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Author: Edward Payson Vining

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TIME IN THE PLAY OF HAMLET ***

Transcriber's Notes:

Every effort has been made to replicate this text as faithfully as possible, including inconsistencies in spelling and hyphenation.

Some corrections of spelling have been made. A list of amendments is at the end of the text.

The Shakespeare Society of New York,
INCORPORATED APRIL 20, 1885.
To promote the knowledge and study of the Works
of Wm. Shakespeare, and the Shakespearean
and Elizabethan Drama.

IN EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE,

JUNE 15, 1885.

Resolved, That in order that the papers printed under authority of this Society may be of the highest character, and of value from all standpoints, the Society does not stand pledged as responsible for the opinions expressed or conclusions arrived at in the said papers, but considers itself only responsible in so far as it certifies by its Imprimatur that it considers them as original contributions to Shakespearean study, and as showing upon their face care, labor and research.

Papers of N. Y. Shakespeare Society, No. 5.

Time in the Play of Hamlet,

BY

EDWARD P. VINING.

Read before the Society December 3d, 1885.

Press of the New York Shakespeare Society.
1886.

Time in the Play of Hamlet.

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.

It now remains to determine the length of the two intervals.

ACT I. opens when the late king was

But two months dead; nay, not so much, not two;

while in the third act the time since his death is stated to be "twice two months." The interval is, therefore, two months, or a little more. During this time Hamlet, in pursuance of his studied plan,

*Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and by this declension*

into his feigned madness. During this time Ophelia, in accordance with her father's commands,

*Did repel his letters, and denied
His access to her.*

That she had not spoken with him for some length of time is shown by her statement that the presents given her by him she had

Longed long to re-deliver,

and it was only on the day preceding the opening of ACT II. that Hamlet had carried his feigned insanity so far as to force his way into her closet and frighten her with his antics. It was at about this time also that the king decided upon his "hasty sending" for Rosencranz and Guildenstern, that they, by associating with him, might learn the cause of his affliction. The ambassadors, whose departure for Norway is mentioned in the first act, are welcomed home again in the second, thus giving us another evidence of the lapse of time. Still another indication of the length of the interval is contained in the fact that Lamond, a gentleman of Normandy, reached the Danish court after Laertes' departure and "two months" before his return.

In the second interval there has been time enough for the news of the death of Polonius to reach Laertes in Paris, and for him, "in secret," to return and spend some time in hiding, while he

*Feeds on his wonder, keeps himself in clouds,
And wants not buzzers to infect his ear
With pestilent speeches of his father's death:*

until at last he raises the body of men by whose aid he breaks through the defences of the king and demands vengeance for the death of his father. The interval had also been sufficient for Fortinbras to march from Denmark to Poland, win a victory there, and then return as far as the Danish court on his way home. It was not sufficient, however, for Rosencranz and Guildenstern to reach England, there to meet their deaths, and for the news to be brought back from England to Denmark. Although Hamlet leaped upon the "pirate" ship when only two days out at sea, it is likely that a much greater time would elapse before his return. If it were only for appearances' sake, it would be necessary that he should remain on the ship for some little length of time to keep up the pretence that it was a "pirate" that had attacked him, and in order that the fact might not become known that it was in reality one of the vessels of Fortinbras that had rescued him in accordance with a plot agreed upon between the two princes. On his return he recognized the fact that the interim before the arrival of the news from England would be but short, and that in this time, if ever, he must act. In truth he had not an hour to spare, for the English ambassadors reached the Danish court only a few minutes after the death of the king.

The best clue to the length of the interval between Scenes iii. and iv. of the fourth act is, however, given by the flowers that were in bloom at each of the two periods.

In the last scene there are named pansies, columbines, daisies, crowflowers, nettles and long-purples; flowers which in England (and it is the English rather than the Danish flora that is referred to by Shakespeare) are all in bloom during the month of April. The time of Polonius's death is fixed with beautiful precision by the words of Ophelia:

I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died.

