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## Delacroix, Dumas and 'Hamlet'

IN middle age Delacroix harboured no illusions about Alexandre Dumas's literary talents and dreaded his visits in search of material for his *Memoirs*. Nevertheless, he often found his writings entertaining, had an obvious affection for the man and admired his irrepressible energy in the face of adversity. Fairly characteristic critical judgments are to be found in Delacroix's *Journal* on 17th October 1853: '*qu'est-ce que Dumas et presque tout qui écrit aujourd'hui en comparaison d'un prodige tel que Voltaire, par exemple?*' And on 22nd July 1860, on dipping into Dumas's *Quinze jours au Sinaï*: '*C'est toujours ce ton cavalier et de vaudeville. [ . . . ] C'est fort gai, mais fort monotone, et je n'ai pu aller à la moitié du premier volume.*' Returning from the theatre together on 22nd May 1855, Dumas speaks of his crushing debts to Delacroix, who notes with sympathy in his *Journal*: '*Le pauvre garçon commence à s'ennuyer d'écrire jour et nuit et de n'avoir jamais le sou. [ . . . ] en attendant il ne se trouve pas vieilli et agit, sous plusieurs rapports, comme un jeune homme. Il a des maîtresses, les fatigue même. [ . . . ] Il mérite de mourir comme les héros, sur le champ de bataille, sans connaître les angoisses de la fin, la pauvreté sans remède et l'abandon.*' When he felt personally threatened by Dumas's money-making projects and cavalier attitude to the truth, Delacroix was less indulgent, writing after an interview on 25th November 1853: '*Dieu sait ce qu'il va faire des détails que je lui ai donnés sottement! Je l'aime beaucoup, mais je ne suis pas formé des mêmes éléments et nous ne recherchons pas le même but. Son public n'est pas le mien.*'

Yet there had been a time, in the 1820s, when they were pursuing similar aims, fighting the same fight against academic constriction, sharing the same enthusiasm for Shakespeare and the English company that performed his plays at the Odéon in 1827, and, in their different ways, being influenced by him. In the first years of the decade both had received encouragement from Talma, the most celebrated French actor of the day; in the closing years Dumas saw his *Henri III et sa cour*, performed at the Comédie-Française in 1829, become the first major triumph of the Romantic drama in France, and Delacroix, less happily, found himself labelled '*le chef patenté du romantisme*' after exhibiting the *Death of Sardanapalus* at the Salon in 1828. If Delacroix may have later had good cause to deplore Dumas's literary vulgarity, he can have had no reason to complain of his taste in the visual arts during their early years, for then Dumas showed himself to be in the front line of the *avant-garde* and paid more than lip-service to the modern movement by acquiring three paintings of outstanding interest by Delacroix: *Tasso in the Hospital of St Anna, Ferrara* of 1824, the famous *Combat of the Giaour and Hassan* of 1826,

inspired by Byron and now in the Art Institute of Chicago, and a picture which, being unillustrated in the literature of the west, as far as I am aware, and unsatisfactorily documented in an east European journal, has given rise to this article: *Hamlet sees the Ghost of his Father*; signed and dated 1825, it is Delacroix's first painting inspired by *Hamlet* and possibly his earliest painting of a Shakespearian subject (Fig.2).<sup>1</sup> Recollecting the period of relative prosperity when Delacroix was paid for the *Massacres de Scio* and able to visit England with the proceeds in 1825, Dumas wrote of these early purchases with justifiable pride in 1863: '*Ce fut dans cette période de prospérité [ . . . ] que Delacroix fit son premier Hamlet, son Giaour, son Tasse dans la prison des fous et Marino Faliero.*'

'*J'ai acheté les trois premiers tableaux; ils sont encore aujourd'hui des plus beaux qu'ait faits Delacroix.*'<sup>2</sup>

The *Hamlet sees the Ghost of his Father* is not only of exceptional interest for the history of Delacroix's treatment of Shakespearian themes, but is seen to be of special moment in relation to Dumas's career if it is recalled

