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***The Tragedie of Hamlet: A Study with the Text of the Folio of 1623* by George MacDonald 1885. Reproduced from the 1905 Fifield ed. by Johannesen, Whitethorn CA, 1995. h.b., 125 x 190 mm, 277pp. ISBN. 1-881084-38-8.**

Paul Priest

How many critics of *Hamlet* were also themselves celebrated authors? We think of Dr. Johnson, Goethe, Coleridge, Hazlitt perhaps, and George MacDonald. And, of these, only MacDonald produced an annotated edition of the play (apart from Johnson's complete Shakespeare). Yet this work seems virtually unknown in the universities. Why this neglect? For it is a fascinating study, clearly the work of a great man—yet at the same time eccentric, idiosyncratic, somehow both deep and narrow. To try to see how the depth and the narrowness work together casts light on both MacDonald and Shakespeare.

Right away the edition gives us a sense of open clarity, in that MacDonald prints the *Folio* text of 1623 unaltered, with variants from the *Second Quarto* in the margin, not trying, as other editors do, to work out a composite text of his own. Thus he keeps us immediately in touch with the “raw materials.” He often tells us whether he prefers a *Folio* or a *Quarto* reading, but sometimes cannot decide.

His notes show a keen attention to detail and a fine ear. See for example the early exchange with Horatio, just after Hamlet has been praising his father:

Hor. My Lord, I thinke I saw him yesternight

Ham. Saw? Who?

Hor. My Lord, the King your Father.

Ham. The King my Father? (Lii. 189-92)

“Saw? Who?,” observes MacDonald, is “[s]aid as if he must have misheard. Astonishment only comes with the next speech” (29). Thus that next speech gives us a fine “double take,” supported by Horatio’s slightly surprised insistence, which would perform beautifully.

He is very attentive to distinctions of meaning. When Polonius tells Laertes, “Giue thy thoughts no tongue, nor any vnproportion’d thought his Act” (I.iii. 59-60), MacDonald glosses “vnproportion’d” as “Not settled

into its true shape (?) or, out of proportion with its occasions (?)—I cannot say which” (39). Nor could Polonius probably have said either. But the two settle comfortably into his slightly cloudy rhetoric. Elsewhere MacDonald distinguishes six separate but compatible meanings of “laps’t in Time and Passion”: **[end of page 47]**

1. “Who, lapsed (*fallen, guilty*), lets action slip in delay and suffering.”
2. “Who, lapsed in (*fallen in, overwhelmed by*) delay and suffering, omits” &c.
3. “lapsed in respect of time, and because of passion”—the meaning of the preposition *in*, common to both, reacted upon by the word it governs.
4. “faulty both in delaying, and in yielding to suffering, when action is required.”
5. “lapsed through having too much time and great suffering.”
6. “allowing himself to be swept along by time and grief.”

Surely there is not another writer whose words would so often admit of such multiform and varied interpretation—each form good, and true, and suitable to the context! He seems to see at once all the relations of a thing, and to try to convey them at once, in an utterance single as the thing itself. He would condense the infinite soul of the meaning into the trembling, overtaxed body of the phrase! (173)

Ingenious and wonderful as this is, in all six interpretations I find “lapsed” as primarily “having ceased from action,” with a suggested image of “fallen” or “*collapsed*” and hence (in 1 and 4) the secondary tincture of “*guilty*” from the theological use, along with “*in*” as either “*involved, enmeshed in*” or “*because of or both*.” These aspects combine readily enough to give me the sense of a single though complex utterance. A little further in Polonius’s speech he bestows wonderful labour on two small syllables:

For the Apparell oft proclaimes the man,
And they in France of the best ranck and station,
Are of a most select and generous cheff in that. (72-74)

No doubt the omission of *of a* gives the right number of syllables to the verse, and makes room for the interpretation which a dash between *generous* and *chief tenders* clearer “Are most select and generous—chief in that,”—“are most choice and well bred—chief, indeed—at the head or top, in the matter of dress.” But without *necessity* or *authority*—one

of the two, I would not throw away a word; and suggest therefore that Shakespeare had here the French idiom *de son chef* in his mind, and qualifies the noun in it with adjectives of his own. The Academy Dictionary gives *de son propre mouvement* as one interpretation of the phrase. The meaning would be, “they are of a most choice and developed instinct in dress.” *Cheff* or *chief* suggests the upper third of the heraldic shield, but I cannot persuade the suggestion to further development. The hypercatalectic syllables *of a*, swiftly spoken, matter little to the verse, especially as it is *dramatic*. (39)

