taking pleasure in what they are about, entering into it with the zest and spirit of honest delight, then I know full well that they are drinking in the author's soul-power, and that what they are drinking in is going to the right spot. For, to find joy and sweetness in the taste of what is pure and good, is the strongest pledge that things are going well. And such a communing of youthful minds with genius and mellow wisdom has something of mystery and almost of magic in it. Rather say, it is a holy sacrament of the mind. As beautiful too as it is beneficent: in this naughty-lovely, or this lovely-naughty, world of ours, I hardly know of a lovelier sight. There is, be assured there is, regeneration in it.

INTRODUCTION.

History of the Play.

"THE Revenge of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, as it was lately acted by the Lord Chamberlain's Servants," was registered at the Stationers' on the 26th of July, 1602. This entry undoubtedly refers to Shakespeare's tragedy, and is the first we hear of it. The tragedy was printed in 1603. It was published again in 1604; and in the title-page of that issue we have the words, "enlarged to almost as much again as it was." This latter edition was reprinted in 1605, and again in 1611; besides an undated quarto, which is commonly referred to 1607, as it was entered at the Stationers' in the Fall of that year. These are all the issues known to have been made before the play reappeared in the folio of 1623. The quartos, all but the first, have a number of highly important passages that are not in the folio; while, on the other hand, the folio has a few, less important, that are wanting in the quartos.

It is generally agreed that the first issue was piratical. It gives the play but about half as long as the later quartos, and carries in its face abundant evidence of having been greatly marred and disfigured in the making-up. Mr. Dyce says, "It seems certain that in the quarto of 1603 we have Shakespeare's first conception of the play, though with a text mangled and corrupted throughout, and perhaps formed on

the notes of some short-hand writer, who had imperfectly taken it down during representation." Nevertheless it is evident that the play was very different then from what it afterwards became. Polonius is there called Corambis, and his man Reynaldo is called Montano. Divers scenes and passages, some of them such as a reporter would be least likely to omit, are wanting altogether. The Queen is represented as concerting and actively co-operating with Hamlet against the King's life; and she has an interview of considerable length with Horatio, who informs her of Hamlet's escape from the ship bound for England, and of his safe return to Denmark; of which scene the later issues have no traces whatever. All this fully ascertains the play to have undergone a thorough recasting from what it was when the copy of 1603 was taken.

A good deal of question has been made as to the time when the tragedy was first written. It is all but certain that the subject was done into a play some years before Shakespeare took it in hand, as we have notices to that effect reaching as far back as 1589. That play, however, is lost; and our notices of it give no clue to the authorship. On the other hand, there appears no good reason for believing that any form of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was in being long before we hear of it as entered at the Stationers', in 1602.

Source of the Plot.

Whether, or how far, Shakespeare may have borrowed his materials from any pre-existing play on the subject, we have no means of knowing. The tragedy was partly founded on a work by Saxo Grammaticus, a Danish historian, written as early as 1204, but not printed till 1514. The incidents, as related by him, were borrowed by Belleforest, through whose

French version, probably, the tale found its way to the English stage. It was called *The History of Hamblet.* As there told, the story is, both in matter and style, uncouth and barbarous in the last degree; a savage, shocking tale of lust and murder, unredeemed by a single touch of art or fancy in the narrator. The scene of the incidents is laid before the introduction of Christianity into Denmark, and when the Danish power held sway in England: further than this the time is not specified. A close sketch of such parts of the tale as were specially drawn upon for the play is all I have room for.

Roderick, King of Denmark, divided his kingdom into provinces, and placed governors in them. Among these were two warlike brothers, Horvendile and Fengon. The greatest honour that men of noble birth could at that time win was by piracy, wherein Horvendile surpassed all others. Collere, King of Norway, was so moved by his fame that he challenged him to fight, body to body; and the challenge was accepted, the victor to have all the riches that were in the other's ship. Collere was slain; and Horvendile returned home with much treasure, most of which he sent to King Roderick, who thereupon gave him his daughter Geruth in marriage. Of this marriage sprang Hamblet, the hero of the tale.