<sup>1</sup> The picture is listed as a lost work (L99) in my *The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix, a Critical Catalogue*, Vol. I, Oxford [1981], pp. 204-5, where full details of, and quotations from, the sparse nineteenth-century literature concerning it will be found. To these may be added an entry in a list of his works compiled by Delacroix at an undetermined date after 1846, in the back of his North African sketch-book preserved at the Musée Condé, Chantilly: '*Hamlet et le spectre, p. [pour] Dumas*' (published in J. GUIFFREY: *Le Voyage d'Eugène Delacroix au Maroc*, Paris [1909], I, p. 160). I learnt of the picture's present location and received a photograph too late to include it among the extant works in my first volume. It is illustrated and discussed by JADWIGA ŻEBRACKA-KRUPINSKA in an article entitled 'Nieznanne obrazy Eugeniusza Delacroix w zbiorach Krakowskich', in *Folia Historiae Artium*, III, Cracow [1966], pp. 69-93, résumé in French, pp. 92-93. Apparently unaware that Dumas owned a painting of this subject, of which he himself recorded the approximate date, and unable to decipher the indistinct (and idiosyncratic) '2' in the date, the author deploys much irrelevant stylistic argument to arrive at the tentative conclusion that the date is 1845(?). Unknown to the author, that is also the date assigned by Robaut (no. 1731), sight unseen and for a quite different reason, to the picture that belonged to Dumas; Robaut evidently listed Dumas's picture in 1845 only because he knew, unlike the Polish author, that it had been included in an exhibition in the foyer of the Odéon in that year.

According to the records of the Jagiellonian University Museum, their painting was bought in Paris by Julia Drucka-Lubecka-Pusłowska about 1870, which happens to be the year in which Alexandre Dumas died. It remained in the possession of her family in their palace in Cracow until 1958, and was then given to the Museum by Xavier Pusłowski.

<sup>2</sup> 'Eugène Delacroix', *Le Monde Illustré*, XIII [July-Dec. 1863], p. 124.

On reconsidering this paragraph in proof, it occurred to me that Dumas may not have been so precocious in buying his Delacroix as his own words and mine suggest. He seems to have acquired the *Tasso* of 1824 c. 1833, the *Giaour* of 1826 perhaps no earlier than 1830, and Delacroix's note cited in Note 1 above could well mean that the *Hamlet* did not enter Dumas's collection before the latter half of the 1840s.

that, in collaboration with Paul Meurice, Dumas was to write the first French version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* since Ducis. This was first performed on 17th September 1846 at Saint-Germain-en-Laye (where Dumas was building Monte-Cristo, his extravagant *château* in the renaissance style), when it was attended by leading critics. In December 1847, it opened at the Théâtre-Historique, which had been founded by Dumas chiefly for the performance of his own works. On the earlier occasion, it was hailed by Théophile Gautier as a welcome substitute for 'ces fades imitations que le Théâtre-Français s'obstine encore à jouer de loin en loin', and he praised Rouvière, who played Hamlet, in these terms: 'Cet acteur, qui a été peintre, comprend admirablement l'extérieur des personnages. Nul ne se grime mieux que lui; il avait copié à s'y tromper, sur ses vêtements et sa figure, les admirables dessins d'Eugène Delacroix. Plus d'une fois il nous a rappelé les grands acteurs anglais.'<sup>3</sup> By 'dessins' Gautier evidently means Delacroix's series of *Hamlet* lithographs published in 1843 (e.g., Fig.3), and his remarks seem to be borne out to some extent by a print published in *L'Illustration* on 25th December 1847, representing the play scene as performed at the Théâtre-Historique (Fig.4) though it is impossible to determine, on the evidence of this single engraving, how pervasive Delacroix's influence may have been. In the opinion of two modern specialists in the history of Dumas's plays, it was no doubt at the suggestion of Dumas that Rouvière imitated Delacroix's conception of Hamlet.<sup>4</sup>

Though more faithful to the spirit and letter of Shakespeare's text than the Ducis version, the Dumas-Meurice *Hamlet* was nevertheless a watered down adaptation, which diluted the harsher ingredients of the original for the benefit of the French popular palate. Shakespeare's verse was transformed into 2,083 alexandrines, his plot sentimentalised. For example, having killed Polonius, Hamlet cries:

'Polonius! ah! je suis bien maudit!  
Celle qui portera le poids de ma folie  
Sera donc toi toujours, Ophélie! Ophélie!'

And at the end only the *méchants* are punished; Hamlet survives. The first appearance of the ghost is suppressed, but not the scene painted by Delacroix, whereas Ducis had exorcised the ghost altogether.

