

LOOK ON HAMLET'S PICTURE, AND ON QUIXOTE'S

The Masterpieces of the Northern and Southern Minds, the Heroes of Doubt and Faith

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Translated for The New York Times by Isaac Don Levine, from a lecture delivered by Turgenev in St. Petersburg in 1860.

(Shakespeare and Cervantes died on the same date, April 23, 1616.)

THE first edition of Shakespeare's tragedy "Hamlet" and the first part of Cervantes' "Don Quixote" appeared in the same year, at the very beginning of the seventeenth century. This accident seemed to me significant, producing a series of thoughts, some of which may possibly strike one as extraordinary. But the very advantage of the great poetical works is that the genius of their creators has inspired them with eternal life, so that our views on them can be infinitely varied, even contradictory and at the same time be equally true. How many interpretations of Hamlet have already been written, and who can number those that will be written yet? To what diverse conclusions did not the study of this really inexhaustible character lead? Don Quixote, because of the very properties of his mission, by virtue of the truly magnificent lucidity of the story, which seems to be illumined by the southern sun, affords less opportunity for different interpretations of his character.

In these two characters are embodied two basic, opposite peculiarities of human nature—two poles of the axis about which it is revolving. It seems to me that all men belong, in a larger or smaller degree, to one of these types; that nearly every one of them resembles either Don Quixote or Hamlet. True, in our own time, the Hamlets have thriven more than the Don Quixotes, but also the ranks of the Don Quixotes have not slackened. Let me commence with Don Quixote and see in him not solely a knight of wretched appearance, a figure created only as a satire on the mediaeval knight romances, but penetrate into the very substance of the matter.

What does Don Quixote express? First of all, faith. Faith in himself. Faith in something external, unshakable; in truth. Don Quixote is all permeated with his devotion to an ideal, for which he is ready to undergo all kinds of suffering, even

Characters of Tragedy



Frederick Ward as Iago. *"I'll pour this pestilence into thee."*

Murder of the Duke of Rutland, 3 Henry VI., Act I, Scene III. Tutor. *Ah, Clifford! murder not this innocent child, lest thou be hated both of God and man!*

Don Quixote loves an imaginary woman, and he is ready to die for her. He loves ideally, purely, so ideally that he does not even suspect that the object of his affection does not exist in reality. There is not a trace of sensuality in his love. But Hamlet? Does he love? Would his ironical creator himself, he who was the profoundest scholar of the human heart, dare give an egotist, a skeptic, one who was full of the decomposing poison of self-analysis, a loving, affectionate heart? Shakespeare made no such mistake, and the careful reader will easily convince himself that Hamlet is a sensuous man, even lustful. Hamlet does not love, but makes believe, and then only carelessly, that he does. We have the word of Shakespeare himself for it in Scene II, Act III, of the tragedy:

Hamlet—I did love thee once.
Ophelia—Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.
Hamlet—You should not have believed me. . . . I loved you not.

And in these last words Hamlet is much nearer to the truth than he himself imagines. His feelings for Ophelia are either cynical or phraseological.

However, enough about the dark sides of Hamlet, those sides that irritate us most, because they are so near and characteristic of ourselves. There is much legitimate and eternal in Hamlet. There is incarnated in him the beginning of negation, that very beginning which another great poet, separating it from the realm of humanity, presented to us in the form of Mephistopheles. Hamlet is the same Mephistopheles, only inclosed in the living form of human nature. That is why his negation is not evil, it is in itself directed against evil. The negation of Hamlet doubts the good, but it doubts not the evil, and enters into a bitter struggle against it. In doubting the good, it suspects its genuineness and sincerity, it attacks it not as good, but as an imitation of it, under the veneer of which are hidden evil and falsehood, its avowed enemies. Hamlet laughs not with the diabolically cold laughter of Mephistopheles; in his bitter smile there is melancholy, bespeaking his sufferings, inviting one's sympathy. The skepticism of Hamlet is not indifference, wherein lies its importance and value. Good and evil, truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness, do not blend themselves before him into one accidental, shapeless, dull something. The skepticism of Hamlet fights implacably against falsehood, and thereby alone becomes one of the foremost champions of truth, in which he is unable to have complete faith.

And thus, on one side there are the Hamlets, thinking, intelligent, but quite as often useless and condemned to inactivity; and on the other hand, the Don Quixotes, semi-insane, serving humanity just because they see and know but one point before them, which frequently exists not in the form seen by them.

The Hamlets are useless to the people. They give nothing. They can lead nowhere, for they go nowhere themselves. And how could they lead, having no ground beneath them? The Hamlets find nothing, invent nothing, leave no trace behind them, except that of their own personality. They love not. They believe not. How could they find things? They are solitary and therefore barren. The Hamlets condemn the masses. When one has no respect for one's self, how can he respect others? Is it worth his while to occupy himself with the masses? They are so rough and dirty. And Hamlet is an aristocrat, not only by birth.

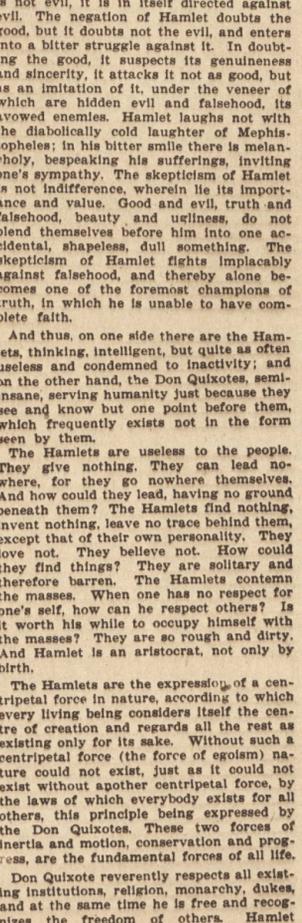
The Hamlets are the expression of a centripetal force in nature, according to which every living being considers itself the centre of creation and regards all the rest as existing only for its sake. Without such a centripetal force (the force of egotism) nature could not exist, just as it could not exist without another centripetal force, by the laws of which everybody exists for others. This principle being expressed by the Don Quixotes. These two forces of inertia and motion, conservation and progress, are the fundamental forces of all life.

