

VICTOR HUGO ON HAMLET, OTHELLO, AND LEAR

KING LEAR.



Edwin Forrest as King Lear
Act IV, scene VI. "Ay, every inch
a King" — FROM THE WENDELL
COLLECTION.

The Great French- man's View of Three Great Tragedies

From Victor Hugo's "William Shakespeare,"
(A. C. McClurg & Co., 1891.)

HAMLET, that awful being complete in incompleteness; all, in order to be nothing! He is Prince and demagogue, sagacious and extravagant, profound and frivolous, man and natter. He has little faith in the sceptre, ruler at the throne, has a student for his comrade, converses with any one passing by, argues with the first comer, understands the people, despises the mob, hates violence, distrusts success, questions obscurity, and is on speaking terms with mystery. He communicates to others maladies that he has not himself; his feigned madness inoculates his mistress with real madness. He is familiar with spectres and with actors. He jests, with the axe of Orestes in his hand. He talks literature, recites verses, composes a theatrical criticism, plays with the bones in a churchyard, dumsounds his mother, avenges his father, and closes the dread drama of life and death with a significant point of interrogation. He terrifies, and then disconcerts. Never has anything more overwhelming been dreamed. It is the parricide saying, "What do I know?"

Parricide? Let us pause upon that word. Is Hamlet a parricide? Yes, and no. He confines himself to threatening his mother, but the threat is so fierce that the mother shudders. "Thy word is a dagger! . . . What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me? Help! help! ho!"—and when she dies, Hamlet, without grieving for her, strikes Claudius with the tragic cry: "Follow my mother!" Hamlet is that sinister thing, the possible parricide.

Instead of the North, which he has in his brain, let him have, like Orestes, the South in his veins, and he will kill his mother.

This drama is stern. In its truth doubts, sincerity lies. Nothing can be vaster, nothing subtler. In it man is the world, and the world is zero. Hamlet, even in full life, is not sure of his existence. In this tragedy—everything floats, hesitates, shuffles, staggers, becomes discomposed, scatters, and is dispersed. Thought is a cloud, will is a vapor, resolution a twilight; the action blows every moment from a different direction; the mariner's card governs man. A work which disturbs and makes dizzy; in which the bottom of everything is laid bare; where the pendulum of thought oscillates only from the murdered King to buried Yorick; and where that which is most real is kingliness impersonated in a ghost, and mirth represented by a death's head.

Hamlet is the supreme tragedy of the human dream. One of the probable causes of the feigned madness of Hamlet has not been, up to the present time, indicated by critics. It has been said, "Hamlet acts the madman to hide his thought, like Brutus." In fact, it is easy for apparent imbecility to hatch a great project; the supposed idiot can take aim deliberately. But the case of Brutus is not that of Hamlet. Hamlet acts the madman for his safety. Brutus screens his project, Hamlet his person.

Given the manners of those tragic courts, from the moment that, through the revelation of the ghost, Hamlet is acquainted with the crime of Claudius, he is in danger. The superior historian within the poet is manifested, and one feels the deep insight of Shakespeare into the darkness of the ancient royalty. In the Middle Ages and in the Eastern Empire, and even at earlier periods, we unto him who found out a murder or a poisoning committed by a King!

Ovid, according to Voltaire's conjecture, was exiled from Rome for having seen something shameful in the house of Augustus. To know that the King was an assassin was a state crime. When it pleased the Prince not to have had a witness, it was a matter of life and death to know nothing; it was bad policy to have good eyes. A man suspected of suspicion was lost. He had but one refuge—madness; to pass for "an innocent"—he was despised, and that, was all. You remember the advice that, in Aeschylus the



Louisa Brunton (Afterward Countess of Craven) as Cordelia.
From a print of 1785

Ocean gives to Prometheus: "To seem mad is the secret of the sage." When the Chamberlain Hugolin found the iron spit with which Edric of Mercia had impaled Edmund II., "he hastened to put on madness," says the Saxon Chronicle of 1016, and saved himself in that way. Heracles of Nisibis, having discovered by chance that Rhinometer was a fratricide, had himself declared insane by the doctors, and succeeded in getting himself shut up for life in a cloister. He thus lived peaceably, growing old, and waiting for death with a vacant stare.

Hamlet runs the same risk, and has recourse to the same means. He gets himself declared insane like Heracles and puts on madness like Hugolin. This does not prevent the uneasy Claudius from twice making an effort to get rid of him—in the middle of the drama by the axe or the dagger, and toward the end by poison.

