

VI

HUMOUR IN "HAMLET"¹

LET my first words be thanks for the invitation with which I have been honoured from President Lovett and the Rice Institute. Among my most delightful experiences as a visitor to the Universities of the New World were the several occasions on which I had the pleasure of addressing Houston audiences. It is with a warm feeling of gratitude that I remember the cordial welcome, the eager response, which a lecturer is sure to find in this city, the intellectual capital of the South-West. Of the rich charm and the radiant humanity of this land, I have been privileged to gather, and I cherish, a glowing sense. For the sake of that past, and of the friendships which, made here, have stood the test of time, I am glad indeed an opportunity has been offered me to speak once more within the walls of this distinguished seminary of learning.

The commemoration of the day is one in which the people of Texas and that of France can unite with the same respect and love for an almost incredibly thrilling story of adventure and heroism. In the very roots of Texas as a modern State there lies one of the seeds of an international friendship equally dear to all Americans and all Frenchmen. Of the romance of Cavalier de La Salle I cannot speak worthily: my labour has been in other fields. But I think I may without an apology touch here upon a theme from English

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literature and from Shakespeare: that, again, is a background that is a part of your heritage, and in her devotion to which France, among many foreign nations, is second to none. May the fact that such a theme is taken up by a Frenchman before an American audience assume a symbolic value much beyond the personality of the speaker, and stand as a modest token of the sympathy that binds together the staunch, the enduring democracies of the world.

The critic who finds humour in *Hamlet*—humour so plentiful, of such refined and intense quality, that the play should rank with the very first, in that respect, among those of Shakespeare—may expect to be met with the remark, that his is the craze of the jaded essayist, casting about in despair for a fresh point of view upon the most scholar-ridden text in English literature.

Yet he has good reason to stick to his point, if reading, and reflection, have brought to him a sense of the arbitrariness with which the scope of the word "humour" is very commonly extended or narrowed. Simple fun indeed, the irrepressible outburst of mirth, the rollicking comedy of farce, are not to be found in this most tragic drama. But the more careful speakers will resist the pressure of our modern looseness of speech: and to them everything is not humour that rouses laughter. They try to preserve a distinction which the psychological instinct of past centuries has evolved, and which our hurried age is doing its best to forget. They demand an interiority, an implicit element in humour.

But the problem shifts to the opposite ground, when the temper of that implicit pleasantry is examined. A theory has become current, in all English-speaking countries, that genuine humour is always associated with a mood of sym-

pathy. A radical difference is pointed out between the heartlessness of wit, or the unkindness of irony, and the good nature that lurks behind the shrewd reserve of the humourist. There is of course a spice of truth in that comforting doctrine. A bent to humour will imply that a person has a frequent and lively sense of the relativity of things: and such a sense is the best antidote to anger, resentment, harshness of every kind: from it there will radiate out, more often than not, a spirit of indulgence. Humour, moreover, implies self-mastery, since language, to serve its peculiar end, must leave the grooves along which the current of spontaneous expression flows; a twist, a paradox, thus becomes the essential condition of its manner; and not being able to let himself go, the humourous person is naturally in a position to take thought, and correct the first promptings of his mood, if by chance they are deficient in cordiality. . . . Lastly, humour feeds on the picturesque variety of experience; in realism it lives and has its being; and although hatred of the world may prompt and sustain the realistic impulse, it is after all more natural and easier to feast upon the diversity of creatures when our curiosity is spurred by a genuine interest in them.

But that element of truth is not enough to make the theory valid. It is a fact that, if English humourists are most often kindly or genial, humour is not necessarily associated with sympathy. Some of the most genuine and the most brilliant humour in literature would have to be banned from the orthodox pale, if it were so. Irony and humour, the twin growths of the reflective and sophisticated mind of man, are very closely related, hardly distinguishable at times, and shade off into each other. To all practical purposes, they belong together; the domain of irony is a province in the empire of humour. To Swift may be left his eminence,

if not his supremacy, in the rich galaxy of English humourists; although there will be rather few of his type, to the many that crowd around the more benign Addison, and the genial Steele. . . .

