

# **Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Written by Mr. William Shakespeare (1736) eBook**

## **Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Written by Mr. William Shakespeare (1736)**

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Series Three:

*Essays on the Stage*

No. 3

Anonymous [attributed to Thomas Hanmer], *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Written by Mr. William Shakespeare* (1736).

With an Introduction by Clarence D. Thorpe

and

a Bibliographical Note

## **The Augustan Reprint Society September, 1947 Price: 75c**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The identity of the "Anonymous" of *Some Remarks on Hamlet Prince of Denmark* has never been established. The tradition that Hanmer wrote the essay had its highly dubious origin in a single unsupported statement by Sir Henry Bunbury, made over one hundred years after the work was written, in his *Correspondence of Sir Thomas Hanmer, with a Memoir of His Life* (London, 1838), to the effect that he had reason to believe that Hanmer was the author. The evidence against this bare surmise is such, however, as to compel assent to Professor Lounsbury's judgment that Hanmer's



authorship “is so improbable that it may be called impossible” (*Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, 60). I have elsewhere set down reasons for my own belief that Hanmer could have had nothing to do with the composition of the essay, arguing on grounds of ideas, attitudes, style, and other internal evidence (“Thomas Hanmer and the Anonymous Essay on *Hamlet*,” *MLN*61 [1934], 493-498). Without going over the case again, I wish here merely to reaffirm my conviction that Hanmer was not the author, and to say that it would seem that the difference in styles and the attitude of Anonymous toward Pope and Theobald are alone convincing proof that Hanmer had no part in the *Remarks*. Hanmer’s style is stiff, formal, pedantic; the style of the essay is free, easy, direct, more in the Addison manner. Hanmer was a disciple of Pope’s, and in his Preface to his Shakespeare and in his edition as a whole shows allegiance to Pope. Anonymous, on the contrary, decisively, though urbanely, rejects Pope’s edition in favor of Theobald’s text and notes. The fact that Theobald was at that time still the king of dunces in the *Dunciad*, adds to the improbability that an admirer of Pope’s, as Hanmer certainly was, would pay Theobald such honor.



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Most careful scholars of our day go no further on the question of authorship than to note that the essay has been “attributed” to Hanmer; some, like Professor Stoll, seem to have dropped the idea that Hanmer was in any way connected with it and safely speak of “the author” or “the anonymous author”; I recall only one case in recent years of an all-out, incautious assignment of the authorship to Hanmer (“Hamlet among the Mechanists,” *Shakespeare Association Bulletin* 17 [July, 1942], 138). It would seem advisable to follow Stoll’s lead and ignore Hanmer entirely.

The anonymous essay has been of continued interest to students of Shakespeare. Echoes of its ideas if not its words appear in such later critics of the eighteenth century as Gentleman, Steevens, Richardson, and Morgann; in 1790 Malone copied out some two pages of the best of it for publication; and in 1864 the whole was reprinted, a not too usual thing for an obscure eighteenth century pamphlet. Present-day students of Shakespeare, among them D.N. Smith, Lounsbury, Babcock, Lawrence, and Stoll have treated the essay with unvarying respect. Remarking that it anticipates some of Johnson’s arguments, Smith calls it in general a “well-written, interesting book” greatly superior to the anonymous essay on Hamlet of 1752 (*Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare*, xxn). Lawrence has recently praised a selected passage for its “wise words ... which may be pondered with profit” (Hamlet and Fortinbras, *PMLA* 61 [1946], 697). And Stoll, who has obviously read the book with care, has found in one of its statements the very “beginning of historical criticism” (PQ 24 [1945], 291; *Shakespeare Studies*, 212n.), and has elsewhere seen much to commend in it.

Reasons for such attention are not difficult to find; for the *Remarks* is both intrinsically and historically an important piece of criticism. It is still worth reading for more than one passage of discerning analysis and apt comment on scene, speech, or character, and for certain not unfruitful excursions into the field of general aesthetics; while historically it is a sort of landmark in Shakespearian literature. Standing chronologically almost midway between Dryden and Johnson, Kames, and Richardson, the *Remarks* shows decisively the direction in which criticism, under the steadily mounting pressure of liberal, empirical thought, is traveling. This little unpretentious book gathers into itself, either in faint adumbration or in fairly advanced form, the tendencies in method and ideas that are to remake criticism in the eighteenth century. There are reflected here the growing distrust of the “Rules” and the deepening faith in mind as the measure and in imagination as the instrument. There is also added recognition of the integrity of effects as a factor in judging literature.

Anonymous is an earlier member of the School of Taste. He is none-the-less concerned with firm principles by which to justify his acceptances and rejections. His announced over-all rule is conformity to “Reason and Nature”—old words that he uses in the newer way. But he is also handily equipped with a stock of stubbornly conservative principles, reaching at times the status of bias, that serve to hold his taste in balance and effectively check unrestrained admiration.



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This conservative side of Anonymous must not pass unnoticed, for it is the part of him that most closely identifies him with his forebears and so throws his more original, independent side into stronger relief. Our author is, not unexpectedly, an invariable moralist; is throughout a stickler for dignity; is sensitive to absurdities, improprieties, and slips in decorum; will have no truck with tragi-comedy in any of its forms. He hates puns and bombast, demands refinement in speech and restraint in manners. He regards Hamlet's speeches to Ophelia in the Player scene as a violation of propriety, is shocked by the lack of decency in the representation of Ophelia's madness, finds Hamlet's frequent levity and the buffoonery of Polonius alike regrettable —Shakespeare's favorite foible, he feels, is "that of raising a laugh." The introduction of Fortinbras and his army on the stage is "an Absurdity"; the grave-diggers' scene is "very unbecoming to tragedy"; the satire on the "Children of the Chapel" is not allowable in this kind of piece.

In all these things Anonymous is an upholder of the tradition of true, restrained wit. But unlike some of his contemporaries, he has a formula for discounting faults. "But we should be very cautious in finding Fault with Men of such exalted Genius as our Author certainly was, lest we should blame them when in reality the Fault lies in our own slow Conceptions ..." This is the language of tolerance, a tolerance that can overlook faults for the sake of greater beauties—one of the distinct marks of the new criticism to which the *Remarks* belongs.

The essay starts out in a boldly challenging tone. Criticism, says the author, has been badly abused: it has been regarded as an excuse for the ill-natured to find fault or for the better-natured to eulogize. But true criticism has for its end "to set in the best light all Beauties, and to touch upon Defects no more than is necessary." Beyond this it seeks to set up a right taste for the age. His own purpose is to examine a great tragedy "according to the Rules of Reason and Nature, without having any regard to those Rules established by arbitrary Dogmatizing Critics ..." More specifically, he proposes to show the why of our pleasure in this piece: "And as to those things which charm by a certain secret Force, and strike us we know not how, or why; I believe it will not be disagreeable, if I shew to everyone the Reason why they are pleas'd ..." This, it need hardly be observed, is all pretty much in the vein of Addison, whom the author extols and whose papers on *Paradise Lost*, he tells us, have furnished a model for the present undertaking. Throughout his criticism Addison had deprecated mere fault-finding and had urged the positive approach of emphasis on beauties. In the last twelve essays on Milton's poem he had shown a new way in critical writing, the way of particular as opposed to general criticism, with the selection of specific details for



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praise and explication; in his essay on the Imagination he had sought to find a rationale for that kind of criticism: in which a man of true taste, going beyond the mechanical rules, “would enter into the very Spirit and Soul of Fine Writing, and shew us the several Sources of that Pleasure which rises in the Mind upon the Perusal of a Noble Work.” With such ideas in mind, Anonymous proceeds to study *Hamlet*, in what is probably the first act-by-act, scene-by-scene analysis of a play in English, according to his understanding of the principles of the “new criticism” as he finds them illustrated in Addison’s theory and practice.

Having brushed aside the “fantastick Rules” of the conventional critics, he proceeds to apply his laws of “Reason and Nature” as criteria by which to test the validity of Shakespeare’s effects and to discover the cause of these effects. The results he achieves are in part conditioned by his interpretation of his basic terms. Reason and Nature had been invoked by many previous critics; but to Anonymous these words are not what they were to Boileau and Pope. They particularly have nothing, or next to nothing, to do with the Deistic concept of a universal nature of external diversity but of an internal rational and universal order, which art reveals and to which art at its best conforms. To Anonymous, who in this is following the lead of the Hobbian school, the nature that is the norm by which Shakespeare is to be judged is merely human nature, used as Whately, Richardson, and Morgann are to use it later, and as Johnson uses it when he argues that there is an appeal open from custom to nature. Anonymous’ interest is in the way the mind works and the way people customarily act. So also when he talks about reason, he is thinking only of what is acceptable to a logical, healthy mind. He has no thought of identifying nature or reason with the traditional Rules or with Homer. On the contrary, he is willing to set both of them quite apart from, or even in opposition to the Rules (with a qualifying concession that they may sometimes meet), and he definitely renounces obligation to show that Shakespeare bears any relation to the ancients whatever, denying at the same time the value of the customary shows of learning in discussing his work. For Shakespeare apparently drew little from the authors of antiquity: “Nature was our great Poet’s Mistress; her alone has he followed as his Conductress.”

Such a view is emancipatory. Free the critic from the idea that nature and the ancients are the same and that reason and the laws ascribed to the ancients are identical, and he is ready to look at modern literature with an independent judgment and to see what it is like and what it is worth in and by itself. Release the critic from the necessity of regarding nature as universal order and reason as the directive of this order, and, whatever the loss in philosophic concept, he is ready for a more specific and particular investigation that turns its



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attention to basic human behavior and the basic ways of the mind as the criterion by which to judge artistic representation. No need now for quaint parallels with the ancients to justify modern practice, nor for scholarly arguments to prove learning; all that is required is to prove adherence to common nature and common rationality. This is the ground upon which Anonymous stands, and it is the ground upon which Morgann is to stand when he gives us the “Falstaff of Nature,” and Johnson when he presents Shakespeare as the dramatist who is “above all modern writers the poet of nature,” whose “persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions by which all minds are agitated,” whose “drama is the mirror of life,” in which his readers may find “human sentiments in human language,” whose practices are to be judged not by appeal to the rules of criticism, but by reference to the author’s design and the great law of nature and reason.

This position opens the way for further advances. Thus, beginning with the assumption that the mind of the spectator or the reader is the chief arbiter in such matters, Anonymous gives us what is perhaps the most enlightened comment on probability and illusion to be found in the period between Dryden and Coleridge. His test for probability is what the imagination will readily accept; and the imagination, he says, will bear a “strong Imposition.” Reason, to be sure, demands that actions and speeches shall be “natural”—but natural within the framework of the situation and character as established by the dramatist on the imaginative level. The author’s words on illusion recall the passage in Dryden about reason’s suffering itself to be “hoodwinked” by imaginative presentation, foreshadow Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief,” and directly suggest Johnson’s passages on the subject. Experience will show, he says, “that no Dramatick Piece can affect us but by the Delusion of our Imagination; which, to taste true and real Pleasures at such Representations, must undergo a very great Imposition.” For example, on our stage all nations speak English, and shock no one; also the actors are recognized as actors and not as the persons represented, and the stage as a stage and not Rome, or Denmark. Without such imposition “farewell all Dramatick Performances.”

