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GOETHE AND SHAKESPEARE

ON Friday, January 2nd, 1824, Goethe said something to Eckermann which suggests that, like discouraged people of today, he looked back upon good old times in unpleasing contrast with his own deteriorating age: "Let him who will not believe that much of Shakespeare's greatness appertains to his great vigorous time, only ask himself the question, whether a phenomenon so astounding would be possible in the present England of 1824, in these evil days of criticizing and hair-splitting journals . . . tame and weak has life itself become during the last two shabby centuries. Where do we now meet an original nature and where is the man who has the strength to be true, and to show himself as he is? This, however, affects the poet, who must find all within himself while he is left in the lurch by all without."

One recalls something about the kingdom of heaven being within you. Goethe had first to find himself and then to apply the spiritual energy within himself to the renewal of spiritual life in a world which seemed to him to be on the decline. A whole world, mind you, not merely Germany. For he was the true cosmopolite ranging his vision beyond the boundaries of the kingdoms and principalities of Germany to survey the world in its entirety.

Herein he differed strikingly from Shakespeare. Shakespeare was a nationalist, intensely patriotic; Goethe was what the world seems crying out for now, an internationalist,

not by declaration only but by the instinct of his being. This connects with another distinction between the two men: Goethe is thought of as the sage; somehow the word does not seem quite to fit the English dramatist; with all his wisdom, with all his sense of the insubstantiality of actualities, he can scarcely be said to have framed and phrased wisdom for its own sake. He could write such a Platonic passage as Prospero uttered in *The Tempest*:

The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

But this same Shakespeare could turn about and write the florid addresses which Henry the Fifth made to his soldiers, the waggeries of Falstaff, the denunciations of Hotspur, the fooleries of the clowns and much else as earthy as the soil of the England in which he lived and which he loved. It is difficult to conceive that Shakespeare ever consciously thought of himself as a purveyor of wisdom in the abstract. Wisdom there is in the plays—they are overflowing with it—but viewed historically we must think of it as the overflowing of a procreant mind, chiefly occupied with the practical business of making producible plays and with the concrete sources of human tragedy inseparable from a world of actual men and women entrapped by the intrigues of others, by their own frailties and disabilities, or by the incurable complexity of life itself. Hazlitt's observation holds, that Shakespeare "without being a moralist was the most moral of poets." But the moral is never deliberately drawn by Shakespeare, is merely deducible from his true observation of human beings and their disasters. The ash-faced, shuffling, shambling gin-drinker carries his moral

palpably, but obviously without purpose or intent of correcting or edifying other people. In short, Goethe wrote, when at his greatest, with a deliberate purpose to convey wisdom; such is the office of the sage. The primary difference between Shakespeare and his dramatic contemporaries was not that he had a more moral purpose than they, but simply that he saw life more accurately and presented the phenomenon with a wider scope than they. His moralities are secondary to his practical business as a showman, whereas the moralities of Goethe are the reflex of a mind, not more powerful than Shakespeare's, but more intentionally didactic. The philosopher that was in Shakespeare was a thoughtful by-product of his daily enterprises. The philosopher that was in Goethe was indigenous, purposeful, altruistic.

It is as much for his sagacity as his art, as much for his wisdom as for the beauty of what he said, that the civilized world has adopted Goethe for its own, and is this year memorializing the one-hundredth anniversary of his death, a Titan in his youth, an Olympian in his later years, a man who through storm and stress found self-unity, which means inward peace, found serenity, without which wisdom cannot be.

His faults were many, artistic and personal, but veiling them all is the fact of his genius, of his unquenchable spirit, of the devotion of his talents to search for truth, of the dedication of his life to the imparting of truth as he saw it.