It is in March that the English violets bloom and pass away.

The early violets of the United States, the "Johnny Jump-ups" of the children, have a curious synchronism in their flowering, which distinguishes them from other plants, and which seems to have passed unnoticed. Go at the right time, and you may find the grass beneath the trees and in moist or shady spots fairly blue with unnumbered myriads of these blossoms. Go two days later, and you may look in vain for a single specimen. They wither, literally, in a day. This little phrase of Shakespeare's shows the same peculiarity to be true of the English violets; and yet Shakespeare is the only writer who has observed it. Many another poet would have made it the basis of a dozen similes, and would have spun out verse after verse with varying references to it, yet Shakespeare in his wealth makes but this unnoticed and incidental allusion to the fact, and refers to it no more forever.

The flowers that are mentioned, therefore, show that the tragedy ends in April, and that it was some time during the month of March that Polonius was slain. The action commenced some two months, or a little more, before that time, or during the first half of the month of January, a time when

The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold.

About two months before this, or early in November, the treacherous Claudius stole upon his sleeping brother,

*With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,
And in the porches of his ear did pour
The leperous distilment.*

And it was in December, or

Within a month—

A little month!

after her first husband's death that Gertrude married his murderer.

Why was it that for thirty days the perturbed spirit of the former king allowed

*The royal bed of Denmark (to) be
A couch for luxury and damned incest,*

and made no sign?

The answer is given by Marcellus:

*Ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say no spirit dare stir abroad.*

It was, therefore, not until after the Christmas holidays were passed, that the ghost of Hamlet's father could bring his message from the grave.

Here it may be well to notice a variation between the first quarto and the following editions of Hamlet, the only one in which the time is changed. In the first form of the play that has come down to us, Gertrude's marriage did not occur until about two months after her first husband's death, and the drama opens immediately after her wedding. The winter's cold is but slightly referred to, and the season of the year seems not to have been as firmly fixed in Shakespeare's mind as it was by further thought and study.

There are two passages which seem to indicate warmer weather than is consistent either with the "bitter cold," which is twice referred to, or with a January night. These are:

*The morn, in russet mantle clad,
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill*

and

*The glow-worm shows the matin to be near,
And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire.*

These I can only account for by the theory that they formed part of the drama in an earlier state, before the time of the play had been fully developed, and that their beauty saved them in the later forms that we now have, notwithstanding their inconsistency with the "bitter cold" of a winter's night.

It cannot escape attention that the first days of November would be very late for the elder Hamlet to be able to continue his afternoon custom of sleeping within his orchard. Still, it is not impossible that pleasant autumn weather might continue until that season of the year.

It may be worthy of notice that the action in the original "Hystorie of Hamblet," on which the drama is founded, covers a period of "many years," and that in the German play, "Fratricide Punished," which by some is thought to be an adaptation of an early form of the drama which has not otherwise reached us, there is not a single indication of any definite lapse of time or of the season of the year.

In the tragedy, as we now possess it, there are, as shown above, two or three passages in which there is some apparent conflict with the remainder of the play, as to the season of the year in which the action took place; but for any evidence of uncertainty as to the lapse of time; for any legerdemain or glamour, the student will look in vain. On the contrary, there are but few creations of the intellect in which the passage of time is as clearly and unmistakably indicated.

As for the various points that have been thought to show some confusion in the mind of our poet, there are none which upon careful examination will not be found to have melted into air—thin air—leaving not a rack behind.

When Hamlet learned the truth of his suspicions, and resolved to obey his father's entreaties for revenge, he needed the aid of a stronger mind, and felt the want of sympathy and counsel; but it is not remarkable that Horatio should have remained unnoticed about the court for some two months after his arrival, during the time that Hamlet was first occupied in brooding over his father's death and his mother's shame; for then his melancholy filled his mind to the exclusion of all other thoughts, and he had not felt it necessary to take any immediate action. Polonius was surprised at Ophelia's account of the outbreak of Hamlet, for it had but just occurred, and no such indication of violent madness had preceded it; Hamlet's former state having been that of a gradual passage from sadness to fasting, sleeplessness, weakness and lightness, and his feigned insanity had but just reached a state which frightened the king into sending for the former companions of the prince to keep him company.