And then, in continuation of this pre-Johnsonian (and pre-Coleridgean) argument he goes on to say that delusion must be accepted, never, however, in defiance of our reason but with the approval of our reason. That Shakespeare’s plays create delusion with the assistance of reason is proved by the success they have so long enjoyed. Sublimity of sentiments, exalted diction, and “in short all the Charms of his Poetry, far outweigh any little absurdities in his Plots.” He knew how to work up “great and moving Circumstances in such a Way as to affect our Passions strongly.” The word used here throughout is *delusion*, but the sense, just as is largely the case with Johnson, is *illusion*—not a demand for such a verisimilitude as will deceive, but for such representation as will lead the imagination to voluntary, pleasurable acceptance.

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Likewise, when Anonymous considers unity his emphasis, like Johnson's and Hurd's, is no longer on the mechanical unities but on unity of design. "When Shakespeare's plan is understood most of the criticisms of Rymer and Voltaire vanish away," Johnson was to write some thirty years later. Anonymous holds steadily for the integrity of Shakespeare's plan in *Hamlet*. Of Act I, iii he says, "Concerning the Design of this scene, we shall find it is necessary towards the whole plot of the Play"; he speaks of I, iv as an "important Scene, on which turns the Whole Play"; the killing of Polonius, he explains, "was in Conformity to the Plan *Shakespeare* built his Play upon"; and finally, of the piece as a whole, he asserts that "there is not one Scene but what some way or other conduces toward the *Denouement* of the Whole; and thus the Unity of Action is indisputably kept up by everything tending to what we may call the main Design, and it all hangs by Consequence so close together, that no Scene can be omitted, without Prejudice to the Whole." When one recalls that the idea of unity of design as evolved in Thomas Warton, Hurd, and Johnson was the intermediate step on the way to a full theory of organic unity we see the importance of such passages in the forward march of criticism.

There is in the *Remarks* a closer examination of event and character than is usual in the period, again in the light of what is reasonable and natural. This includes some "psychologizing" of persons in the play, specifically in partial analyses of Laertes, Polonius, and Hamlet, enough to foreshadow the later vogue but none of it very remarkable. More worthy of notice is the author's use of a psychological method that is to reappear in developed form in Coleridge: that is, a study of successive scenes leading to a climactic moment—in this case Hamlet's meeting with the ghost—for evidence of a skillful working up through right preparatory touches to a point where the audience, in the words of Anonymous, "are forced ... entirely to suspend their most fixed Opinions and believe ..." This may have been done before in criticism; but if so I do not myself recall it.

I should like, also, to risk the suggestion that to the author of *Some Remarks* should go the honor of the earliest adumbration of the "Hamlet problem." For here, before Francis Gentleman or Steevens or Richardson, Anonymous has raised the tantalising question of the why of Hamlet's conduct, the problem of his delay in effecting his revenge, and has glanced at an answer. Anonymous in no wise approves of Hamlet's madness: it was, he thinks, the best possible way to thwart his design of revenge and it was carried on with unseemly lack of dignity. Shakespeare has followed his sources too closely, with bad results. There appears "no Reason at all in Nature, why the young prince did not put the Usurper to Death as soon as possible." To be sure this would have ended the play; the poet must therefore delay the hero's revenge. But, insists Anonymous, "then he should have contrived some good Reason for it." This is clearly recognition of the vexing problem that has since occupied the attention of unnumbered critics—if not in full statement, at least in its essentials.

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Such examples suggest the seminal quality of the best of this little book. The writer was obviously a man who read closely and reflected to good effect on what he read, with the result that he saw new things and helped open new problems and point the way to a generally more fruitful study of his author. Because of this and its prevailing sound critical qualities the anonymous essay ranks with the more important Shakespearian documents of the century. The editors of the *Augustan Reprints* are to be commended for their decision to give it a place in their valuable series. A critical work which is so viable, which has so many points of contact with other good Shakespearian criticism, and which is in itself so stimulating in approach and specific idea deserves the added accessibility which such publication permits.

University of Michigan Clarence D. Thorpe

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*There is hardly any Thing which has been more abus'd than the Art of Criticism; it has been turned to so many bad Purposes among us, that the very Word it self has almost totally lost its genuine and natural Signification; for People generally understand by Criticism, finding fault with a Work; and from thence, when we call a Man a Critick, we usually mean, one disposed to blame, and seldom to commend. Whereas in Truth, a real Critick, in the proper Sense of that Word, is one whose constant Endeavour it is to set in the best Light all Beauties, and to touch upon Defects no more than is necessary; to point out how such may be avoided for the future, and to settle, if possible, a right Taste among those of the Age in which he lives.*

Ill-nature, and a Propensity to set any Work in a ridiculous and false Light, are so far from being the Characteristicks of a true Critick, that they are the certain Marks whereby we may know that a Man has not the true Spirit of Criticism in him.

There is a Weakness opposite to this, which indeed is better natur'd, but is, however, vicious; and that is, the being bigotted to an Author; insomuch that Men of this Stamp, when they undertake to explain or comment upon any Writer, they will not allow him to have any Defects; nay, so far from that, they find out Beauties in him which can be so to none but themselves, and give Turns to his Expressions, and lend him Thoughts which were never his Design, or never enter'd into his Brain.

*Of all our Countrymen, Mr. Addison is the best in Criticism, the most exempt from the Faults I mention; for his Papers upon Milton's Paradise Lost, I look upon as the true Model for all Criticks to follow. In those we see the Beauties and Faults of that great Poet weigh'd in the most exact and impartial Scales.*

Those excellent Papers first gave me an Idea of publishing the following Sheets. Happy! if I can but any ways follow such a Guide, though at ever so great a Distance;

since I am well persuaded, that by this Means I can never be totally in Error, tho' I may sometimes deviate for want of proper Abilities!



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Criticism in general, is what few of our Countrymen have succeeded in: In that respect, our Neighbours have got the better of us; altho' we can justly boast of the compleatest Essay on that Subject that has been publish'd in any Language, in which almost every Line, and every Word, convey such Images, and such Beauties, as were never before found in so small a Compass, and of whose Author it may properly be said, in that respect, \_

He is himself that great Sublime he draws.

*I would not have the Reader imagine, that I believe I have pointed out all the Excellencies in this Tragedy; I am not so vain as to think so. Besides, these Papers are too few to contain them; and I have so little of Presumption in me, that I did not think it reasonable to put my Readers to a greater Expence, by enlarging on the Subject, until I find that they themselves are not averse to it.*

*This is all I have to say at present; whatever else is necessary to premise, will be found in the Introduction to the Remarks, to which I refer.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## SOME REMARKS ON THE TRAGEDY OF

*Hamlet Prince of Denmark.*

I am going to do what to some may appear extravagant, but by those of a true Taste in Works of Genius will be approv'd of. I intend to examine one of the Pieces of the greatest Tragick Writer that ever liv'd, (except *Sophocles* and *Euripides*;) according to the Rules of Reason and Nature, without having any regard to those Rules established by Arbitrary Dogmatising Criticks, only as they can be brought to bear that Test.

Among the many Parts of this great Poet's Character, so often given by some of our best Writers, I shall particularly dwell upon those which they have the least insisted on, which will, however, put every Thing he has produc'd in its true and proper Light.

He had (beyond Dispute) a most unbounded Genius, very little regulated by Art.

His particular Excellency consists in the Variety and Singularity of his Characters, and in the constant Conformity of each Character to it self from its very first setting out in the Play, quite to the End. And still further, no Poet ever came up to him, in the Nobleness and Sublimity of Thought, so frequent in his Tragedies, and all express'd with the most Energick Comprehensiveness of Diction.

And it must moreover be observed, as to his Characters, that although there are some entirely of his own Invention, and such as none but so great a Genius could invent; yet



he is so remarkably happy in following of Nature, that (if I may so express it) he does it even in Characters which are not in Nature. To clear up this Paradox, my Meaning is, that if we can but once suppose such Characters to exist, then we must allow they must think and act exactly as he has described them.

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This is but a short Sketch of the main Part of *Shakespeare's* particular Excellencies; the others will be taken Notice of in the Progress of my Remarks. And if I am so happy as to point out some Beauties not yet discovered, or at least not put in the Light they ought to be, I hope I shall deserve my Reader's Thanks, who will thereby, I imagine, receive that Pleasure which I have always done upon any new Discovery of this sort, whether made by my own Labour, or by the Penetration of others: And as to those Things which charm by a certain secret Force, and strike us we know not how, or why; I believe it will not be disagreeable, if I shew to every one the Reason why they are pleas'd, and by that Confederation they will be capacitated to discover still more and more Charms in the Works of this great Poet, and thereby increase their Pleasure without End.

I do not pretend, in Publishing these Remarks of mine, to arrogate any Superiority of Genius; but I think every one should contribute to the Improvement of some Branch or other of Literature in this Country of ours, and thus furnish out his Share towards the Bettering of the Minds of his Countrymen, by affording some Honest Amusements, which can entertain a Man, and help to refine his Taste, and improve his Understanding, and no Ways at the Expence of his Honesty and Virtue. In the Course of these Remarks, I shall make use of the Edition of this Poet, given us by Mr. *Theobalds*, because he is generally thought to have understood our Author best, and certainly deserves the Applause of all his Countrymen for the great Pains he has been at to give us the best Edition of this Poet, which has yet appear'd. I would not have Mr. *Pope* offended at what I say, for I look upon him as the greatest Genius in Poetry that has ever appear'd in *England*: But the Province of an Editor and a Commentator is quite foreign to that of a Poet. The former endeavours to give us an Author as he is; the latter, by the Correctness and Excellency of his own Genius, is often tempted to give us an Author as he thinks he ought to be.