Happiness is assumed to be a legitimate objective of every career, but when one reads the life stories of great mortals one wonders how often the man who is great enough to have left his inerasable mark on the history of the world's thought and action, has really found happiness in any ordinary meaning of the word. Consider Dante: blessedness he

found undoubtedly, but can we associate happiness, in its superficial meaning, with the record of that life, with that grim, taut face, so familiar in the portrait, with the actual man who, as he passed through the street, was pointed at by a woman talking with her gossip friends as she said "see the man who has been in Hell." I would not seem to be speaking as a pessimist, but as I think of one giant figure after another who has trod this lonely and insecure planet, the thought is forced upon me that earthly happiness is a rather illusory thing. Strong men, brave men, do their work and face the consequences, but the greater they are, the further removed they seem from that ordinary everyday thing which people call happiness. The more they have done to alter the course of history, the further away they seem from what people call happiness. Few men in the world's history have done so much to change its direction as did the Apostle Paul, but not until the very end of his career could he write with satisfaction about his own life. He found the peace that passeth understanding, but happiness? And there was the young Jew whom they killed on a hill; what he found is beyond human penetration, but scarcely "happiness."

I am led to these dolorous remarks by a statement made by Goethe himself to Eckermann some six years before his death. One would have guessed that after his storm and stress period, in the full possession of all his great faculties, in the satisfaction of the world's acclaim, he must have been a happy man. Yet this man said to Eckermann: "I have ever been esteemed one of Fortune's chiefest favorites; nor will I complain or find fault with the course my life has taken. Yet, truly, there has been nothing but toil and care; and I may say that, in all my seventy-five years, I have never had a month of genuine comfort."

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He found something more substantial, the thing which with his clairvoyance he discerned in Shakespeare while reading Shakespeare's works, namely health in all its connotations. Not a few neurotics (the late Frank Harris being one of them) have thought they saw in Shakespeare incredible weakness mingled with his genius, but Goethe saw truer than that. He knew that no weakling could have written the English historical plays, with their fine objectivity; the tragedies with their relentless refusal to compound good and evil; the better comedies with their zest and gusto; and so he said to Eckermann (on March 11, 1828): "While we read him we receive the impression of a man thoroughly strong and healthy, both in mind and in body." Assuredly Goethe and Shakespeare must have been blood brothers in these qualities, and he who has them and by the valor of his spirit maintains them, need not complain of unhappiness.

Perhaps it is in part because Goethe did not seek comfort, but rather truth, self-realization, the spiritual liberation of his people, that he found something more important than comfort, namely mortal immortality, that this man became what he became, that his memory is what it is. In a man like Goethe there is more than poet, dramatist, philosopher, man of affairs; there is something of the deliverer. Thomas Carlyle was one of the early Englishmen to perceive this, to write much about it in his cryptic way, summing up his admonitions in the familiar phrase, "close thy Byron, open thy Goethe."

We know of Goethe what we guess at about Shakespeare, that he was magnificently alive with insatiable avarice for knowledge, unjaded receptivity to all manner of influences from all manner of sources, amazing versatility, prodigal productivity. A life crowded with activities was this life. A giant among men was this man. So we think Shakespeare

must have been, though his life was so much shorter than Goethe's and the reliable data are so meagre that we are prevented from making categorical affirmatives.

Absurdity not infrequently accompanies greatness in the bud. It was a fantastical, sometimes a ridiculous young Goethe who became a student in the university at Leipzig in 1765, the word "student" being used in a Pickwickian sense, for, indeed Goethe gleaned little from the classrooms, was indifferent to academic procedure, sometimes contemptuous. He strolled through the streets in bizarre costume, head haughtily aloft, a theatrical young person. Letters about him at the time were derogatory, justly so: his flippancies, his indecorous gaieties, his love-makings, his rakishness. His chief intellectual interest seems to have been in the conversations of a group of medical students. He did not know enough to contribute much to their discussions of medicine and botany, but he was a good listener, an absorber of matters which later were to pervade his omnivorous curiosities, with that scientific interest which mingled with other manifold enthusiasms. Volatile though he was, he had an extraordinary power of concentration when he fell upon something which seemed to him worthy of concentration. Surely a penetrative onlooker would have discerned genius in the handsome young face, in the great dark luminous eyes which glowed like coals ready to burst into flame. This young Goethe might have become anything; for the moment he prognosticated nothing.

Goethe's Leipzig occupations were sporadic, most of them intense (excepting university duties), too numerous to be catalogued here. A single incident must be recorded, for it bears upon the present topic, the association of his name with Shakespeare's. It was at Leipzig that there fell into his hands a stout little volume of selected passages

from Shakespeare, Dodd's *Beauties of Shakespeare*. Goethe tasted, scarcely tested, but caught something of that spirit of Shakespeare which was foreordained to be one of the releasing forces of his own spirit.