Of course, most editors have thrown them away, and MacDonald’s meaning seems very hard to grasp when the lines are spoken quickly. Even if one knew the French idiom (which literally means “from one’s head”), the adjectives would stretch it out of all shape or fit. Still, MacDonald’s generous enthusiasm to [48] preserve the text is winning. Why *did* Shakespeare write these little words? Did he change course in mid-line and forget to cancel? Does he want to show Polonius doing that? The questions MacDonald raises are most stimulating, even if we may sometimes reject his answers.

The larger questionings come through on the same page, regarding the famous conclusion of Polonius’s send-off:

This aboue all; to thine owne selfe be true:
And it must follow, as the Night the Day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (78-80)

Certainly a man cannot be true to himself without being true to others; neither can he be true to others without being true to himself; but if a man make himself the centre for the birth of action, it will follow, “as *the night the day*” that he will be true neither to himself nor to any other man. In this regard note the history of Laertes, developed in the play. (39)

MacDonald saw the moral contrast between Hamlet and Laertes as central to the play, and was distressed that some critics saw it to Laertes’s advantage. So let us proceed to his central and most lively concern, which (not surprisingly) is the character of Hamlet.

2. The dominant vision of Hamlet in MacDonald’s day, as first set forth by Goethe, the Schlegels and Coleridge, and simplified by lesser minds, was of a delicate intellectual, so fond of thought as to be incapable of action.

As Goethe memorably expressed it:

There is an oak tree planted in a costly jar, which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom; the roots expand, the jar is shivered.

A lovely, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away.¹

Coleridge found in Hamlet “great, enormous intellectual activity, and a consequent proportionate aversion to real action.”² And Hazlitt wrote, “Hamlet is as little of the hero as a man can well be.”³

No strength of nerve? Aversion to action? No hero? MacDonald insists that Hamlet is always courageous and quick to act when action is necessary and possible, but the duty to obey his father’s ghost was outweighed by an even stronger duty to doubt him:

To doubt the ghost was to doubt a testimony which to accept was to believe his father in horrible suffering, his uncle a murderer, his mother at least an adulteress; to kill his uncle was to set his seal to the whole, and, besides, to bring his mother into frightful suspicion of complicity in his father’s murder.

. . . he would be the poor [49] creature most of his critics would make of him, were it otherwise; it is because of his greatness that he suffers so terribly, and doubts so much.

(114-15)

Besides, Hamlet must not only be privately convinced of his uncle’s guilt, but must prove it publicly. Though Hamlet never says this, how could he not have it in mind? Therefore MacDonald offers to “imagine the further course of his thoughts”:

“But how shall I take vengeance on my uncle? Shall I publicly accuse him, or slay him at once? In the one case what answer can I make to his denial? in the other, what justification can I offer? If I say the spirit of my father accuses him, what proof can I bring? My companions only saw the apparition—heard no word from him; and my uncle’s party will assert, with absolute likelihood to the minds of those who do not know me—and who here knows me but my mother!—that charge is a mere coinage of jealous disappointment, working upon the melancholy I have not cared to hide. When I act, it must be to kill him, and to what misconstruction shall I not expose myself!

If the thing must so be, I must brave all; but I could never present myself thereafter as successor to the crown of one whom I had first slain and then vilified on the accusation of an apparition whom no one heard but myself! I must find *proof*—such proof as will satisfy others as well as myself. My immediate duty is *evidence*, not vengeance.” (114)

Is not this brilliant analysis indeed worthy of Hamlet? It is not in the text, but surely such a noble and supremely intelligent character must have thought of such an obvious matter? Is not Shakespeare asking us to assume this—do we need it spelled out in words? And if we say the words are all we have, that Hamlet is not a real person but a piece of text, still that text creates the illusion of a living person; and to that illusion MacDonald lends himself with passion and brilliance.

