

# HAMLET AND MONTAIGNE

— ON SOME PHILOSOPHICAL MOTIVES —

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## I

Montaigne's *Essays* translated by John Florio was licensed in 1600, and first printed in 1603. Its full title was *The Essayes or Moral, Politike and Militarie Discourses of Lo: Michaell Montaigne*, and was dedicated to noble ladies, among whom were found Sidney's daughter, Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland, and Lady Penelope Rich, Essex's sister. But in 1595 a copy of Montaigne's *Essays* had been entered in the Stationers' Registers. This copy has been assumed to be Florio's translation. But a few years elapsed before the publication. The translation was seen by Sir William Cornwall in 1600-1. Perhaps it was then in circulation among his patrons and friends fascinating them with the fine scholarship of the original author on classical literature and with the elegant and proper English into which Florio had translated it. The fact that Florio was, for some years, in the service of the Earl of Southampton and a close friend of Ben Jonson's suggests that Shakespeare, who was also a friend of Ben Jonson's, and was in friendly personal relations with the Earl of Essex and Southampton, might have read his translation. Just at this time Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was in the making. The *Ur-Hamlet*, or *A Hamlet* by Thomas Kyd had been in the possession of Shakespeare's Company in 1594, and during the time between 1594 and 1601 it was being transformed to mature *Hamlet* by Shakespeare himself. Its First Quarto was printed in 1603, in the same year that Florio's *Montaigne* was printed, and the Second Quarto, in which some influence of Montaigne can be traced, was published in 1604.

Certain parallels between *Hamlet* and Florio's *Montaigne* were noticed and discussed by Walter Pater in *Gaston de Latour* (1889), by Georg Brandes in *William Shakespeare* (1899), and by Churton Collins in *Studies in*

*Shakespeare* (1904). John Robertson published *Montaigne and Shakespeare* in 1909. But since then no books on the subject have followed Robertson's. It was not only because Robertson could not gain favour either from Shakespeare scholars in England or from Montaigne scholars in France<sup>1)</sup>, but rather because a new trend of Shakespeare studies took the place of the historical and psychological researches developed by the above authors.

Professor Dover Wilson, whose *Hamlet* in the New Shakespeare Series is one of the greatest monuments in the twentieth century *Hamlet* studies, says in the Introduction, 'Let it suffice to say, as my notes show, I agree with Brandes in finding the influence of Montaigne throughout and with Dowden in believing that Shakespeare was well acquainted with a little book on psychology by Timothy Bright called *A Treatise of Melancholy* published in 1586.' He admits both the influence of Montaigne and that of Bright on it. Needless to say, he is not saying that Bright was as great an author as Montaigne, but that each of them had his own influence on *Hamlet*. He seems to emphasize the importance of Bright's influence, to which due attention has not been paid. But here his ideas of the problem of influence is to be investigated. For he defines it as 'the intellectual sources of *Hamlet*, and in particular the books which Shakespeare was reading shortly before he wrote the play.' He limits the extent of influence so narrowly. Moreover, he says 'Apparently Shakespeare read it (*A Treatise*) through with his notions of Hamlet already formed.' He means to investigate the problem independently of notions of the protagonist. In fact, he says, in *What Happens in Hamlet*, 'the remarkable feature of the parallels (between *Hamlet* and *A Treatise*) to me is that they often seem to show borrowing by the poet of chance words and ideas which have no necessary connection with psychology at all, still less with Hamlet's character' (p.310).

Let me quote here one of the striking parallels which professor Wilson draws :

*Treatise*, p. 106. The body thus possessed with the vnchearefull, and discomfortable darknes of melancholie, obscureth the Sonne and Moone, and all the comfortable planetts of our natures, in such sort, that if they ap-

1) Charles Dédeyan : *Montaigne Chez Ses Amis Anglo-Saxons*. Boiwin, Paris.

peare, they appeare all darke, and more then halfe eclipsed of this mist of blacknes, rising from that hidious lake.

*Hamlet*, 2. 2. 301-7. It goes so heavily with my disposition, that this goodly frame the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.