It is likely enough that Goethe's mandatory father would in any circumstances have withdrawn the lad from Leipzig, for the reports of his academic progress were ungratifying. But nature stepped in to complete the decision. The young wildling fell ill, seriously, a ruptured blood vessel, a flow of blood from the mouth. So Goethe returned to the parental home at Frankfurt. A prolonged period of recuperation, and then, at his father's command, and he himself not unwilling, he went to Strasburg. This was in 1770.

From the point of view of this lecture, one of the most fortunate incidents of the Strasburg residence was Goethe's meeting with Johann Friedrich Herder, five years older than Goethe, with far less genius but with sounder judgment, more control, a riper taste in literature. It was Herder who introduced to Goethe much literature which the young man knew not at all, or only superficially. Herder was one of the instrumentalities that helped Goethe rid himself of dilettantism, and supplied the place thereof with solid ideas about poetry, its nature and its purpose. Herder was to Goethe a tutelary genius, somewhat in the manner of Charles Cowden Clarke to John Keats in a later generation. Herder brought Goethe into contact with Shakespeare, not in scattered "beauties" but in whole plays presumably in Wieland's translation. Goethe seems to have had a nodding acquaintance with this old masterpiece back in Leipzig, but it is clear that not until the Strasburg days, and through the guidance of Herder, did Goethe come to penetrate Shakespeare and to feel the full effect of the older poet's flaming influence. The masterly translation by

Schlegel and Tieck had, of course, not been made at that time.

It was at Strasburg that Goethe prepared an oration on Shakespeare in which he said: "The first page of his [Shakespeare's] that I read made me his for life; and when I had finished I stood like one born blind on whom a miraculous hand bestows sight in a moment. I saw, I felt, in the most vivid manner, that my existence was infinitely expanded; everything now was unknown to me and the unwonted light pained my eyes. By little and little I learned to see, and thanks to my receptive genius I continue vividly to feel what I have won. I did not hesitate for a moment about renouncing the classical drama;" to which he added much in a denunciatory vein about academic drama.¹

One phase of this illumination from Shakespeare was release from the bonds and fetters of the French classical drama, in the grip of which Goethe had felt restless for some time. Another phase, if we are to trust his latter day conversations with Eckermann, was a sort of sense of impotence in the presence of such majestic and all-involving genius as Shakespeare's, for on Friday, January 2nd, 1824, he told Eckermann that any dramatist must study Shakespeare's plays and added: "Having studied them he must be aware that Shakespeare had already exhausted the whole of human nature in all its tendencies, in all its heights and depths, and that, in fact, there remains for him nothing more to do. And how could one get courage only to put pen to paper if one were conscious in an earnest, appreciating spirit, that such unfathomable and unattainable excellencies were already in existence."

The actual effect of Shakespeare on Goethe's creative genius does not seem to have lasted in any powerful ascer-

¹ Life by Lewes, Bk. II, Chapter 6.

tainable way after Goethe had written *Götz, Egmont*, and *Wilhelm Meister*, but that the general effect was coetaneous with his long life is evident in a less tangible manner. Even *Faust* has its Shakespearian influence, not merely in the song from Shakespeare which Mephistopheles sings, but in many less obvious ways—perhaps Margrete has shadings from Ophelia, and we of course do not forget that Eckermann belongs only to the last ten years of Goethe's life. The *Conversations*, together with the discussions in *Wilhelm Meister*, are among the chief sources of Goethe's deliberate Shakespearian criticisms.

The opinions of Shakespeare expressed to Eckermann nearly always glow, but sometimes they seem inconsistent with each other. For example, on October 15, 1825, Goethe said: "Shakespeare . . . is not a theatrical poet; he never thought of the stage; it was far too narrow for his great mind; nay, the whole visible world was too narrow." This is the more habitual tone of Goethe in speaking of Shakespeare, regarding him as a seer, a prophet, as well as the greatest of all poets.

However, on April 18, 1827, Goethe takes the stage view of Shakespeare: "Shakespeare, in writing his pieces, could hardly have thought they would appear in print so as to be told over, and compared with one another; he had rather the stage in view when he wrote; he regarded his plays as a lively and moving scene, that would pass rapidly before the eyes and ears upon the stage, not as one that was to be held firmly, and carped at in detail. Hence his only point was to be effective and significant for the moment."