The name of Swift, indeed, is more relevant and useful to our purpose, than it would be if just brought in to clench an argument. Humour in *Hamlet* subtly and constantly calls up the grim features of Swiftian humour. Shakespeare's hero strangely adumbrates the man of genius who certainly did not feign madness, but perhaps had madness lurking in the depths of his being. And who will draw the line, in the character of Shakespeare's hero, between the obvious pretense, and the not impossible reality, of an unbalanced mind?

The humour of *Hamlet* should be studied in the terms of the Prince of Denmark, without whom, indeed, in that respect as in most others, there would be nothing left of the play. Besides him, the humourous elements gather around two secondary centres only—the character of Polonius, and the churchyard scene—both of which can be naturally examined in connection with Hamlet himself.

The relation between Hamlet's character and humour is an intimate and deep-laid one. Some rather plain facts must be stressed. The tragic predicament in which he finds himself forces upon him a policy of dissimulation. He must repress his feelings, hide his thoughts; and thus he is led to express nothing but under a veil, to use hints, riddles, puzzling and mystifying words. His mental life develops on a double plane; and the duality of his consciousness is so persistent, that it becomes as it were normal. His mind, however, is vigorous and penetrating; it reaches at one stroke profound intuitive conclusions, sees through the affectations and hypocrisies of others. His judgments upon

life and people are too shrewd not to destroy the glamour of illusion; and the dark mystery of crime in which he finds himself desperately involved brings him into contact with the lowest depths of guilt in men. All that, as well, he must hide, except in his musings, his monologues, or his talks with his safe friend, Horatio; but for those occasions, his watchfulness and caution raise a barrier to the free utterance of his personal feelings and plans, or of his views about the world that surrounds him. By nature he is able to bear such a strain. Of a quick, agile mind, ingenious and eloquent, he is past master in the art of ceaselessly raising a fabric of verbal phantasmagoria; and he knows all the vanity of "words, words, words" the better for his native proficiency in the craft of handling them. Not that his motive is a desire to deceive for the sake of deceiving; what Hamlet wants to communicate is not a spun-out figment of his brain; in all his sincere or affected wildness, he never crosses the line beyond which actual lying would begin; his is a proud, fastidious soul, that will not stoop to the mean, self-interested comedy of fear, to the low devices of cheating. What he is after is ambiguity; a manner, on the face of it, fit to bear a normal construction; vague and enigmatical enough, on the other hand, to make his least intelligent hearers obscurely uneasy, and rouse in the sharpest a disquieting sense of a conscious evasion. It is part and parcel of his strategy to create uncertainty, especially at critical moments, in the minds of his natural adversaries; and he finds in such mystification and bravado a thrill, which owes something to the emotion of danger, for Hamlet is brave, he even shows temerity; he tastes as well in those moments the secret pleasure of not really disguising his thought; indeed, it is not the least significant aspect of the drama that such a sensitively truthful and

candid man should be bound to a policy of equivocation and reticence. His subtlety thus enables him to sustain for a long time the paradox of that two-fold mental life, and from his daring as well as from his intellectual alertness, he gathers an ironical, bitter pleasure, the quality of which is hardly distinguishable from that of humour—its constituent elements being the same—and which seems to anticipate the humourous manner of Swift.

The presence of a hidden meaning, in almost all that Hamlet says, imparts to each and every word a kind of virtual expansiveness. The mental stimulus which we derive from such a method of expression hardly ever rouses actual laughter, neither does Hamlet himself laugh—one fancies him, at most, chuckling inwardly; but the fact that we do not laugh, and rarely smile, is no proof that we are outside the proper field of humourous perception; it must be confessed, however, that no variety of humour can compare with this in concentration; no one possesses a greater force of repressed energy; and by liberating itself in our minds, it sets going a series of endless echoes, in the present instance, of meditative, intellectual echoes; while the absence of all physical relief, of all discharge and fulfilment through laughter, holds us fast in a sense of violence and coercion, of harshness and bitterness. That is no healthy humour, but the seal of the abnormal, even of the morbid, or of the tragic, is plainly stamped upon the whole play.

It is true we should put an end to such generalities, and resume contact with the actuality of the drama. Let us try and catch that original quality of Hamlet's humour in being, as the plot progresses, under some of its aspects; they will appear to us in a series of particularly revealing moments.