Before I proceed to the particular Parts of this Tragedy, I must premise, that the great Admirers of our Poet cannot be offended, if I point out some of his Imperfections, since they will find that they are very few in Proportion to his Beauties. Amongst the former, we may reckon some *Anachronisms*, and also the inordinate Length of Time supposed to be employ'd in several of his Pieces; add to all this, that the Plots of his Plays in general, are charged with some little Absurdity or other. But then, how easily may we forgive this, when we reflect upon his many Excellencies! The Tragedy that is now coming under our Examination, is one of the best of his Pieces, and strikes us with a certain Awe and Seriousness of Mind, far beyond those Plays whose Whole Plot turns upon vehement and uncontrollable Love, such as are most of our modern Tragedies. These certainly have not the great



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Effect that others have, which turn either upon Ambition, the Love of one's Country, or Paternal or Filial Tenderness. Accordingly we find, that few among the Ancients, and hardly any of our Author's Plays, are built upon the Passion of Love in a direct Manner; by which I mean, that they have not the mutual Attachment of a Lover and his Mistress for their chief Basis. Love will always make a great Figure in Tragedy, if only its chief Branches be made use of; as for instance, Jealousy (as in *Othello*) or the beautiful Distress of Man and Wife (as in *Romeo and Juliet*) but never when the whole Play is founded upon two Lovers desiring to possess each other: And one of the Reasons for this seems to be, that this last Species of that Passion is more commonly met with than the former, and so consequently strikes us less. Add to this, that there may a Suspicion arise, that the Passion of Love in a direct Manner may be more sensual than in those Branches which I have mention'd; which Suspicion is sufficient to take from its Dignity, and lessen our Veneration for it. Of all *Shakespeare's* Tragedies, none can surpass this, as to the noble Passions which it naturally raises in us. That the Reader may see what our Poet had to work upon, I shall insert the Plan of it as abridged from *Saxo-Grammaticus's Danish History* by Mr. *Theobalds*. "The Historian calls our Poets Hero *Amlethus*, his Father *Horwendillus*, his Uncle *Fengo*, and his Mother *Gerutha*. The old King in single Combat, slew *Collerus* King of *Norway*; *Fengo* makes away with his Brother *Horwendillus*, and marries his Widow *Gerutha*. *Amlethus*, to avoid being suspected by his Uncle of Designs, assumes a Form of utter Madness. A fine Woman is planted upon him, to try if he would yield to the Impressions of Love. *Fengo* contrives, that *Amlethus*, in order to sound him, should be closetted by his Mother. A Man is conceal'd in the Rushes to overhear their Discourse; whom *Amlethus* discovers and kills. When the Queen is frighted at this Behaviour of his; he tasks her about her criminal Course of Life, and incestuous Conversation with her former Husband's Murtherer; confesses his Madness is but counterfeited, to protect himself, and secure his Revenge for his Father; to which he enjoins the Queen's Silence. *Fengo* sends *Amlethus* to *Britain*: Two of the King's Servants attend him with Letters to the *British* King, stricly pressing the Death of *Amlethus*, who, in the Night Time, coming at their Commission, overreads it, forms a new One, and turns the Destruction designed towards himself on the Bearers of the Letters. *Amlethus* returning Home, by a Wile surprizes and kills his Uncle." I shall have Occasion to remark in the Sequel, that in one Particular he has follow'd the Plan so closely as to produce an Absurdity in his Plot. And I must premise also this, that in my Examination



## Page 11

of the whole Conduct of the Play, the Reader must not be surprised, if I censure any Part of it, although it be entirely in Conformity to the Plan the Author has chosen; because it is easy to conceive, that a Poet's Judgment is particularly shewn in chusing the proper Circumstances, and rejecting the improper Ones of the Ground-work which he raises his Play upon. In general we are to take Notice, that as History ran very low in his Days, most of his Plays are founded upon some old wretched Chronicler, or some empty *Italian* Novelist; but the more base and mean were his Materials, so much more ought we to admire His Skill, Who has been able to work up his Pieces to such Sublimity from such low Originals. Had he had the Advantages of many of his Successors, ought not we to believe, that he would have made the greatest Use of them? I shall not insist upon the Merit of those who first break through the thick Mist of *Barbarism* in Poetry, which was so strong about the Time our Poet writ, because this must be easily sensible to every Reader who has the least Tincture of Letters; but thus much we must observe, that before his Time there were very few (if any) Dramatick Performances of any Tragick Writer, which deserve to be remembred; so much were all the noble Originals of Antiquity buried in Oblivion. One would think that the Works of *Sophocles, Euripides, &c.* were Discoveries of the last Age only; and not that they had existed for so many Centuries. There is something very astonishing in the general Ignorance and Dullness of Taste, which for so long a Time over-spread the World, after it had been so gloriously enlighten'd by *Athens* and *Rome*; especially as so many of their excellent Master-pieces were still remaining, which one would have thought should have excited even the Brutes of those barbarous Ages to have examined them, and form'd themselves according to such Models.

VOL. the 7th of Mr. *Theobald's Shakespeare.*

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### SCENE I

*Bernardo* and *Francisco*, two Centinels.

*Bernardo. Who's there? &c.*

Nothing can be more conformable to Reason, than that the Beginning of all Dramatick Performances (and indeed of every other kind of Poesie) should be with the greatest Simplicity, that so our Passions maybe work'd upon by Degrees. This Rule is very happily observ'd in this Play; and it has this Advantage over many others, that it has Majesty and Simplicity joined together. For this whole preparatory Discourse to the Ghost's coming in, at the same Time that it is necessary towards laying open the Scheme of the Play, creates an Awe and Attention in the Spectators, such as very well



fits them to receive the Appearance of a Messenger from the other World, with all the Terror and Seriousness necessary on the Occasion. And surely the Poet has manag'd the Whole in such a Manner, that it is all entirely Natural: And tho' most Men are well enough arm'd against all Belief of the Appearances of Ghosts, yet they are forced, during the Representation of this Piece, entirely to suspend their most fixed Opinions, and believe that they do actually see a Phantom, and that the whole Plot of the Play is justly and naturally founded upon the Appearance of this Spectre.



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Page 227.

Marcell. HORATIO says 'tis but our Phantasie,  
And will not let Belief take hold of Him,  
Touching this dreaded Sight twice seen of Us;  
Therefore I have intreated him along  
With us to watch the Minutes of this Night;  
That if again this Apparition come,  
He may approve our Eyes, and speak to it.

HORATIO, *Tush, Tush, 'twill not appear!*

These Speeches help greatly to deceive us; for they shew one of the principal Persons of the Drama to be as incredulous, in Relation to the Appearance of Phantoms, as we can be; but that he is at last convinc'd of his Error by the Help of his Eyes. For it is a Maxim entirely agreeable to Truth, if we consider human Nature, that whatever is supernatural or improbable, is much more likely to gain Credit with us, if it be introduced as such, and talk'd of as such by the Persons of the Drama, but at last prov'd to be true, tho' an extraordinary Thing, than if it were brought in as a Thing highly probable, and no one were made to boggle at the Belief of it. The Reason of this seems to be, that we can for once, upon a very great Occasion, allow such an Incident as this to have happen'd, if it be brought in as a Thing of great Rarity; but we can by no means so suspend our Judgement and Knowledge, or deceive Our Understandings, as to grant That to be common and usual which we know to be entirely Supernatural and Improbable.

Page 227.

*Enter the Ghost.*

Here it is certain, nothing could be better tim'd than the Entrance of this Spectre; for he comes in and convinces *Horatio*, to save *Marcellos* the Trouble of repeating the whole Story, which would have been tiresome to the Spectators, as these Gentlemen were obliged soon after to relate the Whole to Prince *Hamlet*.

Horatio's Speeches to the Apparition are exceeding Natural, Aweful, and Great, and well suited to the Occasion and his own Character.

*What art Thou, that usurpest this Time of Night, Together with that fair and warlike Form, In which the Majesty of buried Denmark Did some Time march? By Heaven, I charge thee speak.* Page 227.

The other is Page 130.



— *Stay Illusion! If thou hast any Sound, or Use of Voice, Speak to me! If there be any good Thing to be done, That may to thee do Ease, and Grace to me, Speak to me. If thou art privy to thy Country's Fate, Which, happily, Fore-knowing may avoid, Oh Speak! Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy Life Extorted Treasure in the Womb of Earth, For which, they say, you Spirits oft' walk in Death, Speak of it,—Stay and speak!—Stop it Marcellus.*

His desiring *Marcellus* to stop it, is also much in Nature, because it shews a Perturbation of Mind, very much to be expected at such an Incident. For he must know, being a Scholar, (as they term him) that Spirits could not be stopp'd as Corporeal Substances can.



## Page 13

But to return to Page 228.

Bernardo, *How now Horatio! you tremble  
and look pale, &c.*

This is entirely in Nature, for it cannot be supposed, that any Man, tho' never so much endu'd with Fortitude, could see so strange a Sight, so shocking to human Nature, without some Commotion of his Frame, although the Bravery of his Mind makes him get the better of it.

Page 228.

Horatio, *Before my God, I might not this believe,  
Without the sensible and trite Avouch  
Of mine own Eyes.*

This Speech still helps on our Deception, for the Reasons I have already given.

Page 228.

Horatio, *Such was the very Armour he  
had on, &c.*

I have heard many Persons wonder why the Poet should bring in this Ghost in complete Armour. It does, I own, at first seem hard to be accounted for; but I think these Reasons may be given for it, *viz.* We are to consider, that he could introduce him in these Dresses only; in his Regal Dress, in a Habit of Interment, in a common Habit, or in some Phantastick one of his own Invention. Now let us examine which was most likely to affect the Spectators with Passions proper to the Occasion, and which could most probably furnish out great Sentiments and fine Expressions.

The Regal Habit has nothing uncommon in it, nor surprising; nor could it give rise to any fine Images. The Habit of Interment was something too horrible; for Terror, not Horror, is to be raised in the Spectators. The common Habit (or *Habit de Ville*, as the *French* call it) was by no Means proper for the Occasion.

It remains then, that the Poet should chuse some Habit from his own Brain: But this certainly could not be proper, because Invention in such a Case, would be so much in Danger of falling into the Grotesque, that it was not to be hazarded.

Now as to the Armour, it was very suitable to a King, who is described as a great Warrior, and is very particular, and consequently affects the Spectators, without being phantastick. Besides, if there were no other Reason, the fine Image which arises from thence, in these Lines, is Reason enough.



*Such was the very Armour he had on,  
When He th' ambitious Norway combated,  
So frown'd He once, when in angry Parle,  
He smote the sleaded Polack on the Ice.  
'Tis Strange!*

There is a Stroke of Nature in *Horatio's* breaking off, from the Description of the King, and falling into the Exclamation. *'Tis Strange!* which is inimitably Beautiful.

Page 228.

Marcellus. *Good now sit down, &c.*



## Page 14

The whole Discourse concerning the great Preparations making in *Denmark* is very Poetical, and necessary also towards the introducing of *Fortinbrass* in this Play, whose Appearance gives Rise to one Scene, which adds a Beauty to the Whole; I mean, That wherein *Hamlet* makes those noble Reflections upon seeing That Prince's Army. Besides, this Discourse is necessary also to give the Ghost Time to appear again, in order to affect the Spectators still more; and from this Conversation the Interlocutors draw one Reason, why the Spirit appears in Arms, which appears rational to the Audience. It gives also *Horatio* an Opportunity of addressing the Ghost in that beautiful Manner he does.

## Page 229

*Stay Illusion! &c.*

The Description of the Prefages which happen'd to *Rome*, and the drawing a like Inference from this supernatural Appearance, is very nervous and Poetical.

Page 230, 231.

*Bernardo. It was about to speak when the Cock crew &c.*

The Speeches in consequence of this Observation are truly beautiful, and are properly Marks of a great Genius; as also these Lines which describe the Morning, are in the true Spirit of Poetry.

Page 31. *But, look, the Morn, in Russet Mantle clad, Walks oe'r the Dew of yon high Eastern Hill.*

And as to *Shakespeare's* complying with the vulgar Notions of Spirits amongst the *English* at that Time, so far from being low, it adds a Grace and a *Naivete* to the whole Passage, which one can much easier be sensible of than know how to make others so.

SCENE. *The Palace*, (p. 231.) And Sequel.

*Enter the King, Queen, Hamlet, &c.*

It is very natural and apropos, that the King should bring some plausible Excuse for marrying his Brother's Wife so soon after the Decease of his Brother, which he does in his first Speech in this Scene: It would else have too soon revolted the Spectators against such an unusual Proceeding. All the Speeches of the King in this Scene to his Ambassadors *Cornelius* and *Voltimand*, and to *Laertes*, and to Prince *Hamlet*, are entirely Fawning, and full of Dissimulation, and makes him well deserve the Character which the Prince afterwards gives him, of *smiling, damn'd Villain, &c.* when he is informed of his Crime.