The same indication is again found in "King Lear"; the Earl of Gloucester's son takes refuge also in apparent lunacy. Herein is a key to open and understand Shakespeare's thought. To the eyes of the philosophy of Art, the feigned madness of Edgar throws light upon the feigned madness of Hamlet.

The Hamlet of Belleforest is a magician; the Hamlet of Shakespeare is a philosopher. We just now spoke of the singular reality which characterizes poetical creations. There is no more striking example than this type, Hamlet. Hamlet is not in the least an abstraction. He has been at the center of the Italian politeness; he is short, plump, somewhat lymphatic; he fences well, but is soon out of breath. He does not care to drink too soon during the fencing bout with Laertes, probably for fear of sweating. After having thus supplied his personage with real life, the poet can launch him into the full ideal; there is balance enough.

Other works of the human mind equal "Hamlet"; none surpasses it. There is in "Hamlet" all the majesty of the marvellous. A drama issuing from an open sepulchre—this is colossal. "Hamlet" is to our mind Shakespeare's capital work.

No figure among those that poets have created is more poignant and more disquieting. Doubt counseled by a ghost—such is Hamlet. Hamlet has seen his dead father and has spoken to him. Is he convinced? No; he shakes his head. What shall he do? He does not know. His hands clench, then fall by his side. Within him are conjectures, systems, monstrous apparitions, bloody recollections, veneration for the ghost, hate, tenderness, anxiety to act and not to act, his father, his mother, conflicting duties—a profound storm. His mind is occupied with ghastly hesitation.

Shakespeare, wonderful plastic poet, makes the grandiose pallor of the madman visible. Like the great spectre of Albrecht Dürer, Hamlet might be named "Melancholia." Above his head, too, there flits the disemboweled bat; at his feet are science, the sphere, the compass, the hour-glass, love, and behind him, at the horizon, a great and terrible sun, which seems to make the sky but darker.

Nevertheless, at least one-half of Hamlet is anger, transport, outrage, hurricane, sarcasm to Ophelia, malediction on his mother, insult to himself. He talks with the gravediggers, almost laughs, then clutches Laertes by the hair in the very grave of Ophelia, and tramples furiously upon that coffin. Sword thrusts at Polonius, sword thrusts at Laertes sword thrusts at Claudius. At times his inaction yawns open, and from the rent thunderbolts flash out.

He is tormented by that possible life, interwoven of reality and dream, concerning which we are all anxious. Sombulism is diffused through all his actions. One might almost consider his brain as a formation; there is a layer of suffering, a layer of thought, then a layer of dream. It is through this layer of dream that he feels, comprehends, learns, perceives, drinks, eats, frets, mocks, weeps, and reasons.

There is between life and him a transparency—the wall of dreams; one sees beyond it, but one cannot step over it. A kind of cloudy obstacle everywhere surrounds Hamlet. Have you never, while sleeping, had the nightmare of pursuit or flight, and tried to hasten on and felt the anchylosis of your knees, the heaviness of your arms, the horrible paralysis of your benumbed hands? This nightmare Hamlet suffers while awake.

Hamlet is not upon the spot where his life is. He has ever the air of a man who talks to you from the other side of a stream. He calls to you at the same time

that he questions you. He is at a distance from the catastrophe in which he moves, from the passer-by he questions, from the thought he bears, from the action he performs. He seems not to touch even what he crushes.

This is isolation carried to its highest power. It is the loneliness of a mind, even more than the unapproachableness of a Prince. Indecision is, in fact, a solitude; you have not even your will to keep you company. It is as if your own self had departed and had left you there. The burden of Hamlet is less rigid than that of Orestes; it fits pater to his form; Orestes bears fatality, Hamlet destiny.

And thus, apart from men, Hamlet still has within him an undefined something which represents them all. Agnosco fratrem. If at certain hours we felt our own pulse, we should be conscious of his reality, after that. He is the mournful man that we all are in certain situations. Unhealthy as he is, Hamlet expresses a permanent condition of man. He represents the discomfort of the soul in a life unsuited to it. He represents the shoe that pinches and stops our walking; this shoe is the body. Shakespeare delivers him from it, and rightly.

