

7. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

HAMLET, the greatest play by the greatest poet and dramatist who ever lived, is the most written about work of Western culture, apart from the Bible. Why has it attracted so much attention over 400 years? One key to the greatness of this multi-faceted masterpiece is that, in the character of Hamlet, Shakespeare created a brilliant self-portrait of the artist and intellectual as a young man. *Hamlet* is about the author himself, plucking out bits of the heart of his own mystery. And it is also about the madness of the world to which he is trying to adjust. Hamlet is the Humanist idealist, discovering that the world does not correspond to his deepest hopes and desires – and also discovering that he is far from perfect either.



Francis Bacon's essay *Of Revenge*. He condemns private revenge – 'a kind of wild justice' – outright. In passing over revenge, a man is superior to his enemy. Also, the first wrong offends the law, but the revenge of that wrong 'putteth the law out of office'. Laertes exemplifies this kind of situation. His anger and grief make him so bent on getting revenge for the death of Polonius that he says he is willing to be damned to hell. His motive is an entirely private one, and therefore entirely wrong.

At the other extreme, Fortinbras' revenge is driven by honour. He wishes to recover the territory that was lost when his father died. This will not only regain his family's honour but also the honour of the nation. This is what Bacon calls public revenge, which he says is 'for

the most part fortunate'.

If Fortinbras is the example to follow and Laertes the example we should avoid, what of Hamlet? He seems to have a justifiable cause. After all, his father was murdered in a cowardly manner, and the murderer has even entered into an incestuous relationship with his mother. Yet Hamlet Senior's death is fratricide, a private affair linked to Claudius' desire for Gertrude. Moreover, Claudius has apparently been chosen as king by his noblemen, for Hamlet refers to 'the election'. So it would not be a public revenge and it would solve nothing, for the obsessive poison of revenge would continue afterwards, with the object being transferred from his uncle to his mother.

This poison eats away at Hamlet and he becomes a cold, cynical and tormented soul. After a protracted struggle, in which for a time it appears that a Christian Humanism has defeated his hate, he finally ignores his conscience, abandons reason for passion and surrenders to violent revenge, with catastrophic consequences.

On top of this layer of the play, Shakespeare places another... and another. *Hamlet* is a play not only about ethics but also about politics and philosophy. Politically, it is a satire on Elizabethan politics. The court in Elsinore, like that of Elizabethan England, is a very claustrophobic world in which plotting, intrigue and spying are rife and no one goes unwatched. Claudius even speaks of 'not single spies, but in battalions'.

Hamlet is spied upon by Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, while Reynaldo is employed by Polonius to spy on his son Laertes in Paris. Hamlet's *Mousetrap* is a scheme to spy on Claudius and thereby 'catch the conscience of the king'. Hamlet and Horatio also spy on Ophelia's burial, until Hamlet reveals himself when Laertes jumps into Ophelia's grave.

The spying game in *Hamlet* reflects the reality of late Elizabethan court life. At its head stood Lord Burghley,

Shakespeare took an old revenge story and transformed it by the touch of his incomparable genius into a play that not only lifts the theme onto a higher plain by contrasting private revenge with public justice, but also beautifully and powerfully addresses life, the universe and everything. How can we know anything? Is life worth living? Are human beings capable of creating a morally good society? How can Humanism triumph in a world dominated by power politics?

Hamlet is full of questions, mysteries and riddles. Even the word 'question' itself is used seventeen times. There is, however, one question Hamlet does not ask himself, and yet it pervades his entire thoughts: "Would it be right for me to kill Claudius?" Critics used to debate why Hamlet delays his revenge, as if taking such action was the obvious thing to do. But, apart from the fact that it would have deprived the author of his opportunity to reflect on these matters, it should be obvious that the play is partly a protracted reflection on the medieval morality of blood revenge. "Conscience doth make cowards of us all", says Hamlet, trumpeting the reality that he is delayed by his own moral doubts.

The story recounts the murder of a Danish king, apparently at the hands of his brother, and the subsequent emotional turmoil that his son undergoes as he struggles with the idea of vengeance. At the back of Hamlet's mind is the notion that killing Claudius would be merely a private revenge and therefore wrong, but the question is never spelt out so precisely because Shakespeare is a writer who subtly insinuates his ethical message rather than preaching to his audience. We are meant to find the answer ourselves in the experience of the whole play.