Of course, the only person in the play who can be aware of Hamlet’s delay is Hamlet himself, blaming himself for it in two major soliloquies which furnish his critics with their chief ammunition against him. But, says MacDonald, are not those most ungenerous who:

upon the sad confession of a man immeasurably greater than themselves, and showing his greatness in the humility whose absence makes admission impossible to them, immediately pounce upon him with vituperation, as if he were one of the vile, and they infinitely better. Such should be indignant with St Paul and say—if he were the chief of sinners, what insolence to lecture *them* and certainly the more justified publican would never by them have been allowed to touch the robe of the less justified Pharisee. Such critics surely take little or no pains to understand the object of their contempt: because Hamlet is troubled and blames himself, they without hesitation condemn him—and there where he is most commendable.

(113) [50]

Moreover, MacDonald perceives that Hamlet’s self-accusation is emotional, not reasonable:

although sure in his heart that his uncle is guilty, in his brain he is not so sure. Bitterly accusing himself in an access of wretchedness and rage and credence, he forgets the doubt that has restrained him, with all besides which he might so well urge in righteous defence, not excuse, of his delay. (112-13)

In the “rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy of Act II he calls himself many

hard names; but do we really think he is muddy-mettled, pigeon-livered and the rest? The very anguish of his self-accusation belies it.

The other soliloquy, spoken after Hamlet has met the Norwegian soldiers marching to attack Poland, is not in the *Folio*, so MacDonald concludes that Shakespeare cancelled it. The reason, he surmises, is that it could suggest a wrong idea of Hamlet—namely that since he says he has “cause and will, and strength, and means” to take his revenge, but is obviously unable to touch the King at that moment, he must be planning to take it by ensnaring Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—but in that case:

the author exposes his hero to a more deprecatory judgement than any from which I would justify him, and a conception of his character entirely inconsistent with the rest of the play. He did not observe the risk at the time he wrote the passage, but discovering it afterwards, rectified the oversight—to the dissatisfaction of his critics, who have agreed in restoring what he cancelled. (195)

Again we have bitter self-shame: “bestial oblivion . . . craven scruple . . . three parts coward.” But again:

are we *bound* to take any man’s judgement because it is against himself? I answer, “No more than if it were for himself.” A good man’s judgement, where he is at all perplexed, especially if his motive comes within his own question, is ready to be against himself, as a bad man’s is sure to be for himself. . . .

In his present mood, Hamlet forgets the cogency of the reasons that swayed him in the other. (195)

Having reconstructed what he thinks Hamlet’s reason must be doing, MacDonald can more easily assign these soliloquies to emotion. But the famous, cool, central soliloquy is not so easily assigned. “To be or not to be”—is Hamlet really thinking about killing himself just as he is about to spring his daring Mousetrap? If so, would that be a sign of weakness? Earlier, in his first soliloquy, he briefly wished “self-slaughter” was permitted, but as MacDonald says: “The suggestion of suicide, however, he dismisses at once—with a momentary regret, it is true—but he dismisses it—as against the will of God to whom he appeals in his misery” (25). [51]

“O God, God!” We may not be sure what is the ratio of devotion to death-wish here, but the mention is certainly brief. “To be or not to be” dwells on the subject much longer—unless, as MacDonald argues, it is not about suicide at all:

Neither in its first verse, . . . nor in it anywhere else, do I find even an allusion to suicide . . . Hamlet . . . may have been plunged in some profound depth of the metaphysics of existence, or he may have been preoccupied with the one practical question, that of the slaying of his uncle, which has . . . haunted his spirit for weeks But whatever thought, general or special, this first verse may be dismissing, we come at once thereafter into the Light of a definite question: “Which is nobler—to endure evil fortune, or to oppose it *à outrance*; to bear in passivity, or to resist where resistance is hopeless—resist to the last—to the death which is its unavoidable end?” (124)

Certainly “to take Armes against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them” suggests a positive act of resistance—even though a hopeless one, such as killing the King—sooner than a suicide. But what about the long list of life’s troubles:

For who would beare the Whips and Scornes of time,
 The Oppressors wrong, the poore mans Contumely,
 The pang of dispiz’d Loue, the Lawes delay,
 The insolence of Office, and the Spumes
 That patient merit of the vnworthy takes,
 When he himself might his *Quietus* make
 With a bare Bodkin? (*Quarto* III. i. 70-76)

Do not these point to suicide rather than regicide? But MacDonald asks: How could he even glance at the things he has just mentioned, as each a reason for suicide? It were a cowardly country indeed where the question might be asked, “Who would not commit suicide because of any one of these things, except on account of what may follow after death?”! One might well, however, be tempted to destroy an oppressor, *and risk his life in that*. (121)

One might, but would one then be thinking of these things? Certainly one of permanent questions of *Hamlet* criticism now is whether the bodkin is meant for himself or for the King—or in what proportion these combine, since most critics would allow some presence of each idea. The thought of regicide does seem to grow stronger towards the end of the speech: as MacDonald says: “How could *suicide* be styled *an enterprise of great pith*? Yet less could it be called of *great pitch*” (123). (*Folio* and *Quarto* readings respectively.) Nor does “conscience doth make cowards of us all” seem comfortable with

suicide: “Hamlet would hardly call turning from *suicide* cowardice in any sense” (121). That word *coward*, in all three of these soliloquies, does seem to express an obsessive fear. [52]

But MacDonald may give a slight easement from his total exclusion of suicide from the speech when he writes: “Throughout, observe, how here, as always, he generalizes, himself being to himself but the type of his race” (124). So Hamlet’s speech seems to begin with the thought of his task uppermost—then broadens to the general human condition and the remedies available—then returns at the end to his task. But no grounds for accusing him of weakness!

3. Does Hamlet ever commit a serious mistake, even a crime, a murder? It would seem that the killing of Polonius behind the arras in the Queen’s bedroom was mistaken, not only because he mis-takes his man, but also because he exposes himself to revenge by Polonius’s son, finally causing his own death (though it also brings about the circumstances which deliver the public proof of the King’s guilt). But for MacDonald the action was not mistaken:

Hamlet takes him for, hopes it is the king, and thinks here to conclude: he is not praying now! and there is not a moment to be lost, for he has betrayed his presence and called for help. As often as immediate action is demanded of Hamlet, he is immediate with his response—never hesitates, never blunders. There is no blunder here: being where he was, the death of Polonius was necessary now to the death of the king. Hamlet’s resolve is instant, and the act simultaneous with the resolve. . . . Doubtless those who blame him as dilatory, here blame him as precipitate, for they judge according to appearance and consequence (169).

MacDonald seems to see Hamlet thinking: “Oh! It’s Polonius. Never mind. Even if I knew, I would have had to kill him anyway.” Thus MacDonald opens the possibility of a scene that didn’t happen, and by using his imagination awakens ours. It might have gone something like this:

Ham. Dead for a ducat, dead!

Qu. Nay, hold thy hand, it is not who you think!

Pol. Gently, my Lord, you know I seek your weal.

Ham. This prying lord for once has pried too far.

He knows too much now. If he tells the King,

Farewell revenge. Old busybody, die.

Pol. My Lord, if you know aught against the King,
Confide in me, I'll help you to the throne.

Ham. In *you!* A bitter jest. You die forthwith.
I'll be arrested either way, but this way
They'll still believe me mad.

Qu. Oh Hamlet, Hamlet . . .

Would Hamlet be capable of stabbing Polonius in cold blood, in the Queen's presence, just to keep him quiet, knowing the inevitable reaction? Does [53] MacDonald think that? Apparently so. It is another dilemma, another anguish that Shakespeare has kept out of this play and has not invited us to imagine.

So is MacDonald here filling in Hamlet's unspoken thoughts, or is he writing a new play? Granted that what he says is objectively true—that the revenge would be impossible if Polonius were to survive—still Shakespeare shows us his hero having just put up his sword behind the King at prayer, itching to find him in a damnable posture, hearing a noise, "Is it the King," delivering the stab he had refused before—and then finding with more vexation than remorse that it is someone else, whose death he has not intended and will cause him trouble. MacDonald's considerations, however just, seem to me to clutter our experience of the scene.