Such irreconcilments may be squared by recalling the fact that Goethe was talking, not writing essays, and that conversation often has its contradictions, especially when he who talks has so rich, so varied, so multifarious a mind as

Goethe's. It would be natural for him to think of Shakespeare in one aspect at one time, at another time in an entirely different aspect. Emerson bids us say what we really think today without squeamish anxiety that today's utterance shall be in perfectly logical accord with what we said yesterday. Consistency, said Emerson, is the "hobgoblin of little minds." If I sincerely believe what I say on one occasion, why should I ruffle my contentment for fear that the sincerity of one utterance may seem to contradict the sincerity of another utterance? Truth is larger than my little mind. Truth has many facets.

Then there is another possible key to Goethe's inconsistencies: he was a scholar, a scholar of almost immeasurable attainments, but he sometimes made merry over the meticulous endeavors of the philological type of scholar to explain to a nicety every detail in Shakespeare. He had his fun at the expense of those who sought to explain every situation or every allusion in Shakespeare as reminiscent of something in older literature. They say, said Goethe, that Shakespeare "must have taken that from the ancients. . . . How odd! As if one had to go so far for such things and did not . . . feel and utter them every day."

Not for a moment would I give the impression that I myself would seek to belittle faithful, industrious, productive scholarship. But I must say that I do sometimes marvel at the things that are published about Shakespeare, for example, comparatively recent studies of the "sources" of Falstaff. Ever since there was such a thing as Shakespearian scholarship it has been known that Shakespeare got a general conception of Falstaff from Latin comedy with its braggart soldier. But if we put together all that has been written about Falstaff in the last dozen years there is nothing left of Shakespeare in the gorgeous old rascal, for diligent re-

search has brought forth some ancient or mediaeval original for everything that Falstaff does, says, or thinks. No one has as yet discovered a character in stage history of the gigantic mirthful dimensions of Falstaff, and surely no one can believe that Shakespeare read all the vast literature which is cited in connection with Falstaff. In short, whatever general suggestion Shakespeare may have borrowed, Falstaff remains a great original creation, and most of the delving scholarship has little relevancy to Shakespeare's comic knight. To discharge myself from suspicion of underrating diligent and competent scholarship, I quote the concluding sentence from Dr. E. E. Stoll's great essay on Falstaff.¹ Every informed person knows something about the reach and exactitude of Dr. Stoll's research and learning; many are aware that Dr. Stoll has written an essay on Falstaff in which he shows the almost innumerable passages in earlier literature which parallel things in the character and conversation of Falstaff. But erudition has not drowned Dr. Stoll's sense of proportion and reality, and he concludes his noble essay thus: "If Falstaff has, though much mirth, no philosophy, the poet has both; and Falstaff holds us under his spell, not only in his own right but also in that of his maker."

Goethe laughed when he told a young Englishman: "I would not have advised you to undertake *Faust*. It is mad stuff and goes quite beyond all ordinary feelings." We have no such intimate records of Shakespeare, but we may fancy him laughing and saying to one of us pedagogues: "Do you really try to get young men and women to understand *Hamlet*? Do you really think you understand the play? *I don't. It is mad stuff and goes beyond all ordinary feelings.*"

Goethe understood Shakespeare the playwright with a

¹ Shakespeare Studies, pp. 403-90.

practical and plain understanding. He also understood Shakespeare the philosopher with a profundity which perhaps no one has approached. It is interesting that though he and Shakespeare were both classed as romanticists, Goethe saw and understood the hard kernel of realism in Shakespeare. Indeed, a certain hardness in Shakespeare seems to have tempered, lowered somewhat the lofty-minded Schiller's enthusiasm for Shakespeare. But no such effect appears in Goethe.