The King's and Queen's Questions to *Hamlet* are very proper, to give the Audience a true Idea of the Filial Piety of the young Prince, and of his virtuous Character; for we are hereby informed of his fixed and strong Grief for the Loss of his Father: For it does not appear, that the Usurpation of the Crown from him, sits heavy on his Soul, at least, it is not seen by any Part of his Behaviour.

How his Uncle came to be preferred to him, we are left entirely in the dark, but may suppose it to have been done in the same Manner, as several things of the like Nature have been effected, viz. by Corruption and Violence, and perhaps upon the Pretence of the Prince's being too young.



## Page 15

I can by no Means agree with Mr. *Theobalds*, (p. 235.) who thinks, that it is necessary to suppose a considerable Number of Years spent in this Tragedy; because Prince *Hamlet* is said to desire to return to *Wittenberg* again, and is supposed to be just come from it; and that afterwards, the Grave-Digger lets us know that the Prince is Thirty Years old; my Reasons are, that as *Wittenberg* was an University, and *Hamlet* is represented as a Prince of great Accomplishments, it is no wonder that he should like to spend his Time there, in going on in his Improvements, rather than to remain inactive at *Elsinoor*, or be immers'd in Sottishness, with which he seems to tax his Countrymen; as will appear in the Sequel. Besides, he might well desire to return there, when he found his Throne usurped, and his Mother acting so abominable a Part. And as to the Term of going to School, &c. That does not at all imply literally a School for Boys, but is poetically used for Studying at any Age.

Another Reason may be given why there cannot be supposed to be a great Length of Time in this Play; which is this, That we see in the First Act, Ambassadors dispatch'd to old *Norway*, concerning his Nephew *Fortinbras's* Army, which was then ready to march; and in the Fourth Act, we see this Prince at the Head of that Army, which immediately, upon the Embassy from the *Danish* King to his Uncle, we are naturally to suppose he leads to that other Enterprize which is mentioned in that Scene. Now it is no ways likely, that between the Embassy and the marching of an Army already assembled before that Embassy, there should be a Number of Years. These Reasons and the whole Conduct of the Piece convince me, that this is one of *Shakespeare's* Plays, in which the least Time is employ'd; how much there is, I cannot pretend to say.

As to the *Prolepsis*, or in other Words, the mentioning the University of *Wittenberg*, long before its Establishment, thus antedating its Time, I shall not justify *Shakespeare*; I think it is a fault in him; but I cannot be of Opinion, that it has any bad Effect in this Tragedy. See Mr. *Theobald's* Note, (p. 235.)

As to *Hamlet's* Soliloquy, I shall set down the whole Passage, and shall subjoin the Remarks of a very eminent Author which are in the Spirit of true Criticism.

*Oh that this too, too solid Flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve it self into a Dew!  
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
His Cannon 'gainst Self-slaughter! Oh God! Oh God!  
How weary, stale, and unprofitable,  
Seem to me all the Uses of this World!  
Fie on't! Oh fie! 'tis an unweeded Garden,  
That grows to Seed; Things rank and gross  
in Nature,  
Possess it merely. That it should come to this,  
But two Months dead! Nay, not so much,  
not Two!*

*So Excellent a King, that was to this,  
Hyperion to a Satyr: So Loving to my Mother,*



## Page 16

*That he would not let e'en the Winds of  
Heav'n  
Visit her Face too roughly. Heav'n and Earth!  
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on  
him,  
As if Increase of Appetite had grown  
By what it fed on; yet within a Month!  
Let me not think. Frailty! Thy Name is  
Woman.  
A little Month; e'er yet those Shoes were old,  
With which she follow'd my poor Father's  
Body,  
Like Niobe, all Tears; Why she, even she,  
(Oh Heav'n, a Beast that wants Discourse  
of Reason,  
Would have mourn'd longer) married with  
mine Uncle,  
My Father's Brother; but no more like my  
Father,  
Than I to Hercules. Within a Month,  
E'er yet the Salt of most unrighteous Tears  
Had left the flushing in her gaul'd Eyes,  
She married. Oh! most wicked Speed, to  
post  
With such Dexterity to incestuous Sheets!*

*It is not, nor it cannot come to Good.  
But, break my Heart, for I must hold my  
Tongue.*

“The young Prince, (says this Author in the *Tatler*,) was not yet acquainted with all the Guilt of his Mother; but turns his Thoughts on her sudden Forgetfulness of his Father, and the Indecency of her hasty Marriage. The several Emotions of Mind, and Breaks of Passion in this Speech, are admirable. He has touch'd every Circumstance that aggravated the Fact, and seem'd capable of hurrying the Thoughts of a Son into Distraction. His Father's Tenderness for his Mother, express'd in so delicate a Particular; his Mother's Fondness for his Father, no less exquisitely described; the great and amiable Figure of his dead Parent, drawn by a true Filial Piety; his Disdain of so unworthy a Successor to his Bed: But above all, the Shortness of the Time between his Father's Death, and his Mother's Second Marriage, brought together with so much Disorder, make up as noble a Part as any in that celebrated Tragedy. The Circumstance of Time I never could enough admire. The Widow-hood had lasted two



Months. This is his first Reflection: But as his Indignation rises, he sinks to scarce two Months; afterwards into a Month; and at last, into a *little* Month. But all this so naturally, that the Reader accompanies him in the Violence of his Passion, and finds the Time lessen insensibly, according to the different Workings of his Disdain. I have not mentioned the Incest of her Marriage, which is so obvious a Provocation; but can't forbear taking Notice, that when his Fury is at its Height, he cries, *Frailty, thy Name is Woman!* as Railing at the Sex in general, rather than giving himself leave to think his Mother worse than Others."

Page 238.

*Enter* Horatio, Bernardo, *and* Marcellus, *to* Hamlet.

The Greeting between *Hamlet*, *Horatio*, and *Marcellus*, is very easy, and expresses the benign Disposition of the Prince, and first gives us an Intimation of his Friendship for *Horatio*.



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Page 238.

*We'll teach you to drink deep, e'er you depart.*

This seems designed to reflect upon the sottish Disposition, then encouraged amongst the *Danes* by the Usurper, as will appear in the Sequel; and gives us one Reason why *Elsinoor* was disagreeable to Prince *Hamlet*; and certainly, much confirms what I before said, as to his going back to *Wittenberg*.

Page 238.

The Prince's Reflections on his Mother's hasty Marriage, are very natural, and shew That to be one of the principal Causes of the deep fix'd Concern so visible in his Behaviour; and then they serve to introduce the Relation of the Appearance of his Father's Ghost.

Page 238, to the End of the Scene.

*Hamlet* receives the Account they give him with such a Surprise as is very natural, and particularly his breaking off from the Consequence of his Question, *viz. Hold you the Watch to Night?* and saying *arm'd?* that is, returning to the main Question, is exceedingly in Nature.

Their differing in the Account of the Time the Spectre staid, throws an Air of Probability on the Whole, which is much easier felt than described.

The Prince's Resolution to speak to the Phantom, let what will be the Consequence, is entirely suitable to his Heroical Disposition; and his Reflection upon his Father's Spirit appearing in Arms, is such as one would naturally expect from him; and the Moral Sentence he ends his short Speech with, suits his virtuous Temper, at the same Time that it has a good Effect upon the Audience, and answers the End of Tragedy.

Page 241, to the End of the Scene, in p. 246.

SCENE in *Polonius's* House.

*Enter Laertes and Ophelia, and afterwards Polonius.*

It is evident by the whole Tenour of *Polonius's* Behaviour in this Play, that he is intended to represent some Buffoonish Statesman, not too much fraught with Honesty. Whether any particular Person's Character was herein aim'd at, I shall not determine, because it is not to the Purpose; for whoever reads our Author's Plays, will find that in all of them, (even the most serious ones) he has some regard for the meanest Part of his Audience, and perhaps too, for that Taste for low Jokes and Punns, which prevailed in his Time among the better Sort. This, I think, was more pardonable in him, when it was confined



to Clowns, and such like Persons in his Plays; but is by no Means excusable in a Man, supposed to be in such a Station as *Polonius* is, Nay, granting that such Ministers of State were common, (which surely they are not) it would even then be a Fault in our Author to introduce them in such Pieces as this; for every Thing that is natural is not to be made use of improperly: But when it is out of Nature, this certainly much aggravates the Poet's Mistake. And, to speak Truth, all Comick Circumstances, all



## Page 18

Things tending to raise a Laugh, are highly offensive in Tragedies to good Judges; the Reason in my Opinion is evident, viz. that such Things degrade the Majesty and Dignity of Tragedy, and destroy the Effect of the Intention which the Spectators had in being present at such Representations; that is, to acquire that pleasing Melancholy of Mind, which is caus'd by them, and that Satisfaction which arises from the Consciousness that we are mov'd as we ought to be, and that we consequently have Sentiments suitable to the Dignity of our Nature. For these and many other Reasons, too long to mention here, I must confess myself to be an Enemy also to all ludicrous Epilogues and Farcical Pieces, at the End of Tragedies; and must think them full as ridiculous as if we were to dress a Monarch in all his Royal Robes, and then put a Fool's Cap upon him.

But to come to the Scene now under Examination. It is certain, that except it be in playing upon the Word *Tender* p. 244. (of which too he is sensible himself,) our old Statesman behaves suitably to his Dignity, and acts fully up to his Paternal Character; so here we shall not tax him.

The Advice of *Laertes* to his Sister contains the soundest Reasoning, express'd in the most nervous and poetical Manner, and is full of Beauties; particularly, I can never enough admire the Modesty inculcated in these Lines:

*The chariest Maid is prodigal enough,  
If She unmask her Beauty to the Moon.*

*Ophelia's* modest Replies, the few Words she uses, and the virtuous Caution she gives her Brother, after his Advice to her, are inimitably charming. This I have observed in general in our Author's Plays, that almost all his young Women (who are designed as good Characters) are made to behave with a Modesty and Decency peculiar to those Times, and which are of such pleasing Simplicity as seem too ignorant and unmeaning in our well taught knowing Age; so much do we despise the virtuous Plainness of our Fore-fathers!

*Polonius* and *Laertes* Behaviour to each other, is exceeding natural; and I agree with Mr. *Theobalds's* Emendation as to that Circumstance, (p. 243.) of *Polonius* Blessing his Son; but I can by no Means be of his Sentiment, that it was a Circumstance, which, if well managed by a Comick Actor, would raise a Laugh, (See his Note, p. 243.) for I am perswaded, that *Shakespeare* was too good a Judge of Nature, to design any Thing Comick or Buffoonish upon so solemn an Occasion, as that of a Son's taking leave of his Father in the most emphatical and serious Manner. And therefore, whatever Actor proceeds upon this Supposition (as I have seen some do in parallel Cases) does only shew his Ignorance and Presumption. This Assertion of mine will appear indisputable, if my Reader considers well the whole Tenour of this Scene, with the grave and excellent Instructions which it contains, from *Polonius* to *Laertes*, and from both to *Ophelia*. It is



impossible that any Buffoonry could be here blended, to make void and insignificant so much good Sense expressed in the true Beauties of Poetry. As to Prince *Hamlet's* Love for *Ophelia*, I shall speak to it in another Place.