The other "murder" for which Hamlet has often been blamed, both before and after MacDonald wrote, is his arranging for the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in England. Was this necessary? MacDonald points out that of course he was expecting to go there with them; and in that case "[i]t is easy to imagine a man like him, averse to the shedding of blood, intending interference for their lives: as heir apparent, he would certainly have been listened to" (251). Easy for you George MacDonald. But with such intentions, why write the order? Would he use the hope of reprieve to pressure his friends into helping him to persuade the King of England to support him against Claudius? That sounds Machiavelian, and against the text, which, as with Polonius, suggests quick, impulsive, retaliatory action: "So that's the game! Til show them I can play it too." He has the same kind of reaction when he feels Laertes poisoned blade in his flesh. It is certainly persuasive that a man as noble, and politically responsible, as MacDonald conceives Hamlet to be, would have the thoughts MacDonald attributes to him, but again I cannot help feeling that he is writing a different play—a different stage experience.

A final, relatively minor fault sometimes found with Hamlet is that of

lying to Laertes before the fencing match:

What I haue done

That might your nature honour, and exemption

Roughly awake, I heere proclaime was madnesse. (V.i. 209-11)

For he knows he killed Polonius in full sanity, even if not in full self-possession. The usual defence is that Hamlet cannot tell the truth—that he was after the King—in the King’s presence. But MacDonald claims it was not even a lie. First of all, Hamlet is not here apologising for the deaths of either Polonius or Ophelia, for “Hamlet is not aware that Laertes associates him with either,” but rather for ranting at Laertes by the graveside, when he was in a “towering passion,” as he tells Horatio (V.i. 80). This seems extremely doubtful, since just [54] before that he says: “Tor by the image of my Cause, I see / The Portraiture of his.” MacDonald interprets the passage: “the similarity of their condition, each having lost a father by violence, ought, he says, to have taught him gentleness with him” (253). He seems to overlook the normal Elizabethan meaning of *cause* as a ground of action, as a *case* at law. The straightforward interpretation is: “My case against Claudius is just like Laertes’s against me.” And how could Hamlet suppose Laertes ignorant of who killed his father? What audience could imagine this? But even for the rant, MacDonald’s justification is most unpersuasive:

It was by cause of madness, not by cause of evil intent. For all purposes of excuse it was madness, if only pretended madness; it was there of another necessity, and excused offence like real madness. What he said was true, not merely expedient, to the end he meant it to serve. But all passion may be called madness, because therein the mind is absorbed by one idea; “anger is a brief madness,” and he was in a “towering passion”: he proclaims it madness and so abjures it. (263)

MacDonald interprets “*Hamlet* denies it” (V.ii. 250) as “refuses the wrong altogether—will in his true self have nothing to do with it. No evil thing comes of our true selves, and confession is the casting of it from us, the only true denial. He who will not confess a wrong, holds to the wrong” (263).

Does MacDonald realise that he here equivocates twice? He equates a brief anger with mental illness, and then equates a recognition that one’s deepest self did not intend a deed (“The good that I would, I do not”) with the refusal to take any responsibility for it. He seems uncomfortable in the twists and turns of his argument. “It was madness, though only pretend madness, since he had to pretend, and all passion is madness—and Hamlet confesses

it by refusing to confess.” But he seems determined to hold to Hamlet’s “true self,” the essential self, which speaks essential truth, whatever the appearance. We are no longer on the stage, but far above it, in the flies.

4. Hamlet would have avoided all these errors, if such they be, had he not made what many regard as his central mistake in the play: refusing to kill Claudius when discovered at prayer—because this would send his soul to heaven! MacDonald concedes that this may have been “only an excuse, that his soul revolted from the idea of assassination”; but he gives him further reasons:

he refuses to be carried away by passion, or the temptation to opportunity. The sight of the man on his knees might well start fresh doubt of his guilt, or even wake the thought of sparing a repentant sinner. He knows also that in taking vengeance on her husband he could not avoid compromising his mother. [Perhaps he] was calmed in a measure by the doubt whether a man could thus pray—in supposed privacy, we must [55] remember—and be a murderer. Not even yet had he proof *positive*, absolute, conclusive: the king might well take offence at the play, even were he innocent; and in any case Hamlet would desire *presentable* proof . . . To have been capable of the kind of action most of his critics would demand of a man, Hamlet must have been the weakling they imagine him. When at length, after a righteous delay, partly willed, partly inevitable, he holds documents in the king’s handwriting as proofs of his treachery—*proofs which can be shown*— . . . then, and only then, is he in cool blood absolutely satisfied as to his duty— . . . the righteous deed is done, and done righteously, the doer blameless in the doing of it. (165-67)

