of Hamlet

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“So far from being Shakespeare’s masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure.” This comment of T. S. Eliot’s on *Hamlet*—one of three that I shall single out from his essay—has not really proved damaging to the play. Readers have continued to find it as coherent as any other Shakespearian tragedy, and there have been no reports of audiences retreating baffled from the theatre in mid-performance. “Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear.” Taken as a factual statement, this is not in itself especially alarming either: everything depends on the deductions made from it. Eliot’s really damaging comment is the third one, because it so encapsulates his deductions. “The Hamlet of Laforgue is an adolescent; the Hamlet of Shakespeare is not, he has not that explanation and excuse.”<sup>1</sup>

The “artistic failure” of *Hamlet* has been widely overlooked and the character possibly “dominated by an emotion . . . in *excess* of the facts as they appear” has continued to be a fascinating study. It is the “adolescent” conception of Hamlet which has diminished his stature, producing the figure whom critics can describe as “fundamentally immature”, his central characteristic “the desire to escape from the complexities of adult living”. The last two quotations are from L. C. Knights’s essay of 1940,<sup>2</sup> and Knights’s interpretation, developed in *An Approach to Hamlet* (1960), may be taken as representing the view of the play from which it may take longest to recover.

Disagreements in *Hamlet* criticism, so far as they depend on disputed interpretations of this passage or that, may go on for ever. It is more important to try to distinguish what underlies these varying interpretations: the critical procedures being followed, and more especially the assumptions being made, which are most often left unstated. The critical method followed by Professor Knights is one implicit in any sound criticism of drama,

1 T. S. Eliot, “Hamlet” (1919), reprinted in *Selected Essays* (1951), pp. 143, 145, 146.

2 Reprinted in *Explorations* (1946, Peregrine, 1964), pp. 81, 80. All subsequent page-references are to the Peregrine edition.

and notably demonstrated by Dr F. R. Leavis in his essay on *Othello*.<sup>3</sup> Put crudely, the principle is that as the totality of a play necessarily transcends any character in it, we should do better to take our bearings from the play as a whole than from the utterance of any one person, even the principal person. Thus Dr Leavis argues that many critics have gone astray because "they have preferred to see the play through Othello's eyes rather than Shakespeare's" (p. 152), accepting Othello at his own valuation, as a noble figure betrayed by the malicious Iago. But the play itself shows, on the contrary, that Othello is fatally addicted to "heroic self-dramatization" (p. 146), and that "the mind that undoes him is not Iago's but his own" (p. 144). The play is to be interpreted as judging Othello, as exposing him to us.

Following this approach with *Hamlet*, Professor Knights in his essay of 1940 observed that "how far we are invited to sympathize with Hamlet is at least a debatable question" (p. 77). He set against the Romantic estimate the possibility that *Hamlet* may be "an objective study of a particular kind of immaturity" (p. 85). When our attention is forced on his malicious and sterile wit, the callousness with which he sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, and his brutal and self-righteous castigation of the Queen, this may not be an indication that the play (for whatever reason) has got out of hand. It may be that Shakespeare is exposing to us "the obstinate self-centredness and suspicion of the maladjusted individual" (p. 84), and that Hamlet's attitudes of "hatred, revulsion, self-complacence and self-reproach . . . are, in their one-sided insistence, forms of escape from the difficult process of complex adjustment which normal living demands and which Hamlet finds beyond his powers" (p. 81).

Whether or not one agrees with the inferences from it, the critical method itself cannot be impugned. Attending to the play as a whole, we can see more than Hamlet sees, and Professor Knights would have us go outside Hamlet's view of things and where necessary adopt a critical stance towards that view. The Romantic critics were misled by seeing the action of *Othello* only through Othello's eyes, not penetrating the "sonorous, simplifying rhetoric" (p. 82) through which Othello reveals his inadequacy, and the same danger beckons with *Hamlet*.

In his 1940 essay, the application of this approach led Pro-

3 "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero", *Scrutiny*, VI (December 1937), 259-283, reprinted in *The Common Pursuit* (1952; Peregrine, 1962). All page-references are to the Peregrine edition.

fessor Knights to an inconclusive result. While questioning the Romantic interpretation, he seemed still too occupied with Eliot's view of the play as "a spontaneous and uncritical expression of Shakespeare's own unconscious feelings" (p. 85) to see it as clearly an objective study of immaturity. He therefore chose a position of compromise. While Hamlet in the play is possibly being measured by Shakespeare against a "developing scale of values", yet "a clear-sighted view of the fundamental weaknesses of Hamlet's personality is by no means incompatible with a lively dramatic sympathy" (p. 86). By 1960, however, this compromise seems to have gone. "What we have in *Hamlet*—as in *Othello*, and less successfully, in *Timon*—is the exploration and implicit criticism of a particular state of mind or consciousness."<sup>4</sup>

