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TIME IN THE PLAY OF
HAMLET

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If it were not for the fact that we find conflicting opinions as to the force and meaning of some one or more words or phrases in almost every scene of Shakespeare's dramas, and that—as to “Hamlet” in particular—nearly every critic differs in many vital points from all others of his army of co-laborers, it might be a matter of some surprise to see the great divergence of opinion as to the length of time covered by the action of this tragedy.

On the one side it has been seriously contended that its entire action transpired within a period of not more than ten days; while on the other it has been thought to extend over at least ten years. Nay, more, there have been those who, in eloquent phrase, have urged the view that Shakespeare's method of dealing with the dramatic element of time is to artfully convey two opposite ideas of its flight—swiftness and slowness—so that by one series of allusions we receive the impression that the action of the drama is driving on in hot haste, and that all the events are compressed within a period of but a few days; while by another series we are insensibly beguiled into the belief that they extend over months or years. “So,” say they, “whenever time comes in as an element, we are subject to Shakespeare's glamour and gramarye—to his legerdemain. We are held in a confusion and delusion about the time.”

This theory is so pretty and striking—it harmonizes so nicely with our natural love of mysticism and transcendental lore, and with the vague views of those who fancy that they are diving into the depths of Shakespeare when they do but skim the surface—that it is a pity that the facts are all against it.

Now, the truth is that our immortal poet has laid out the action of the different scenes with minute consideration both of the time occupied by each and of the interval elapsing between them, when any occurs, and he has so carefully indicated the lapse of time that he who runs may read, if he will but look as he runs. There is no conflict, no glamour; neither confusion nor delusion.

Henry A. Clapp has recently shown this so clearly that it may seem a work of supererogation to again discuss the matter. He, however, considered the general subject of the passage of time in all of Shakespeare's plays, and, therefore, could devote but little space to the one drama of “Hamlet”; hence, it seems possible that to his masterly presentation of the subject something may be added which will be of interest to Shakespearean students.

ACT I., Scene i., of the tragedy of “Hamlet” opens at midnight and continues until dawn, and at its close, Marcellus, speaking of Hamlet, says:

I this morning know
Where we shall find him most conveniently.

In Scene ii. Horatio says of the ghost:

My lord, I think I saw him yesternight,

and Hamlet declares:

I'll watch to-night.
Upon the platform, 'twixt eleven and twelve
I'll visit you.

This watch and its events are given in Scenes iv. and v., while the third scene fills out the day, before the night comes on.

Between the first and second acts, one—and the principal one—of the two intervals in the play occurs; a lapse of time, as will hereafter be shown, of a little more than two months.

In ACT II., Scene i., Polonius says:

I will go seek the king.

and in Scene ii. he enters the Audience Chamber and announces that he has found

The very cause of Hamlet's lunacy.

In the same scene the players arrive, and Hamlet says of the play of “The Murder of Gonzago:”

We'll ha't to-morrow night.

This act, therefore, covers but one day, while the first scene of the next act occurs on the following day, as is proven by the words of Rosencranz in reference to the actors:

They have already order
This night to play before him.

In Scene ii. this mimic drama is given, and Scenes iii. and iv. occur the same night, Hamlet's interview with his mother taking place, in accordance with the message brought to him, immediately after the breaking up of the play:

She desires to speak with you in her closet ere you go to bed.

Act iv. commences with a continuation of the events of the same night, as is shown by Gertrude's words:

Ah, my good lord, what have I seen to-night!

while the king declares:

The sun no sooner shall the mountains touch,
But we will ship him hence.

Morning has not dawned at the close of Scene iii., for among the last words of the king is the declaration:

I'll have him hence to-night.

Between Scenes iii. and v. the second interval of the play occurs; a period, probably, of not less than two weeks, nor more than about a month.

In the last words of Scene v. the king says to Laertes:

I pray you go with me,

and the conversation between them is concluded in Scene vii. In the same scene the letter from Hamlet is read, in which he writes:

To-morrow shall I beg leave to see your kingly eyes.

Ophelia's burial, in Act v., Scene i., takes place on the following day, for the king says to Laertes:

Strengthen your patience in our last night's speech:

and there is no reason for thinking the action of the final scene to be delayed beyond the close of the same day, for in it Hamlet concludes his explanations to Horatio, and is welcomed "back to Denmark" by Osric, who must, therefore, then meet him for the first time since his return. Moreover, the words of the king in his last speech, in Scene i.,

We'll put the matter to the present push,

indicate clearly that it was not his intention to allow any delay to occur.

It, therefore, appears that ACT I. represents the events of two nights and the intervening day, and that some interval of time then elapses. ACT II., Scene i., to ACT IV., Scene iii., inclusive, covers two days and the night following the second day; and, after a second interval, the events of two days are given in ACT IV., Scene v., and the remaining scenes of the play.

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