Ophelia had longed for a considerable period to re-deliver Hamlet's remembrances, for, in accordance with her father's instructions, she had denied him all access to her for some two months, and on the occasion (the day before she returned his gifts) when Hamlet, in fantastic attire, came suddenly before her, no word was spoken, and her surprise and agitation would naturally have prevented all thought of his remembrances.

When Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he has "of late foregone all custom of exercises," it is merely as an excuse for his loss of mirth, in order that they may not learn its true cause; but the fact was, as Hamlet confessed to Horatio, that since the time when Laertes went into France (that is to say, since the time when the ghost first appeared to him) he had been in continual practice with the foils.

Laertes had been at home, "in secret," for some little time before he forced his way into the presence of the king, gathering the populace to his side and maturing his plans for rebellion. There is no reason to believe that he had failed to take time to go to his own home after returning from France. On the contrary, Ophelia's words,

My brother shall know of it,

indicate that even in her madness there remained in her mind a knowledge of her brother's presence near her. Laertes was surprised at her insanity, for her mind had but just given way, and he, with the king and queen, saw her first violent outbreak.

It seems strange that the King should propose a fencing match but a few hours after the burial of Ophelia, and that her brother should be willing to engage in it; but the King's fear of Hamlet, and Laertes' desire for revenge, were so great as to override all other considerations.

The discrepancy between Hamlet's apparent "youth" and the thirty years which are fixed as his age by the words of the grave-digger and of the player King, is the last point to which reference need be made; and, without stopping to discuss the subject here, it may be briefly said that much of the apparent discrepancy disappears upon careful examination, and that sufficient explanation may be found for the little that may appear to remain.

In this, as in other cases, the truth is, that Shakespeare wrote with all care, and indulged in neither legerdemain nor clap-trap. We may safely conclude that whenever faults appear to us to exist in his work, they are much more likely to lie in our own carelessness and ignorance than in any imperfection in the poet.

COMMUNICATION

FROM

J. O. HALLIWELL-PHILLIPPS, Esq.

COMMUNICATION

From J. O. HALLIWELL-PHILLIPPS, F. R. S., F. S. A., Hon. M. R. S. L., Hon. M. R. I. A.: First Honorary Member of the Shakespeare Society of New York.

(Read in Society December 3rd, 1885, and ordered incorporated in the Minutes.)

HOLLINBURY COPSE, BRIGHTON, ENGLAND,
14th November, 1885.

Dear Mr. Appleton Morgan,

It will, I fear, be too difficult for me to express, in adequate terms, my appreciation of the compliment that the Shakespeare Society of New York propose to bestow upon me. I take it as exceedingly kind of them so to notice an old bookworm, and let me hope that you will offer my responsive acknowledgements.

But it occurs to me to submit to their notice a few memoranda on the history of the first Shakespeare Society that was ever formed, in the hope that they may prove of some little interest, especially as evidences that it is possible for Shakespearean research and criticism to be amicably and temperately conducted for a lengthened period, and thence presumably forever.

The Shakespeare Society of London was instituted in the year 1840, the then leading members of the council being the director, Mr. Payne Collier; the secretary, Mr. F. G. Tomlins; the treasurer, Mr. Dilke, grandfather of the present Sir Charles Dilke; Rev. William Harness; Charles Knight; Campbell, the poet; Macready, Alexander Dyce, Douglas Jerrold, Sergeant Talfourd, Thomas Wright, and Young, the tragedian. To these were added shortly afterward Bolton Corney, Charles Dickens, Henry Hallam, J. R. Planche and Peter Cunningham, the last named taking the place of Mr. Dilke as treasurer. Later acquisitions included Boyle Bernard, Knight Bruce, John Forster, Rev. H. H. Milman and Sir George Rose.