But here more than ever MacDonald seems to be writing a different play, more reasonable, but I think less moving. Not only does the text offer no shred of doubt in Hamlet about the King’s guilt, but more seriously, MacDonald seems to miss the frightful agony to which the revenge code leads, with its totalitarian demands that press it into eternity (and this is also against the “excuse” view). Laertes is willing to cut Hamlet’s throat in the church, but Hamlet, more logical as well as more sensitive, feels driven to behaviour which not only is diabolical, as Dr Johnson observed, but also blasphemously presumes to control God’s decision about the King’s soul.

And yet in this scene Shakespeare may come closest to telling us what revenge is essentially all about. It was traditional in revenge drama that the revenger must not only punish, but make known to the victim *who* is punishing him: affect his understanding. Hamlet in his mousetrap play has informed the King that he knows his secret, and he has done more: he has made the King feel the beginnings of grief and remorse. If he could complete this educational process, what need would there be of further punishment? We can find here the hint that the only important purpose of punishment is education. A significant part of Hamlet's nobility is that he is a born teacher. (See him instructing the players, or Guildenstern with the recorders!). And so, of course, was George MacDonald. He was also a friend and admirer of the great theologian F. D. Maurice, whose universalism he admired and shared. He believed that every soul could be redeemed, whatever prolonged suffering might be required. Would he not have been delighted to see Hamlet evolve from revenger to educator? (As in a way he did, when he became Prospero.)

So here too it is tempting to imagine a scene that never happened, in which Hamlet speaks to the King—perhaps has overheard part of his soliloquy—and while calling him to account, still is impressed that the King could pray so fervently and apparently sincerely “that God might forgive you, and so cheat me of my revenge—I once thought; but now I see this could take away the need and even my desire for it.” The King says: “I’m afraid my prayers never got to heaven: they were not whole-hearted,” And Hamlet: “But even praying to be able [56] to pray must be something.” So the King implores Hamlet’s forgiveness and abdicates in his favour, “And will you now leave my mother?”—No, the thing is impossible, neither of them is remotely capable of it. From this point the tragedy rushes down its certain downhill course.

5. Such an impossible fantasy is still imaginable as an ideal possibility (morally, although not, of course, dramatically), an extension perhaps of what MacDonald seems all along to have been constructing—the *ideal* possible Hamlet, Hamlet’s essential or eternal self. “To thine own self be true.” Laertes seems to understand this in its egotistical, Hamlet in its true, divine sense:

Like the aphorism “Honesty is the best policy,” it reveals the difference between a fact and a truth. Both sayings are correct as facts, but as guides of conduct devilishly false, leading to dishonesty and treachery. To be true to the divine self in us,

is indeed to be true to all; but it is only by being true to all, against the ever present and urging false self, that at length we shall see the divine self rise above the chaotic waters of our selfishness, and know it so as to be true to it. (205-07)

And however dark his mind at the play's end, though he dies "with his mother's sin blackening for him all womankind . . . and with the knowledge . . . that he had sent the woman he loved, with her father and her brother, out of the world"—maniac, spy and traitor" (277), still MacDonald finds him true to his true self in that he has finally done his task:

the Poet gives Hamlet the only true success of doing his duty to the end—for it was as much his duty not to act before, as it was his duty to act at last—then sends him after his Ophelia—into a world where true heart will find true way of setting right what is wrong, and of atoning for every ill, wittingly or unwittingly done or occasioned in this. (277)