In these rambling generalizations I have got ahead of the story. The young enthusiastic Goethe when he came completely under the spell of Shakespeare, was compelled to write a Shakespearian play, an historical play, even as Shakespeare had written historical plays. The first creative fruit of the Shakespearian obsession was *Götz von Berlichingen*, the dramatized story of the nobleman and robber baron, who in the early sixteenth century encouraged the oppressed peasants in their restlessness. The play was in three versions, the first of which was severely condemned by Herder, who returned Goethe the manuscript saying "Shakespeare has ruined you." Goethe had the good sense to see that Herder was correct, rewrote the play, issued it in 1773, finally adapted it to the Weimar Theatre in 1804. The play is Shakespearian in a negative rather than in a positive sense. While the character-drawing is bold, especially in the case of Götz himself, his wife and mother, the siren Adelaide von Walldorf, and Brother Martin (who is of course Martin Luther), there is little of the subtlety of the Shakespearian characters. The real significance of the play is that it broke defiantly with the academic drama of France and captivated young Germany with a splendid irregularity of construction, of action instead of long declamations, of many scenes, of negligence of all that was known

as "dramatic unity." The issuance of the play signaled the storm and stress period of German thought and German art.

Wilhelm Meister's critique of *Hamlet* created an era in Hamlet criticism equivalent to the era in German drama instigated by *Götz*. For a hundred years and more it set the standard for the interpretation of Hamlet and even to this day much of it is accepted.

But though it is audacious to take issue with Goethe, I am forced to question, have long questioned, the complete correctness of Goethe's estimate of the *character* of Hamlet. I do not believe that Hamlet was the "delicate Prince" envisioned by Goethe. Omitting for the time most of the much that is said about the play in general in Goethe's novel, the long discussions about revising the play, altering the external action, dropping some of the characters, adding others, and so forth, let us come to the heart of the matter in the myriad-times quoted passage about the Prince himself. Here it is as translated from Volume 21 of the Weimar edition of Goethe's works:

"I sought for every indication of what the character of Hamlet was before the death of his father: I took note of all that this interesting youth had been, independently of that sad event, independently of the subsequent terrible occurrences, and I imagined what he might have been without them.

"Tender and nobly descended, this royal flower grew up under the direct influences of majesty; the idea of the right and of princely dignity, the feeling for the good and the graceful, with the consciousness of his high birth, were unfolded in him together. He was a prince, a born prince. Pleasing in figure, polished by nature, courteous from the heart, he was to be the model of youth and the delight of the world.

“Without any supreme passion, his love for Ophelia was a presentiment of sweet needs. His zeal for knightly exercise was not entirely his own, not altogether natural to him; it had rather to be quickened and inflamed by praise bestowed upon another. Pure in sentiment, he knew the honorable-minded, and would prize the repose which an upright spirit enjoys, resting on the frank bosom of a friend. To a certain degree he has learned to discern and value the good and the beautiful in arts and sciences; the vulgar was offensive to him; and if hatred could take root in his tender soul, it was only so far as to make him despise the false and fickle courtiers and scornfully to play with them. He was calm in his temper, simple in his behavior, neither content in idleness, nor yet too eager for employment. An academic routine he seemed to continue even at court. He possessed more mirth of humor than of heart; he was a good companion, compliant, modest, discreet, and could forget and forgive an injury, yet never able to unite himself with one who overstepped the limits of the right, the good, and the becoming.

“Figure to yourselves this youth, this son of princes, conceive him vividly, bring his condition before your eyes, and then observe him when he learns that his father’s spirit walks; stand by him in the terrible night when the venerable ghost itself appears before him. A horrid shudder seizes him; he speaks to the mysterious form; he sees it beckon him; he follows it and hearkens. The fearful accusation of his uncle rings in his ears; the summons to revenge, and the piercing reiterated prayer: ‘Remember me!’

“And when the ghost has vanished, who is it we see standing before us? A young hero panting for vengeance? A born prince, feeling himself favored in being summoned to punish the usurper of his crown? No! Amazement and

sorrow overwhelm the solitary young man; he becomes bitter against smiling villains, swears never to forget the departed, and concludes with the significant ejaculation: 'The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!'

"In these words, I imagine, is the key to Hamlet's whole procedure. To me it is clear that Shakespeare sought to depict a great deed laid upon a soul unequal to the performance of it. In this view I find the piece composed throughout. Here is an oak tree planted in a costly vase, which should have received into its bosom only lovely flowers; the roots spread out, the vase is shivered to pieces.