Hamlet the humourist literally plays with Polonius. The old man indeed is tempting game; an easy prey, but so repaying, that it may well appeal to a fastidious palate. Their natures are parted by a gulf. Whatever can be seen on the surface of things, with clear-sighted, one might say with shrewd eyes, Polonius sees, and nothing else. Whatever human eyes can perceive beyond the surface, Hamlet perceives; and his sight takes in the surface as well, but chooses not to dwell upon it; he registers it as a matter of course, and from it he derives only the pretexts of his humour, its starting points, one of the planes upon which it plays. Polonius thinks very highly of himself: is he not an experienced counsellor of state, cautious and wise in the estimation of the world? His is a normal, average, tame wisdom, correct enough within its narrow limits, but shut in on every side by invisible barriers, unable even to suspect, much less to cope with the secret dramas of life, and the unfathomable problems with which we are all beset. He is sententious, and would be Machiavellian; but he is only naive; in his inferences he regards himself as secure, whilst he is a prey to the passive working of a judgment which has lost all elasticity. A humorous flavour, since there is implicit comedy, dwells for us in that character of a worthy man whom dotage threatens on every side, and who insists on laying very obvious snares to catch his betters. Of course he will claim to be fully aware of the risks of error—what should experience be good for else—and triumphantly immune from them. The dramatic irony which all along arises from his hidebound cleverness, from his mental associations swayed by merely verbal analogies, has already in itself the tang of pungent humour.

But the potential humour springs into actual, abundant life, when Hamlet, strained, intense, alive to his fingers' tips,

comes across the respectable counsellor, who has taken it upon himself, for the sake of the King, his master, to pluck out the heart of the young man's mystery. . . .

. . . *Polonius*: How does my good lord Hamlet?

Hamlet: Well, God-a-mercy.

Pol.: Do you know me, my lord?

Ham.: Excellent well; you are a fishmonger.

Pol.: Not I, my lord.

Ham.: Then I would you were so honest a man.

Pol.: Honest, my lord!

Ham.: Ay, sir; to be honest as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.

Pol.: That's very true, my lord. (II, ii) . . .

One need not any further quote so familiar a text . . . Hamlet here, as elsewhere, plays a bewildering game, but in the display of his irresponsibility the shafts of implicit satire take effect more surely. As Polonius puts it, there is method in his madness. Is not it worth our while to note that "madness with a method" would be an acceptable, although an outside and wide definition of humour? And when Polonius goes on to remark that Hamlet's answers are "pregnant," does he not show himself alive to that suggestive power which is the characteristic of humourous presentment?

Indeed the virtuality, the expansive power of Hamlet's words, in his most casual retorts, are exceptional, even with Shakespeare. The play as a whole is the drama of reflection. Let us instance that short passage of words between the prince, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which begins:

. . . *Hamlet*: What's the news?

Rosencrantz: None, my lord, but that the world's grown honest.

Hamlet: Then is Doomsday near, but your news is not true. (II, ii) . . .

To the repressed power of resilient thought in compressed expression, there is joined the constant sense of a relativity in all things; and what should be born from the union, but the very soul of humour? "There's nothing either good or bad," Hamlet says, "but thinking makes it so" (II, ii). Those words are an illuminating flash of light upon the play; they sum up the essential experience of a soul that ceaselessly broods over the universal illusion of life. That essence is bitter; it is flavoured with skepticism, with pessimism. Let it impregnate, indeed prompt, the sly exercise of reticence, the under-statements of irony, and it will find its natural outlet in the covert significance of humour. Since everything is relative, why should there not be a dissociation in language between thought and words? Why should not a serious meaning, the vital discovery of illusion, clothe itself with apparent light-heartedness, and the smile of the philosopher hide behind the naive gravity of the clown?