This is the thesis that Professor Knights seeks to establish in *An Approach to Hamlet*. Again he finds in the Hamlet of the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy "a desire to lapse *back* from the level of adult consciousness" (p. 193), just as his reproaches of himself to Ophelia indicate not "mature self-knowledge" but mere "self-flagellation" (p. 197). That he has been "shocked by the revelation of the power of sex" may contribute to his overwrought behaviour towards Ophelia, but he has been shocked "as an adolescent may well be horrified and frightened when the revelation of dangerous powers within comes as part of a traumatic experience". And "Hamlet was not in years an adolescent; he was, as Shakespeare tells us, a man of thirty" (pp. 199-200).

"The Hamlet of Laforgue is an adolescent," Eliot wrote, "the Hamlet of Shakespeare is not, he has not that explanation and excuse." It is time to begin considering some of the assumptions involved. By what scale of values does adolescence or immaturity need to be excused or justified? Unless we know the assumptions on which the argument is mounted, and can accept their validity, are we bound to give any heed to the statement at all? The critic himself may not be fully aware of the position he has come to occupy. Professor Knights had referred in his earlier essay to Hamlet's avoiding "the difficult process of complex adjustment which normal living demands" (p. 81), and in his later study he remarks on the "movement of recoil and disgust" in Hamlet which is "stronger than any counter-balancing movements of positive and

4 *An Approach to Hamlet* (1960), reprinted with *Some Shakespearean Themes* (Peregrine, 1966), p. 189. All subsequent page-references are to the Peregrine edition.

outgoing life" (p. 190). Responsiveness to the demands "normal living" and to "movements of positive and outgoing life" may suggest the standards Hamlet is failing, if in a rather perplexing way (exactly what "movements of positive and outgoing life" are required of someone in Hamlet's situation?) Professor Knights refers also to *King Lear* as indicating a condition (of insight, of forgiveness?) that Hamlet does not attain.

Allowing that some such standards of judgment are operating—I pursue their implications in a moment—yet they are brought into question by the way they are applied. Hamlet is reproved by Professor Knights for his "unseemly ranting" in Ophelia's grave (p. 198), for the "impure streak of the indulgence of an obsessive passion" (p. 200) that runs through his condemnation of the Queen, and though he has been wounded by his mother's conduct, this "still does not excuse his obscenity towards Ophelia—Ophelia whom he had said he loved, and she believed him" (p. 199). It is always an uneasy procedure to prescribe how a tragic hero might have conducted himself better, in the face of the conduct delineated in the play. But a world which reproves "unseemly rant", detects an "impure streak" and cannot excuse "obscenity" (towards "Ophelia whom he had said he loved, and she believed him") seems a world remote from Shakespeare's plays. It is a world of bourgeois morality, in which one has the sense of a wayward character being carpeted in the headmaster's study.

This is not a matter of the interpretation of this scene or that, it is a matter of the assumptions being made and applied. The excesses of Hamlet's behaviour are deplored in the play itself, but it is disquieting to note the quarter from which the rebuke comes:

But to persever  
In obstinate condolment is a course  
Of impious stubbornness. 'Tis unmanly grief.  
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,  
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,  
An understanding simple and unschooled.  
For what we know must be and is as common  
As any the most vulgar thing to sense,  
Why should we in peevish opposition  
Take it to heart?

(I.ii.92-101)

We may grant Claudius's comments on this adolescent behaviour in a grown man, as we may grant that Hamlet's conduct is on occasion "unseemly" or "obscene". But what inferences are we then empowered to draw? Is this a play in which "seemliness" and refraining from "obscenity" are at a premium, or do we

trivialize it by regarding it so? It is essentially at this level that the argument should be pursued. It would be a much less human Hamlet who could pass these tests, or escape Claudius's strictures, but the tests themselves are so incongruous. It is as though the play were inviting us to decide whether or not Hamlet has the qualities desirable in someone like a head prefect.