It has never been clear whether Delacroix attended a performance of *Hamlet* by the ill-received English troupe which played in Paris in 1822, nor do his writings make it certain that he saw the play in London in the summer of 1825; it is known only that he was disappointed to have missed seeing Young as Hamlet when in London. But given the date of his *Hamlet sees the Ghost of his Father*, it seems most likely to have been influenced by a performance seen in London. It is not so accomplished a picture as the others from the 1820s listed by Dumas: the

king is weakly modelled, even for a ghost, Hamlet's action undirected, the setting a monotonous and obtrusive row of cardboard cylinders poorly related to the figures. The cock perched on the cannon is, however, a lively and inventive touch of a kind that Delacroix delighted in around this period (see the frog in the *Brigand quenching his Thirst* and the lizard in the *Still Life with Lobsters*). It is of course the painter's way of telling us that dawn is breaking, Shakespeare's equivalent, 'The glow worm shows the matin to be near,/And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire', being unpaintable.

Almost twenty years later, in the lithograph (Fig.3), Delacroix greatly improved the composition. The interaction between Hamlet and the ghost is more dramatic and, now dominating the battlements instead of being overshadowed by them, they form a kind of framing arch for a single machicolated tower. Their swords are less awkwardly placed and serve to animate the design rather than to encumber it. But the cock has gone. . .

'Look here, upon this picture, and on this'

The *Hamlet sees the Ghost of his Father* was not the only Hamlet picture by Delacroix destined for Dumas's collection. Produced in the first decade of his career, it was to find its complement in the last, for on 15th April 1854 he noted in his *Journal*: 'Composé, à l'intention de Dumas, l'Hamlet ayant tué Polonius'. Unfortunately, the history of Delacroix's treatment of this subject has become so confused since his death that it cannot be elucidated as confidently as that of the earlier picture. What can be done at this stage is to draw attention to a case of mistaken identity that has affected all the modern literature and to indicate paths that may lead to a resolution of the problems involved. In order to avoid making a tedious enumeration of earlier errors, the latest 'official' version of the history of the *Hamlet and the body of Polonius* that is supposed to have been painted for Dumas and now belongs to the Musée Saint-Denis at Reims (Fig.5) will be summarised here.

In the *Mémorial* catalogue of the Delacroix exhibition mounted at the Louvre in 1963 (no.477), it is assumed that the picture which Delacroix says he composed for Dumas in April 1854 is the same '*Hamlet et Polonius*' that he records in his *Journal* on 14th April 1856 as having recently sold for 1,000 francs, but it is questioned whether in the event it was actually Dumas who bought it. Subsequent owners are given as: Bouruet (in 1864); Edwards; his sale, 7th May 1870, to Candamo; Carlin: his sale, 29th April 1872, to Fevre; Fanien; Viot; his sale, 25th May 1886, to Levesque; acquired by Brame who sold it to Cheramy; his sale, 5th May 1908; acquired by the Museum at Reims in 1913. It is relevant to add here that the picture which passed in the Cheramy sale of 1908 also passed in the sale of his estate on 15th April 1913, where it was bought by Brame, according to annotated copies of the sale catalogue. The records of the Musée Saint-Denis show that they acquired their picture from Brame in July 1913. In an attempt to trace the evolution of the picture through further entries in Delacroix's *Journal*, it is held in the *Mémorial* that notes dated 12th and 15th October 1854 apply to it. They read: '*mis de la couleur sur le carton de l'Hamlet et Polonius à terre*';

<sup>3</sup> T. GAUTIER: *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France*, 4<sup>e</sup> série, Paris [1859], pp.328ff. See also, 5<sup>e</sup> série, p.205, for the performance at the Théâtre-Historique.