This is properly said to be a parallel of phraseology, not of ideas and words. So essential a difference lies between the two; one is prosaic and the other poetical. I prefer a passage from Montaigne to the above quoted by Professor Wilson from Bright:

Book II. Chapter XII. Who hath perswaded him that this admirable moving of heavens vaults, that the eternal light of these lampes so fiercely rowing over his head, that the horror-moving and continuall motion of this infinite vaste ocean were established, and continue so many ages for his commoditie and service? (*An Apology of Raymoud Sebond*)

Such expression of Florio's as 'this admirable moving of heavens vaults, that the eternal light of these lampes' is echoed in Hamlet's 'this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire.' Moreover, as to the ideas underlying the passages, Hamlet is confessing at once his hope of the infinite possibility of human intellect and his despair of human nature, and Montaigne is also arguing forcibly that the capacity of human reason is poorly limited in the domain of religious belief. Their resemblance would be clearer with the following lines which conclude their views on humanity:

2. 2. 307-. What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

II. XII. Is it possible to imagine anything so ridiculous as this miserable and wretched creature, which is not so much as master of himself, exposed and subject to offences of all things, and yet dareth call himself Master and Emperor of this Universe?

Brandes missed this parallel. Robertson noticed and says, 'Here the thought diverges, Shakespeare making it his own as he always does, and altering his aim; but the language is curiously similar' (p. 53). What does he mean by the word 'diverge'? He seems to be regretting that he cannot read Montaigne wholly into Hamlet. And it is regrettable to us that in spite of his sharp sense of literary facts he does not endeavour to establish a comprehensive survey of the parallels between the two. Brandes is more systematic and comprehensive. But he seems to be too scientific and indifferent to appreciate the poetical aspect of *Hamlet*. If he had appreciated this parallel, his work might have become a greater source of suggestions to us.

## II

Florio is said to have made Montaigne an English classic. It is full of piquant ideas and proverbial equivalents of the original, which are effective on the stage. Therefore its influence on the contemporary dramatists was great. A lady in Jonson's *Volpone* states this fact, 'All our English writers, will deign to steal out of this author, mainly; Almost as much, as from Montaigne' (III. iv. 87-90). Though 'to steal out of Montaigne' sounds exaggerated, John Webster sometimes borrows, in fact, a whole passage from him. Let me draw a parallel between them. In *An Apology*, Montaigne investigates contradictory facts in sense perception, and points out, as an instance, that colour of an object is in some cases modified by the operation of eyesight itself. He gives an instance of the patient of jaundice:

II. XII. Such as are troubled with the yellow jaundise deeme all things they looke upon to be yellowish, which seeme more pale and wan to them then to us.

And all that jaundis'd men behold,  
They yellow straight or palish hold.

In Webster's *The White Devil* Flamineo says, consoling Camillo who is jealous of his beautiful wife, Vittoria:

I. 2. 108-9. True, but they that have the yellow Jaundice, thinke all objects they looke on to bee yellow. Jealousy is worsen...

The patient of jaundice in Montaigne is transformed into a man in jealousy by Webster. Montaigne is in all seriousness 'to verifie the authoritie which senses have over discourse' (II. XII.). But Webster's imagination, inflamed by Montaigne, allows Flamineo to dally with jealousy, and utter a witty speech:

I. 2. 99-. It seemes you are Jealous, ile shew you the error of it by a familiar example — I have seene a pair of spectacles fashioned with such perspective art, ... — now should you weare a pair of these spectacles, and see your wife trying her shooe, You would imagine twenty hands were taking up of your wives clothes, and this would put you into a horrible causelesse fury —

Now there is a parallel between Montaigne and Hamlet, which seems similar to, but in reality quite different from, that between Montaigne and Webster. Professor Wilson refers to it in his *Hamlet* :

5. 2. 34-7. I once did hold it, as our statists do,  
A basenss to write fair, and laboured much  
How to forget that learning, but, sir, now  
It did me yeoman's service.

I. XXXIX. I have in my time seene some who by writing did earnestly get both their titles and living, to disavow their aprentissage, mar their pen, and affect the ignorance of so vulgar a qualitie;(and which our people holds to be seldome found amongst wise men, endeavouring to commend for better qualities).

'To write fair' refers, as Professor Wilson interprets, to the elaborate Italian calligraphy employed in state letters addressed to sovereign princes at this period. Hamlet is contemptuous of a style that marked the trained clerk rather than the gentleman. But I point out another pair of similar ideas and words between them.

5. 2. 38-44. An earnest conjuration from the king,

As England was his faithful tributary,  
 As love between them like the palm might flourish,  
 As peace should still her wheaten garland wear  
 And stand a comma 'tween their amities,  
 And many such like 'as'es' of great charge ...

