

# Heresy About Hamlet

WE are permitted to say that the writer of this article was born in 1874. Without permission we add that she has published a novel and received an O.B.E. So it is not only the young and irresponsible who are going radical.

I HOPE Hamlet's modern dress will do good in opening the road to the discussion of the play itself in the light of modern thought. We are apt to approach it on our knees, with bowed heads as a fanatic approaches the altar of his gods: a posture that blinds clear vision.

After the Canterbury College players have attacked the play, divested it of long-windedness and of all those surprising incongruities that have made it eternally inexplicable, it should be a comprehensible and homogeneous presentation. But is it? Do any of us know the manner of man that Shakespeare intended Hamlet to be? Consider the soliloquies.



SHAKESPEARE GETS OFF HIS BIKE: Our artist imagines a meeting between The Bard and the writer of this article.

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"They see the film," we were told, "and they seem to have had enough; but if they are hearing a serial, they don't get so much at a time, and I suppose they get impatient and want to find out what happens, or they miss some and want to fill in the gap, or perhaps they just want the satisfaction of knowing more of the background of the story; because all the serials are abridged a lot, aren't they?"

## Schoolboys' Interest

The effect of radio serials on boys' reading was referred to by the rector of the Southland Boys' High School (Dr. G. H. Uttley) in his annual report at the recent breaking-up ceremony. At the beginning of the year, a complete set of Jane Austen's novels had been placed on the school library shelves, Dr. Uttley said. During the year there had been a steady demand for these books, although Jane Austen was not a writer one would expect to interest boys. Inquiry showed that the radio serial of one of her novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, had aroused keen interest in this writer's other novels, and there had been a good demand for them.

In the first we hear an over-burdened youth, desperately depressed because he feels his inadequacy in face of the great responsibility he is called upon to take up. At least we read that into it. No word of his special difficulty is said.

O! that this too too solid flesh would melt . . . Or that the Almighty had not fixed his canon 'gainst self slaughter.

He is entirely orthodox, does not dream of disobeying. He may only bemoan the "cursed spite."

Before the second soliloquy the plot has ripened. Hamlet's conduct has come under official notice and suspicion. There are various theories as to its cause and purpose. A scheme is afoot to test them. Polonius is ensconced behind the arras, Ophelia is on the spot. The trap is laid and the audience is agog to see whether the hero falls into it. Hamlet comes on. What does he do? Speaks the immortal "To Be or Not to Be." Does the beauty of it blind us to its strange inappropriateness?

This time our hero is no longer orthodox. He is pure agnostic—pagan: "Who would grunt and sweat under a weary life (Does he grunt and sweat?) when he himself 'might his quietus make with a bare bodkin' if it were not that 'dreams may come.' He recounts the 'thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to' so eloquently and convincingly that his words spring into our daily lives and are used as the best means of expressing our own workaday worries.

the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely

The pangs of despised love, the law's delay  
The insolence of office, and the spurns,  
that patient merit of the unworthy takes.

Wonderful! But could any of these ills conceivably have touched the Prince of Denmark? Possible "the pangs of despised love" if it had not been demonstrated before our eyes that he does not so suffer.

He then talks of "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns" overlooking the fact that all the coil is about one traveller who has returned and made himself particularly obvious.

In the soliloquy on the players, Hamlet says what might be usual in the circumstances with unusual force and beauty. This one was no doubt written for the occasion. But in the fourth he has apparently become strictly Catholic: he shrinks from killing his uncle because the uncle is praying: "for so he goes to Heaven . . . a villain kills my father; and for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send to Heaven."

Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.  
He took my father grossly, full of bread,  
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;  
And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?

Is this the same man who asked "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them?"

MIGHT I dare to suggest that Shakespeare got tired of writing plays (and well he might) and when another was required of him, bundled together all the superb lines and speeches he could lay hands upon, threw them together for the eternal controversy of posterity, and called the hotch-potch *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*?

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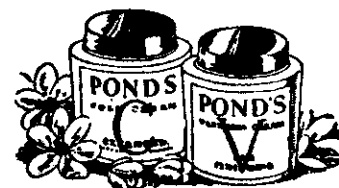
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