Fengon became so envious of his brother, that he resolved to kill him. Before doing this, he corrupted his wife, whom he afterwards married. Young Hamblet, thinking he was likely to fare no better than his father, went to feigning himself mad. One of Fengon's friends suspected his madness to be feigned, and counselled Fengon to use some crafty means for discovering his purpose. The plot being all laid, the counsellor went into the Queen's chamber, and hid

behind the hangings. Soon after, the Queen and the Prince came in; but the latter, suspecting some treachery, kept up his counterfeit of madness, and went to beating with his arms upon the hangings. Feeling something stir under them, he cried, "A rat, a rat!" and thrust his sword into them; which done, he pulled the man out half dead, and made an end of him. He then has a long interview with his mother, which ends in a pledge of mutual confidence between them. She engages to keep his secret faithfully, and to aid him in his purpose of revenge; swearing that she had often prevented his death, and that she had never consented to the murder of his father.

Fengon's next device was to send the Prince to England, with secret letters to have him there put to death. Two of his Ministers being sent along with him, the Prince, again suspecting mischief, when they were at sea read their commission while they were asleep, and substituted one requiring the bearers to be hanged. All this and much more being done, he returned to Denmark, and there executed his revenge in a manner horrid enough.

There is, besides, an episodical passage in the tale, from which the Poet probably took some hints, especially in the hero's melancholy mood, and his apprehension that "the spirit he has seen may be the Devil." I condense a portion of it: "In those days the northern parts of the world, living then under Satan's laws, were full of enchanters, so that there was not any young gentleman that knew not something therein. And so Hamblet had been instructed in that devilish art whereby the wicked spirit abuseth mankind. It toucheth not the matter herein to discover the parts of divination in man, and whether this Prince, by reason of his over-great melancholy, had received those impressions, divining that which never any had before declared." The "impressions" here spoken of refer to the means whereby Hamblet found out the secret of his father's murder.

It is hardly needful to add that Shakespeare makes the persons Christians, clothing them with the sentiments and manners of a much later period than they have in the tale; though he still places the scene at a time when England paid some sort of homage to the Danish crown; which was before the Norman Conquest. Therewithal the Poet uses very great freedom in regard to time; transferring to Denmark, in fact, the social and intellectual England of his own day.

General Characteristics of the Play.

We have seen that the *Hamlet* of 1604 was greatly enlarged. The enlargement, however, is mainly in the contemplative and imaginative parts, little being added in the way of action and incident. And in respect of those parts, there is no comparison between the two copies; the difference is literally immense, and of such a kind as to evince a most astonishing growth of intellectual power and resource. In the earlier text we have little more than a naked though in the main well-ordered and well-knit skeleton, which, in the later, is everywhere replenished and glorified with large, rich volumes of thought and poetry; where all that is incidental and circumstantial is made subordinate to the living energies of mind and soul.

Accordingly Schlegel well describes this play as "a tragedy of thought." Such is, indeed, its character; in which respect it stands alone among all the tragedies in being; and it takes this character from the hero's mind. Hamlet everywhere floods the scene with intellectual wealth, and this in the varied forms of wit, humour, poetry, and high philosophy,

with large stores of moral and practical wisdom: affluent with the spoils of learning, of genius, and art, he pours out in inexhaustible variety and profusion, enriching and adorning whatever he touches, and making it fresh, racy, delectable, and instructive. And he does all this without any sign of exertion; does it with the ease and fluency of a free native impulse, such as to preclude the idea of its being a special purpose with him. For, with all his redundancy of mental treasure, he nowhere betrays the least ostentation of intellect. It is plainly the unlaboured, unaffected issue of a mind so full that it cannot choose but overflow.

But perhaps the leading characteristic of this play lies in its strong resemblance to the Classic Tragedy, in that the action is, in a very peculiar degree, dominated by what the ancients called Fate, but what, in Christian language, is termed Providence. In no other modern drama do we take so deep an impression of a superhuman power presiding over a war of irregular and opposing forces, and calmly working out its own purpose through the baffled, disjointed, and conflicting purposes of human agents. Of course, the Poet's genius is itself the providence of the play. But here, again, his insight is so profound and so just, his workmanship so true to the course of human experience, that all things come to pass just as if ordered by the Divine Providence of the world. And, however the persons go at cross-aims with each other or themselves, they nevertheless still move true to the author's aim: their confused and broken schemes he uses as the elements of a higher order; and the harshest discords of their plane of thought serve to enrich and deepen the harmonies of his; their very blunders and failures ministering to his success, their wilfulness to his law, their madness to his reason.

Political Basis of the Action.