I. XXXIX. I have no skill in ceremonious letters, which have no other substance but a faire contexture of complimentary phrases and curteous words. I have no taste nor faculty of these tedious offers of service or affection. I believe not so much as is said, and am nothing pleased to say more than I believe. It is farre from that which is used nowadies: For, there was never so abject and servile a prostitution of presentations; life, soule, devotion, adoration, servant, slave;

It seems that there might have been a strange coincidence of temper between Montaigne and Shakespeare. It is Walter Pater who first noticed it, and suggested possible echoes between their thoughts. In *Gaston de Latour* he depicts an encounter of Gaston with Montaigne. That part of this novel, which is entitled the *Suspended Judgement*, suggests us the direction which further investigation of the parallels should follow. Gaston is an earnest youth, a representative of the early Renaissance. Prompted by the searchings of mind, he visits great Montaigne and stays in his mansion for weeks, listening to the master's great talk. In describing the originality and significance of Montaigne in the movement of thought in general at that time, Pater compares him to Shakespeare in drama, 'Shakespeare, who represents the free spirit of the Renaissance moulding the drama, hints, by his well-known preoccupation with Montaigne's writings, that just there was the philosophic counterpart to the fulness and impartiality of his own artistic perception of the experience of life.' Proceeding to the investigation of parallels, Pater is soon fascinated particularly with Hamlet's words, 'there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so' (II.ii.252-3). To it he finds two or three nearest parallels in Montaigne:

I. XL. Now that which we term evil is not so of it selfe, or at least such as it is that it depends of us to give it another taste and another countenance.

I. L. Things several in themselves have peradventure weight, measure, and condition : But inwardly, in us, she(the soul) cuts it out for them, as she understandeth the same herself.

He regards the passages as insisting on possible existence of various opinions on a subject in the free activity of mind in the modern age, but in reality he interprets them as a statement of the suspended judgement which is his fundamental view of life. He is so deeply possessed with this idea that his speculation develops no further.

Georg Brandes, following the same way as Pater's, enlarges the extent of the investigation. He noticed in *Hamlet* not only the suspended judgement, but more echoes in philosophical motives or themes from Montaigne. Moreover, he sees them recurring and intertwined in *Hamlet*. He meant to analyze and systematize them from one coherent point of view. But to our regret, he allotted only a small portion of his book to the discussion, and he had other preliminary things to do, such as to explain the relation between Shakespeare and Giordano Bruno. His intention remains half accomplished.

### III

What remains in this essay for us to do is to draw more parallels, and investigate interrelations of philosophical motives in them more consistently than Brandes and others did. Brandes tried to detect a series of philosophical motives, but, as to relations among them in a coherent whole, he left it to be more closely observed and systematized. Needless to say, Shakespeare is not a philosopher, but *Hamlet* is philosophically and poetically as convincing as Montaigne is. Montaigne is not a sceptic. If so, he could never have had so significant an existence to Pascal. Mr. T. S. Eliot aptly observed, 'Montaigne exists, so to speak, on a plane of numerous concentric circles, the most apparent of which is the small inmost circle, a personal puckish scepticism which can be easily aped if not imitated (Introduction to *Pensées*). Hamlet exists also on the same plane of existence, and scepticism is his most apparent small circle. I must start from Hamlet in doubt and sorrow.

To Hamlet in the mourning garment for the late King, the consolation of the King and the Queen sounds conventional and hollow. The Queen

says, 'Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die' (I. ii. 72). While to Hamlet, it is not common, but is rather a particular event. The King's words are more repugnant to him. He preaches that Hamlet's father lost a father, and 'that father lost, lost his' (I. ii. 88-9). Now Hamlet is not only confronted with the sorrow for his father's death, but also with the conventional morals of the court or the 'use of this world' which allows people to be drunk at the wedding feasts soon after the late King's funeral. In the First Soliloquy, he says, 'O, God, beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourned longer' (I. ii. 150-1). He appeals to reason, and decides to go his own way. This reasonable act becomes the young prince who studied at the University of Wittenberg, a center of new learning. It may be said that a conflict between reason and convention is a dramatic motive of the earlier part of the play.

The phrase 'discourse of reason' is not found in any play by Shakespeare before Hamlet, except in Hector's speech of *Troilus and Cressida* (II. ii. 116). The word 'discourse' is originally a term of Scholastic Philosophy which was applied to activity of soul in recognition of God's mystery. In common usage, the verb 'discourse' means 'to pass from premises to conclusion' (Johnson). The noun 'discourse' is used, with or without reason, for the process or the faculty of understanding, rationalization. Dowden says in the Notes to *Hamlet*, the phrase is 'found several times in Florio's Montaigne.' And Robertson says, 'It is difficult to doubt that it came from Montaigne.'

