

HAMLET'S "MADNESS."

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DRS. STERN and Whiles, in an interesting and provocative article in the January issue (1), claim to have solved the problem of Hamlet on the assumption that Hamlet suffered from the Ganser state occurring during the course of another psychosis. By this theory they hope to reconcile the seemingly contradictory views that Hamlet was insane, and that he was pretending to be so. He was both, they say, and the latter because of his being in the Ganser state.

The authors claim to have examined the problem from a strictly psychiatric viewpoint; but it must be remembered that such a viewpoint is necessarily subject to many limitations, inasmuch as there exists no parallel to Hamlet in actuality. One has constantly to bear in mind that Hamlet is not an historical personage, but a character in a play, and that our task is not to explain some Hamlet of our own, but Shakespeare's Hamlet; and in consequence our theories must not only be psychologically acceptable, but must conform with the text of the play which, after all, is the final arbiter. With this in mind, a psychiatric study of Hamlet may be of great value, but it need not and perhaps cannot be expected to "explain" Hamlet.

The two hypotheses which the authors advance are (1) that Hamlet was suffering from the Ganser state, and (2) that this arose during the course of a concurrent psychosis. I ask permission to discuss these in that order.

What exactly is the Ganser state? It is a hysterical alteration of consciousness, a hypnoic mechanism, according to Kretschmer, which is on the borderline of malingering, and is characterized by childish theatrical behaviour and rambling talk. It may, but need not, co-exist with a psychosis. In my own experience, I have found it occurring not infrequently in congenitally feeble-minded patients who have feared that some misdemeanour might entail their going to prison. Such a patient recently told me that he couldn't say how many shillings there were in a pound unless he could weigh them! Crooked answers, as the authors say, are characteristic of the syndrome.

The Ganser state, however, is a descriptive epithet, not an explanatory one. By itself it explains nothing; it requires to be explained; and the explanation of its occurrence that is generally accepted is that it represents an unconscious or semiconscious attempt to simulate insanity. The occurrence of such pretension of madness with little or no conscious awareness can only be understood when the relevant facts of the case are disclosed; and I would submit that an intensive study of Hamlet will throw more light on the nature of the Ganser state than the latter can possibly do in the elucidation of Hamlet's behaviour; though I willingly concede that the critics should be beholden to Drs. Stern and Whiles for drawing their attention to such a possibility. The hypothesis is one which, though it may not explain all that its authors would have it explain, none the less is capable of clarifying some of the enigmatic passages of the play, though I cannot accept some of the examples the authors have chosen. There were many obvious external reasons why Hamlet should deliberately assume insanity, as he declared to Horatio he intended to do. Later, doubtless, owing to an ever-increasing mental conflict brought about by the immense external difficulties of his task aggravated by great weaknesses within, he did from time to time pass from ordinary consciousness into a twilight state without knowing that he was doing so; but all his simulations were not of this sort; for he was often deliberate in his deceptions. Hamlet's demeanour depended very much on whether he believed himself to be unobserved; and much of his "madness" was designed for onlookers and eavesdroppers; he had to be very wary.

So far then with regard to Hamlet's assumption of madness. We now have to consider the essential "madness" the "psychosis" which Drs. Stern and Whiles describe and illustrate, but which they do not name. They recount as proof of Hamlet's insanity that he was suffering from melancholia, that he was suicidal, excitable and hysterical, hallucinated and lacking in insight; and finally they have Hamlet's own corroboration of their diagnosis. But who has ever known a melancholic express his weariness of soul with such precision and profundity? Such an ability, indeed, provides a diagnostic criterion of a very different kind of depression. The soliloquies which reveal his "sore distraction" and despondency make manifest at the same time that he was fundamentally sane. Ophelia's madness is never in doubt; but Hamlet, it seems to me, though "on the brink," never passes into lunacy. His excitability and hysteria are evident enough, though the passages adduced to demonstrate them are susceptible of an entirely different interpretation: "Hillo ho ho boy," for example, was a well-known Elizabethan form of greeting derived from the falconer's call, as "Come bird come" shows it to be. The question of Hamlet's hallucinations is rather more complicated. If any of our patients were to report that they had seen and received verbal instructions from a ghost we would have no hesitation in ascribing their condition to hallucinations; but the ghost of his murdered father that appeared to Hamlet and exhorted him to avenge his murder by slaying the King was no hallucination, for it had been seen by three other men whose sanity is not doubted. It is true that in Act III, sc. 4, the Ghost appears to Hamlet but is invisible to his mother, the Queen. Drs. Stern and Whiles submit this as evidence that Hamlet was hallucinated; but it was the *same* Ghost who had been visible to others, and we cannot suppose that Shakespeare had intended his hearers to imagine it to be hallucinatory. "Lacking in insight"—I would not choose to say this about Hamlet, whose insight was in fact too profound. And, finally, his own confession. It is true that Hamlet speaks of his own "madness," but the fact that he does so proclaims it to be other than the accepted sort.

Hamlet's inward struggle is symbolic of the conflict in all of us and there are many aspects of it; the Christian *versus* the natural man, the challenge to his manhood by the spirit of his father frustrated by his secret bondage to his mother, his urge to slay, and his deep disavowal of such an act, all these and many others, it seems to me, brought Hamlet to the verge of lunacy, but I do not consider that he passed beyond it. He was not master of the situation, but he understood it and contended valiantly with frustrations from without and from within, and in the end succeeded.

Drs. Stern and Whiles have written a paper which well deserves study, for the tragedy of Hamlet, though not so susceptible of a strict psychiatric assessment as the authors imagine, is none the less of perennial interest to all psychiatrists.

REFERENCE.

STERN, E. S., and WHILES, W. H. (1942), *Journ. Ment. Sci.*, **88**, 134.