A converse proof of the importance, the quasi-permanence, that the inverted method of presentment assumes in the play, is that on the few occasions when the repression relaxes—for example when Hamlet is speaking to himself, with nothing indirect about his manner—a sense of flatness will creep upon the reader. The monologues of the play are not its most interesting moments; Shakespeare's art there is plain, honest, but distinctly on a lower level. The writer's intuition would not fail to teach him, of course, that some sort of alleviation to constant pressure was indispensable. But even the famous soliloquy of Act III ("To be or not to be . . .") owes its fascination to the direct simplicity with which the most poignant theme in man's

individual experience is handled. This transcends art, this is genius. Still, to the reader spoilt by the prodigious wealth of virtual significance which the ironical scenes lavishly offer, there is almost an anti-climax in the transition from humour to genius.

One may interpret Hamlet's attitude and words in the first interview with the players (II, ii), as showing an undercurrent of irony. Other constructions, of course, have been put upon the passage; but in view of Hamlet's usual manner, a fair case, at least, can be made out for the impression that he must have his tongue more or less in his cheek, when he finds in an obviously ranting piece the virtue of "modesty," and praises it for "an honest method, as wholesome as sweet." One alternative is to launch upon the dangerous waters of textual conjecture, and to hint that un-Shakespearean elements can be detected in the play as we have it. That, one may probably say with a measure of safety; but the giants of criticism are still at odds about the how, the when, and the where. . . .

When Hamlet meets the players again (III, ii), the advice he gives them is certainly straightforward; and what does it amount to? That actors are to preserve the values of discretion, and not to "overstep the modesty of nature"; they must leave the audience the pleasure of meeting them half-way. The clowns, in particular, must not overdo their effects; they are to speak no more than is set down for them, nor must they lose caste in the manner of those "that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too." The stress is laid here indubitably upon the reticence, the reserve of genuine art, and by the same token, of humour, since there is no humour without some restraint. The rule that the comic characters are not themselves to laugh, does hit unerringly the central trick

in the strategy of humorists. Taken in connection with Falstaff's remarkable phrase: "a jest with a sad brow" (Second Henry IV, v, i), this passage throws full light on the very clear realization which Shakespeare had worked out, before any other English writer, of the characteristic manner of humour.

The further progress of this scene with the "play within the play," shows us Hamlet, once more, in company with his mother and the King; and his few answers to them, brief and steely, are loaded with a dreadful intensity of implicit meaning; with a threatening, murderous irony, probably the extreme form of what humour can be when divested of the gentleness with which it is most often humanized.

Is Hamlet always master of himself? Not by any means. His fierce exulting triumph, when the King can bear the strain of remorse no longer, and hastily walks away, breaks through his guard; as does indignation in his scathing words to his mother (III, IV). This, again, is true to nature: not only must the mask of indirectness be at times laid down—for instance in the relaxed moments of communion with one's self, in the monologues—but it should occasionally be wrenched off by the violence of unrestrained feeling. Irony here gives place to bitterness. It might be tempting to explain in a similar fashion Hamlet's extraordinary outbursts of brutal, insulting grossness to Ophelia. But the more probable interpretation is that while the degree of his rudeness may be miscalculated under the stress of his bitter passion, still his behaviour is largely a matter of desperate policy; he wants to kill his affection, and hits upon the savage plan of desecrating it in his own eyes. What concerns us is that on all those occasions, as the indirect method of expression is dropped, there is a perceptible falling off in

the character, from its usual pitch of concentration and self-command.

More than ever filled with a grim humour of ominous threatening significance are Hamlet's answers to Rosenkrantz, Guildenstern, and the King himself, at the beginning of Act iv. He now is no longer in doubt; and the edge of his scorn is sharpened by his certainty. No wider background of implications can be conveyed by words on the stage; and the minds of the spectators must be singularly quick, if in the rapid succession of those flashes, the mental fields illuminated are to be caught up and explored. It is impossible not to remember, when reading the play at leisure, that its length much exceeds the average duration of an Elizabethan performance; and that Shakespeare, here at last, must have written whole speeches with the assurance that he was writing for himself—or for the library, not for the stage.

The end of Act III and part of Act IV are inferior in concentration and power of phrasing. It seems plain that the poet is working upon the pattern of a previous play, however free his recasting may be; and that he is raising an ordinary "revenge tragedy" to heights which it had not been planned to reach. At all such moments, again, the quality of the art is perceptibly lowered; facts, naked explicit facts, that must be shown or told, are breaking the spell of a purely implicit play, which tends to be enacted only in our imaginations.