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Concerning the Design of this Scene, we shall find it is necessary towards the whole Plot of the Play, and is by no Means an Episode. As to *Laertes's* Character, I shall lay some thing of it else where.

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Scene. *The Platform before the Palace.*

*Enter Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus.*

The Beginning of this Scene is easy and natural. The King's taking his Rowse, seems introduced to fill up a necessary Space of Time, and also perhaps to blacken still more the Character of the Usurper, who had revived a sottish Custom (as appears by the Prince's Remarks upon it) omitted by several of his Predecessors; for it would have been improper to have had the Ghost appear the Minute the Prince was come on to the Platform. Some Time was requisite to prepare the Minds of the Spectators, that they might collect all their Faculties to behold this important Scene, on which turns the whole Play, with due Attention and Seriousness; although, indeed, I must think that the Prince's Speech would not be much worth preserving, but for That Reason: for expressed and amended, according to the best that can be made of it, (as Mr. *Theobalds* has done it) it is but of very obscure Diction, and is much too long; for a very short Moral is to be drawn from it.

Page 248.

*Enter the Ghost.*

We now are come to the sublimest Scene in this whole Piece, a Scene worthy of the greatest Attention; an Heroical Youth addressing the Shade of his departed Father, whom he tenderly loved, and who, we are told, was a Monarch of the greatest Worth. Surely there cannot be imagin'd any Scene more capable of stirring up our noblest Passions. Let us but observe with how much Beauty and Art the Poet has managed it. This Spectre has been once spoken to by the Friend of our young Hero, and it must be confessed, that *Horatio's* Speech to it is truly great and beautiful: But as the like Incident was again to happen; that is, as the Ghost was again to be addressed, and with this Addition, by the Hero of the Play, and Son to the King, whose Spirit appears; it was necessary, I say, upon these Accounts, that this Incident should be treated in a sublimer Manner than the Former. Accordingly we may take Notice, that *Hamlet's* Speech to his Father's Shade is as much superior to that of *Horatio* upon the same Occasion, as his is to any Thing of that kind that I have ever met with in any other Dramatick Poet.

*Hamlet's* Invocation of the heavenly Ministers, is extremely fine; and the begging their Protection upon the Appearance of a Sight so shocking to human Nature, is entirely



conformable to the virtuous Character of this Prince, and gives an Air of Probability to the whole Scene. He accosts the Ghost with great Intrepidity; and his whole Speech is so full of the Marks of his Filial Piety, that we may easily observe, that his Tenderness for his Father gets the better of all Sentiments of Terror which we could suppose to arise, even in the Breast of the most undaunted Person, upon the seeing and conversing with so strange an Apparition.



## Page 20

His breaking from his Friends with that Vehemency of Passion in an Eagerness of Desire to hear what his Father could say to him, is another Proof of his Filial Tenderness.

The Reader of himself must easily see why the Spectre would not speak to the Prince, but a-part from those who were with him: For it was not a Secret of a Nature fit to be divulg'd. Their earnest Intreaties, and almost Force which they use to keep him from going, are much in Nature; the Reasons they give him, and the Reflections they make after he is gone, are poetically express'd, and very natural.

The Ghost's Account of the base Murther committed on him, is express'd in the strongest and most nervous Diction that Poetry can make use of; and he speaks with such Gravity and Weight of Language as well suits his Condition. The Ideas he raises in the Audience by his short Hint concerning the Secrets of his Prison-House, are such as must cause that Terror which is the natural Effect of such Appearances, and must occasion such Images as should always accompany such Incidents in Tragedy.

The Ghost's bringing out the Account of his Murder by Degrees, and the Prince's Exclamations as he becomes farther acquainted with the Affair, are great Beauties in this Scene, because it is all entirely conformable to Nature; that is, to those Ideas by which we naturally conceive, how a Thing of this sort would be managed and treated, were it really to happen.

We are to observe further, that the King spurs on his Son to revenge his foul and unnatural Murder from these two Considerations chiefly, that he was sent into the other World without having had Time to repent of his Sins, and without the necessary Sacraments, (according to the Church of *Rome*.) as Mr. *Theobalds*, (See his Note, *p.* 253.) has well explained it, and that consequently his Soul was to suffer, if not eternal Damnation, at least a long Course of Penance in Purgatory; which aggravates the Circumstances of his Brother's Barbarity. And, Secondly, That *Denmark* might not be the Scene of Usurpation and Incest, and the Throne thus polluted and profaned. For these Reasons he prompts the young Prince to Revenge; else it would have been more becoming the Character of such a Prince as *Hamlet's* Father is represented to have been, and more suitable to his present Condition, to have left his Brother to the Divine Punishment, and to a Possibility of Repentance for his base Crime, which by cutting him off, he must be deprived of.

His Caution to his Son concerning his Mother, is very fine, and shews great Delicacy in our Author; as has been observ'd by a great Writer of our Nation. The Ghost's Interrupting himself (*but soft, methinks, I scent the Morning Air, &c.*) has much Beauty in it, particularly, as it complys with the received Notions, that Spirits shun the Light, and continues the Attention of the Audience by so particular a Circumstance.



## Page 21

The Sequel of this Scene by no Means answers the Dignity of what we have hitherto been treating of. *Hamlet's* Soliloquy, after the Ghost has disappeared, is such as it should be. The Impatience of *Horatio*, &c. to know the Result of his Conference with the Phantom, and his putting them off from knowing it, with his Caution concerning his future Conduct, and his intreating them to be silent in Relation to this whole Affair; all this, I say, is natural and right; but his light and even ludicrous Expressions to them; his making them swear by his Sword, and shift their Ground, with the Ghost's Crying under the Stage, and *Hamlet's* Reflection thereupon, are all Circumstances certainly inferiour to the preceeding Part.

But as we should be very cautious in finding Fault with Men of such an exalted Genius as our Author certainly was, lest we should blame them when in reality the Fault lies in our own slow Conception, we should well consider what could have been our Author's View in such a Conduct. I must confess, I have turn'd this Matter on every Side, and all that can be said for it (as far as I am able to penetrate), is that he makes the Prince put on this Levity of Behaviour, that the Gentlemen who were with him, might not imagine that the Ghost had reveal'd some Matter of great Consequence to him, and that he might not therefore be suspected of any deep Designs. This appears plausible enough; but let it be as it will, the whole, I think, is too lightly managed, and such a Design as I have mention'd might, in my Opinion, have been answered by some other Method more correspondent to the Dignity and Majesty of the preceeding Part of the Scene. I must observe once more, that the Prince's Soliloquy is exquisitely beautiful.

I shall conclude what I have to say on this Scene, with observing, that I do not know any Tragedy, ancient or modern, in any Nation, where the Whole is made to turn so naturally and so justly upon such a supernatural Appearance as this is; nor do I know of any Piece whatever, where a Spectre introduced with so much Majesty, such an Air of Probability, and where such an Apparition is manag'd with so much Dignity and Art; in short, which so little revolts the Judgment and Belief of the Spectators. Nor have I ever met in all my Reading, with a Scene in any Tragedy, which creates so much Awe, and serious Attention as this does, and which raises such a Multiplicity of the most exalted Sentiments. It is certain, our Author excell'd in this kind of Writing, as has been more than once observed by several Writers, and none ever before or since his Time, could ever bring Inhabitants of another World upon the Stage, without making them ridiculous or too horrible, and the Whole too improbable and too shocking to Men's Understandings.

## ACT II.

*Polonius and Reynoldo, and afterwards Ophelia.*



*Polonius's* Discourse to *Reynoldo* is of a good moral Tenour, and thus far it is useful to the Audience. His forgetting what he was saying, (p. 260) as is usual with old Men, is extremely natural, and much in Character for him.



## Page 22

*Ophelia's* Description of *Hamlet's* Madness, does as much Honour to our Poet as any Passage in the whole Play, (p. 261, and 262.) It is excellently good in the *Pictoresque* Part of Poetry, and renders the Thing almost present to us.

Now I am come to mention *Hamlet's* Madness, I must speak my Opinion of our Poet's Conduct in this Particular. To conform to the Ground-work of his Plot, *Shakespeare* makes the young Prince feign himself mad. I cannot but think this to be injudicious; for so far from Securing himself from any Violence which fear'd from the Usurper, which was his Design in so doing, it seems to have been the most likely Way of getting himself confin'd, and consequently, debarr'd from an Opportunity of Revenging his Father's Death, which now seem'd to be his only Aim; and accordingly it was the Occasion of his being sent away to *England*. Which Design, had it taken effect upon his Life, he never could have revenged his Father's Murder. To speak Truth, our Poet, by keeping too close to the Ground-work of his Plot, has fallen into an Absurdity; for there appears no Reason at all in Nature, why the young Prince did not put the Usurper to Death as soon as possible, especially as *Hamlet* is represented as a Youth so brave, and so careless of his own Life.

The Case indeed is this: Had *Hamlet* gone naturally to work, as we could suppose such a Prince to do in parallel Circumstances, there would have been an End of our Play. The Poet therefore was obliged to delay his Hero's Revenge; but then he should have contrived some good Reason for it.

His Beginning his Scenes of Madness by his Behaviour to *Ophelia* was judicious, because by this Means he might be thought to be mad for her, and not that his Brain was disturb'd about State Affairs, which would have been dangerous.

Page 263.

*Enter King, Queen, Rosincrantz, Guildenstern, &c.*

The King in this Scene, seems to be but half perswaded that *Hamlet* is really mad; had he thoroughly believed it, it was to no Purpose to endeavour to sound his Mind; and the shortest and best Way, and what, methinks, the King ought most to have wished for, was to have had him confin'd; and this was an excellent Reason to give the People for so doing.

The Queen seems to have no Design or Artifice in relation to her Son, but mere Affection; which, considering all Things, one would little expect from her.

The Account of the Embassy to *Norway*, was necessary towards the Introduction of *Fortinbrass*, in the Sequel, whose coming in at the Close of the Play winds up all very naturally.



*Polonius's* Character, (p. 267, 268.) is admirably well kept up in that Scene, where he pretends to have discovered the Cause of the Prince's Madness, and would much deserve Applause, were such a Character allowable in such a Piece as this.



## Page 23

*Hamlet's* Letter to *Ophelia*, which *Polonius* reads, is none of the best Parts of this play, and is, I think, too Comick for this Piece. The whole Conduct of *Hamlet's* Madness is, in my Opinion, too ludicrous for his Character, and for the situation his Mind was then really in. I must confess, nothing is more difficult than to draw a real Madness well, much more a feign'd one; for here the Poet in *Hamlet's* Case, was to paint such a Species of Madness as should not give cause of Suspicion of the real Grief which had taken Possession of the Prince's Mind. His Behaviour to those two Courtiers, whom the Usurper had sent to dive into his Secret, is very natural and just, because his chief Business was to baffle their Enquiries, as he does also in another Scene, (p. 304.) where his falling into a sort of a Pun upon bringing in the Pipe, is a great Fault, for it is too low and mean for Tragedy. But our Author in this (as in all his Pieces) is glad of any Opportunity of falling in with the prevailing Humour of the Times, which ran into false Wit, and a constant endeavour to produce affected Moral Sentences.