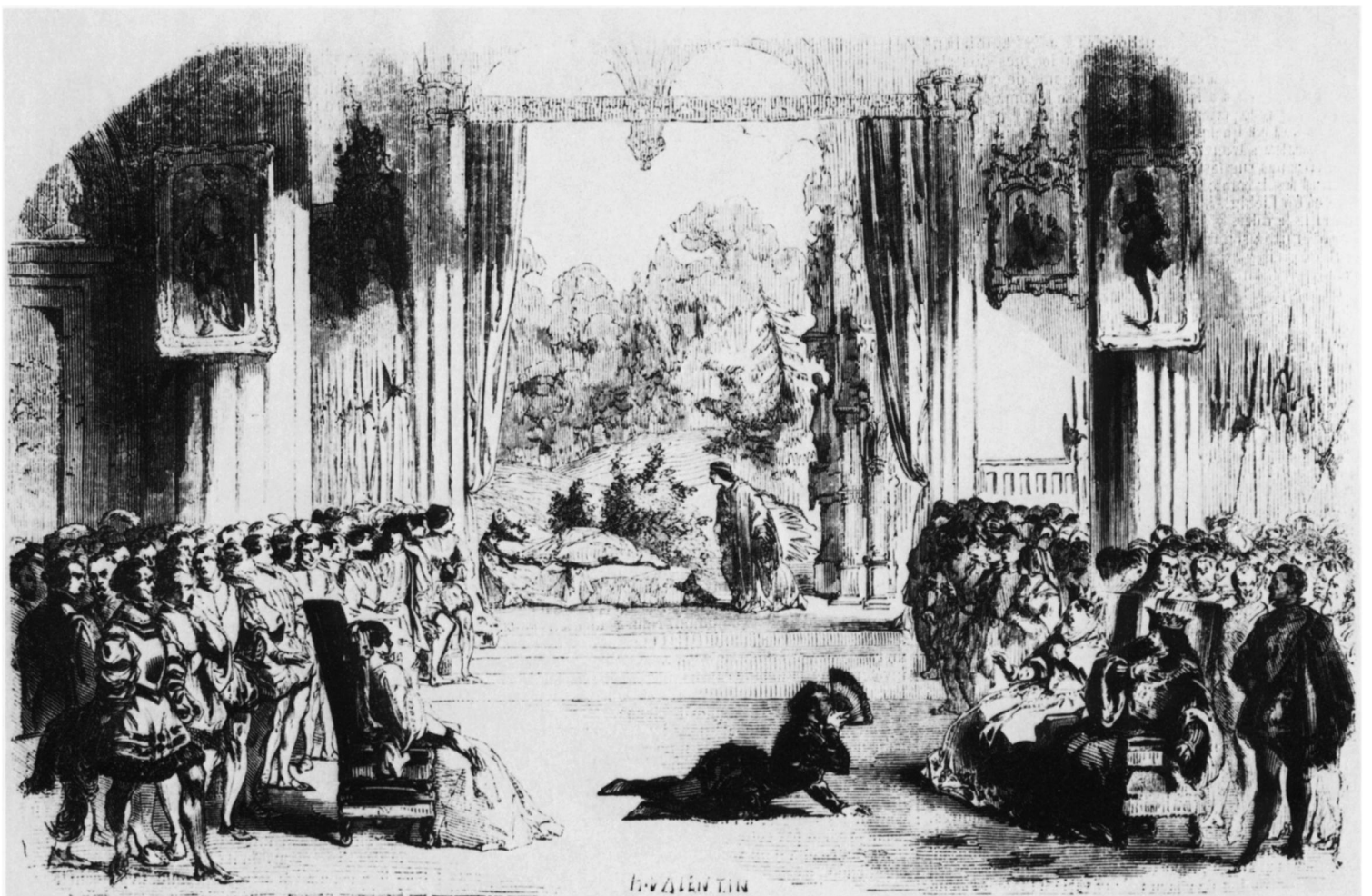
<sup>4</sup> F. BASSAN and S. CHEVALLEY: *Alexandre Dumas père et la Comédie-Française*, Paris [1972], p.165. This contains an informative account of the history of the Dumas-Meurice *Hamlet* and its numerous transformations, before it was finally accepted for its first performance at the Comédie-Française in 1886, pp.161ff.



2. *Hamlet sees the Ghost of his Father*, by Eugène Delacroix. 1825. 45 by 37 cm. (The Jagiellonian University Museum, Cracow).



3. *Hamlet sees the Ghost of his Father*, by Eugène Delacroix. 1843. Lithograph, 25.8 by 19.3 cm.



4. *Hamlet, the play scene*, by H. Valentin. 1847. Engraving, 14.5 by 22.5 cm.





5. *Hamlet and the body of Polonius*, by an unknown artist after Delacroix. 59.5 by 48.1 cm. (Musée Saint-Denis, Reims).



6. *Hamlet and the body of Polonius*, by Eugène Delacroix. c. 1855-56. 58 by 48 cm. (Location unknown; photograph Braun, 1874).

