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Footsteps on the Battlements

Sylvia Townsend Warner*

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*(1893–1978)

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Abstract

Writing in 1948, Sylvia Townsend Warner takes a sceptical look at recent trends in performances of *Hamlet* on stage and screen, and also at academic and psychoanalytic discussions of the play.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; *Hamlet*; Laurence Olivier; Ernest Jones.

Expressing a divided personality by being A and B on alternate evenings, a ruthless egotist full of moral sensibility wandered through neo-Byzantine halls, suffering from an Oedipus complex, wearing peg-top trousers and unable to make up his mind though relieved of the obligation to say what is expected of him ... Yes, it is Hamlet; and these are some of the latest bulletins on his condition, drawn from Dr. Ernest Jones, Mr. Roy Walker, Senor Madariago, and reviews of two stage productions and a film.¹

Of course it is Hamlet. Who but Hamlet calls out so much ingenuity, solicitude, insight, explaining, explaining away, coddling, swaddling and twaddling? For professors of English literature, psychologists, moralists, and producers, are all men of action. Murder comes to them as naturally as sneezing. You conceive an impulse to do away with a gentleman older than yourself who has done your family an injury; you put it into effect. Nothing could be easier or more straightforward. And that anyone can conceive such an impulse in Act One and hang till Act Five before acting on it fills them with such concern and understanding sympathy for a maladjusted character that there is next to nothing they won't do to show this unfortunate person in a more favourable light.

'Had Hamlet gone naturally to work, there would have been an end of our play.'² This observation, made in 1730, shows how even at that date Hamlet was recognised as a special case. A stage, and an actor, might be enough for Macbeth or Othello, and no doubt some actors claimed, might be enough for Hamlet. The better sort of thinkers know otherwise; if Hamlet is to be got out of his difficulties, such rude horse-surgery is not enough.

'For Hamlet a lovely voice is essential.' This prescription comes from Dr. Harold Hobson. But a lovely voice is not enough, for Hamlet's hair is also a matter of great importance. 'Mr Eddison possesses an excellent *mezzo voce* but has few vocal reserves on which to draw. Also the dressing of his hair over-feminises his appearance. Despite these defects...' That is Dr. Beverley Baxter, M.P. Dr Ivor Brown makes a similar diagnosis. 'He impressed me as needing aspirin and a hair-cut.' While not actually called in to prescribe for a different Hamlet, Dr. Brown cannot pass the bedside without a warning word. 'Leaving the new film's criticism to my colleague, I only venture to suggest that the dashing and brilliant Olivier's platinum pow ...'³ and Dr. Lejeune also shakes her head over this vital deficiency ... 'bleached hair that adds no Scandinavian tincture to the piece, and ages him unnecessarily.' 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother. But the Faculty seem to find an inky frock-coat more satisfying. I have not noticed any regrets about Hamlet's hair in the Stratford production, unless Dr Brown's statement that Helpmann's performance 'is as an electric candle to Scofield's quivering torch', is to be read as indicating that Mr. Helpmann's hair is smooth and Mr. Scofield's curly.

In writing of the Stratford *victoriana* Dr Alan Dent has a more breezy bedside manner. 'My own view is that *Hamlet* would continue to be a great and exciting play if it were set in the West Indies with the men wearing nothing but loin-cloths and the women sarongs.' This is a courageous affirmation of faith in the patient's constitution; but I fear it is dangerous. That *if* might so easily read as a *provided that*, and just as experts on child-welfare toss away blankets and cot-curtains, experts on Hamlet-welfare will produce him in a loin-cloth – though the setting will probably be Mexican baroque.

It is left to Dr. Richard Winnington to make the most pregnant suggestion, and the one which, in my opinion, is likely to give the most interesting clinical results. In his notice of the Hamlet film, Dr. Winnington says nothing about Hamlet's hair – mere palliative allopathy, I daresay, to him. He is all for plastic surgery. 'It is not,' says he, 'until Eileen Herlie (Queen Gertrude) drinks the poisoned cup, that this great

drama fuses and reaches out at us from the screen. That one small scene, wherein for the first time in any version of *Hamlet* Gertrude knowingly poisons herself, points the admirable failure of all the rest of the film.'