The principal personages of the drama stand at or near the head of the State, and thus move in the highest public representative capacity: the whole world of Denmark is most nearly concerned in them as the recognized supreme organs of the national life and law. In the political order of the play, the Danish crown is partly elective, partly hereditary; that is to say, elective within the circle of a particular family and kindred. Whatever there is of hereditary right belongs to the Queen, who is accordingly described as "the imperial jointress of this warlike State." She was the only child of the former King; and Hamlet's father was brought within the circle of eligibility by his marriage with her. Of course, when her first husband died, and she married a second, the second became eligible just as the first had done. So that Claudius, the present King, holds the crown by the same legal title and tenure as Hamlet's father had held it.

A horrible crime has been committed, — a crime the meanest, the blackest, the hatefullest that man is capable of. Claudius has murdered his own brother and his King; stealing upon him in his sleep, and pouring a slow but deadly poison in his ear, which so wrought that he seemed to die of a natural though mysterious disease. The deed was done so secretly and with such consummate craft as to elude and defy all human discovery. It was and could be known only to the author of it, and to God; even the victim knew nothing of it till after his death. No trace of the crime, not an atom of evidence, nothing even to ground a suspicion upon, exists, save in the conscience of the criminal himself. So that the hideous secret lies buried in the grave of the murdered man; and no revelation of it is possible on Earth, but

by his coming out of the tomb. Through this act of fratricide and regicide, Claudius has hewed his way to the Danish throne; he having beforehand made love to the Queen, and seduced and corrupted her.

Claudius is essentially a low, coarse, sensual, brutish villain; without honour and without shame; treacherous and cruel in the last degree; at once hateful, loathsome, and execrable. At the same time he is mighty shrewd and sagacious; quick and fertile of resource; inscrutably artful and cunning; withal, utterly remorseless and unscrupulous, and sticking at nothing, however base or wicked, to gain his ends, or to secure himself in what he has gained. Thus he stands forth, "a bold bad man," of a character too vile and too shocking to be suffered to live, yet exceedingly formidable to contend with, — formidable from his astuteness, formidable from his unscrupulousness; above all, formidable from the powers and prerogatives with which he is invested as an absolute king. Such as he is, Hamlet knows him thoroughly; understands alike his meanness, his malice, and his cunning; takes the full measure both of his badness and his potency.

It appears that the Queen was nowise an accomplice directly in the murder; that she had, indeed, no knowledge of it, perhaps no suspicion. But she has incurred guilt enough in suffering such a wretch to make love to her, when she had a husband living; in being seduced by his "wicked wit and gifts"; and then in rushing, with indecent and shameless haste, into a marriage held deeply criminal in itself, even though the forms of decorum had been strictly observed in the time and manner of it. These doings have fallen with terrible weight upon her son, oppressing his soul with unutterable grief and shame, and filling his mind with irrepressible suspicions and divinings of foul play. He knows not how or

why it is, but he feels that the air about him is all tainted with the breath of hypocrisy and lust, of treachery and murder; insomuch that he would gladly escape, even by his own death, from scenes so horrible and so disgusting.

Hamlet's Madness.

The proper action of the play turns upon the circumstance, that the hero meets and converses with the ghost of his murdered father, and thence learns by what means Claudius has reached his present position. He thereupon starts off in a most strange, inexplicable course of behaviour: he seems quite beside himself; acts as if he were crazy. — Shakespeare's persons, generally, affect us just like those in actual life; so that we severally take different impressions and form diverse opinions of them. Especially is it so in the case of Hamlet. Hence it has been variously argued and discussed, whether his madness be real or feigned, or whether it be sometimes the one, sometimes the other. My own judgment is, and long has been, that he is really mad; deranged not indeed in all his faculties, nor in any of them continuously; that is to say, the derangement is partial and occasional: in other words, he is mad in spots and at times; paroxysms of wildness and fury alternating with intervals of serenity and composure. My main reasons for this judgment are as follows: —

1. From the natural structure and working of his mind; from the recent doings in the royal family; from the state of things at the Court; still more from his interview with the Ghost, and the Ghost's appalling disclosures and injunctions, "shaking his disposition with thoughts beyond the reaches of his soul"; above all, from his instant view and grasp of the whole dire situation in which he is now placed; — from all this, he *ought* to be crazy; and it were vastly to his credit,

both morally and mentally, to be so: we might well be amazed at the morbid strength or the natural weakness of his mind, if he were not so. We are told that, against stupidity, the gods themselves are powerless. And, sure enough, there are men with hearts so hard, and with heads so stolid and stockish, that even the gods cannot make them mad; at least, not, unless through some physical disease. Hamlet, I think, can hardly be a man of that stamp.

