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The Moral Universe of Hamlet

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THE MORAL UNIVERSE OF HAMLET

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THE MORAL UNIVERSE OF HAMLET

Shakespeare's interest in the moral element in tragedy has been noted by more than a few respected critics. Seneca's moral writings were very popular with the Elizabethans and definitely influenced Shakespeare in his writing of tragedy. Hamlet praises Horatio for possessing Stoic qualities: he is "a man that fortune's buffets and rewards / hath ta'en with equal thanks," and he is a "man that is not passion's slave." The emphasis upon fortitude, indifference to follies of fortune, the rule of reason, and the sense of justice were repeated frequently by Seneca and emphasized by Shakespeare in his tragedies.¹ Shakespeare's abiding belief that essential goodness adhered to moral orders or moral laws which were given us for this life complemented his belief that people who transgressed these moral laws brought down sorrow not only upon themselves but upon others.²

A. C. Bradley, in discussing the moral element in Shakespearean tragedy, noted that in tragedy the main source of the convulsion which produced suffering and death was never good: "good contributed to this

¹ E. Hankins, The Character of Hamlet (University of North Carolina Press, 1941), p. 47.

² Blanche Coles, Shakespeare's Four Giants (Rindge, New Hampshire, 1957), p. 31

convulsion only from its tragic complication with its opposite in one and the same character."³ The character of Hamlet illustrates one point. Hamlet's love for truth makes it impossible for him to show respect where he has none, and his adherence to a moral order makes it impossible for him to show indifference in the face of moral evil.⁴ Hamlet is called upon to assert moral order in a world of moral confusion and obscurity. He is a man of honesty, and he is forced to use the weapons of his adversaries, forced to practice shifting and subtle strategy; thus he comes to waste himself in ingenuity and device. All of the strength which he possessed would have become organised and available had his world been one of honesty, happiness, and love. But a world of deceit, espionage, and selfishness surrounds him. His idealism, at the age of thirty, occasionally takes on pessimistic qualities; his life and heart become sterile; he loses the energy which sound and joyous feelings provide; and in the wide-spreading waste of corruption which surround him, he is tempted to understand and abhor things rather than accomplish some practical services. In the unweeded garden of the world, why should he risk his life in trying to uproot a single weed?⁵

A second tragic concept illustrated in Hamlet is that evil, once started on its course, will so work as to attack and destroy

³A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1965), p. 37.

⁴Karl Werder, The Heart of Hamlet's Mystery (New York, 1907), p. 93.

⁵Edward Cowden, Shakespeare: His Mind and Art (London, 1880), p. 116.

impartially the good and the bad; and if Shakespeare makes us feel that a Providence is ordinant in all of this, it is his way of universalizing the particular situation.⁶

These aspects of the tragic world more than imply the existence of fate, although many critics have attempted to explain this idea by psychoanalyzing Hamlet's character. The psychology of Hamlet is somewhat like that which German metaphysicians have given to their Spirit of the World, which is the prey to its own perversity and to what is called the romantic irony, so that it eternally pursues the good in a way especially designed never to accomplish it.⁷

Hamlet is the first volume of Shakespeare's tragic reading of life, the psychological volume in which he seeks to penetrate the emotional springs of pity and awe through an analysis of the mental and moral nature of man, and to bring into relief at once the potentialities of that nature, and the causes, rooted in itself, whereby a piece of work--"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!"--is foredoomed to sterility and failure.⁸ But the idea of a fated or foredoomed tragedy tends to leave

⁶L. C. Knights, Some Shakespearean Themes and An Approach to Hamlet (Stanford, 1966), p. 175.

⁷George Santayana, Shakespeare's Critics, ed A. M. Eastman and G. B. Harrison (Ann Arbor, 1964), p. 182.

⁸E. K. Chambers, Shakespeare: A Survey (London, 1958), p. 181.

the observer rebellious or desperate. At the end of Hamlet the observer is filled with a sense of victory for Hamlet and salvation for Denmark, not because of the collision with a fate or blank power, but with a moral power, a power which we all admire and revere.⁹ It is moral law which holds Hamlet fast and causes him to react inwardly against the external pressures of the world.¹⁰

To begin with Bradley's concept, it is Hamlet's sharpened moral sense which results in a dramatic collision with Claudius and Gertrude. Hamlet's perception of evil necessarily appears appealing to us, because this sharpened moral sense is possessed by no one else in the play. While most of the other characters are bound in a moral fog, which results in an imperceptible descent into evil, Hamlet is given the gift of moral precision. Alone among the feigners of awkward roles, the players of shabby theatrics, Hamlet commands full awareness of the role or roles for which he casts himself. But Hamlet's gift of moral precision in a world of evil is the very cause of his tragedy. His sights may be set too fine. Moral precision may be not only useless but also even dangerous. It may inhibit action, it may even seem ridiculous. Moral passion is attractive when it is set against dulled conscience and seamy intrigues which surround it. But if evil is as deep-seated as the play suggests—if it is metaphysical, in other words--then moral

⁹Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 39.

¹⁰John Vyvyan, The Shakespearean Ethics (London, 1960), p. 359.

passion becomes superfluous.¹¹ Tragedy comes because the subtleties are so many and the opportunities for self-sacrifice so obvious that only the stupid brain or blunt moral sense is able to disregard them and reach the goal.¹²

Hamlet finally reaches the goal, but while doing so, we witness Hamlet's moral sense having to justify two worlds. Coleridge has said that Shakespeare "wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to outward objects and our meditation on inward thoughts--a due balance between the real and imaginary world."¹³ This intricate balance which Shakespeare has devised between inward and outward elements shows us a man who acts inwardly against external forces which are "rank and gross" and entirely alien to him. The complications which arise from this "due balance" result in "the history for a soul which moved through shadowy borderlands between the night and day."¹⁴

In Hamlet, Shakespeare for the first time used to the full the conflict between the two views of man's nature. On one side was the picture of man as he should be--it was bright, orderly, optimistic. On the other was the picture of man as he is--it was full of darkness

¹¹John Green, "The Postures of Hamlet," (Shakespearean Quarterly, XI, iii, 1960), p. 358.