"A beautiful, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off; every duty is holy to him—this too hard. The impossible is required of him—not the impossible in itself, but the impossible to him. He winds, turns, agonizes, advances, and recoils, ever reminded, ever reminding himself, and at last almost loses his purpose from his thoughts, without ever again recovering his peace of mind."

It seems to me that two or three things were overlooked by Goethe, perhaps one or two things unknown to him.

There are sources and sources. The disrespectful way in which I spoke a little while ago about alleged sources of Falstaff have no bearing on the real sources of *Hamlet*. To know the material from which Shakespeare drew the stuff out of which he created Hamlet is essential to an understanding of him. Did Goethe know the stage story which Shakespeare recreated into the spiritual tragedy of Hamlet? Did Goethe know about the lost *Hamlet*, the old play (perhaps by Kyd) which Shakespeare made the basis of the story of pretended madness, of murder and the rest? Did

Goethe know Saxo Grammaticus? Did he know the history of Hamlet in the Belleforest version? Did he know the vast difference between the first and second quarto publications of *Hamlet*? Did he know even the German version *Der bestrafte Brudermord* and its conjectural connection with the Shakespearian play? In short, did he realize the practical problem confronting Shakespeare, of transforming a gory, sensational melodrama into a story of a soul's conflict?

It seems to me that Hamlet is not the frail and delicate Prince Goethe conceived. Goethe is quite correct in distinguishing what is external from what is internal in the play. The Norway episodes, Hamlet's killing of Polonius, the pirate ship—such things are externalities, different from the spiritual conflict betrayed in the soliloquies. Nevertheless, Shakespeare makes them a part of the story which he was relating dramatically, and they must not be brushed away as negligible.

Shakespeare represents Hamlet as sunk in melancholy, drenched in despair—this in the soliloquies. But also he represents him as killing three men with his sword, grappling a famed athlete in a desperate wrestling bout, boarding a pirate ship alone, following resolutely a ghost when stalwart men (one a soldier) warned him not to, remorselessly signing the death warrants of two men. These are not the acts of a "delicate" individual, but rather of a daring man, proceeding sometimes on impulse, sometimes with fixed resolution, but not wavering. Unless we follow the plan suggested in *Wilhelm Meister* to change the whole story, we must accept Hamlet's deeds as well as his thoughts as part of his character, and the deeds are audacious, bold.

What, then, is the point of Hamlet's behavior? It seems to be that we may find a clue in the tragedies which imme-

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diately preceded and immediately followed *Hamlet*, namely *Julius Caesar* and *Othello*.

Certainly neither Brutus nor Othello is delicately framed, yet each perishes. Why? Because each is thrown into an environment uncongenial to his nature. Each is a misfit in the pattern of life. Maladaptation seems to have been one conception Shakespeare had of human tragedy.

You answer, this presses hard upon what Goethe says about Hamlet, but Goethe's analysis as I see it represents a condition, not a conclusion. Brutus shrinks from an act of ferocity, not because he is frail, but because he is noble. Othello is not a scholar and philosopher like Brutus and Hamlet, but the conditioned elements of his strength are turned to failure by the manipulations of the shrewd, unscrupulous Iago.

It was characteristic of Shakespeare to carry over some idea or situation from one play to the next which he wrote. This seems to me to be true of these three plays, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*. From each to the next he transfers the idea of a strong man who without loss of strength is perplexed in the extreme by the situation in which he finds himself.

Good and evil were stark realities to Shakespeare as they were to Goethe, though Shakespeare was more ruthless than Goethe in giving his plays unmitigated tragic endings. But to both men good and evil were subtly interwoven, nowhere more than in *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*, where what is fine becomes defiled, not through grossness but through the cruel complexity of life.

Hamlet is strong enough for anything, but he is also a thinking man and, like Brutus, he must ponder before he adopts the habits of assassins.

Neither can I agree with Goethe that the interest of

Hamlet culminates at the end of the third act. True, the fourth act is broken, but in its elements there is sustained dramatic interest. It was fine dramatic tact to introduce the element of pathos in contrast to the vehement activity of the third act. Ophelia is like a musical composer's variation of a dominant theme, and by the way, Shakespeare has laid no ground-plan for the Freudian conception of Ophelia which is expounded at length in *Wilhelm Meister*, unless there is a Freudian strain of obscenity in all mad people—a theme beyond my ken. Then in the fourth act Shakespeare turns back from pathos to stirring activity in the conduct of Laertes and the remorseless subtlety of Claudius.