2. It is a part of the old ghost-lore, that the being talked with by a ghost either finds a man mad or makes him so. If the ghost be subjective, — that is, a mere spectral illusion born of a diseased or frenzied brain, — then the interview finds him mad, the pre-existing madness causing the illusion: but if, on the other hand, the ghost be really objective, and duly authenticated as such, as it is in the case of Hamlet, then the interview causes the madness. This old notion is referred to by Horatio, when he tries to dissuade Hamlet from following the Ghost, on the ground that the Ghost may depose his "sovereignty of reason, and draw him into madness." At all events, the being thus ghosted was held to be no such trifling matter as we are apt to consider it: it was accounted a very pokerish, soul-harrowing business; insomuch that a man, after such an experience, could hardly continue the same he was before. And so Hamlet, directly after his conversation with the Ghost, on being rejoined by his friends, flies off into a course of behaviour so strange, so wild, so eccentric, as to throw them into amazement.

3. Hamlet is believed to be really mad by all the other persons in the play, though they are quite in the dark as to the cause; all, I mean, except the King, whose evil conscience renders him nervously suspicious that the madness is assumed, to cover some hostile design. Of course, this so

general belief arises because he acts precisely as madmen often do; because his conduct displays the proper symptoms and indications of madness: nor does it make at all against this belief, that his behaviour has many contra-indicants. And, on this point, Hamlet himself, it appears, agrees with the rest: for, in his generous apology, his solemn appeal, to Laertes, near the close, — where I cannot think it just to pronounce him insincere, — he alleges his mental disorder as fairly entitling him to the pardon which he asks for the offence he has given. And, indeed, it seems to be admitted, on the other side, that, if Hamlet were actually mad, he could not enact the madman more perfectly than he does. "If," says Professor Lowell, "Shakespeare himself, without going mad, could so observe and remember all the abnormal symptoms as to be able to reproduce them in Hamlet, why should it be beyond the power of Hamlet to reproduce them in himself?" This means, I take it, that Hamlet counterfeits madness with an imitation so perfect as to be indistinguishable from a genuine case. But, if so, then what ground is there for saying it is not a genuine case?

4. Many distinguished members of the medical profession, deeply learned in the science, and of approved skill in the treatment, of insanity, have, in our time, made a special study of Hamlet's case, as also of Shakespeare's other delineations of madness; and — without a single exception, so far as I know — have all reached the same conclusion. I cannot but think that here their judgment ought to have much the same weight which it is allowed to have in actual cases. Dr. Conolly of England, referring to Hamlet's first soliloquy, —

> O, that this too-too solid flesh would melt, &c., —

has the following: "Of his father's ghost he has at this time

heard nothing. No thought of feigning melancholy can have entered his mind; but he is even now most heavily shaken and discomposed, — indeed, so violently, that his reason, although not dethroned, is certainly well-nigh deranged." Dr. Isaac Ray, also, formerly of Providence, in a very able and well-considered essay on the subject, states it as "a scientific fact, that Hamlet's mental condition furnishes in abundance the pathological and psychological symptoms of insanity in wonderful harmony and consistency." And Dr. A. O. Kellogg of Utica fully concurs with Dr. Ray. "There are," says he, "cases of melancholic madness, of a delicate shade, in which the reasoning faculties, the intellect proper, so far from being overcome, or even disordered, are rendered more active and vigorous. Such a case Shakespeare has given us in the character of Hamlet, with a fidelity to nature which continues more and more to excite our wonder and astonishment, as our knowledge of this intricate subject advances."

It is to be remembered, however, that a mind diseased is by no means necessarily a mind destroyed; and that it may be only a mind with some of its faculties whirled into intemperate and irregular volubility, while others of them are more or less palsied. And Dr. Ray justly observes, in regard to Hamlet, that madness "is compatible with some of the ripest and richest manifestations of intellect."