¹²Chambers, Shakespeare: A Survey, p. 183.

¹³Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Shakespearean Criticism (London, 1964), p. 34.

¹⁴Dowden, Shakespeare: His Mind and Art, p. 112.

and chaos. The reader is given an awareness of this contrast in Hamlet, and this contrast is one of the main sources of our recognition of Hamlet's greatness.¹⁵ This contrast in the nature of man results in an almost irreconcilable predicament for Hamlet. The moral theme of this play is to bring the "native hue of resolution" to bear on life, and, to make the deeper findings of "pale thought" effective in the world of living men, the thinker must come down to that world. By coming down to that world, he accepts its terms, its way of making things happen; accepts the necessity of managing affairs by making levers of men's weaknesses, and so necessarily tends to live in a world of machines, not men. It is machine--like to be involved in an army which can find honor in a straw. Looking into himself, he believes intensely in the soul of man. Looking at people about him, and especially those who are effective in the corrupted currents of this world, he sees creatures of circumstance, not of spirit--circumstance which a clever, conditioning mind can control, and so make people dance like a puppet.¹⁶

But it is very late in the play before Hamlet realizes the distinction between spirit and circumstance. It seems that Hamlet is innately inclined to believe in unchanging standards of good and evil but finds himself in circumstances which result in his behaving as if everything

¹⁵Theodore Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man (New York, 1943), p. 94.

¹⁶A. P. Rossiter, Angel With Horns (New York, 1961), p. 185.

was absolutely relative, conditioned, accidental.¹⁷ The relativity of circumstances and situations leaves Hamlet with a series of alternatives which are equally 'balanced.' Shakespeare has left Hamlet, who is sad and gay, arrogant and humble, cruel and kind, brutal and tender, who can mock the aged but forbid others from doing so, who can talk bawdry but worship purity, who can kill, "lug the guts into the neighbour room," and then "weep for what he has done," as something for us to consider--an enduring moral enigma. It is the best balancing feat in literature, and Hamlet provides more excitement than any other in the world.¹⁸

Many critics have thought Hamlet to possess a rare character perfection that is distinguished by a strong idealism which makes him see man as a piece of work to be marvelled at because this "paragon of animals is so noble in reason." Then he finds his mother to be guilty of conduct that a beast without reason would shun. As a result of this discovery, the earth becomes a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors, and the world an "unweeded garden" where things only vile and rank can grow. Thus we find Hamlet to possess ideals so lofty, with heart and mind so true to those ideals that he can find neither place nor peace in an imperfect world.¹⁹

Hamlet is a fine and noble being; however, most of what we see of him in action is not controlled by his fineness and nobility but by

¹⁷Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁸Alfred Harbage, Hamlet Enter Critics ed. Claire Sacks and Edgar Whan (New York, 1962), p. 110.

¹⁹Coles, Shakespeare's Four Giants, pp. 32-33.

accidental circumstances: by Gertrude's remarriage; the Ghost's revelation of foul treachery; a stupid, loving girl's conventional behavior when slighted; by his committing the wrong murder; showing his feelings for Ophelia in the wrong manner and the wrong place; accepting the fencing challenge not only against his "gain-givings," but also contrary to his own calculation of his severely limited opportunity to plot against Claudius before the news from England arrives.²⁰

Hamlet's fineness and nobility is of such a high quality that critics have depicted him as a hypersensitive, hyperintelligent, and witty, but sadly inexperienced and morally unsophisticated young man who is shaken to the core of his being by intimate contact with unprecedented evil.²¹ One of the deepest characteristics of his nature is a longing for sincerity, for truth in manners and mind; an aversion from all affected or exaggerated falsity.²²

Hamlet also seeks to regulate his conduct in this world with a view toward life in the next. Early in the play he refuses to commit suicide because "the Everlasting had fixed His canon against self-slaughter." Hamlet later describes his "conscience" in terms of a concern for the "undiscovered country" and for the future welfare of his soul. The message which summons him to action comes itself

²⁰A. P. Rossiter, Angel with Horns, p. 180.

²¹Gunnar Boklund, Essays on Shakespeare (Princeton, 1965), p. 135.

²²Dowden, Shakespeare: His Mind and Art, p. 134.

from another world. But Hamlet is conscious of the forces of good and evil which struggle for the souls of men, and he seeks to follow the good. Hamlet sees justice as the eternal principle; in the short span of this life, one should follow that principle which best prepares one for life beyond the grave.²³ He feels that one should not live for this life alone, nor be very concerned about its length or brevity, but he should live so as to gain happiness after death. To such a life, the time of death is of no importance--"The readiness is all." One must not determine his conduct by the opinions of others but by the sense of right within himself. He must study the truth for himself and always attempt to remain in harmony with himself. Above all he must obey the voices of his own conscience and follow Polonius' advice--"to thine own self be true." To walk by the light within oneself, to strengthen that light by a contemplation of the eternal laws, to live here as one hopes to live in the hereafter, is the proper course for thoughtful men. The words of Socrates and Christ are words echoed by Hamlet himself--"I do not set my life at a pin's fee; / And for my soul, what can it do to that, / Being a thing immortal as itself." It is Hamlet's deep concern for a right conduct of life, this embodiment and setting forth of man's most difficult problem, that makes Shakespeare's Hamlet one of the noblest utterances of the human spirit.²⁴

²³Hankins, The Character of Hamlet, pp. 86-87.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 91-92.