and '*avancé le Polonius et Hamlet (sur carton)*'. There are two overriding objections to the *Mémorial* version of the history of the picture begun for Dumas. First, the painting which passed in the Edwards sale in 1870 (the catalogue of which lists Bouruet-Aubertot but not Dumas as a previous owner) and later belonged to Fanien is not the Reims painting: this is made clear by comparing the picture at Reims with the original photograph in the Edwards sale catalogue and with the Braun photograph used as publicity for the exhibition held at the Palais Bourbon in 1874, to which the picture out of the Edwards sale was lent by Fanien (Fig.6). The differences are perhaps most conspicuous in the drapery on the floor on both sides of the foreground and in the figure of the queen (Figs.7 and 8).<sup>5</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that there are two photographed versions of *Hamlet and the Body of Polonius* of virtually identical design and size, one of which is untraced and has long been thought to be the version at Reims. This lost version, which in the absence of the original can best be studied from the Braun photograph, was enlivened by crisp and sparkling brushwork, which from all appearances fully justified the comments made on it by Charles Ponsonailhe in his review for *l'Artiste* of the retrospective Delacroix exhibition held at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1885: '*une facture splendide, émerveillante*'.<sup>6</sup> It was also firmly and clearly signed at the bottom right: *Eug. Delacroix*. The Reims version, on the other hand, is less finished and duller in handling. The brushwork is bland and the drawing lacks vitality (compare Hamlet's hat on the floor or Polonius's left cuff in the two pictures). At the lower right, there are traces of lettering which may well be a crude attempt to make this version appear to be the Edwards picture with its signature scraped and damaged. If that is what they are, the deception is exposed by the position of the mutilated inscription, which begins farther to the left than the signature on the Edwards version. The picture at Reims seems, in short, to be a copy, with slight variations, of the Edwards version, made perhaps by one of Delacroix's pupils but not from his own hand.<sup>7</sup>

When did the Reims version first come to be identified with the Edwards version? Apparently about the time when it was acquired by the Museum in 1913, because illustrations of the version which belonged to Cheramy contained in the Meier-Graefe-Klossowski catalogue of his collection of 1908 and in the catalogues of both his sales show this to have been the Edwards version and still in 1913 to have been clearly signed. Therefore, unless Cheramy bought the Reims version from Brame in the nineteenth century, thinking it to be the Edwards version, and it was subsequently illustrated by the wrong photographs in these three catalogues, which is extremely unlikely, the confusion would seem to have occurred after Brame bought the Cheramy version in April 1913, and sold the other version to the Reims museum in July of the same year. To date, I have had no reply from M. Paul Brame to my inquiries whether his firm's records contain information that would shed light on these troublesome questions. By 1916, in any event, the error was ensconced in the best Delacroix literature: in his monograph of that year, Etienne Moreau-Nélaton illustrated the Reims picture by a photograph of the Edwards-Cheramy version (his Fig.365), which he also thought was the picture painted for Dumas.

The fact that the support of the *Hamlet and Polonius* mentioned in the two *Journal* entries of October 1854 cited above is noted by Delacroix as being cardboard creates a problem. Could the untraced Edwards-Cheramy version be on cardboard? It is listed as a canvas in the Meier-Graefe-Klossowski catalogue of 1908 (following Robaut – no.943 – who could have been wrong), but as '*panneau*' in the catalogues of the two Cheramy sales. If it is on cardboard, then the *Hamlet and Polonius* which Delacroix began for Dumas in April 1854 and the picture of the same subject that he sold for 1,000 francs shortly before 14th April 1856 (*Journal* II.442), and which subsequently belonged to Bouruet and Edwards, could well be one and the same painting. This is unlikely, however, in view of descriptions of the Bouruet version in nineteenth-century catalogues, and the listing of the support as '*panneau*' in the catalogues of the Cheramy sales appears to be an error, the backing having perhaps been mistaken for the support. It is much more likely that the version which Delacroix sold in 1856 for 1,000 francs passed directly into the collection of Bouruet, for whom he was painting a *Medea* on commission in May 1856 (*ibid.*449), then into the various private collections listed in the *Mémorial* catalogue of 1963, following Robaut. In that case, a different version painted on cardboard would appear to have been the picture intended for Dumas, and that version was either never finished or has never come to light. It may have been sold privately by Dumas or by his family, like the *Hamlet sees the Ghost of his Father*, the *Tasso* and the *Giaour and Hassan*, to find its way into a spot no less remote than the Puslowski Palace in Cracow.

<sup>5</sup> The discrepancies cannot, in my opinion, be explained as the result of damage and restoration. The only record of a restoration of the Reims picture is in 1922, when it appears to have been simply cleaned and relined.

<sup>6</sup> *L'Artiste*, 9<sup>e</sup> série, XXIII [1885], p.180.

<sup>7</sup> The colours correspond with the description of the version which belonged to Cheramy given in the Meier-Graefe-Klossowski catalogue of his collection of 1908. Delacroix did not normally reproduce his colour schemes without variation in different versions of a subject.



7. Detail of Fig. 5.



8. Detail of Fig. 6.



9. *Lion devouring a Goat*, by Eugène Delacroix. Salon 1848. (After cleaning; see Saleroom Note).