Confronted with 'the use of this world,' Hamlet in Act II takes an ironical attitude to people around him. Discourse of reason in him leads him to it. He surprises the spy with praise of honesty. To Polonius he says, 'I would you were so honest a man' (II. ii. 176). And he refers to the maiden Ophelia with such obscene words as 'a good kissing carrion.' He tries to deprive, under the disguise of madness, the court of all its misleading appearances, and at the same time reduce human life to a naked physical process. Life and death appears to Hamlet in Act II to be nothing but a purely physical change. It is a prelude to the theory of transmigration put forward by Hamlet in the later part of the play.

We can draw a parallel between Hamlet's words after the unfortunate accident of killing Polonius and those of Montaigne in *An Apology* :

4. 3. 20-2. a certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him : your worm is your only emperor for diet, we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots.

II. XII. the hert and life of a mighty and triumphant emperor is but the break-fast of a seely little worme.

Hamlet is ironical, and his words are somewhat ambiguous. But what he means becomes clearer and more significant as his dialogue with Claudius goes on : 'A man may fish with worm that hath eat of a king and eat of the fish that fed of that worm.' He refers to the 'wheel of birth,' and explains the theory to Claudius, 'Nothing, but to show how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.' He ironically applies the theory to Claudius, and implies that Claudius cannot escape from the 'wheel' as he is the King, though a debased king, and is doomed to the transformation from the King to worm and then to fish.

As the problem of life and death is the motif of the play, so the *Essays* discusses recurrently the same problem, and we find a chapter wholly devoted to it. The title of the chapter itself is significant to us : *That to Philosophise is to learn how to Die* (I. XIX.). In the process of his thought discourse of reason is allowed to exercise its function in accordance with Nature. The following is the synopsis of his opinion on the problem of life and death :

Our religion hath had no surer humane foundation than the contempt of life. Discourse of reason doth not only call and summon us unto it. For why should we feare to lose a thing, which being lost, cannot be moaned? but also, since we are threatened by so many kinds of death, there is no more inconvenience to feare them all, than to endure one : ... But Nature compels us to it. Depart (saith she) out of this world, even as you came unto it. The same you came from death to life, return without passion or amazement from life to death : your death is but a peece of the worlds order, and but a parcell of the worlds life. (I. XIX.)

This stoicism in Book I is integrated in Christian faith in *An Apology* in Book II. Thus discourse of reason, Nature, and the grace of God become three fundamental elements of Montaigne's philosophy. He says,

'Now our reason and human discourse is as the lumpish and barren matter, and the grace of God is the form thereof. 'Tis that which gives both fashion and worth unto it. So is it of our imaginations and discourse; they have a kind of body, but a shapeless mass, without light or fashion, unless faith and grace of God be joyned thereunto. '(II. XII.).

This is a marvellous aspect of his philosophy. From such a heightened point of view he looks down on the limited, helpless existence of human beings. Therefore, it becomes often inevitable that his description sounds ironical and even paradoxical. Thence the coincidence of ideas between the *Essays* and *Hamlet* is derived. Let me examine the parallel from a viewpoint of context of their thoughts.

II. XII. Touching strength, there is no creature in the world open to so many wrongs and injuries as man: ... seely lice are able to make Silla give over his Dictatorship: the heart and life of a mighty and triumphant emperor is but the break fast of a seely little worme.

This passage has been read as a parallel to *Hamlet* 4.3.20-2 by Brandes, to which Professor Wilson agrees in the Notes. But, in fact, I detect here some difference between Hamlet and Montaigne. In the dialogue with Claudius, Hamlet does not mean to humble man's pride, but indicates the existence of man as it really is. Thus he refers to the theory of transmigration. On the other hand, Montaigne takes a disparaging attitude toward the theory, as it is too irrational a doctrine to be held by an existentialist as Montaigne. He says, 'For in the Metempsychoses or transmigration of soules of Pythagoras, and the change of habitation which he imagined the soules to make, shall we thinke that the lion in whom abideth the soules of Caesar, doth wed the passions which concerned Caesar, or that it is he?... And shall we imagine that in the transmigration which are made from the bodies of some creatures into others of the same kind, the new succeeding ones are not other than their predecessors were? Of a Phenix cinders, first (as they say) is engendered a worme and then another Phenix: who can imagine that this second Phenix be no other and different from the first? (II. XII.)