Lastly, the Fifth Act and the scene in the churchyard offer us the quintessential spirit of the play—a tragic, philosophical spirit of humour. Supremely rich, supremely moving suggestions reverberate through our minds in silent echoes from the theme, the situation, the spoken words. In that wealth of implicit significance the properly comic element is very small, and such as there is appears

only at intervals. Humour here lives exclusively in intellectual emotions; its quality is almost entirely serious.

The poignant episode of the churchyard is of an extraordinary simplicity in its boldness. Never had a writer before dared to put upon the stage the attendant images of physical death with that unflinching directness. The whole thing is obvious, elementary—and bears the stamp of genius. The tone is more than ever that of Swiftian irony. Puns, verbal quibblings, enter into the atmosphere of sinister suggestion. Their very presence points to an irresponsibility of the mind, which we interpret instinctively as a sign of an inner strain, so violent that it must find relief at any cost.

One of the points where the strong undercurrent of grim humour most plainly breaks out, and where the groundlings are distinctly appealed to, is the jocular passage of words about England: in that country Hamlet's madness must have passed quite unnoticed, since everybody is more or less mad there. . . .

The moment when Yorick's skull is dug out with its empty sockets and gaping mouth is loaded, of course, with symbolical meaning. An association is thus created between two sets of images: a tragic, a funereal background suddenly appears behind the very type of human pleasantry, in its most specialized and professional form: the jester. . . . Yorick's skull laughs now with a different grin; and death himself stares through the vacant orbits of the silenced fool. It is no wonder that Sterne, the most complete humorist of the eighteenth century should have selected for his literary personality the name of Yorick, and thus have linked up his finished, absolute humour with that symbol of the grim contrast which the thought of destruction forces upon the mirth of man.

After that, we still have Hamlet's humour at a relaxed pitch, almost lively enough to make us laugh, in the scene with Osric (v, ii), where he plays in masterly fashion with that servile courtier's meanness. He mocks Osric's far-fetched, artificial manner, and caps his conceits with a more dazzling display. Shakespeare's object is plain: he wishes to satirize, once more, such cheap tricks of verbal jugglery, the besetting sin of the age; and whilst proving himself second to none in the art, he shows up the unsubstantial vanity of it.

But the shadow which approaching events cast before is drawing near, and every one of the spectators shares in Hamlet's awareness of it. He meets his fate with open eyes. When he falls, after finding strength in a quick, desperate rush to fulfill the duty of justice that had wrought so strangely upon his life, his last words call up again that sense of the unexpressed, if not the inexpressible, which is the centre of his personality, as it is that of humour: a significance is finally liberated that will grow and expand forever; and how could any comment be of further purpose, when this has been uttered: "The rest is silence"?

Silence it cannot be yet for me, as some conclusion, however tentative, must be reached. Since in the most thoughtful and one of the most tragic of Shakespeare's dramas—in the tragedy of reflection, as we called it—humour of a kind can be found, entering so intimately into the very texture of the principal character, and through that character, of the play, shall we not be justified in saying that humour is, to a greater degree perhaps than has been generally conceded, essential to and co-extensive with Shakespeare's mind? Its presence and diffuseness in *Hamlet* should no longer remain a paradox, as soon as we take stock of the fact that the tragic mood tempered and modified by search-

ing thought provides just the duality and the contrast which are the main constituents of humour. Equally intelligible and more natural is, in other plays, the rise of virtual humour through the fusion of comedy and of thought. The comedy here is so entirely a matter of reflection, that the resulting humour hardly ever materializes into a smile-provoking energy; it hovers, like a refined and a sardonic essence, over the drama as a whole; the tragic Muse, watching it, will show on her lips just the slightest dip of irony within the quieter curves of pity and sadness. But that spiritual portrait of the greatest dramatic genius, which each of us does create and call up from the fascination of the play, from the experience of a moved, a wondering and an enslaved spirit, will not fail to wear, in the wistful contemplation that transcends laughter and tears, the gleam of a pensive amusement that sublimates and includes them both.

LOUIS CAZAMIAN.