

HAMLET: FROM AN ACTOR'S PROMPT BOOK

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Hamlet: from an Actor's Prompt Book by Herbert Beerbohm Tree

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HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE

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THE SUBSTANCE OF A LECTURE
DELIVERED BY
HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE
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HAMLET—FROM AN ACTOR'S PROMPT BOOK.¹

IT seems somewhat bold to attempt to say anything fresh about Hamlet—a subject upon which more wise and more foolish things have been spoken than upon any theme within the scope of English literature. Indeed, it is only by ignoring the vast voluminousness of learned speculation and ingenious comment that I dare hope to put forward that which alone can excuse my temerity—an original point of view. My point of view is that of the actor, and in this declaration I trust I shall not be held guilty of a too fantastic presumption, for were not Shakespeare and Hamlet both actors? I purpose then to approach this most debated of Shake-

¹ Reprinted from the London "Fortnightly Review."

Shakespeare's masterpieces through the despised medium of practical experience—I propose, in fact, to attempt to remove the seeming inconsistencies of Hamlet's character with the assistance of an actor's prompt copy. Hamlet is not only literature—it is drama. Hamlet himself is human or he is nothing. It is in the living humanity which animates his whole being that the unequalled attractiveness of this great creation lies. It is because Hamlet is eternally human that the play retains its lasting hold on our sympathies. We are all potential Hamlets. And who more than the actor in the white heat of passion, can explore the giddy heights and latent tracts of Shakespeare's masterpiece? He has the privilege—a privilege which alone would make his life an enviable one—of speaking those noble words, of being for the time translated into the higher region of the great poet's greatest imaginings; of soaring on the wings of passion into the rapt heaven of poetic fantasy; of experiencing personally, in the portrayal of Hamlet, his youthful aspirations, his scorns of the insolence of office, and, perchance, his love for the fair Ophelia.

Like all great works, Hamlet is distinguished by simplicity; he who will approach this sub-

ject with the mind of a child will see clearly—it is only when we look at Hamlet as through the blurred microscope of super-subtlety that it becomes a nebular hypothesis. It is the first duty of the actor, in his interpretation of the tragedy, to bring home the poet's meaning. Of course, each is bounded by his own personality, by the limitation of his own mental horizon. The question as to whether Hamlet was mad or feigning madness, has vexed the minds and spoilt the tempers of countless writers. They have not the suppleness of mind to understand that a man may have many facets—that he may be everything by turns, and everything sincerely,—“A pipe for fortune's finger to sound what stop she pleases.” Here is a young prince of lofty ideals, whose natural refinement of mind has been cultivated at the University of Wittenberg. His sensitive nature shrinks from the contemplation of the boorish court—where he is as much out of place as a jewelled ring in a hog's snout. He returns to Denmark to find a riotous rabble merry-making over the nuptials of his own mother with his father's brother. He sees this hiccupping monarch sitting on his honoured father's throne, and reeling towards his mother's

bed. What wonder that the world seems to him "an unweeded garden that grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature"? Hamlet sickens at the sight—the flood of grief at the loss of his beloved father engulfs, for the moment, his tender passion for the fair Ophelia—and he gives vent to his feelings in an outburst on the frailty of woman.

Hamlet learns from Horatio and his companions of the apparition of his father's spirit. His prophetic soul already presages foul play, and through the darkness of his suspicions now rises the blood-red sun of revenge. Up to this point Hamlet has been a perfectly sane and rational young man. In the meeting with the Ghost, again, there is nothing abnormal in his attitude—he is overcome with awe on beholding his father's spirit in arms, and is prepared to follow him regardless of perils. In the second Ghost scene Hamlet is overwhelmed with grief and indignation on learning of the infamy by which his father met his death. To the actor this is a scene of intense and prolonged excitement, more exhausting, because pent up, than perhaps any passage in the whole play. I have sometimes asked myself, with that second consciousness of the actor, whether

thus to waste one's vital force could have any compensating effect upon the audience, for Hamlet's eyes are fixed on the Ghost, his face is averted from the public, and probably the actor's excitement is lost upon them. But, nevertheless, I conclude that it is necessary for the actor to undergo this strain of self-excitation in order to reach that condition of hysteria which overcomes Hamlet after the Ghost's departure. Here again Hamlet, it seems to me, behaves just as any highly-wrought young man would behave on hearing of the terrible fate which had befallen a beloved father. He is all on fire to sweep to his revenge with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love. But the fire is too fierce—it perforce burns itself out. And here the actor should make clear to the audience that physical exhaustion prevents Hamlet from carrying out the impulse of his mind—the weakened physical machine is, as it were, unequal to respond to the promptings of the mind. Hamlet cries:

Oh, all ye hosts of heaven! Oh Earth, what else?
And shall I couple hell? Oh, fie. Hold, hold, my
heart;
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up.