This description, however, is far from being definitive.

The mind of Hamlet possesses a sense of almost being able to produce goodness itself. Sometimes it would appear, and in no cynical mood, that "there's nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." It is in this moral creative power of man, when his "instinctive nature has grown to the disciplined awareness of his spiritual consciousness, that Shakespeare sees the sanctity of man, and the marvel of his spiritual potentiality is unmistakable in Hamlet."²⁵ Even though Hamlet knows academically all about the corruption of nature and is quite cognizant of (possibly only from conversation) the less savory expressions of sexual relationship; his dominant emotions in the face of life are surely those he nostalgically recalls in his first conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In the noble frame of his own personal relationships he observes man with wonder and admiration--"what a piece of work is man...the paragon of animals."²⁶

The negative side of Hamlet's idealism, the aversion to evil, is developed more fully in the hero of the tragedy than in the Hamlet of Wittenberg. Hamlet's disgust at his uncle's drunkenness, his loathing at his mother's sensuality, his astonishment and horror at her shallowness, his contempt for everything affected, pretentious, or false, his indifference to everything purely external is incomparable

²⁵H. B. Charlton, Shakespearean Tragedy (Cambridge, 1952), p. 238.

²⁶M. D. H. Parker, The Slave of Life (London, 1955), p. 90.

to anything else in Shakespeare. His disgust is strong and hearty enough to encompass the whole rotten element in Denmark, and his indifference to mere externalities is the main reason for his only friendship and his impatience with distinctions of rank and wealth.²⁷ But if we can learn to look upon Hamlet neither as an ideal figure nor as an agent of death, but as a young man both bewildered and analytical, at the mercy of circumstances rather than in command of them, in the power of his emotions rather than his thoughts, with a strong sense of self-respect as well as of moral values, then we will come closer to him and to a realization of the intrinsic unity of the play.²⁸

With these thoughts in mind, let us proceed to analyze Hamlet's situation involving the other members in his moral universe. Hamlet is not a part of the natural world. His world takes on an identity of its own; it has a shape and voice, and addresses those that are in it. The moral laws of nature and of nations "speak aloud." The Ghost speaks aloud to Hamlet.²⁹ All through the play Hamlet wavers between materialism and spiritualism, between belief in immortality and disbelief, between reliance upon a divinity and a bowing under fate. In presence of spirit he is himself spirit: "I do not set my life at a pin's fee."³⁰

²⁷Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 97.

²⁸Boklund, Essays on Shakespeare, p. 137.

²⁹Geoffrey Bush, Shakespeare's Critics ed. A. M. Eastman and G. B. Harrison (Ann Arbor, 1964), p. III.

³⁰Dowden, Shakespeare: His Mind and Art, p. 118.

Hamlet's contact with the Ghost sets off the beginning of many misgivings for Hamlet. The misgivings turn on the function and the nature of devils in general--"the devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape." But nothing could describe Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost as an appointment with "a pleasing shape." As we shall see, his account is as philosophically valid and so particularly inept as are so many of his generalizations.³¹

The Ghost in Hamlet is different from others: he is not a product of a tortured conscience and in fact does not appear to its murderer at all. He is a "revenge ghost" but not the conventionalized figure of Kyd's tragedies. He represents the direct intervention in the affairs of living men. The nature of this intervention is the problem which is given to Hamlet to solve. Like other Christians, Hamlet believed in the influence of God and of the devil upon human affairs. But to have such influence personified, incarnated in a visible figure which gave him a direct command from another world, was a new and terrifying experience, especially since he was not sure whether the figure was a personification of good or evil.³²

King Hamlet's Ghost is a Christian soul in Purgatory, which ought, in theological strictness, to be a redeemable soul, a phase of penitential and spiritual experience; yet this soul fears to witness the sun rising over the east, trembles at the cock crow, and instigates the

³¹Charlton, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 90.

³²Hankins, The Character of Hamlet, p. 132.

revenge of crime by crime. Such an ambiguous Ghost is an unreliable witness which is only part of Hamlet's dilemma.³³ It is the Ghost's revelation of the murder, and of the basic knowledge of Gertrude's adultery with its all too obvious bearing upon the murder, which turns Hamlet into a man possessed. Inevitably, the shock tells hardest upon the wound already there, a wound which is also intellectually poorly protected. Therefore, the grief for Gertrude's frailty is turned to rage in him, and the sense of her corruption infects him and all womanly beauty in his eyes. Such moral ignorance and wantonness, he cries, makes men mad. The cleavage between Hamlet and his mother has significance for Hamlet alone. His moral indictment, when he launches it, bewilders Gertrude. She has no idea of this moral corruption of which she is a part.³⁴

Putting Hamlet somewhere else than in the Danish court he finds himself in, let him succeed to the peaceful accession to the throne, giving him worthy objects for his love and reverence, and substantial leverage for a beneficent activity, and the splendid powers of action which come out spasmodically in destroying the plot against his life in his manipulation of the players to his purpose of discovery, and his final vindication of the right, would have assured

³³Harbage, Hamlet Enter Critic, pp. 103-104.

³⁴Harley Granville-Barker, Prefaces to Shakespeare (Princeton, 1946), p. 236.

him a great career. His princely courtesy, his genial good-fellowship, the heartiness of his friendship, would have given him the happiness and popularity which his nobleness deserved.³⁵

But the ethos of the court he finds himself in is made up of coarse pleasures--"heady revel east and west." It is made up of moral obtuseness (Polonius), sycophancy (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), base and treacherous plotting (Laertes), and brainless triviality (Osric). This is the moral world which revolves about Hamlet and the middle-aged sensuality of Claudius and Gertrude.³⁶

The action of Hamlet is cast in a pattern which follows a purposive moral order. The minor characters serve supporting functions. They represent moral forces and moral positions, and, taken together, they stand for humanity at large. The setting is not an isolated castle in distant Denmark; the castle of Elsinore is the world.³⁷

The Danish court is not any average court made up of normal human beings but a poetic presentation of this present evil world. It is a court made up exclusively of selfish, indifferent, stupid, and unsympathetic people, and Hamlet is the one man who embraces good, is solitary and bewildered, coming to comprehend his moral isolation, an isolation impossible in a real world, but made complete in the play for poetic emphasis. The cases of partial isolation

³⁵Lewis Campbell, Tragic Drama (New York, 1904), p. 46.