We hear the Victorian violins—but it seems altogether consistent with MacDonald's conception of Hamlet to desire a restoration or fulfilment in heaven. A. C. Bradley imagined something similar for King Lear, though he wondered whether it was appropriate for tragedy.⁴ Certainly such a hope dilutes tragedy if imagined too concretely, yet tragedy also likes to hint at some mysterious, undefined transcendence. "Flight's of angels sing thee to thy rest." Hamlet's actual conversations with Ophelia have been tragic enough—though MacDonald sees that "it is love suppressed, love that can neither breathe nor burn, that makes him rude" (123)—so that we could well wish them to have another opportunity in the world beyond. Conversely, Hamlet's grim pun as he forces the cup on Claudius, "Is thy Union here?" (his union with Gertrude) "suggests a terrible meeting below" (271). It does, doesn't it! **[57]**

All the same, we have wondered all along whether MacDonald was writing a different play; and the nature of that play may now appear as not so much as tragedy as heroic drama. Although MacDonald sees Hamlet's bewilderment, his anguish, his self-hatred, still the balance of emphasis seems to lie on Hamlet's reason being in control of his actions.

To bring out this side of things is a most important contribution! MacDonald has certainly disposed of "Hamlet the weakling"—though the best criticism of his time was not that simplistic. Edward Dowden wrote in 1875:⁵

It has been truly said that only one who feels Hamlet's strength

should venture to speak of Hamlet's weakness. That, in spite of difficulties without and inward difficulties, he still clings to his terrible duty—letting it go, indeed, for a time but returning to it again, and in the end accomplishing it—implies strength. He is not incapable of vigorous action—if only he be allowed no chance of thinking the fact away into an idea But all his action is sudden and fragmentary, it is not. continuous and coherent. (129-30)

This seems balanced, imaginative, and close to the text. A. C. Bradley, writing not many years after MacDonald, spoke of a paralysing melancholy that inhibits Hamlet from action.⁶ This does not persuade in all cases: he should have considered the reasons MacDonald gives for doubting the ghost!⁷ But at least it locates the centre of gravity of the play in the vulnerable awareness of the hero, where tragedy wants it to be.

A weakling cannot be a tragic hero—as Aristotle essentially observed—but neither can a man who is always perfectly self-reliant. Tragedy demands both strength and weakness, and Hamlet's great supply of both has made him the enduringly fascinating and sympathetic figure he is. The outward uncertainties of the play—like the Ghost, the duty to revenge,⁸ the Queen's guilt, the King's prayers, hell, heaven, purgatory,⁹ and the hopes for Denmark at the end (for the King is dead, but so are the leading families, and the throne taken by a "man of action" in the most frightening sense)—all these combine with the hero's uncertainty about himself, doubting his own courage and will, his love, perhaps his entire sanity, so fiercely that if we sometimes doubt them too, we may be simply sharing his experience. And in that sharing, our sympathy and love increase; and through all that swirling darkness comes a strange and indefinable light. [58]

Notes

1. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Trs. by Thomas Carlyle, book 4 chapter 13.
2. Notes for the third lecture given at Bristol, 1813, in *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, Ed T. M. Raynor, London: Dent, 1960, volume 1 page 34.
3. *Characters*, 1817, page 103. Cited in *Shakespeare, A New Variorum Edition*, 1877-1918, Ed. Horace H. Furness, Philadelphia and London 1877-1918, page 156.
4. *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1904, New York: Meriden, 1955, Lecture 8 page 325.
5. *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art*, 1875, London: Harper, 1901.
6. *Op. cit.* Lecture 3 pages 120ff.
7. Bradley should have also considered other points, not well-known when MacDonald wrote: the Ghost, appearing at midnight in a dark lonely place, speaking

to one person only, and counselling violence, would have looked very much like a “Divel” to the Elizabethans. See e.g. Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967, 118-36.

8. C.f. Robert E. Wood, *Hamlet: Some Necessary Questions of the Play*, Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1994:

Revenge tragedy in general undertakes a programme which provides textual resolutions of the conflict between legal codes and the individual’s sense of justice But rather than resolving a conflict of two systems of codes in a textual narrative, *Hamlet* multiplies the number of conflicts, positing a protagonist who becomes aware of the inadequacy and incompatibility of all his articulated codes (136).

9. For the tension between the new Protestantism’s rejection of Purgatory and the hold the old religion still had on the imagination see Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Princetown: Princetown UP, 2001. **[59]**