Hamlet—Prince of you like, but King never—is incapable of governing a people, so wholly apart from all does he exist. On the other hand, he does better than to reign; he is. Take from him his family, his country, his ghost, the whole adventure of Elsinore, and even in the form of an inactive type he remains strangely terrible. This results from the amount of humanity and the amount of mystery in

The African adores the white man. Othello has for his light and for his frenzy Desdemona. And then, how easy to him is jealousy! He is great, he is dignified, he is majestic, he soars above all heads; he has as an escort bravery, battle, the braying of trumpets, the banners of war, renown, glory; he is radiant with twenty victories, he is studied with stars, this Othello; but he is black. And thus how soon, when jealous, the hero becomes the monster, the black becomes the negro! How speedily has night beckoned to death! By the side of Othello, who is night, there is Iago, who is evil—evil, the other form of darkness. Night is but the night of the world; evil is the night of the soul. How deeply black are perfidy and falsehood! It is all one, whether what courses through the veins be ink or treason. Whoever has jostled against imposture and perjury with knavery. Pour hypocrisy upon the break of day, and you put out the sun; and this, thanks to false religions, is what



King Lear ~ Act III, scene II.
"Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters' blessing"

him. Hamlet is formidable—which does not prevent his being ironical. He has the two profiles of destiny.

Let us retract a word said above. The capital work of Shakespeare is not "Hamlet"; the capital work of Shakespeare is all Shakespeare. This is, moreover, true of all minds of this order. They are mass, block, majesty, bible; and their unity is what renders them impressive.

Have you never gazed upon a beclouded headland running out beyond eyesight into the deep sea? Each of its hills contributes to its make-up. No one of its undulations is lost upon it. Its bold outline is sharply marked upon the sky, and juts far out amid the waves; and there is not a useless rock. Thanks to this cape, you can go amidst the boundless waters, walk among the winds, see closely the eagles soar and the monsters swim, let your humanity wander in the eternal uproar, penetrate the impenetrable. A genius is a headland into the infinite.

Now, what is Othello? He is the night. An immense fatal figure. Night is amor-ous of day. Darkness loves the dawn.



Othello ~ Emilia ~ She lov'd thee, cruel Moor. Act V, scene II.

Lear is the occasion for Cordelia. Maternity of the daughter toward the father. Profound subject! A maternity venerable among all other maternities, so admirably translated by the legend of that Roman girl who in the depth of a prison nurses her old father. The young breast near the white beard; there is no holier sight! Such a filial breast is Cordelia!

Once this figure dreamed of and found, Shakespeare created his drama. Where should he put this consoling vision? In an obscure age. Shakespeare has taken the year of the world 3105, the time when Josiah was King of Judah, Asanippus King of France, and Leir King of England. The whole earth was at that time mysterious. Picture to yourself that epoch.

The temple of Jerusalem is still quite new; the gardens of Semiramis, constructed 900 years before, are beginning to crumble; the first gold coin appears in Aegina; the first balance is made by Phidon, tyrant of Argos; the eclipse of the sun is calculated by the Chinese; 312 years have passed since Orestes, accused by the Eumenides before the Areopagus, was acquitted; Hesiod is just dead; Homer, if he still lives, is 100 years old; Lycurgus, thoughtful traveler, re-enters Sparta; and one may perceive in the depth of the sombre cloud of the Orient the chariot of fire which carries Elijah away; it is at that period that Leir—Lear—lives and reigns over the dark islands.

Jonas, Holofernes, Draco, Solon, Thespis, Nebuchadnezzar, Anaximenes, who is to invent the signs of the zodiac; Cyrus, Zoroaster, Tarquin, Pythagoras, Aeschylus, are not yet born; Coriolanus, Xerxes, Cincinnatus, Pericles, Socrates, Brennus, Aristotle, Timoleon, Demosethes, Alexander, Epicurus, Hannibal, are ghosts awaiting their hour to enter among men; Judas Maccabaeus, Viriatus, Popilius, Jugurtha, Mithridates, Marius and Sylla, Caesar and Pompey, Cleopatra and Antony, are far away in the future; and at the moment when Lear is King of Britain and of Ireland there must pass away 895 years before Virgil says "Penitus toto divisos orbe Britannos," and 900 years before Seneca says "Ultima Thule." The Picts and the Celts (the Scotch and the English) are tattooed. A redskin of the present day gives a vague idea of an Englishman then.

It is this twilight that Shakespeare has chosen—a long, dreamy night in which the inventor is free to put anything he likes; this King Lear, and then a King of France, a Duke of Burgundy, a Duke of Cornwall, a Duke of Albany, an Earl of Kent, and an Earl of Gloucester. What matters your history to him who has humanity? Besides, he has with him the legend, which is also a kind of science, and as true as history, perhaps, although from another point of view.