³⁶Knight, Some Shakespearean Themes and An Approach to Hamlet, p. 184.

³⁷Irving Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy (New York, 1960), p. 56.

we sometimes notice in real life are hardly less pathetic, but for dramatic effect Hamlet's moral solitude must be complete, with the relief of only one noble but limited friend.³⁸

In Hamlet's moral sensibility there is definite danger. Any great shock that his moral universe might inflict on him would be felt with great intensity.³⁹ His early soliloquies show us that his nature has been shocked into melancholy and disillusion, before there was any hint of his father's murder, by the character stain of his mother. From this an infection spread swiftly throughout his soul, making all womanhood, his own manhood, and all mankind, even the earth and the overhanging heavens seem foul and pestilent.

The Elizabethans, grand as we think them, began the horror of sexual life. The real "mortal coil" in Hamlet is all sexual; Hamlet's horror of his mother's incest, sex carrying with it a wild and nameless terror which it had never carried before, overcomes Hamlet with a horrible revulsion from his physical connection with his mother and makes him recoil in similar revulsion from Ophelia. He is horrified by the merest suggestion of physical contact, as if it were an unspeakable taint.⁴⁰

Lawrence's twentieth century outlook upon Hamlet's sexual attitudes may be extreme, but that the evil with which Hamlet is

³⁸Charles F. Johnson, Shakespeare and His Critics (New York, 1909), p. 363.

³⁹Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 98.

⁴⁰D. H. Lawrence, Shakespeare's Critics, ed. A. M. Eastman and G. B. Harrison (Ann Arbor, 1964), p. 45.

obsessed should be slanted to the sexual act is not as remarkable as many critics appear to think. Quite apart from Hamlet's personal experiences, where it is, as it were, the milieu of all the particular evils of infidelity which heap murder and usurpation upon adultery and incest. It is, as every religion has realized, integral and fundamental to human life, so that if human nature has been corrupted, its conception is integrally presented and transmitted in the sex act. Hence the theological attitude which calls for an Immaculate Conception if the human nature taken from Mary is to be incorrupt.⁴¹

To Shakespeare, bestiality resulted from the obscuring of the rational nature by lust, and this use is almost invariably bound together with his depiction of misanthropy. To the misanthrope quite normal sins, if they concern him personally, are exaggerated into bestiality. He looks at the world with a jaundiced eye and attributes to the whole human race the moral corruption which he sees in particular members of it. In every case the accusation of bestiality is associated with sexual licence. Lust is of the body, love is of the mind, and while the two are not usually separable, the quality of amorous desire is determined by the relative proportions in which they are combined. But one who forgets all rational considerations, one whose love is nothing more than

⁴¹Parker, The Slave of Life, pp. 102-103.

a reveling in physical sensation, appears bestial and horrible to the idealist, because he has surrendered that faculty which marks him as a man, his reason.⁴²

So strong has been Hamlet's moral training, so strong are now the dictates of his offended conscience, that he is disgusted and horrified by his mother's infidelity; his despair is complete, and he is completely silenced by the knowledge that his words and actions are powerless to rectify his mother's astounding sacrilege which, as he describes it, "cannot come to good." His accustomed esteem for his mother, and with it the greater portion of his moral outlook on life, has crumbled around him in irreparable fragments.⁴³ Hamlet's whole moral world is shaken by his knowledge of his mother's guilt. Her deed has destroyed his faith in womanhood; women are indeed frail and are capable of "Such an act/ That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,/ Calls virtue a hypocrite, takes off the rose/ From the fair forehead of an innocent love/ And sets a blister there."⁴⁴ Hamlet is clearly a man of fine moral susceptibilities, so exquisite in his sense of right that questions such as that of chastity and the purity of second marriage touch him profoundly. He is disgusted to frenzy by the thought of impurity.⁴⁵

⁴²Hankins, The Character of Hamlet, pp. 118-119.

⁴³Robert R. Reed, "Hamlet, the Pseudo-Procrastinator," Shakespearean Quarterly, IX, II (1958), p. 184.

⁴⁴Hankins, The Character of Hamlet, pp. 26-27.

⁴⁵Charlton, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 84.

Hamlet has lived in his own ideal world, a world fashioned in his own idea, a world in which chastity is a main prop. When he finds that, of all the women in the universe, it is his own mother who seems unaware of this steadfastness of the moral order, the whole structure topples over him. The only way to preserve purity is for womanhood to seclude themselves from men--"get thee to a nunnery." Ophelia also becomes a source of corruption--"Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" But sterility is a denial of life; as a moral injunction it is the negation of morality, a tragic negation at that. It is only the imaginative idealist's intellectual world which is destroyed; however, that is Hamlet's main, if not his only, world.⁴⁶

It seems more than evident that Hamlet's moral world has been shattered by the promiscuity of his mother. The character of Gertrude has been the source of controversy for many critics, and the importance of a definite and specific depiction of her actions is more than relevant to Hamlet. She has been characterized as the weakling who was lacking in moral stamina and "was as much the cause of the tragedy in Hamlet as Iago was the cause of tragedy in Othello."⁴⁷ Gertrude, however, is not exceptionally or actively evil but rather a victim of her own spiritual and moral ignorance. When Hamlet says to her, "You go not till I set you up a glass/

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁷Coles, Shakespeare's Four Giants, p. 32.