And he preaches the unity of mind and body : 'for we are built of two principall essential parts, the separation of which is the death and consummation of our being. ... We do not say that the man suffereth when the wormes gnaw his body and limbs whereby he lived, and he consumeth them : This nought concerns us, who consist of union of mind and body joy'nd in meet communion (Lucretius)' (II.XII)

In Act V Hamlet again refers to maggots or worms on carcass in Act IV. His concern about the cycle of life has been in the process of development. In the graveyard scene of Act V, he traces skulls and bones in front of him to a politician, or a courtier, and his imagination flies to 'Lady Worms' and 'fine revolution.' This tendency seems to take a definite form in the following speech on the doctrine of transformation. It fits the real situation on a deeper level. In fact, Shakespeare is preparing for the coming catastrophe.

5. I. 198-210. Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole? ... as thus — Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel? Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,  
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.

O, that that earth, which kept the world in awe,

Should patch a wall t'expel the winter's flaw !

Hamlet's observation is not cynicism. On the contrary, his soul is purified by thy doctrine of transformation. Because his soul, by realizing the doctrine, obtains release from the wheel of birth. This, in return, works as a dramatic motivation of the play. Here lies a difference between Hamlet and Montaigne. The difference consists in the manner of obtaining liberty of soul from the wheel of birth. Hamlet approaches in ideas to early Greek philosophers rather than to Montaigne who lived in the early days of the Renaissance.

The main purpose of the Orphic observances and rites was to release the soul from the wheel of birth, that is, from reincarnation in animal or vegetable forms. Pythagorean philosophy is itself purification, katharsis,

and a way of escape from the wheel. The idea is nobly expressed in Plato's *Phaedo* which is dedicated to the Pythagorean community<sup>1)</sup>. I think some passages of Hamlet in Act V can be read as a stray echo from Plato. Let me draw a parallel passage from the *Phaedo*, because I think the dialogue between Socrates and Simmias reminds us of that between Hamlet and Horatio :

'And what is purification but the separation of the soul from the body, as I was saying before ; the habit of the soul gathering and collecting herself into herself from all sides out of the body; the dwelling in her own place alone, as in another life, so also in this, as far as she can; — the release of the soul from the chains of the body ?

Very true, he said.

And this separation and release of the soul from the body is termed death ?

To be sure, he said.

And the true philosophers, and they only, are ever seeking To release the soul. Is not the separation and release of the soul from the body their especial study ?

That is true'. (67 Jowett)

Let me examine a parallel which I think is concerned with the relation of *Hamlet* to Plato. Professor Wilson draws a parallel between Hamlet and Montaigne's summary of the Apology of Socrates :

3. I. 60-4. To die, to sleep —

No more, and by a sleep to say we end

The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to ; 'tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wished to die to sleep !

III. XII. If it be a consummation of ones being, it is also an amendment and entrance into a long and quiet life. Wee finde nothing so sweet in life, as a quiet rest and gentle sleepe, and without dreames.

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1) J. Burnet: *Early Greek Philosophy*. Black, London. P. 309.

Here the word consummation coincides. Florio translated Montaigne's 'Si c'est un anéatissement de notre etre,' into 'if it be a consummation of ones being.' This is a part of the summary of Socrates' Apology paraphrased by Montaigne, and is not a faithful translation of the original. In fact, Montaigne begins this passage as follows: 'as near as I remember, Socrates speakes in this sense that ...' Let me quote the original passage:

'(Let us reflect in another way, and we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is good; for one of two things) — either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or as may say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. For if a person were to select the night in which his sleep was undisturbed even by dreams, and were to compare with this the other days and nights he had passed ...' (40, *Apology*. Jowett)

Professor Wilson draws one more parallel on death between Hamlet and Montaigne. It is on 'the readiness is all' in Act V.

5. 2. 218-20. If it be now, 'tis not to come — if it be not to come, it will be now — if it be not now, yet it will come — the readiness is all.

I. XIX. It is uncertain where death looks for us; let us expect her everie where ... I am ever prepared about that which I may be ... A man should ever, as much as in him lieth, be ready booted to take his journey, and above all things, looke he have then nothing to do but with himselfe.

In the quotation from Montaigne, Professor Wilson omits some passages where Montaigne's idea of death is told as it becomes the title of the chapter, *That to Philosophise is to learn how to Die*. For instance, we find the following passage between 'everie where' and 'I am ever prepared':

He who hath learned to die, hath unlearned to serve ...

To know how to die, doth free us from all subjection and constraint ...

Verily, if Nature afford not some helpe in all things, it is very hard

that art and industrie should goe farre before.

(To be continued)

15th October, 1963.