

Eleanor Prosser's Hamlet and Revenge: Critical Comments

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English 640
December 1, 1976

Eleanor Prosser's Hamlet and Revenge (Stanford, 1967) follows the modern approach to Shakespearean criticism begun by E. E. Stoll around 1919. The idea that Hamlet, like all other Shakespearean plays, should be interpreted from instinct rather than conditioning is, according to Miss Prosser, a "new perspective" which breathes fresh air upon the miasma caused by our previously accepted misconceptions. It is the purpose here, then, to respond as naturally to Miss Prosser as she would have an audience respond to Hamlet.

The primary focus of this abundantly documented book is the Prayer Scene (III.iii.36-98). Hamlet's refusal to kill Claudius at prayer raises many questions, the most profound being whether or not the eternal damnation which Hamlet desires for Claudius (an obviously pagan concept) can be accepted behavior in a play so "packed with Christian references." Refuting the critics who maintain that Hamlet is "merely voicing a conventional sentiment of the Elizabethan stage", Miss Prosser assumes "his [Shakespeare's] audience was undoubtedly as morally revolted by Hamlet's malevolence in the Prayer Scene as the modern reader is. Our instincts are valid." (pp. 189-90)

Are they, however? Miss Prosser uses her thorough and extensive (if a bit verbose) scholarship as carte blanche in drawing many one-sided conclusions. This is one. It is indeed possible that Hamlet's audience, then and now, is prepared for seemingly intoler-

able behavior when Hamlet resolves:

"Yea, from the table of my memory I'll wipe away
all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressure past
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter."¹(I.V.98-104)

At this point in the play the Ghost has exited, instructing Hamlet to get revenge but "Taint not thy mind." Since, as Prosser makes eminently clear throughout her text, revenge is considered a sin in Elizabethan England, Hamlet's thoughts and actions can no longer be representative of the true Renaissance man. Hamlet confesses to Rosencrants and Guildenstern:

"I have of late - but wherefore I know not - lost
all my mirth [Optimism], foregone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory...Man delights not me - nor woman neither...." (II.ii.291-305)

Certainly this change in Hamlet is observed by Ophelia who, in lamenting "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!", then proceeds to recall the "courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword" of the "Before" Hamlet (termed thus by Professor Richard J. Jaarsma). *Note please!* Are we to believe that although the characters are aware of Hamlet's sudden perverseness, the audience is not? Miss Prosser would have been better advised not to assume that the twentieth century knows

¹Quotations from Hamlet are based upon the edition of Irving Ribner and George Lyman Kittredge (Toronto, 1971).

more about the morals and ethics of Elizabethan England than did the Elizabethans.

Another crucial scene in interpreting Hamlet's modus operandi is the Closet Scene which immediately follows the Prayer Scene. At this climactic moment in the play, Hamlet shows a sudden burst of energy that has caused a schism among critics ever since. Who does Hamlet think is behind the arras? Prosser expresses a strong, almost dogmatic, argument for Claudius:

/.The Elizabethan stage is completely unlocalized. A spectator never pauses to consider what room is where or how long adjoining corridors may be. The action is too swift to allow him to consider anything but what is specifically mentioned or enacted. Hamlet wanted to catch Claudius in just such a place. He assumes the eavesdropper is Claudius. Claudius believes that Hamlet assumed it was he. The spectator is given no reason to doubt it. (p.192)

There is one serious flaw in this logic, however. If Hamlet thinks he is stabbing Claudius, then the play is virtually over. All Hamlet, now so resolute, has to do is the mere formality of stalking off after Claudius and finishing the job he is obviously prepared to do. Opposing the Claudius theory, other critics (notably Harley Granville-Barker and Richard J. Jaarsma) ^{find} base their stand on the actual text of the play. Hamlet's simple reply to his mother's beseeching "O me, what hast thou done?" is "Nay, I know not. Is it

the King?" He obviously does not know whom he has killed until he draws the curtain. Then, upon seeing Polonius, Hamlet's lack of contrition is not, as Prosser surmises, part of his "progressive descent into evil." Again, the spectator can readily perceive the "After" Hamlet, a young man drained of his essence by a ghost who would have him "Taint not thy mind."