Where you may see the inmost part of you." Gertrude sees for the first time the moral corruption of which she is a part. The reference to seeing oneself's innermost depths in a mirror was familiar to Elizabethans, for moral law was often referred to in these terms, and it was in terms of this moral law that Elizabethans were taught to judge themselves.⁴⁸ Gertrude is not a shallow character. She does not possess the force and determination of Cleopatra, but she combines a love as strong as Cleopatra's with a respect for moral law. The agony of her struggle is such as to endanger her life, but it cannot shake her love for Claudius. "We should not say that her will is weak but rather that her love is strong."⁴⁹

The other woman in Hamlet's world is of a different character, but she is still categorized with Gertrude. Ophelia is a tender and fragile soul who probably would have grown to her slight perfection in some neat garden-plot of life. But in the "unweeded garden" of Denmark, Hamlet quickly learns that Ophelia could neither receive great gifts of soul nor in return give equivalent gifts. There is an exchange of small tokens between them, but of the large exchange of soul there is none; and Hamlet, in a cynical mood can truthfully exclaim, "I never gave you aught."⁵⁰ Ophelia is the dramatic

⁴⁸Roland Mushat Fryer, Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine (Princeton, 1963), p. 248.

⁴⁹Hankins, The Character of Hamlet, pp. 213-214.

⁵⁰Dowden, Shakespeare: His Mind and Art, pp. 122-123.

representation of moral blindness--her moral law is Polonius' word, and she is incapable of discovering that her father is an instrument of evil. Her virtue is the "cloistered virtue" which Milton scorned. Hamlet's acceptance of provident intercession comes only after a prolonged struggle; without this struggle there can be no knowledge, truth, or salvation. The "maimed rites" of Ophelia's funeral illustrate with tragic poignancy that there was no salvation in her pain and death.⁵¹ But if there is a lack of salvation in Ophelia's death, it detracts very little from the tragic pathos of which she is a large part. Hamlet never raises the presumably crucial question of her purity and integrity, but her lack of it is taken for granted. This results in the sunnery scene in which Hamlet's actions towards Ophelia seem highly questionable. It seems that his mind is too easily made up by his unyielding conviction that the nature of his moral world is evil.⁵²

The relationship between Claudius and Gertrude should excite our pity rather than our contempt. Even though they are definitely not heroic, they are still intensely human. Recognizing their violation of moral law and struggling to obey it, they are prohibited by a mutual love which they cannot control. Their intense passion has a scope and power which does not readily appear in their usually calm

⁵¹Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 88.

⁵²Boklund, *Essays on Shakespeare*, p. 126.

demeanor.⁵³ Their spiritual struggle results from the conflict between their love and moral law. Thus the climax of Hamlet properly comes in the third and fourth scenes in Act III, where within minutes of each other the three main characters pass through a great spiritual crisis. Claudius struggles to repent and fails. Gertrude is brought to the brink of repentance by Hamlet but likewise fails, as we learn from her reference to her "sick soul" near the end of Act III. Hamlet also undergoes a profound spiritual experience. During his vehement conversation with Gertrude, attempting to bring her to repentance and to hold up a mirror to herself so she could see her moral corruption, his father's voice from the other world bids him to have mercy upon Gertrude. The result is to substitute pity instead of anger in his heart, his misanthropy disappearing in a sea of emotion. Subsequently, he resolves to kill the King as a matter of justice rather than revenge. We should note that the spiritual quality of his experience is shown by his soliloquy just before going to Gertrude, "Now could I drink hot blood," lines which show his bitterness and desire for revenge. "His change of heart consists in the triumph of justice, involving a willingness to show mercy, over revenge as a motive."⁵⁴

The cause of Gertrude's fall into infidelity, which in turn causes Hamlet's moral world to be turned upside down, and indeed

⁵³Hankins, The Character of Hamlet, p. 220.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 193.

the primary cause for the moral evil which inundates Denmark is Claudius. Claudius, however, is much more than a mere allegorical embodiment of evil. He impresses us as the politician who, successful for the time being, fatefully degrades the nation; Hamlet, on the other hand, impresses us as the true statesman who looks into moral and social reality.⁵⁵ Claudius' coup d'état impresses Hamlet the least, because to anyone of normal human reactions, personal evils impinge more strongly than political evils. "It is the fabric of human life itself, the texture of physical and moral corruption which, in the dissolution of all that is strongest and purest both in Hamlet's personal and political relationship is revealed to him as a fact of nature."⁵⁶ Claudius' opening speech concerning the discreet state of mourning for his late brother and his marriage to his "sometime sister" shows its uncomfortably balanced periods and forced vocabulary. The audience should feel ill at ease when he is present, even though they may find it difficult to realize that he is the "rankest and grossest of the things in nature which Hamlet condemns."⁵⁷

There are those, however, who do not think Claudius in possession of such a morally corrupt nature. Claudius, except for his initial crime of regicide and the successive crimes which expectedly follow

⁵⁵G. R. Elliott, Scourge and Minister (New York, 1965), p. 11.

⁵⁶Parker, The Slave of Life, p. 91.