He was very capable of drawing *Hamlet* in Madness with much more Dignity, and without any Thing of the Comick; although it is difficult, as I said, to describe a feign'd Madness in a Tragedy, which is not to touch on the real Cause of Grief.

Page 277.

The Scene of the Players is conducive to the whole Scheme of this Tragedy, and is managed with great Beauty. We are to observe, that the Speeches spoken by the Prince, and one of the Players, are dismal Bombast, and intended, no doubt, to ridicule some Tragedy of those Days.

The Poet's stepping out of his Subject to lash the Custom of Plays being acted by the Children of the Chapel, is not allowable in Tragedy, which is never to be a Satire upon any modern particular *Foible* or Vice that prevails, but is to be severe upon Crimes and Immoralities of all Ages, and of all Countries.

*Hamlet's* Speech, (p. 281.) after his Conversation with the Players, is good; and by it we see that the Poet himself seems sensible of the Fault in his Plot. But that avails not, unless he had found Means to help it, which certainly might have been.

The Prince's Design of confirming by the Play, the Truth of what the Ghost told him, is certainly well imagin'd; but as the coming of these Players is supposed to be accidental, it could not be a Reason for his Delay.

## ACT III.

Page 284.

*How smart a Lash, that Speech doth give my Conscience, &c.*



The Poet here is greatly to be commended for his Conduct. As consummate a Villain as this King of *Denmark* is represented to be, yet we find him stung with the deepest Remorse, upon the least Sentence that can any ways be supposed to relate to his Crime. How Instructive this is to the Audience, how much it answers the End of all publick Representations by inculcating a good Moral, I leave to the Consideration of every Reader.



## Page 24

Hamlet's Conversation with *Ophelia*, we may observe, is in the Style of Madness; and it was proper that the Prince should conceal his Design from every one, which had he conversed with his Mistress in his natural Style could not have been.

I am perswaded, that our Author was pleas'd to have an Opportunity of raising a Laugh now and then, which he does in several Passages of *Hamlet's* satirical Reflections on Women; but I have the same Objections to this Part of the Prince's Madness, that I have before mentioned, *viz.* that it wants Dignity. *Ophelia's* melancholy Reflections upon *Hamlet's* having lost his Sovereignty of Reason, is natural and very beautiful. As to the King's sending him to *England*, See Mr. *Theobald's* Note. I purposely omit taking Notice of the famous Speech, *To be, or not to be, &c.* every *English* Reader knows its Beauties.

The Prince's Directions to the Players are exceeding good, and are evidently brought in as Lessons for the Players, who were *Shakespeare's* Companions, and he thought this a very proper Occasion to animadvert upon those Faults which were disagreeable to him. Whoever reads these Observations of his, if one may prove a Thing by a negative Argument, must believe *Shakespeare* to have been an excellent Actor himself; for we can hardly imagine him to have been guilty of the Mistakes he is pointing out to his Brethren.

Notwithstanding all this, and that the Opportunity seems natural enough to introduce these Remarks, yet I cannot think them agreeable in such a Piece as this; they are not suitable to the Dignity of the Whole, and would be better plac'd in a Comedy.

Page 292, Act 3d.

Hamlet's Expression of his Friendship for *Horatio*, has great Beauties; it is with Simplicity and Strength, and the Diction has all the Graces of Poetry. It was well imagin'd, that he should let his Friend know the Secret of his Father's Murder, because, thus his Request to him, to observe the King's Behaviour at the Play, is very naturally introduc'd as a prudent Desire of the Prince's. The Friendship of *Eneas* for *Achates* in the *Eneid*, is found Fault with much for the same Reasons that some Criticks might carp at this of *Hamlet's* for *Horatio*, *viz.* that neither of them are found to perform any great Acts of Friendship to their respective Friends. But, I think, that the Friendship of *Hamlet* and *Horatio* is far superior to that of *Eneas* and *Achates*, as appears in the last Scene, where *Horatio's* Behaviour is exceeding Tender, and his Affection for the Prince likely to prove very useful to his Memory.



## Page 25

Hamlet's whole Conduct, during the Play which is acted before the King, has, in my Opinion, too much Levity in it. His Madness is of too light a Kind, although I know he says, he must be idle; but among other Things, his Pun to *Polonius* is not tolerable. I might also justly find Fault with the want of Decency in his Discourses to *Ophelia*, without being thought too severe. The Scene represented by the Players is in wretched Verse. This we may, without incurring the Denomination of an ill-natur'd Critick, venture to pronounce, that in almost every Place where *Shakespeare* has attempted Rhime, either in the Body of his Plays, or at the Ends of Acts or Scenes, he falls far short of the Beauty and Force of his Blank Verse: One would think they were written by two different Persons. I believe we may justly take Notice, that Rhime never arrived at its true Beauty, never came to its Perfection in *England*, until long since *Shakespeare's* Time.

The King's rising with such Precipitation, and quitting the Play upon seeing the Resemblance of his own foul Crime, is very much in Nature, and confirms the Penetration of our Author's Hero.

Page 302.

Hamlet's Pleasantry upon his being certified that his Uncle is Guilty, is not a-propos in my Opinion. We are to take Notice that the Poet has mix'd a Vein of Humour in the Prince's Character, which is to be seen in many Places of this Play. What was his Reason for so doing, I cannot say, unless it was to follow his Favourite *Foible*, viz. that of raising a Laugh.

Page 306.

The Prince's Resolution upon his going to his Mother, is beautifully express'd, and suitable to his Character.

Page 306, 307.

What *Rosincrantz* says of the Importance of the King's Life, is express'd by a very just Image.

Page 307.

The King's seeming so very much touch'd with a Sense of his Crime, is supposed to be owing to the Representation he had been present at; but I do not well see how *Hamlet* is introduced so as to find him at Prayers. It is not natural, that a King's Privacy should be so intruded on, not even by any of his Family, especially, that it should be done without his perceiving it.

Page 309.



Hamlet's Speech upon seeing the King at Prayers, has always given me great Offence. There is something so very Bloody in it, so inhuman, so unworthy of a Hero, that I wish our Poet had omitted it. To desire to destroy a Man's Soul, to make him eternally miserable, by cutting him off from all hopes of Repentance; this surely, in a Christian Prince, is such a Piece of Revenge, as no Tenderness for any Parent can justify. To put the Usurper to Death, to deprive him of the Fruits of his vile Crime, and to rescue the Throne of *Denmark* from Pollution, was highly requisite: But there our young Prince's Desires should have stop'd, nor should he have wished to pursue the Criminal in the other World, but rather have hoped for his Conversion, before his putting him to Death; for even with his Repentance, there was at least Purgatory for him to pass through, as we find even in a virtuous Prince, the Father of *Hamlet*.



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Page 310.

*Enter the Queen and Polonius, and afterwards Hamlet.*

We are now come to a Scene, which I have always much admired. I cannot think it possible, that such an Incident could have been managed better, nor more conformably to Reason and Nature. The Prince, conscious of his own good Intentions, and the Justness of the Cause he undertakes to plead, speaks with that Force and Assurance which Virtue always gives; and yet manages his Expressions so as not to treat his Mother in a disrespectful Manner. What can be expressed with more Beauty and more Dignity, than the Difference between his Uncle and Father! The Contrast in the Description of them both, is exquisitely fine: And his enforcing the Heinousness of his Mother's Crime with so much Vehemence, and her guilty half Confessions of her Wickedness, and at last her thorough Remorse, are all Strokes from the Hand of a great Master in the Imitation of Nature.

His being obliged to break off his Discourse by the coming in of his Father's Ghost once more, adds a certain Weight and Gravity to this Scene, which works up in the Minds of the Audience all the Passions which do the greatest Honour to human Nature. Add to this, the august and solemn Manner with which the Prince addresses the Spectre after his Invocation of the Celestial Ministers.

The Ghost's not being seen by the Queen, was very proper; for we could hardly suppose, that a Woman, and a guilty one especially, could be able to bear so terrible a Sight without the Loss of her Reason. Besides that, I believe, the Poet had also some Eye to a vulgar Notion, that Spirits are only seen by those with whom their Business is, let there be never so many Persons in Company. This Compliance with these popular Fancies, still gives an Air of Probability to the Whole. The Prince shews an extreme Tenderness for his Father in these Lines,

*On Him! on Him! &c.*

*His Form and Cause conjoin'd, &c.*

and really performs all the strictest Rules of Filial Piety thro' out the whole Play, both to Father and Mother; and particularly, to the Latter in this Scene, whilst he endeavours to bring her to Repentance. In a Word, We have in this important Scene, our Indignation raised against a vile Murderer, our Compassion caus'd for the inhuman Death of a virtuous Prince; our Affection is heighten'd for the Hero of the Play; and, not to enter into more Particulars, we are moved in the strongest Manner, by every Thing that can gain Access to our Hearts.

Hamlet's killing *Polonius*, was in Conformity to the Plan *Shakespeare* built his Play upon; and the Prince behaves himself on that Occasion, as one who seems to have his Thoughts bent on Things of more Importance. I wish the Poet had omitted *Hamlet's* last

Reflection on the Occasion, viz. *This Counsellor, &c.* It has too much Levity in it; and his *tugging* him away into



## Page 27

another Room, is unbecoming the Gravity of the rest of the Scene, and is a Circumstance too much calculated to raise a Laugh, which it always does. We must observe, that *Polonius* is far from a good Character, and that his Death is absolutely necessary towards the *Denouement* of the whole Piece. And our Hero had not put him to Death, had not he thought it to have been the Usurper hid behind the *Arras*; so that upon the Whole, this is no Blemish to his Character.

Hamlet's Behaviour to the King, &c. (Act *fourth*, p 320 and Sequel,) concerning *Polonius's* Body, is too jocose and trivial.

Page 326. *Enter Fortinbrass with an Army.*

This is a Conduct in most of our Author's Tragedies, and in many other of our Tragedy Writers, that is quite unnatural and absurd; I mean, introducing an Army on the Stage. Although our Imagination will bear a great Degree of Illusion, yet we can never so far impose on our Knowledge, and our Senses, as to imagine the Stage to contain an Army: Therefore in such a Case, the Recital of it, or seeing the Commander, and an Officer or Two of it, is the best Method of conducting such a Circumstance. *Fortinbrass's* Troops are here brought in, I believe, to give Occasion for his appearing in the last Scene, and also to give Rise to *Hamlet's* reflections thereon, (p. 327.) which tend to give some Reasons for his deferring the Punishment of the Usurper.

*Laertes's* Character is a very odd one; it is not easy to say, whether it is good or bad; but his consenting to the villainous Contrivance of the Usurper's to murder *Hamlet*, (p. 342.) makes him much more a bad Man than a good one. For surely Revenge for such an accidental Murder as was that of his Father's (which from the Queen, it is to be supposed he was acquainted with all the Circumstances of) could never justify him in any treacherous Practices. It is a very nice Conduct in the Poet to make the Usurper build his Scheme upon the generous unsuspecting Temper of the Person he intends to murder, and thus to raise the Prince's Character by the Confession of his Enemy, to make the Villain ten Times more odious from his own Mouth. The Contrivance of the Foil unbated (i.e. without a Button) is methinks too gross a Deceit to go down even with a Man of the most unsuspecting Nature.

