

harmless bit of fooling by Michael Innes, the detective-story writer (who is also J. I. M. Stewart, of Christ Church, Oxford, a rising Shakespeare scholar with a strong flair for psychology). The holocaust at the end of *Hamlet* is made the starting-point for an "investigation"—in pleasant parody of the manner of such literary detectives as Professor Dover Wilson—which reveals that the catastrophe in the play has really been engineered by Fortinbras, who impersonated the ghost of Hamlet's father to set in train an action that would clear his own way to the Danish throne. This is amusing reading, and must have made good listening on the Third Programme.

"The Hawk and the Handsaw," also by Michael Innes, is a much more ambitious and less successful effort. This is radio drama with all the trimmings: apparently the author takes his theme at least half seriously; and the result—despite its air of learning and fashionable psychology—has all the familiar stagey bookishness of Victorian historical reconstructions. It is more like Clemence Dane than anything else, and this can hardly have been the effect intended.

Mr. Rayner Heppenstall's radio play, "The Fool's Saga," is even longer and much more chaotic: it is based on early Scandinavian forms of the Amleth legend, and deals chiefly with Hamlet's two visits to England, perhaps in the 6th Century. It is hard to believe that such a medley of scraps of scholarship and elaborate metrical imitations could be intelligible to any but honours graduates in English—imagination boggles at what it must have sounded like on the air. Mr. Heppenstall is a poet, and as a poet does seem to be enjoying himself at rare moments in his play. But I doubt if this Hamlet volume, as a whole, will raise many laughs outside college common-rooms, and not even the strenuous salesmanship of Mr. Gollancz is likely to succeed in making it popular. It may be recommended with a caution to Shakespeare students; and to all radio script-writers, as a warning of how silly they can be made to look in cold print.

—J.B.

VENUS OBSCURED

VENUS OBSERVED, by Christopher Fry; Geoffrey Cumberlege: Oxford University Press. English price, 6/-.

CHRISTOPHER FRY is probably the only original who is writing for the English stage at the present time. He has put liveliness, wit and a cascade of language into verse form and has been accepted by enthusiastic audiences as a new and exciting playwright. His latest play has recently been staged in London with Sir Laurence Olivier in the leading role. It is, I understand, good box office. All the same, I cannot write with any real enthusiasm about *Venus Observed*. Compared with many other current offerings it would still, I suppose, appear as something out of the ordinary, but coming after, say, *The Lady's Not for Burning*, and comparing Fry with Fry, I cannot help but feel that *Venus Observed* is rather like a damp squib after a full-scale pyrotechnic display.

The former plays so dazzled us with their rhetoric, with the pace and flow of the words, that if we saw the faults, we accepted them as relatively unimportant. The disregard for the ordinary limitations of the stage, the bad entrances, the feeble, often unexplained exits, the dearth of movement, did not

(continued on next page)

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