Hamlet himself both affirms and denies his madness; the one in his moments of calmness, the other when the fit is strong upon him. Nor is there any reason but that in both he may be perfectly sincere. It is commonly supposed that insane people are always unconscious of their state; whereas there are many cases in which the patient is more or less conscious of it. And the degree of consciousness is apt to

be inversely as that of the disease. So that the being conscious is no sure proof of simulation; in fact, any one simulating would be almost certain to pretend unconsciousness, and so betray his falsehood by overacting his part. Thus Hamlet, in the first turn of his distemper, when he utters such "wild and whirling words," seems to be at least partly aware of his state, for he speaks of it. Once only (in the scene with his mother) does his paroxysm run to so high a pitch that he loses the consciousness of it entirely, insomuch that he goes to arguing against it. In this case, at least, his mind is completely enthralled to illusions spun out of itself; the ghost which he sees and hears being purely subjective, as is evident in that his mother neither hears nor sees any thing of the kind. Well might she say, "this bodiless creation ecstasy is very cunning in." Yet here his intellectual faculties are kindled to the most overwhelming eloquence, burning both his mother and himself with their preternatural light.

Shakespeare's great, earnest, delicate mind seems to have been specially charmed with those forms of mental disease in which the intellect is kindled into preternatural illumination and expression. We have many instances of this; as in old Timon's terrible eloquence of invective; in Macbeth's guilt-inspired raptures of meditation; in Lear's heart-withering imprecations; and most of all in Hamlet's profound moralizing, his tempestuous strains of self-reproach, and his overwrought consciousness of "thoughts that wander through eternity." I have sometimes thought that an instinct of genius may have put the Poet upon these frequent displays of mental exorbitancy, because the normal workings of the human mind did not afford scope enough for the full discharge of his own colossal and "thousand-souled" intellectuality

My own idea, then, is, that, in order to make this play emphatically a tragedy of thought, the Poet's method was, to conceive a man great, perhaps equally so, in all the elements of character, mental, moral, and practical; and then to place him in such circumstances and bring such influences to work upon him, that all his greatness should be made to take on the form of thought. And with a swift intuitive perception of the laws of mind, which the ripest science can hardly overtake, he seems to have known just what kind and degree of mental disturbance or disease would naturally operate to produce such an irregular and exorbitant grandeur of intellectual manifestation.

To return for a moment to the particular question of Hamlet's madness. Why should he feign to be mad? How can he further, or hope to further, his end by assuming such a part? It does not help him onward at all; it rather hinders him; the natural effect of his conduct being to arouse suspicions in the King's mind, to put him on the alert, and to make him guard himself with redoubled vigilance. Let us see how it is.

The Ghost enjoins upon Hamlet two things; first, "Revenge this foul and most unnatural murder"; second, "Howsoever thou pursuest this act, taint not thy mind." Thus time and manner are left to Hamlet's own judgment; only he must not, he must not corrupt himself with any wicked or dishonourable course of action. He is solemnly warned against pursuing revenge by any methods involving self-defilement; and is to proceed as ever bearing in mind that

> Him, only him the shield of Jove defends,
> Whose means are pure and spotless as his ends.

He might take off Claudius as secretly, and in some such

way, as Claudius has taken off his father; but this would be to stain himself with the most abominable guilt and baseness. Whatsoever he does, he must be ready to avow it in the face of all Denmark, and to stand responsible for it. Come what may, he must, he can, use no arts but manly arts. Observe, then, what a dreadful dilemma he is placed in: he must punish, it is his most sacred duty to punish, a crime which it is not possible for him to prove, and which must not be punished till it has been proved. His strong, clear head instantly takes in the whole truth of his situation; comprehends at a glance the entire case in all its points and bearings. All this may well fill him, as indeed it does, with the most excruciating and inevitable agony; and, while he thus lives in torture, his mighty suffering, even because he is so strong, arouses all his faculties, and permits not a particle of the intellectual man to be lost.

Thus, from the time of his interview with the Ghost, all is changed with Hamlet; all, both without and within: henceforth he lives in quite another world, and is himself quite another man. All his old aims and aspirations are to be sternly renounced and thrust aside: life can have no more joys for him: his whole future must be cast in a new shape. All the duties upon which his thoughts have been hitherto centred are now merged in the one sacred, all-absorbing task enjoined upon him as from Heaven itself.

Now so great, so sudden, so agonizing a change within cannot but work some corresponding change without: it will naturally and even necessarily register itself in his manner and behaviour: while he *is* so different, how is it possible he should appear the same? And he himself evidently foresees that this change will cause him to be regarded as beside himself, as out of his right mind; especially as he cannot