The Scenes of *Ophelia's* Madness are to me very shocking, in so noble a Piece as this. I am not against her having been represented mad; but surely, it might have been done with less Levity and more Decency. Mistakes are less tolerable from such a Genius as *Shakespeare's* and especially in the very Pieces which give us such strong Proofs of his exalted Capacity. Mr. *Warburton's* Note (in Mr. *Theobalds*) on *Laertes's* Rebellion, is very judicious, (as indeed are all those of that Gentleman) only I cannot think *Laertes* (for the Reasons I have given) a good Character.



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### ACT V.

The Scene of the Grave-Diggers. (p. 344.) I know is much applauded, but in my humble Opinion, is very unbecoming such a Piece as this, and is only pardonable as it gives Rise to *Hamlet's* fine moral Reflections upon the Infirmary of human Nature.

Page 354.

Hamlet's Return to *Denmark* is not ill contriv'd; but I cannot think that his Stratagem is natural or easy, by which he brings that Destruction upon the Heads of his Enemies, which was to have fallen upon himself. It was possible, but not very probable; because methinks, their Commission was kept in a very negligent Manner, to be thus got from them without their knowing it. Their Punishment was just, because they had devoted themselves to the Service of the Usurper in whatever he should command, as appears in several Passages.

It does not appear whether *Ophelia's* Madness was chiefly for her Father's Death, or for the Loss of *Hamlet*. It is not often that young Women run mad for the Loss of their Fathers. It is more natural to suppose, that like *Chimene* in the *Cid*, her great Sorrow proceeded from her Father's being kill'd by the Man she lov'd, and thereby making it indecent for her ever to marry him.

Page 351.

In *Hamlet's* leaping into *Ophelia's* Grave, (which is express'd with great Energy and Force of Passion) we have the first real Proof of his Love for her, which during this whole Piece has been forced to submit to Passions of greater Weight and Force, and here is suffered to break out chiefly, as it is necessary towards the Winding up of the Piece. It is but an Under-Passion in the Play, and seems to be introduced more to conform to the Plan our Poet built upon, than for any Thing else; tho' as the whole Play is managed, it conduces towards the Conclusion, as well as it diversifies, and adds Beauties to the whole Piece.

Page 357.

The Scene of the Fop *Osrick* is certainly intended as a Satire upon the young Courtiers of those Days, and is humourously express'd, but is, I think, improper for Tragedy.

Hamlet's feeling, as it were, a Presage in his own Breast, of the Misfortune impending from his accepting *Laertes's* Challenge, is beautiful; and we are to note, that our Author in several of his Plays, has brought in the chief Personages as having a sort of prophetick Idea of their Death; as in *Romeo* and *Juliet*. It was (I doubt not) the Opinion of the Age he lived in.



Laertes's Death, and the Queen's, are truly poetical Justice, and very naturally brought about; although I do not conceive it to be so easy to change Rapiers in a Scuffle, without knowing it at the Time.

The Death of the Queen is particularly according to the strictest Rules of Justice, for she loses her Life by the Villany of the very Person, who had been the Cause of all her Crimes.



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Page 364.

Since the Poet deferred so long the Usurper's Death, we must own, that he has very naturally effected it, and still added fresh Crimes to those the Murderer had already committed.

Upon *Laertes's* Repentance for contriving the Death of *Hamlet*, one cannot but feel some Sentiments of Pity for him; but who can see or read the Death of the young Prince without melting into Tears and Compassion? *Horatio's* earned Desire to die with the Prince, (*p. 365, and Sequel,*) thus not to survive his Friend, gives a stronger Idea of his Friendship for *Hamlet* in the few Lines on that Occasion, than many Actions or Expressions could possibly have done. And *Hamlet's* begging him to *draw his Breath in this Harsh World* a little longer, to clear his Reputation and manifest his Innocence, is very suitable to his virtuous Character, and the honest Regard that all Men should have not to be misrepresented to Posterity; that they may not let a bad Example, when in reality they have set a good one; which is the only Motive that can, in Reason, recommend the Love of Fame and Glory.

Page 366.

When the Ambassadors from *England* say,

*Where shall we have our Thanks?*

And *Horatio* answers,

*Not from his Mouth,  
He never gave, &c.*

I wonder that Mr. *Theobalds* should see any Difficulty in this; for it is but applying to the King what *Horatio* says, who knew the whole Affair, and then his Answer is just and true; and indeed, I think it cannot well be understood in any other Sense from the whole Tenour of the Passage.

*Horatio's* Desire of having the Bodies carried to a Stage, &c. is very well imagined, and was the best way of satisfying the Request of his deceased Friend. And he acts in this, and in all Points, suitably to the manly, honest Character under which he is drawn throughout the whole Piece. Besides, it gives a sort of Content to the Audience, that tho' their Favourite (which must be *Hamlet*) did not escape with Life, yet the greatest amends will be made him, which can be in this World, *viz.* Justice done to his Memory.

*Fortinbrass* comes in very naturally at the Close of this Play, and lays a very just Claim to the Throne of *Denmark*, as he had the dying Voice of the Prince. He in few Words gives a noble Character of *Hamlet*, and serves to carry off the deceased Hero from the Stage with the Honours due to his Birth and Merit.



I shall close these Remarks with some general Observations, and shall avoid (as I have hitherto done) repeating any Thing which has been said by others, at least as much as I possibly can: Nor do I think it necessary to make an ostentatious Shew of Learning, or to draw quaint Parallels between our Author and the great Tragic Writers of Antiquity; for in Truth, this is very little to the Purpose in reviewing *Shakespeare's*



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Dramatic Works; since most Men are I believe convinced, that he is very little indebted to any of them; and a remarkable Influence of this is to be observed in his Tragedy of *Troilus and Cressida*, wherein it appears (as Mr. *Theobalds* has evidently demonstrated it,) that he has chosen an old *English* Romance concerning the *Trojan* War, as a worthier Guide than even *Homer* himself. Nature was our great Poet's Mistress; her alone has he followed as his Conductress; and therefore it has been with regard to her only, that I have considered this Tragedy. It is not to be denied, but that *Shakespeare's* Dramatic Works are in general very much mix'd; his Gold is strangely mingled with Dross in most of his Pieces. He fell too much into the low Taste of the Age he liv'd in, which delighted in miserable Puns, low Wit, and affected sententious Maxims; and what is most unpardonable in him, he has interspersed his noblest Productions with this Poorness of Thought. This I have shewn in my Remarks on this Play. Yet, notwithstanding the Defects I have pointed out, it is, I think, beyond Dispute, that there is much less of this in *Hamlet* than in any of his Plays; and that the Language in the Whole, is much more pure, and much more free from Obscurity or Bombast, than any of our Author's Tragedies; for sometimes *Shakespeare* may be justly tax'd with that Fault. And we may moreover take Notice, that the Conduct of this Piece is far from being bad; it is superior in that respect (in my Opinion) to many of those Performances in which the Rules are said to be exactly kept to. The Subject, which is of the nicest Kind, is managed with great Delicacy, much beyond that Piece wherein *Agamemnon's* Death is revenged by his Son *Orestes*, so much admired by all the Lovers of Antiquity; for the Punishment of the Murderer alone by the Son of the murdered Person, is sufficient; there is something too shocking in a Mother's being put to Death by her Son, although she be never so guilty. *Shakespeare's* Management in this Particular, has been much admired by one of our greatest Writers, who takes Notice of the beautiful Caution given by the Ghost to *Hamlet*,

*But howsoever thou pursuest this Act, &c.*

The making the Whole to turn upon the Appearance of a Spectre, is a great Improvement of the Plan he work'd upon; especially as he has conducted it in so sublime a Manner, and accompanied it with all the Circumstances that could make it most perfect in its kind.

I have observed in my Remarks, that the Poet has, with great Art, brought about the Punishment of the guilty Queen by the very Person who caused her Guilt, and this without Staining her Son's Hands with her Blood.



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There is less Time employ'd in this Tragedy, as I observed else where, than in most of our Author's Pieces, and the Unity of Place is not much disturbed. But here give me leave to say, that the Critick's Rules, in respect to these two Things, if they prove any Thing, prove too much; for if our Imagination will not bear a strong Imposition, surely no Play ought to be supposed to take more Time than is really employ'd in the Acting; nor should there be any Change of Place in the least. This shews the Absurdity of such Arbitrary Rules. For how would such a Genius as *Shakespeare's* have been cramped had he thus fettered himself! But there is (in Truth) no Necessity for it. No Rules are of any Service in Poetry, of any kind, unless they add Beauties, which consist (in Tragedy) in an exact Conformity to Nature in the Conduct of the Characters, and in a sublimity of Sentiments and nobleness of Diction. If these two Things be well observed, tho' often at the Expence of Unity of Time and Place, such Pieces will always please, and never suffer us to find out the little Defects in the Plot; nay it generally happens (at least Experience has shewn it frequently) that those Pieces wherein the fantastick Rules of Criticks have been kept strictly to, have been generally flat and low. We are to consider, that no Dramatick Piece can affect us but by the Delusion of our Imagination; which, to taste true and real Pleasures at such Representations, must undergo very great Impositions, even such as in Speculation seem very gross, but which are nevertheless allowed of by the strictest Criticks. In the first Place, our Understandings are never shocked at hearing all Nations, on our Stage, speak *English*; an Absurdity one would think that should immediately revolt us; but which is, however, absolutely necessary in all Countries where Dramatick Performances are resorted to, unless the Characters be always supposed to be of each respective Nation; as for instance, in all *Shakespeare's* Historical Plays. I say, this never shocks us nor do we find any Difficulty in believing the Stage to be *Rome*, (or *Denmark*, for instance, as in this Play;) or *Wilks* to be *Hamlet*, or *Booth* to be a Ghost, &c. These Things, I repeat it, appear difficult in Speculation; but we find, that in Reality they do go down; and must necessarily do so, or else farewell all Dramatick Performances; for unless the Distress and Woes appear to be real (which they never can, if we do not believe we actually see the Things that are represented) it is impossible our Passions should be moved. Let any one fairly judge, if these do not seem as great Impositions on our Reason, as the Change of Place, or the Length of Time, which are found fault with in our Poet. I confess there are Bounds set to this Delusion of our Imaginations, (as there are to every Thing else in this World) for this Delusion is never perform'd in direct Defiance of our Reason; on the contrary, our Reason helps on the Deceit;



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but she will concur no farther in this Delusion, than to a certain Point which she will never pass, and that is, the Essential Difference between Plays which deceive us by the Assistance of our Reason, and others which would impose upon our Imaginations in Despight of our Reason. It is evident by the Success our Author's Pieces have always met with for so long a Course of Time; it is, I say, certain by this general Approbation, that his Pieces are of the former, not of the latter Sort. But to go to the Bottom of this Matter, would lead me beyond what I propose.