⁵⁷Boklund, Essays on Shakespeare, p. 121.

it, always seems struggling to be a good man and a worthy king; and he also smarts under the "lash" of his conscience. "His private character appears most clearly in his prayer-soliloquy; and here, above all, he shows an honesty with himself and a sense of moral values that are not consonant with total depravity."⁵⁸

If Claudius is not the core of the rottenness in Denmark, Hamlet's situation becomes even more complicated because he must seek out and destroy the cause of evil rather than the effect. Shakespeare has taken care to show us in the exhausted society of Denmark, where everything needs to be renewed, what religion is. To Ophelia's funeral the Church reluctantly dispatches its representative. All that the occasion suggests of cruel, harsh, formal, and inhuman dogmatics is said by the priest. This is the religion which permits Claudius a relatively free conscience, and makes Hamlet an aimless wanderer after truth. It seems better to consort with players rather than priests.⁵⁹ So Hamlet abandons formal religion and seeks answers to his questions by the dumb show. The "mouse-trap" shows Hamlet exactly what he knows already, and it also warns Claudius and permits him to adapt to the situation. However, Hamlet has experienced an intellectual and emotional triumph which, to judge from his diffident preparations, is more than he expected, and

⁵⁸ John Draper, The Hamlet of Shakespeare's Audience (New York, 1966), pp. 148-150.

⁵⁹ Dowden, Shakespeare: His Mind and Art, p. 137.

will now determine the course that he will take to the "exclusion of the sadder but wiser thoughts of 'To be, or not to be.' " ⁶⁰ Hamlet soon becomes emboldened and more sure of himself and his actions, and the "moral Hamlet, with his conscience, is the one to 'catch the conscience of the King' through the players. " ⁶¹

The "warned" and "conscience-stricken" Claudius now becomes a formidable opponent of Hamlet. This collision between Hamlet and Claudius forms an interesting dramatic contrast; yet both men show sides of the same great thought. Hamlet possesses morality without action, Claudius possesses action without morality. Hamlet embodies the undone which should be done; Claudius embodies the done which should be undone. Both men perish by the inherent irreconcilable elements of their lives. ⁶²

Perhaps Claudius' most useful instrument is Polonius, whose death has made Hamlet a murderer, not a revenger, and results in Hamlet's despair. But Polonius' death has also showed Hamlet the means by which to achieve his duty--hence his self-satisfaction. Hamlet's only possibility lies in stopping to think "too precisely upon the event"; this excitement which his reason and blood has

⁶⁰Boklund, Essays on Shakespeare, p. 129.

⁶¹Vyvyan, The Shakespearean Ethic, p. 377.

⁶²Denton Snider, Shakespearean Drama (St. Louis, 1887), p. 392.

experienced must be allowed to urge him on until a state has been attained where his thoughts will be "bloody, or be nothing worth."⁶³

But it is clear that Polonius was much more than a mere instrument of Claudius; in fact, we even find a trace of moral adherence in Polonius. To enjoy and appreciate fully Polonius' morality we must observe him in his conversation with Reynaldo. Reynaldo is sent as a spy upon the conduct of Laertes in Paris, where he was sent with the most tender bestowal of paternal blessing. Polonius does not expect an ideal type of morality from Laertes. As is natural, Laertes will sow his wild oats in Paris.⁶⁴ Strangely enough, it is also during Polonius' paternal blessing to Laertes that perhaps the one statement which Hamlet finally realizes, and exercises in solving the riddles of his own moral universe, is uttered by Polonius, "To thine ownself be true."

Horatio is undoubtedly one of the only "lights" in the moral darkness of Hamlet's world. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," and Denmark is Hamlet's world. However, Horatio escapes this world because he is "the man that is not passion's slave." Horatio also, unlike Hamlet, can live in his own world while Hamlet is given the injunction to act in a world which is completely alien to him. For the rest of the people in Hamlet's world, besides Horatio, Hamlet may say in at least three senses,

⁶³Boklund, p. 132.

⁶⁴Dowden, Shakespeare: His Mind and Art, p. 126.

"I am most dreadfully attended."⁶⁵ Hamlet cannot escape from his surrounding and corrupt world. In the wreck of his world, he is destroyed along with the rottenness.

But Horatio's mere presence means more to Hamlet than alienation and detachment from a morally corrupt society. Even though Horatio does not act at all to assist Hamlet in solving his complication, and holds his advice to a minimum, Hamlet takes Horatio's attitudes into great consideration. For instance, Hamlet expresses doubts about the Ghost before hearing its message, "Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned, / Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell, / Be they intents wicked or charitable, / Thou comest in such a questionable shape / That I will speak with thee." It is illogical to reason that Hamlet invents these doubts as excuses for inaction because he has not yet heard the Ghost's speech. The reasonable doubts were not even dispelled after he had heard the Ghost's testimony, no matter how much his passions to act were aroused. Hamlet's conversations with Horatio show that the latter was also in doubt concerning the Ghost and its speech. "Hamlet's respect for the moral integrity of his friend, and his realisation that Horatio was not convinced of the King's guilt, must have been powerful restraints against hasty or impetuous action."⁶⁶

⁶⁵Parker, The Slave of Life, p. 94.

⁶⁶Hankins, The Character of Hamlet, pp. 37-38.

With Hamlet's complete moral universe in mind, it becomes evident that Hamlet's complication will not be easily solved. If he determines to secure revenge and keep his mind untainted at the same time, he has, to be sure, adopted contradictory principles of action.⁶⁷ Hamlet shrinks from killing Claudius, guilty or not, in a personally revengeful mood. But when Claudius' guilt has been proved beyond a doubt, a dreadful outbreak of that revengeful mood--dreadful and blind because Hamlet did not previously face the moral question involved--results in the blind murder of Polonius.⁶⁸

Vengeance is impossible for Hamlet because there is no way to adapt it into the moral sphere of his world. "It falters, it shrinks back from itself, and it must do so, for it lacks the sure basis, the tangible hilt; it lacks what alone can justify it before God and the world--material proof."⁶⁹ He must settle the moral issue of personal revenge in a benevolent universal order in which God has kept the punishment of the wicked as his own prerogative.⁷⁰ However, we have already seen that Horatio is the only man in the world to whom Hamlet must justify his actions, for the rest of the world is totally corrupt and depraved as far as Hamlet is concerned. We have

⁶⁷Albert H. Tolman, Views About Hamlet (New York, 1904), p. 19.