I have dwelt on the censure of superficial qualities like "unseemliness" in Hamlet to indicate where unexamined assumptions may lead, giving impressions which may well be unsought. The talk of Hamlet as "adolescent" must always have these dangers about it. But Professor Knights's account of the "immaturity" of Hamlet is more searching than this. *An Approach to Hamlet* is devoted to showing how the corruption around the prince seems to activate similar tendencies in himself, how there is an ineluctable circularity in his thinking—his mind always returning to himself, until it has forfeited all purpose and direction. If Hamlet contemplates death, his contemplation reveals a merely negative attitude; his reaction to sex shows "no mature self-knowledge" (p. 197); if he allows his intellect to play, it proves to be an intellect "largely at the service of attitudes of rejection and disgust that are indiscriminate in their working" (p. 196). The play presents in Hamlet a fixation of consciousness, a character who, whatever his gifts, can never be free of himself, and "at each of the crucial points of the action Shakespeare leaves us in no doubt of the inadequacy—and worse—of Hamlet's basic attitudes" (p. 212).

Professor Knights's interpretation is too carefully and closely argued to be adequately represented in any summary. The point to be emphasized, however, is that Hamlet's character is not simply being defined in these terms: it is being judged. Measured against the capacity to cope with the difficulties of "normal living", against the "movements of positive and outgoing life", against the perceptiveness that is won by Lear, Hamlet must be seen to fail. The play is devoted to "the exploration and implicit criticism of a particular state of mind", and it convinces us of "the inadequacy—and worse—of Hamlet's basic attitudes" at every crucial point. Like Troilus, and then Othello and Timon, Hamlet has sadly to be written off.

This is an argument which calls in question much more than "unseemly ranting" and "obscene jesting". It is however no less mistaken. Again it is not a question of whether Professor Knights

has interpreted every key passage correctly.<sup>5</sup> Although I might not accept his interpretation, it is simpler for my purpose to assume that he is right—that he has correctly diagnosed the circularity of Hamlet's thinking, his inability to be free of himself, the paralysis of his consciousness. The remarkable feature of this analysis is that it is not conducted to show how poignant such a situation must be, what anguish it must bring to the one experiencing it. It is conducted in order to make the right judgement on Hamlet, and that is a dismissive judgement. But is this really what the play is doing? The play may indeed show Hamlet to be immature, fixated, and isolated from the movement of positive and outgoing life—but does it not show beyond this that such a predicament has a strong claim on our sympathies? Its real failure would be if it did not. While I should hesitate to say what are the moral criteria applicable to *Hamlet* (or to any play of Shakespeare's), I have no hesitation in feeling that they must go beyond those invoked by Professor Knights. *Hamlet*, no less than *Lear*, challenges any moral assumptions we bring to it: it shows that a man's very "immaturity" and his paralysed consciousness may give a particular keenness to his plight, may claim our fellow-feeling, enlarge our apprehension.

Professor Knights has brought out forcefully one element in our consideration of *Hamlet*. But the appeal is always, on his own principle, to the play as an "imaginative whole". Critics contemplating that whole have not overlooked the "negative" qualities in the leading character. The "sentimental" view of Hamlet was dismissed by Bradley in 1904, when he drew attention to the elements of "embitterment, callousness, grossness, brutality" in the prince<sup>6</sup>; in the 1930s G. Wilson Knight in *The Wheel of Fire* was describing the manifestations of cynicism and cruelty in Hamlet's actions, and A. J. A. Waldock in *Hamlet: A Study in Critical Method*—still probably the best single book on the play—brought out the ferocity inherent in Hamlet's decisions in the prayer-scene. Such "weaknesses" (if we are to use that word) admitted, no critic of the play, with the exception of Salvador de Madariaga, has been able to regard Hamlet *consistently* in adverse terms. It would require a strenuous, almost superhuman effort to do so. Hamlet

5 For alternative readings of the same evidence, see D. R. C. Marsh, *Shakespeare's 'Hamlet'* (1970), and Patrick Cruttwell, "The Morality of Hamlet" in *Stratford-upon-Avon Studies* 5, *Hamlet* (1963).

6 A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904: repr. 1951), pp. 101-104.

has remained the figure in the play with the greatest capacity for experience, whose sensibility—disabled or not—dwarfs every other mind into insignificance. It is not to his discredit that he is not King Lear.

The response that continues to be given to Hamlet, the fascination and sympathy aroused by his dilemma, may well be accounted for by that famous remark of Coleridge's, to the validity of which Professor Knights seems also to subscribe: "I have a smack of Hamlet myself".<sup>7</sup> If *Hamlet* does continue to appeal to us all, the consequence of Professor Knights's argument, taken to its logical conclusion, must be that the play appeals to us all by appealing to what is worst in us all. It would be alone among Shakespeare's plays in doing so.

<sup>7</sup> *Table Talk*, 24 June 1827 (1894), p. 47.