The ghost is the secondary focus of Miss Prosser's investigation. Called the "linchpin of Hamlet" by J. Dover Wilson, this apparition with the appearance of King Hamlet is not King Hamlet at all, says Prosser, but "the Devil - for such I conceive the Ghost to be." (p.138) Surely Professor Prosser offers convincing proof that, if not the Devil, then certainly the Ghost is an evil spirit. Although Catholics and Protestants argued over the existence of Purgatory, they agreed that a soul could not return from Heaven or Hell. That buttresses the spirit belief.

Now, however, suspicion creeps into the minds of the audience:

"The nature of the Ghost is thrown into question as it is in no other play of the Elizabethan or Jacobean period, and Shakespeare may well have intended to jolt his audience into a fresh response to what had become a hackneyed convention. For the first time, they were to decide whether a stage ghost was a good spirit or an evil one, and they were to do so on religious principles. Marcellus's

speech on the cock and the Advent of 'our Saviour's birth' makes the play's Christian context unmistakable...."(P.102)

Other clues are also given. The Ghost becomes "offended" when Horatio charges it "By heaven" to speak. Scholarly Horatio then reflects:

"In what particular thought to work I know not;
But, in the gross and scope of mine opinion,
This bodes some strange eruption to our state."
(I.i. 67-9)

One could hardly consider that an expression of a feeling left by a good spirit. Consider also, Miss Prosser states, to whom the ghost appears:

"If to a man of healthy mind and stable faith, it may be either good or evil, for God permits the testing of the virtuous. If, however, a ghost appears to any of the following, it is unquestionably demonic: the superstitious, the simple and credulous, innocent children, murderers and tyrants, demoniacs and magicians, and - above all - melancholics." (P.110)

Hamlet, then, says Prosser, is a prime candidate for a ghostly visit:

"Is there not also a hint that Hamlet's grief may make him spiritually vulnerable? We need no Elizabethan treatise on mental pathology to tell us that he is melancholy, that he is in an emotional state that could lead to deep depression." (p.127)

The story of Hamlet really begins, as Elizabethans could see, because of his vulnerability, and, once he makes contact with the ghost (The Devil, according to Prosser), Hamlet is doomed to be taken

further down the path of evil.

Professor Prosser concludes by reiterating the importance of the audience not to be taken in by "codes and counter-codes, about sources and conventions, but - to respond as naturally as one would to a modern play." If we can, says Prosser, we can then begin to understand that the plight of Hamlet has always been - and always will be.

Thus Hamlet and Revenge, despite an individual critic's disagreements or unanswered questions, is most assuredly a significant contribution to the ever-increasing body of facts and ideas that we are gleaning because of professors like Eleanor Prosser. Certainly the scholarship shown in this study is of the highest quality. The approximate one-third of the book devoted to an Elizabethan history of revenge gives the reader the background necessary to fathom the rather lengthy remainder which focuses on Hamlet's revenge, the actions and the reasons, throughout the entire play.

As for the heart and mind of Hamlet, Miss Prosser's book has not closed all doors; in fact, it has opened many. Written during a period in Shakespeare's career when he concentrated on tragedies only, the play shows the master at his very best. Hamlet, obvious to some, enigmatic to others, has been stripped, decorated, cut apart, glued together, folded, spindled, and finally mutilated, yet he still

causes more arguments among scholars than perhaps does any other Shakespearean character. Perhaps it is Prince Hamlet's ghost seeking retribution upon the intelligentsia. Perhaps Hamlet is Kit Smart's and not William Shakespeare's play. I think not, however. In creating Hamlet, Shakespeare has, it seems to me, given the world a multi-faceted character and play that no book or essay can ever totally capture. Mark Anthony's words perhaps ring as true for Hamlet as they do for Caesar:

"If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
And grievously hath **[Hamlet]** answer'd it."

*An excellent, tight, and perceptive
analysis*

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