⁶⁸Elliott, Scourge and Minister, p. XXIV.

⁶⁹Werder, The Hearth of Hamlet's Mystery, p. 9.

⁷⁰Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 67.

also seen that the God of the religion which hesitantly allows Ophelia a "dogmatic" funeral and permits Claudius a relatively conscienceless reign does not have to bother Hamlet's need for justification. Neither the world nor God, although Hamlet has a strongly marked moral and religious element, need be consulted in justification of Hamlet's actions.⁷¹

Hamlet's compulsion to kill the King is contraposed by the question of whether he has the right to kill the King. It is important here to inquire into the nature of this right, which seems to inhibit Hamlet's action. The question of justifying himself once he does act compounds his complication. But it becomes evident that he does not have to justify himself to law, nor custom, nor public opinion, because his sense of right would defy all of them if a conflict were to arise. It is Hamlet himself, his own subjectivity, which he sets up as the judge of his action. He cannot satisfy himself that he should kill Claudius, however great the other considerations may be which impel him to act. Here one sees the moral consciousness in its extreme expression; it is the assertion of the right of the individual to determine the nature of his act. As far as Hamlet's attempt at revenge is concerned, it should be observed that his language is dominated by thoughts of vengeance, and he tries to goad himself into it, but there is always a moral scruple which thwarts him. "The presupposition of the entire play is the moral nature of Hamlet; hence it is not brought into

⁷¹Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 147.

prominence directly, but is always implied as the element which he is trying to overcome; it is the native stock, which he is attempting to inoculate with a new resolution."⁷²

Hamlet ranks very high above other plays of its kind because of the heroism and nobility of its hero, his great power of insight into, and reflection upon, his circumstances, and his capability of suffering the moral anguish which moral responsibility brings. Hamlet thinks that man is "ordained to govern the world according to equity and righteousness with an upright heart," and not to alienate himself from the world and leave it to its corruption. If one embraces this conception of one's duty and destiny, as Hamlet does in Act V, one will be most certainly involved in tragic dilemmas. "For how can men secure justice except by committing injustice, and how can he act without outraging the very conscience which demands that he should act."⁷³

Conscience, however, can be a very difficult term to define in Hamlet's situation, but it can also prove to unlock to us some of the mystery which encompasses Hamlet's action or inaction. Vyvyan was undoubtedly referring to conscience when he spoke of the individual's assertion of his own act: "By it the individual claims the privilege of determining his own action through himself, against

⁷²Vyvyan, The Shakespearean Ethic, p. 305.

⁷³Helen Gardner, Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. L. F. Dean (New York, 1967), pp. 224-225.

all demands of objective institutions, as States, law, or any established authority."⁷⁴ In his "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, Hamlet speaks of conscience which makes "cowards of us all; / And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied over with the pale cast of thought, / And enterprises of great pith and moment / With these regard their currents turn away, / And lose the name of action." Hence the paradox that our wholesome moral fear of what may come after death may nurse a sickly pensiveness destroying the "native" will power which is a basic factor in true morality upon earth. "Thus conscience which, naturally, 'puzzles the will' with the thought of troubles in the unseen world may keep us, unnaturally, from fighting 'outrageous fortune' at the risk of our lives in the seen world."⁷⁵ Hamlet's thoughts about conscience echo the grim words of the murderer in Richard III: "It [conscience] is a dangerous thing: it makes a man a coward."

What Hamlet does not know is that his moral force is useless as long as the moral issue implicit in his task remains unresolved. His delay is not the result of some psychological quirk; it is a symbolic statement of the futility of man's attempts to destroy evil without first learning to know himself.⁷⁶ Since he must satisfy his own conscience, he must be true to himself. Hamlet finally sees that he

⁷⁴Vivyan, p. 305.

⁷⁵Elliott, Scourge and Minister, p. 76.

⁷⁶Ribner, Patterns In Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 68.

he can retain "perfect conscience" by killing Claudius, the moral issues are resolved and simplified. "Damnation is no longer a question of acting, but a question of what it would mean not to act. Hamlet submits to his fate, whatever it may be."⁷⁷ Divine intervention and ordinancy in heaven have instilled in Hamlet a "perfect conscience" to kill the King who murdered his father, "whored" his mother, and even attempted to destroy Hamlet himself. Hamlet even thinks it damning "To let this canker of our nature come/ In further evil." Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are sent to their deaths by Hamlet, but "They are not near my conscience; their defeat/ Does by their own insinuation grow:/ 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes/ Between the pass and fell incensed points/ Of mighty opposites." So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were pawns who were destroyed in the great struggle of moral forces--Hamlet and Claudius. At this point in the play, the only stain on Hamlet's "perfect conscience" is Laertes, to whom Hamlet "forgot himself" and attempts to make reparation by consenting to a duel of rapiers. It soon becomes evident that "perfect conscience" does not make men cowards.⁷⁸

To know what were good to do is very often the difficult problem of human life. To control our passions, to keep ourselves back from ill-advised action until we can see our duty clearly, is sometimes

⁷⁷Matthew N. Prosser, Hamlet and the Name of Action (Penn State Press, 1965), p. 110.