That this is Shakespeare's purpose is stressed by the fact that it isn't only Hamlet who is seeking revenge. In the play we are presented with three avengers. Fortinbras and Laertes as well as Hamlet are looking to avenge the deaths of their fathers. The clue to Shakespeare's intention lies in

satirised as Polonius. Burghley wrote *Certain Preceptes*, or Directions for the use of his son Robert Cecil, just as Polonius issues precepts for Laertes. Both are based on the principles of self-love, deceit and cunning.

The most famous is:
*"To thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou can'st not then be false to any man"*.

Now, this seems to be a statement of basic Humanist philosophy. Don't deceive yourself, don't pretend to be what you're not; be honest with yourself; be faithful to what you believe in. And so on. Now, at one level it is. But it has a double meaning. What Polonius is saying is perfectly in keeping with his own ethic of self-interest; logically, a man cannot be false to anyone else if he acknowledges fidelity only to himself and his own ends at the expense of others.

In other words, the thought means something different to a Machiavellian like Polonius than it does to a Humanist like Hamlet. But how can the latter values triumph in a world dominated by Machiavellianism? There is no doubt that Shakespeare presents Hamlet as a Humanist prince walking into such a world. He is fresh out of Wittenberg University, where he has imbibed all the essential tenets of Humanism: freedom of thought and the autonomy of the individual; reason overcoming passion; the importance of truth; a humane and loving ethic; and an open-minded yet sceptical attitude.

Above all, he has been taught:
"What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (Act 2, Sc.2).

The sting in the tail here appears to be a counterblast to works such as *Pico della Mirandola's Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486). Pico has God saying to Adam: "we have made thee... so that with freedom of choice and with honour as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayst fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer".

Hamlet and Shakespeare appear to reject this naive and optimistic Humanism in favour of the more

disillusioned brand of Montaigne, who stresses the limitations of reason and understanding in human affairs, who maintains that the external world was one of appearances which human beings could never hope to see past to the realities behind them and who, in the *Apology of Raymond Sebond*, describes man as a "miserable and wretched creature, who is not so much as master of himself, exposed and subject to offences of all things, and yet dareth to call himself Master and Emperor of this universe".

We might say that Hamlet is the sceptical Humanist who questions even the basic tenets of Humanism. For example, he tells his friend (whose name means, "I speak reason") that "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy". He

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is also torn between the old medieval honour blood code and the new genuinely Christian Humanism of rising above it all.

He even questions the point of life itself. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche thought Hamlet was the visionary Dionysian hero: "both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint".

So Hamlet is partly the nihilist who sees through the facade of order and reason in western culture and stares into the abyss of nothingness. As he says, like Yorick, we all end up as skulls or, like Alexander, as loam to stop a beer-barrel or, like Caesar, turned to clay that might stop a hole to keep the wind away.

The key here is 'partly'. It is wrong to reach a final verdict on Hamlet. As Harold Bloom suggests, his quintessence is never to be wholly committed to any stance or attitude, any mission or indeed anything at all (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p406). Hamlet is too

intelligent to be at one with any role. Shakespeare created him as a dialectic of antithetical qualities, a 'dance of contraries', everything and nothing, a fullness and emptiness playing off against each other.

And why? The answer is because like all Shakespearean dramas, *Hamlet* is a treasury of the disputes that frustrated and delighted both Humanists and counter-Humanists. Action versus contemplation, theory versus practice, appearance versus reality, art versus nature, self versus others, reason versus passion, deduction versus induction, individuality versus communality, and so on. In treating of these polarities, Shakespeare generally presents structures of balanced contraries rather than syllogistic endorsements of one side or another. In doing so, he achieves a higher realism, transcending the mere imitation of experience and creating, in all its conflict and fertility, a mirror of mind itself.

Thus in *Hamlet* we have a conflict between the old and the new ideas: medieval superstition opposed by modern rationality; medieval morality opposed by Christian forgiveness; self-interested realpolitik opposed by civic Humanism.

This is not to imply that Shakespeare has no ethical core. *Hamlet* is a tragedy, after all. By exposing the weaknesses, cynicism and evil in the world, how his hero succumbs to them, and the destructive consequences that they inevitably produce, the playwright is educating his readers/audience to avoid the same mistakes.

Shakespeare's plays are profoundly moral and deal with the deepest ethical themes and issues. Evil never triumphs. *Hamlet* does not end with the prince destroying his enemies and ruling Denmark happily ever after. Even characters who are essentially good are punished for their evil acts; so in a sense, Hamlet dies for the killing of Polonius. And with him, the young and immature Shakespeare dies too. If Hamlet is the author as a young man, then the humane and philanthropic Prospero is Shakespeare in his full Humanist maturity.