Now I consider this very interesting, for it moves the diagnosis into an entirely new field. What is wrong with *Hamlet* is not, as we have so mistakenly supposed, Hamlet himself. Re-shape Shakespeare's action and characterisation, and the great drama of *Hamlet* will fuse and reach out at us – whatever that may mean; but obviously it means something highly pleasurable. Here, in parenthesis, I must remark that Dr. Winnington's methods were favoured by other eminent practitioners in the past: Dr Cibber, for instance, was all for plastic surgery. But leaving this on one side, let us speculate on the possibilities now opened to us; and though it is tempting to think what plastic surgery might do for other Shakespearean problem plays, *Timon of Athens*, for instance with his face lifted, *Titus Andronicus* with a new heart, let us keep to *Hamlet*. By poisoning herself deliberately instead of taking poison by accident, Queen Gertrude is transformed from Shakespeare's kind-hearted, easy-going and enigmatically stupid matron to a sympathetic and contemporary character. She leaps in one bound from the first folio to News of the World.

Other grafts of contemporary tissue should be tried, and especially, I think, non-theatrical grafts. One of the past troubles with *Hamlet* has been the selfish conservatism of actors, who will insist on acting him – ranting about on a stage, as if the rendering of the part were no more than a matter between themselves and Shakespeare, and slighting the proffered co-operation of Shakespearean interpreters. Here is Mr. Walker, for instance, interpreting the play of *Hamlet*, line by line, with a devotional expositiveness that used in other days to be reserved for the Book of Daniel. 'Hamlet's acquiescence is significant. He leans suddenly towards his mother – "I shall in all my best obey you, madam." The words have an inner meaning he does not intend. Too often he will obey his mother's nature in him when struggling to give of his best.' Here is Dr. Ernest Jones, proving that *Hamlet* hangs back from killing Claudius, because in killing *Hamlet*'s father and bedding the Queen, Claudius has done what *Hamlet* wished to do, and that 'the relationship with Ophelia never flowers' because she is 'in part felt to be a permitted substitute for the desired relationship with Laertes.' But carried away by the gross raptures of acting the part of *Hamlet*, players fail to convey these fine inner meanings. *Hamlet*'s acquiescence signifies little more than half it should. Dr. Ernest Jones's relationship with the drama never flowers.

If plastic surgery, as advocated by Dr. Winnington, be applied, all this can be put right. The Queen has been brought up-to-date; but that is only a beginning. There is Horatio. Horatio's function is in the main to listen to what Hamlet says. Why not replace him by Dr. Walker, who will explain what Hamlet meant? I do not see plainly, just at this moment, what should be done about Claudius, but I am quite clear how the use of plastic surgery can improve the Ghost.

'What look'd he, frowningly?'

'A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.'

The figure seen haunting the battlements of Elsinore is that of Dr. Ernest Jones, and during the subsequent action his researches into Hamlet's subconscious mind bring new life and meaning to the old play.

For home consumption, that is. For a dollar-earning film, the part of Dr. Jones should be given to Ophelia.

Theatre Today: A Theatre Today Miscellany,⁴ edited by Montagu Slater and Arnold Rattenbury (1948), 61–2.

Notes

- 1 Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949), expanding an essay from 1910; Roy Walker, *The Time is Out of Joint: A Study of Hamlet* (1948), a book which also supplied the epigraph to Warner's 'Hamlet in England'; Salvador de Madariaga, *On Hamlet* (1948). The other figures who feature in the article are Harold Hobson (1904–92), theatre critic with *The Sunday Times* from 1945 to 1976 (facetiously dignified by Warner with a doctorate, along with the other film and theatre critics cited in the article) Beverley Baxter (1891–1964), Conservative MP from 1935 until his death and theatre critic for the *London Evening Standard*; Ivor Brown (1891–1974), theatre critic for *The Observer*; Robert Eddison (1908–91), actor, who played Hamlet at the St James Theatre in 1948; Laurence Olivier (1907–89), who had platinum blond hair in his 1948 film of *Hamlet*; Caroline Lejeune (1897–1973), film critic for *The Observer* from 1928 to 1958; Robert Helpmann (1909–86), actor and dancer; Paul Scofield (1922–2008), actor: Scofield and Helpmann alternated the role of Hamlet in the 1948 Stratford Memorial Theatre season; Alan Dent (1905–78), film critic for the *Illustrated London News*; Richard Winnington (1903–53), caricaturist and film critic for the *News Chronicle*; Colley Cibber (1671–1757), actor-manager, playwright and poet.
- 2 Quoted from *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet...* (1736), attributed to Thomas Hanmer.
- 3 'Pow': head, poll (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).
- 4 The monthly magazine *Theatre Today* was launched by Montagu Slater and Arnold Rattenbury in 1946 and ran until 1947.