⁷⁸Elliott, Scourge and Minister, p. 185.

even more difficult. A refusal to act, which would be cowardly in some circumstances, in others may embody the highest form of courage. To reason first and to act afterward is the ideal of rational justice and constitutes obedience to one's conscience. One who acts without seeing his duty clearly is guilty of rashness; one who sees his duty and does not perform it is guilty of cowardice. Between these two opposites is justice, which requires that one first "know what were good to do," and then do it, or as Hamlet comes to observe, "The readiness is all."⁷⁹

But it is important to observe that there is very little Hamlet can do to influence this state of readiness. It is up to Hamlet always to be ready, but when and if it will come is up to Providence. The divinity which Hamlet finally embraced is a moral order which includes man's highest exercises of foresight, energy, and resolution. The "disposition of Hamlet to reduce to a minimum the share which man's conscious will and foresight have in the disposing of events, and to enlarge the sphere of the action of power outside the will, has a dramatic and theological significance."⁸⁰ As Hamlet left to divinity the choices of action which the destruction of his ideal world had thrust upon him, so he left to it also, without denying them, the doubts nurtured by the real world of moral and physical corruption in which he found himself.⁸¹

⁷⁹Hankins, The Character of Hamlet, pp. 80-81.

⁸⁰Dowden, Shakespeare: His Mind and Art, p. 140.

⁸¹Parker, The Slave of Life, p. 107.

Some critics have felt that Hamlet's surrender to "divinity" is the direct cause of his tragedy. Because Hamlet refuses to "defy augury," he soon becomes a fated victim of "gods who kill us for their sport." I do not think this Hamlet's tragedy. It is true that he dies while destroying the evil and corruption in Denmark, but it is by his death that the evil is purged and Denmark is cleansed of this moral corruption. Hamlet's tragedy is that he is unable to coordinate the "due balance" in his moral universe. His morally steadfast character is given an injunction from another world, a world of spirit, ordering him to secure revenge but to leave his mind untainted. This contradictory injunction thrusts him into a world which seems to him a "sterile promontory," and where "to be honest is to be one out of ten-thousand." The "uses" of this world seem to him "weary, stale, and unprofitable," and it is his thoughts on the next world which actually determine his actions in this one. But even though the world is morally corrupt and evil--an "unweeded garden," Hamlet's moral sense prohibits him from securing hasty and impetuous revenge.

Revenge, I feel, is the key word. During Claudius' and Laertes' plot against Hamlet, Claudius makes the statement that "Revenge should have no bounds." This statement seems very appropriate to Laertes who, upon learning of Polonius' death and Ophelia's madness, has thrown "Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!" Laertes "dares damnation" and "vows to the blackest devil." Claudius' above statement is certainly true, but one must accept the same vows as Laertes has to secure revenge.

Hamlet, very simply, refuses to accept the vows which Laertes has expressed, and certainly possesses the "bounds" that Claudius says would prohibit revenge. Hamlet, however, takes almost four-fifths of the play to make this realisation. He thinks himself cowardly and cannot figure out why he "still lives to say this thing's yet to do." He possesses the conscience which Laertes has rejected; he is inhibited by moral bounds to secure revenge; he is the victim of moral anguish and a moral struggle which is incomparable to anything else in literature. But as we have already seen, this struggle finally leads to truth and salvation.

And truth and salvation are secured by Hamlet's discovery of a divine ordinance. This discovery begins during the second appearance of the Ghost, while Hamlet is "setting up a glass" to his mother. The Ghost's appearance results in a definite change in Hamlet's outlook on his mother, the original cause for Hamlet's moral anguish. As Hamlet's outlook changes from anger to pity, his thoughts change to repentance, and he now observes that "heaven hath pleased it so/... That I must be their scourge and minister." This is Hamlet's first acknowledgement of a divine intervention in his life. In the beginning of the play he was not sure of the Ghost's status, but now he is ready to become a "scourge and minister" of heaven.

But this first realization of Hamlet's is by no means the last, and fortunately so, because it is on his journey to England, which he goes on with the idea in mind of heavenly ordinance, when he sees

Fortinbras' army which "finds quarrel in a straw/ When honor's at stake." This reverts him, momentarily, back to attempting to "spur my dull revenge." But it is also during this journey that he again observes that heaven was ordinant in his waking during the night to discover Rosencrants and Guildenstern's commission, just happening to have his father's signet in his purse so as to seal, in turn, Rosencrants and Guildenstern's execution, and even being recognised as a true Prince and being saved by the pirates. Hamlet has now found out that "Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well, / When our deep plots do pall: and that should teach us/ There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will."

Hamlet now permits divinity to shape his ends. His moral exquisiteness now sees it "perfect conscience, / To quit him (Claudius) with this arm, and is 't not to be damn'd, / To let this canker of our nature come/ In further evil." Hamlet has no idea whatsoever what the final outcome of the fencing match will be; he submits to it only because he wants to make reparation with Laertes so that he can cleanse his conscience. He has "forgotten himself" to Laertes, and feels responsible, in a way, for Polonius' and Ophelia's deaths. As far as Hamlet is concerned, the fencing match is nothing more than this.

But the intervention of divinity makes the fencing match the end of evil in Denmark, the purgation of moral corruption, and the death of Hamlet which still brings truth and salvation. "The engineer (Claudius and Laertes) is hoist with his own petar," and "treachery is justly

killed." Treachery is the ingredient which goes into revenge, but Hamlet has found out, with his "perfect conscience," that revenge is no longer the matter at hand, but justice. The distinction between the two is great, and Hamlet has undergone a profound moral struggle to attain this understanding. In his death he does not abandon his moral steadfastness; he secures justice by slaying Claudius; he makes Laertes free of his death and prohibits Horatio from taking his life against the "Everlasting's canon." Fateful death is certainly tragic in Hamlet, but it is neither the killing by gods for sport which we find in King Lear nor the strutting and fretting of the poor player in Macbeth. With Fortinbras succession to the throne, we are given a sense of the purged and cleansed Denmark and also the final peace of two weary and anguished souls: King Hamlet, and the soul who journeyed through the depths of evil to finally find truth, salvation, and an answer to the moral riddles of his universe, Hamlet.

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