In the fifth act there is not a let down but rather an accumulation and culmination of interest. In this act we see most vividly illustrated Goethe's own great saying that Hamlet has no plan, but that the play is full of plans.

Again, we may seem to be yielding the case to Goethe, but I think there is a line of distinction. Hamlet has returned to Denmark without a clearly formed project. Events and the wiles of most unholy rascals bring matters to a termination undevise by mortals, but it is a prepared Hamlet whom we encounter in this act—"The interim is mine." Hamlet knows that the end is drawing near, how near he does not know, nor the manner of the end. But he is calmly ready for what comes when it shall come. No "delicate prince" this, but a man in panoply, doing one of the most difficult things in life, waiting in uncertainty, and ready for the event when it comes, however it may come. Though these discriminations may seem to be wire drawn, they are and have been to me for a long time, realities. With all my reverence for Goethe, with all my recognition of the incalculable service he rendered the interpretation of Shakespeare, I have long believed that the nuances of *Wilhelm Meister's*

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analysis of Hamlet have misled many subsequent students into a misinterpretation of the central thing in Hamlet. Hamlet is complex, as most great men are complex, but he is no weakling. It is the nobility of a great nature which causes him to tax himself severely with tardiness, with waiting too precisely on the event. Great strength in an intolerable dilemma is the situation, and in part the tragedy of Hamlet. With nearly all the rest that Goethe said about Shakespeare I agree heartily and for it I am deeply grateful.

German students, German actors and the German public have made Shakespeare a German possession. The pre-Bismarckian Germany saw, especially in Hamlet, a reflex of itself. "Hamlet is Germany," exclaimed Freiligrath, and the saying has been echoed until it became a proverb in the old Germany—not the Germany of imperialistic obsession, but a nobler Germany which sought from study and meditation a finer self-realization. The effect of Hamlet upon Germany has been more far-reaching than literature. Hamlet has been a mirror in which the German nation saw itself reflected, with its "magnificent successes" and its "chaotic failures," as Herford remarks. The success of Hamlet himself was not material success, but spiritual. He went down, but he went down with flag flying. Life and its complexities were too much for him, but his spirit was untainted, as was the spirit of Germany itself when it was the source and fount of much that was best in the thought and learning of the world.

It is a true saying that "it is the characteristic of genius ever to be stimulating other men's genius." If Shakespeare had done nothing else in the world, he would have done a great deed in setting aflame a genius so royal as Goethe's.

Goethe lived to see himself recognized for what he was.

Shakespeare did not. He sought only rest for his marrowless bones in his little native village.

We have no evidence on which to base a statement that Shakespeare died a disappointed man. Practical Englishman that he was, he apparently found satisfaction in his latter years in augmenting his worldly fortunes. He who had repeatedly cried out for reality in his plays found reality at last in trading in beeves and real estate. Is it not evident that he regarded his plays as ephemeral stuff to be used for theatrical productions and then to be allowed to drop into oblivion?

I can see the matter in no other way. After Shakespeare returned to Stratford he had from three to five years in which he could have collected his plays. He never turned a hand to preserve them. At least seventeen of the plays, among them some of the most important, were left unprinted in any form. Only the enterprise of two of Shakespeare's fellow players and a London printer led to the collection of the plays and their publication, seven years after Shakespeare was dead. Assuredly Shakespeare, unlike Ben Jonson, had little or no faith in the literary worth of his plays.

For the approval of the crowd it is probable that Shakespeare cared little, except in so far as it brought him monetary return, but if he could have looked into the future, could have foreseen that one hundred and fifty years after his death, the greatest of all poets of the new era, one of the greatest in the history of the world, would receive from his writings inspiration and instigation, surely Shakespeare would have thought a little better of his own writings. Carlyle said something to the effect that your faith in me infinitely increases my faith in myself. If Shakespeare could have felt the handclasp of Goethe and heard the assurance

that Goethe believed him to be the supreme spirit in letters of all time, surely it would have meant much to Shakespeare. It would have meant more to foresee that he had passed the torch of the divine fire of genius to the man who of all others succeeding him, was most worthy to bear that torch.

STOCKTON AXSON.