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Daniel Kilham Dodge
University of Illinois

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LINCOLN AND HAMLET

It is now pretty generally known that Abraham Lincoln, whose schooling, according to his own statement, amounted in all to somewhat less than a year, was not only a steady reader and admirer of Shakespeare but also one of the keenest critics of some of the tragedies. His brief remarks on the opening lines of *Richard III*, protesting against the rhetorical rendering so dear to most actors, are not surpassed, for insight and sympathy, by the best criticism of Lamb and Coleridge, and his expressed preference for Claudius's soliloquy to the more famous "To be or not to be," shows the courage of true conviction, quite uninfluenced by the conventional view. That Lincoln took his Shakespeare to heart is clearly shown by the pathetic story of his reading the lines of Constance on Prince Arthur and his application of the mother's grief to his own recent bereavement in the death of Willie. His several references to Hamlet's reflections on fate, occurring especially in conversations, are still more characteristic; and it is this, the most popular of Shakespeare's tragedies—with the possible exception of Lincoln's favourite, *Macbeth*—which suggests the following comparison.

A famous German critic once said, "*Hamlet ist Deutschland.*" I am almost tempted to paraphrase the German epigram and say, "Lincoln is Hamlet"; for in spite of the many evident differences between the Danish prince of fiction and the American president of fact, the two so widely separated men have not a few characteristics in common.

In the first place, both Hamlet and Lincoln are humorists and, as an almost necessary consequence, both are melancholy. The melancholy of the Dane is so pronounced as often to make us lose sight of his humour, and the humour of the American is so often cited as to make us forget his melancholy. But in both men the two qualities, apparently so contradictory and yet actually so closely related, are essential. Hamlet, with his solemn jests in the churchyard at Elsinore, simply anticipates Lincoln on the battlefield of Antietam. Hamlet's mystification of that old fool Polonius and of that young fool Osric finds its counterpart in Lincoln's jests with the serious though by no

means foolish Staunton and Sumner. Your true humorist is always incited to his best efforts by your serious foe to humour, who may discern some method in his madness, but is quite unable to give it a local habitation and a name. An interesting connecting link between Hamlet and Lincoln in this special class of jesting is Lamb, as he badgers the unfortunate collector of stamps.

It is a significant fact that the actor by whom the lighter side of Hamlet's nature is most emphasised is a woman, Sarah Bernhardt. For in Hamlet there is a marked strain of the feminine, and this same subtle quality is no less marked in the apparently rugged and masculine Lincoln. It exists in both men perhaps in contradiction of the humorous sense, which we usually associate with the male sex, but it is possible that it revealed itself to the French actress partly as a result of sex sympathy. In both Hamlet and Lincoln the feminine strain, so often found in men of genius, is associated with their innate purity. Although we should not at first think of applying Horatio's phrase, "Good night, sweet prince," to Lincoln, with whom we usually associate adjectives of quite different bearing, it may have some justification. We know that Lincoln was a lover of children and that all children with whom he came in contact loved and confided in him. We know nothing of Hamlet in this connection, though his relation to Yorick suggests a similar quality. But there are many other evidences of Hamlet's purity of mind and life that serve to bring him into close touch with Lincoln.

As fatalists Hamlet and Lincoln are strikingly alike; and the resemblance is curiously illustrated by an incident immediately preceding the death of each man. Just as Hamlet says to Horatio, "But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart," and, in reply to his friend's urgent request that he regard the mysterious warning, declares that he will "defy augury," so Lincoln disregarded the entreaties of his wife that he give heed to his dream of the night before, and absent himself from the play at which he met his death. Both men were fatalists and in a certain sense dreamers. But at the same time, both were men of exceptional bravery, refusing to yield to what they regarded as weakness.

Reference has already been made to Lincoln's remarkable critical ability. This included the study of the drama on the histrionic as well as on the purely literary side; and his criticism of *Richard III* is directed in the main to the stage interpretation

of the scene. Probably without realising it Lincoln applies here one of the essential principles of acting as laid down by Hamlet in his directions to the players. Lincoln was no less disturbed by the meaningless ranting, which appeals to the general, than Hamlet himself. Both Hamlet and Shakespeare took the stage seriously and with nice appreciation, and both were offended by the failure of many actors to do the same.

In the quality of sincerity Hamlet and Lincoln stand on the same ground. Lincoln could have said with Hamlet, "Seems, Madam! nay, it is, I know not seems." Both were as impatient of insincerity in others as they were incapable of harbouring it themselves.

No less striking than their sincerity is the common sense of the two men. It is mainly this trait that makes them both such admirable judges of character. Hamlet did not need the revelation of his father's ghost to suspect his uncle. In vain did Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seek to conceal their real purpose from the keen young prince. With equal certainty Hamlet recognised the true sympathy of Horatio and in a slighter degree of Marcellus and Bernardo. So Lincoln, even in the strange surroundings of Washington, was quick to discern between friend and foe, applying to every one the touchstone of good sense and sound judgment.

Finally, in both Hamlet and Lincoln there is a depth of religious feeling, not unmixed with philosophic doubt and questioning. Whether or not Lincoln ever showed any serious interest in spiritualism, there is clearly a vein of mysticism in his make-up that induces him frequently to turn with eager questionings about the dim past and the mysterious future. The majesty of Niagara suggests to him the thought that when Moses was on the earth the thunder of its water was already resounding and that before man was Niagara existed. Is not that the same kind of sublime commonplace that we find in Hamlet's reflections on humanity?

In Hamlet Lincoln found a congenial spirit and though his humility would have forbidden his comparing himself to so gracious a creation there is surely no impropriety in another's doing so, and it may be that the comparison will appeal to others.

DANIEL KILHAM DODGE.

University of Illinois.