Since therefore it is certain, that the strict Observance of the Critick's Rules might take away Beauties, but not always add any, why should our Poet be so much blamed for giving a Loose to his Fancy? The Sublimity of Sentiments in his Pieces, and that exalted Diction which is so peculiarly his own, and in fine, all the Charms of his Poetry, far outweigh any little Absurdity in his Plots, which no ways disturb us in the Pleasures we reap from the above-mention'd Excellencies. And the more I read him, the more I am convinced, that as he knew his own particular Talent well, he study'd more to work up great and moving Circumstances to place his chief Characters in, so as to affect our Passions strongly, he apply'd himself more to This than he did to the Means or Methods whereby he brought his Characters into those Circumstances. How far a general Vogue is the Test of the Merit of a Tragedy, has been often considered by eminent Writers, and is a Subject of too complicated a Nature to discuss in these few Sheets. But I shall just hint two or three of my own Thoughts on that Head. Nature is the Basis of all Tragick Performances, and no Play that is unnatural, *i.e.* wherein the Characters act inconsistently with themselves, and in a Manner repugnant to our natural Ideas, can please at all. But a Play may be natural, and yet displease one Sett of People out of Two, of which all Audiences are composed. If a Play be built upon low Subjects, but yet carried on consistently, and has no Merit but Nature, it will please the Vulgar; by which I mean, all the unlearned and ill-educated, (as for Instance, *George Barnwell*, a Piece calculated for the Many) but it must be nauseous to the Learned, and to those of improved and exalted Understandings. So on the other Hand, a Piece which turns upon Passions, which regard those of high Station chiefly, cannot be so pleasing to the Vulgar; for tho' all Men are born with the same Passions, yet Education very much exalts and refines them. Thus the Loves of Boors and Peasants may delight the Populace, but those of better Sort must have Delicacy in that Passion to see it represented with any tolerable Patience. The same is to be said of Jealousy and Revenge, which are indeed felt by all, but in Breasts well educated are felt with sharper Pangs, and are combated with more Vehemence, and from more and greater Motives; therefore such People are fitter to judge,



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and more likely to be taken with noble and sublime Representations of such Incidents. I need not observe, that the Vulgar cannot judge of the Historical Propriety of a great Character, This is obvious to every one; nor can they judge of the Passion of Ambition, as it has Power with Princes and great Men, because not being versed by Reading in parallel Stories, and not being in such a Situation of Life, as to feel the Torments of such Passions, they cannot certainly tell whether such Things are represented with proper Circumstances, and proper Consequences drawn from them. And moreover, as all Men are by Nature more prone to some Passions than to others, This must cause Variety of Sentiments in relation to the same Piece. Besides all this, we may be very certain that different Education, different Degrees of Understanding, and of the Passions common to all Men, must cause a Variety of Sentiments concerning such Representations. To prove this, let us observe how the Tastes of Nations differ in relation to these Things; so much, that one would be tempted sometimes to think, that they did not all partake of the same Passions; but certainly they vary in the Degrees of them; therefore by a Parity of Reason we may justly conclude, that Difference of Education among those of the same Nation must affect their Passions and Sentiments. The better sort have (if one may so express it) some acquired Passions which the lower sort are ignorant of. Thus indeed it seems at first Sight; but on a nearer View they are found to be, as I said, the same Passions augmented or refined, and turned upon other Objects. The different Manner in which one of *Corneille's* or *Racine's* Pieces would be received by an Audience of *Turks* or *Russians*, and an Audience of *Frenchmen*, (supposing the former to understand the Language, and the latter to be free from any national Prejudices for the Authors) is a lively and strong Emblem of the Force of Education and Custom among Creatures, all cast in the same Mould, and endued with the same Faculties and Passions with very little real Difference. Still farther, we may observe, that even good Acting will recommend some bad Pieces, as bad Acting will take away half the Merit of good Ones; and some National Subjects are pleasing (as the *Albion Queens* and *Earl of Essex*) to the Many, tho' they very little affect the Few. When I speak of Plays, I desire to be understood of Tragedies, in which I think the *English* excell; for I can mention very few of our Comedies with any Approbation; since in the Latter, neither the Morals of the Inhabitants of this Nation are regarded, or Nature followed. In short, not to pursue a Subject, that would carry me great Lengths, I conclude from this, that a Piece which has no Merit in it but Nature, will please the Vulgar; whereas exalted Sentiments, and Purity and Nobleness of Diction, as well as Nature, are absolutely requisite to please those of a true Taste. And



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it is very possible, that a Play which turns upon some great Passion, seldom felt by the Vulgar, and wherein that Passion is treated with the greatest Delicacy and Justness; I say, it is very possible that such a Piece may please the Few, and displease the Many. And as a Proof of the bad Taste of the Multitude, we find in this Nation of ours, that a vile *Pantomime* Piece, full of Machinery, or a lewd blasphemous Comedy, or wretched Farce, or an empty obscure low Ballad Opera, (in all which, to the scandal of our Nation and Age, we surpass all the World) shall draw together crowded Audiences, when there is full Elbow-Room at a noble Piece of *Shakespeare's* or *Rowe's*.

Before I conclude, I must point out another Beauty in the Tragedy of *Hamlet*, besides those already mentioned, which does indeed arise from our Author's conforming to a Rule which he followed, (probably, without knowing it,) only because it is agreeable to Nature; and this is, that there is not one Scene in this Play but what some way or other conduces towards the *Denouement* of the Whole; and thus the Unity of Action is indisputably kept up by every Thing tending to what we may call the main Design, and it all hangs by Consequence so close together, that no Scene can be omitted, without Prejudice to the Whole. Even *Laertes* going to *France*, and *Ophelia's* Madness, however trivial they may seem (and how much soever I dislike the Method of that last mentioned) are Incidents absolutely necessary towards the concluding of all; as will appear to any one upon due Consideration. This all holds good, notwithstanding it is my Opinion, that several of the Scenes might have been altered by our Author for the better; but as they all stand, it is, as I said, quite impossible to separate them, without a visible Prejudice to the Whole. I must add, that I am much in Doubt, whether Scenes of Prose are allowable, according to Nature and Reason, in Tragedies which are composed chiefly of Blank Verse; the Objection to them seems to be this, that as all Verse is not really in Nature, but yet Blank Verse is necessary in Tragedies, to ennoble the Diction, and by Custom is become natural to us, Prose mixed with it serves only, methinks, to discover the Effects of Art, by the Contraste between Verse and Prose. Add to all this, That it is not suitable to the Dignity of such Performances.

In short, Vice is punished in this excellent Piece, and thereby the Moral Use of it is unquestionable. And if *Hamlet's* Virtue is not rewarded as we could wish, Mr. *Addison's* Maxim ought to satisfy us, which is this, "That no Man is so thoroughly Virtuous as to claim a Reward in Tragedy, or to have Reason to repine at the Dispensations of Providence; and it is besides more Instructive to the Audience, because it abates the Insolence of Human Nature, and teaches us not to judge of Men's Merit by their Successes. And he proceeds farther, and says, that though a virtuous Man may prove unfortunate, yet a vicious Man cannot be happy in a well wrought Tragedy." This last Rule is well observed here.



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Another Reason why we ought to bear with more Patience the Sufferings of a virtuous Character, is the Reflection on the future Rewards prepared for such, which is more suitable to the Moral Maxims established in a Christian Country. Besides, had it pleased our Author to have spared *Hamlet's* Life, we had been deprived of that pleasing Sensation which always (as I have else where observed) accompanies a Consciousness that we are moved as we ought to be; which we most assuredly are, when we feel Compassion rise in us for the young Prince's Death in the last Scene. I shall just touch upon one Thing more, and then I shall end these Reflections.

I am very sensible that our Nation has long been censur'd for delighting in bloody Scenes on the Stage, and our Poets have been found fault with for complying with this vicious Taste. I cannot but own, that there is a great deal of Justice in these Complaints; and must needs be of Opinion, that such Sightings should never be exhibited but in order, visibly, to conduce to the Beauty of the Piece. This is sometimes so much the Case, that Action is often absolutely necessary. And to come more particularly to the Subject now in hand, I desire any unprejudiced Man, of any Nation whatever, (if such can be found) who understands our Language, to consider whether the Appearance of the Ghost, and the Deaths of the several principal Personages, (with whatever else may offend the Delicacy I mention) could possibly have that great, that noble Effect, by being told to the Audience, as they most undoubtedly have, by being brought on the Stage. If this Matter be well examined with all possible Candour, I am well perswaded that it would be found in the End, that this Piece would, by the Method I speak of, loose half its Beauty.

The *French*, (as has been often observ'd) by their Rules of Criticism, have voluntarily imposed on themselves an unnecessary Slavery; and when little Genius's among them have written Tragedies with these Chains on, they have made most miserable work of it, and given Plays entirely void of Spirit. Even the great Genius's in that Nation, such as *Corneille* and *Racine*, and Mr. *De Voltaire* (which last being capacitated by having liv'd among us, and by learning our Language, to judge of the Defects and Merits of both Nations, is highly sensible of the Truth of what I now say, as appears in his Preface to his *Brutus*) even they have been forced to damp their Fire, and keep their Spirit from soaring in almost all their Pieces; and all this is owing to the false Notions of Decency, and a Refinement of Taste among our Neighbours, which is getting now to such a Height, that so far from being able to bear the Representation of Tragical Actions, they are hardly able to bear any Subjects which turn upon the weightier Passions; such as Ambition, Revenge, Jealousy, &c. The Form of their Government, indeed, is of such a Nature, that many Subjects cannot

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be treated as they ought, nor work'd up to that Height which they are here, and were formerly at *Athens*, &c. and Love, for that Reason among others is made to be the Basis of almost all their Tragedies. Nay, the Education of the People under such a Government, prevents their delighting in such Performances as pleased an *Athenian* or a *Roman*, and now delight us *Britons*. Thus every Thing conduces to debase Tragedy among them, as every Thing here contributes to form good Tragick Writers; yet how few have we! And what is very remarkable, each Nation takes Delight in that, which, in the Main, they the least excel in, and are the least fit for. The Audience in *England* is generally more crowded at a Comedy, and in *France* at a Tragedy; yet I will venture to affirm, (and I shall be ready upon Occasion to support my Assertion by good Reasons) that no Comick Writer has ever equal'd *Moliere*, nor no Tragick Writer ever came up to *Shakespeare*, *Rowe*, and Mr. *Addison*. Besides the many Reasons I have already given in Relation to the *French*, I might add, that their Language is less fit for Tragedy, and the Servitude of their Rhime enervates the Force of the Diction. And as for Our Comedies, they are so full of Lewdness, Impiety and Immorality, and of such complicated perplexed Plots, so stuffed with Comparisons and Similies, so replenished with Endeavours at Wit and Smartness, that I cannot forbear saying, that whoever sees or reads them for Improvement (I make some Exceptions in this Censure) will find a contrary Effect; and whatever Man of a True Taste expects to see Nature, either in the Sentiments or Characters, will (in general) find himself very much mistaken.

*FINIS.*

The *Remarks* was printed anonymously, in 1736, with the following title page:

Some / Remarks / on the / Tragedy / of / *Hamlet* Prince of *Denmark*, / Written by / Mr. *William Shakespeare*. / [double rule enclosing a printer's device] / *London*: / Printed for W. Wilkins, in *Lombard-/ Street*. M,DCC,XXXVI. price 1s.

The edition of 1736 was reprinted in London, 1864, for sale by John Russell Smith, with an identical title page. The reprint bore the following cover:

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1736.

The usual ascription of the essay heretofore to Sir Thomas Hanmer derives from the statement by Sir Henry Bunbury, on page 80 of his *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas Hanmer, Bart*, London, 1838, that he had "reason to believe that he was the author ..."

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