The society was especially fortunate in the selection of its director. A fluent speaker, courteous to all, ever in a good humor, always ready to encourage younger men in his favourite pursuits, and, withal, a good financier, Payne Collier was the beau ideal of the chairman of a literary society.

Mr. Tomlins, a journalist and dramatic critic, made in every respect an excellent secretary. Replete with good humor and fun, he frequently enlivened what might otherwise have been a somewhat too dull and technical meeting of the council; without allowing all this, I need scarcely add, to interfere with the legitimate duties of his office.

Mr. Cunningham—kind-hearted, genial Peter—was our excellent treasurer from nearly the commencement to the termination of our society. In common with most literary and scientific bodies, the power of government rested in an oligarchy, and I have specially mentioned these three names, being those in whom the real control of the society was vested, however wisely they accepted the services or adopted the advices of others. But there was, indeed, no one who desired to share in the absolute responsibility of the management; least of all, no one who was foolish enough to aim at the position of a supreme dictator. A few observations from recollection of two or three of the other members of the council may, perhaps, be admissible.

Macready only attended occasionally, but one of his first steps (he being then the lessee of the Drury Lane Theater) was an announcement that he had placed the names of every member of the council on the free list of that establishment, made an indelible impression on my memory. It was a delightful communication, money then being an exceedingly scarce commodity with me; and thus I was enabled to witness and study nearly every evening the best acting of the day, including the unrivaled personification of *Imogen* by Helen Faucit.

Alexander Dyce was a frequent attendant. Although sometimes caustic in his writings, he was the reverse at the council and in conversation, and that he was personally one of the kindest and best hearted of men few can vouch with more accuracy than myself, having enjoyed the advantage of his friendship from the days of my boyhood until his death in the year 1869.

Planche, the most prolific English dramatist England has seen since the days of Heywood, was also a frequent attendant. He was one of the most amiable and genial of men, one whose genius and graceful humor have not as yet been adequately recognized.

There was not, in fact, a single member of the council in whom was embedded an element of discord in respect to the objects or management of the society, and having belonged to the council from the time of its institution in 1840, until its dissolution in 1853, I can bear sufficient testimony to the enduring harmony that prevailed.

The same kind feelings and good humor characterized the annual general meetings, where, I verily believe, if an egotistical literary firebrand had ventured to disturb the general concord—and no one else could have managed such an achievement—he would have been gently and courteously lynched. It is true that I am speaking of a primitive and unenlightened period, before it had been suggested that Shakespeare was somebody else: but even the enunciation of so startling a theory as that would not, I am persuaded, have disturbed the serenity of a body who had perfect reliance on freedom of criticism, leading eventually to the victory of truth.

A similar catholicity of spirit—the absence of a specific platform—the trenchant and spontaneous rejection, if I understand your scheme rightly, of nothing but offensive dogmatism and insolent criticism—these are the elements that will commend the Shakespeare Society of New York to every temperate student, and demand his earnest wishes for its influence and permanency.

With a reiteration of my grateful acknowledgments to your society for their kindness, and apologies for intruding upon them this little specimen of an old man's garrulity, believe me, yours faithfully.

[Signed]

J. O. HALLIWELL-PHILLIPPS.

To Appleton Morgan, Esq., President of the Shakespeare Society of New York.

Transcriber's Note:

The following is a list of corrections made to the original. The first passage is the original passage, the second the corrected one.

Front matter:

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then elapses. ACT II., Scene i, to ACT IV.,

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Page 28:

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Page 28:

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Page 29:

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J. O. HALLIWELL-PHILLIPS.

J. O. HALLIWELL-PHILLIPS.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TIME IN THE PLAY OF HAMLET ***

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