Shakespeare agrees with Walter Mapes, Archdeacon of Oxford—that is something; he admits, from Brutus to Caldwalla, the ninety-nine Celtic Kings who have preceded the Scandinavian Hengist and the Saxon Horsa; and since he believes in Mulmutus, Clingill, Ceolulf, Cassibelan, Cymbeline, Cynolph, Arviragus, Guiderius, Esculin, Cudred, Vortigern, Arthur, Uther Pendragon, he has every right to believe in King Lear, and to create Cordelia. This site adopted, the place for the scene marked out, the foundation laid deep, he takes all in hand and builds his work,—unheard-of edifice.

He takes tyranny, of which at a later period he will make weakness.—Lear; he takes treason—Edmund; he takes devotion—Kent; he takes ingratitude, which begins with a care and he gives to this monster two heads—Goneril, whom the legend calls Gonerille, and Regan, whom the legend calls Ragau; he takes pater- nity; he takes royalty; he takes feudality; he takes ambition; he takes madness, which he divides, and he places face to face three madmen—the King's buffoon, madman by trade; Edgar of Gloucester, mad for prudence sake; the King, mad through misery. It is at the summit of this tragic pile that he sets the bending form of Cordelia.

There are some formidable cathedral towers,—as, for instance, the Giralda of Seville,—which seem made all complete, with their spirals, their staircases, their sculptures, their cellars, their caecuma, their aerial cells, their sounding chambers, their bells, their walling, and their mass and their spire, and all their vastness, in order to support an angel spreading its golden wings. Such is the drama "King Lear."

The father is the pretext for the daughter. That admirable human creature, Lear, serves as a support to this ineffably divine creation, Cordelia. All that chaos of crimes, vices, manias, and miseries finds its justification in this shining vision of virtue. Shakespeare, bearing Cordelia in his brain, in creating this tragedy was like a god who, having an Aurora to establish, should make a world to put her in.

And what a figure is that father! What a tyrant! It is man stooping. He does nothing but shift his burdens for others that are heavier. The more the old man becomes enfeebled, the more his load augments. He lies under an overburden. He bears at first power, then ingratitude, then isolation, then despair, then hunger and thirst, then madness, then all Nature. Clouds overcast him, forests heap their shadow upon him, the hurricane swoops down upon the nape of his neck, the tempest makes his mantle heavy as lead, the rain weighs upon his shoulders, he walks bent and haggard as if he had the two knees of Night upon his back. Dismayed and yet colossal, he flings to the winds and to the hail this epic cry: "Why do ye hate me, Tempests? Why do ye persecute me? Ye are not my daughters!"

And then all is over; the light is extinguished; reason loses courage, and leaves him; Lear is in his dotage. This old man, being childish, requires a mother. His daughter appears, his only daughter, Cordelia. For the two others, Regan and Goneril, are no longer his daughters—save so far as to entitle them to the name of parricides.

Cordelia approaches.—"Sir, do you know me?" "You are a spirit, I know," replies the old man, with the sublime clairvoyance of frenzy. From this moment the filial nursing begins. Cordelia applies herself to nursing this old, despairing soul, dying of inanition in hatred. Cordelia nourishes Lear with love, and his courage revives; she nourishes him with respect, and the smile returns; she nourishes him with hope, and confidence is restored; she nourishes him with wisdom, and reason awakens. Lear, convalescent, rises again, and step by step returns again to life; the child becomes again an old man, the old man becomes a man again. And behold him happy, this wretched one!

It is upon this expansion of happiness that the catastrophe is hurled down. Alas! There are traitors, there are perjurers, there are murderers. Cordelia dies. Nothing more heart-rending than this. The old man is stunned; he no longer understands anything; and, embracing her corpse, he expires. He dies upon his daughter's breast. He is saved from the supreme despair of remaining behind her among the living, a poor shadow, to feel the place in his heart empty, and to seek for his soul, carried away by that sweet being who is departed. O God! the words whom Thou lovest Thou takest away.

To live after the flight of an angel; to be the father orphaned of his child; to be the eye that no longer has light; to be the deadened heart that knows no more joy; from time to time to stretch the hands into obscurity and try to recapture a being who was there, (where, then, can she be?); to feel himself forgotten in that departure; to have lost all reason for being here below; to be henceforth a man who goes to and fro before a sepulchre, not received, not admitted—this is indeed a gloomy destiny. Thou hast done well, poet, to kill this old man.

For rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters; I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness; I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children. You owe me no subscription.

Act III, Scene II.