Don Quixote reverently respects all existing institutions, religion, monarchy, dukes, and at the same time he is free and recognizes the freedom of others. Hamlet

abuses kings, courtiers, and is, in reality, tyrannical and intolerant. Don Quixote scarcely knows how to write and read. Hamlet, in all probabilities, kept a diary. Don Quixote, in spite of his ignorance, has certain conceptions of political affairs, administrative matters. Hamlet has no time and no desire to occupy himself with such things.

Both Hamlet and Don Quixote die tragically. But how unlike their deaths! The end of Don Quixote awakens in one's heart untold emotions, at that moment his real significance is revealed to all. "I am no more Don Quixote," he says before his death to his armor-bearer, "I am again the good Alonso, as they called me of old, Alonso el Bueno." Beautiful are the last words of Hamlet. He is "restful, calm, gives his last orders. But the eye of Hamlet is not turned forward. . . . "The rest is silence," says the dying skeptic, and he becomes silent forever.

Perhaps of all the works of Shakespeare "Hamlet" is the most popular. It is impossible not to marvel at the genius who, resembling his Hamlet in so many respects, separated him from his own self by a free motion of his creative power, placing his character before posterity for eternal study. The spirit that has created Hamlet is the spirit of the northerner, the spirit of reflection and self-criticism, a heavy, gloomy spirit, void of harmony and bright colors, not shaped in elegant but petty forms, but a deep, powerful, many-sided, independent, masterly spirit. The spirit of the southerner had molded the



George Frederick Cooke as Hamlet. *"Was ever woman in this humor won?"*

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King John, Act IV, Scene I. Arthur. *O, save me, Hubert, save me! my eyes are out. Even with the fierce looks of these bloody men.*



Painted by James Northcote. Begbie's Collection.

sacrifice his life. For his life he values as much as it is worth as a medium in the realization of his ideal, in the inauguration of a reign of truth and justice on earth. It may be argued by some that his ideal was derived by his distorted imagination from the fantastic world of knight romances. Very well, this forms the comical side of Don Quixote, but the ideal retains all its untarnished purity. Don Quixote would think it shameful to live for his own sake, to care for his own self. He lives outside of himself, for others, for his brethren, for the extermination of evil. There is not a trace of egotism in him, he never worries about his own weal, he is all self-sacrifice, he trusts—trusts firmly, without any suspicion. That is why he is fearless, patient, satisfied with the scantiest food, with the seediest garments: all this concerns him little. Humble by heart, his spirit is great and courageous. His pitiable piety does not stifle his freedom. Foreign to pride, he never doubts his ability, his calling, even his physical powers. His will is the inflexible will.

The constant pursuit of the same goal makes his thoughts somewhat monotonous, his mind one-sided. He knows little, and he really does not need to know much. He knows what he wants, therefore he lives on earth and this is the main thing. Don Quixote at one time may appear to be entirely insane, as indisputable matter vanishes before his eyes, melts away like wax at the touch of the flame of his enthusiasm, and, at another time, narrow-minded, unable to sympathize with or enjoy anything quickly. But the strength of his moral organism—and this insane wandering knight is the most moral being in the world—adds especial force and dignity to all his comments and utterances, to all his figure, in spite of the comical and humiliating situations in which he constantly entangles himself. . . . Don Quixote is an enthusiast, a champion of an ideal, enveloped by his brilliant lustre.

And what is Hamlet?



Robert Mantell as King Lear. Cordelia. *Sir, do you know me? Lear. You are a spirit, I know; when did you die?*



Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson as Hamlet, Gertrude Elliott as Ophelia. Ophelia. *Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.*

form of Don Quixote, a light, cheerful, naive, impressionable spirit which goes not to the bottom of life, which reflects, but not embraces, all the phenomena of life. Shakespeare and Cervantes—it may be said—what comparison can there be between the two? Shakespeare is a giant, a demi-god. True, but neither is Cervantes a pigmy before this giant, but a full-sized man. Doubtless, Shakespeare crushes Cervantes with the wealth and force of his imagination, the brilliancy of his poetic heights, the depth and vastness of his tremendous mind. But neither can one meet in "Don Quixote" dull witticisms, unnatural comparisons, or imitated passages. Shakespeare takes his characters from everywhere, from heaven, from earth; nothing can escape his piercing look. He uproots them with incomparable violence, with the force of an eagle dropping on its prey. Cervantes gently presents before his reader his few characters, as a father introduces his children. He takes only what is near him, but what is near him he knows well. All humanity seem to be subject to the mighty genius of the English poet, while Cervantes obtains his wealth from his own soul, clear, humble, rich with experiences in life, but not hardened by them. The circle subject to him is much narrower than Shakespeare's, but it also reflects a humanity in itself. Cervantes will not dazzle his reader's eye with a lightning-like word, will not thrill him with the Titanic power of his masterful inspiration; his poetry is not Shakespeare's—often a tempestuous ocean—it is a deep river, calmly flowing between its multicolored banks. One's imagination readily pictures the figures of the two poets—contemporaries, who died on the very same day, the 23d of April, 1616. Cervantes, in all probability, knew nothing of Shakespeare. But the great dramatist, in the quietude of his Stratford home, may have read the famous novel, which was then already translated into English. . . . A picture worthy of the brush of a painter-philosopher! Copyright, 1916, by The New York Times Company