

Perfect Idealism in Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet

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Abstract

Hamlet's exclusion from his father's throne was not Hamlet's problem on the whole but the restoration to its rightful owner was virtually necessary for his survival and personal safety. He refers explicitly, at least twice, that he has unwillingly taken on himself the task of revenge. Hamlet was an unwilling instrument in the gradual drift towards disaster. He bitterly resents being played upon like a pipe by being given over entirely to serve somebody else's behest. He cannot indeed fully recognize that he is his father's puppet. He cannot shrug off his father's commands as none of his own concern. Hamlet's problem is the problem of responding to a call unflinchingly. But the Ghost is in no way concerned about Hamlet's own safety. He is concerned only with the revenge of his own murder. He is uncompromising in his call for revenge. As a dutiful son he is to carry out his father's order and kill Claudius as an act of filial duty. But Hamlet is in an intolerable position. He can save himself and Denmark by killing Claudius, but to kill Claudius is to act out his father's wish and the disaster for Hamlet is that this course of action perfectly coincides with the solution of his own problem. Hamlet is torn between two courses of action, both equally painful. If they conflict with the individual goal, they create one dilemma; if they coincide, they create another. Hamlet is a perfect example of an idealist who shrinks from accepting the role forced upon him. The idealist is confused with accepting the role of the exploiting father.

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Introduction

Hamlet has been placed in the most agonizing circumstances that a human being can be placed in. He is grief-stricken on the sudden and unnatural death of his father. He does not consciously suspect that his father was murdered, let alone by his uncle, Claudius. He was deprived by his uncle of his father's throne, despite being his father's only son and heir apparent to the throne. His mother, far from being as shocked as Hamlet was by her husband's death, married his uncle within a few weeks of becoming a widow; thus enabling Claudius to justify the *usurpation* of the throne by virtue of his marriage to his deceased

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brother's widow. It could safely be predicted that Claudius would soon try to kill the rightful heir. Hamlet does in fact perceive that his life is in danger. Faced with an imminent threat to his life, Hamlet has an obvious course of action; he must kill Claudius as soon as possible in what is, in fact, self-defense. Hamlet cannot kill Claudius without any apparent convincing reason especially because he stands to gain the crown by the deed.¹

It is obvious that the tension of the struggle for gaining the crown seems to run rather more prominently alongside the interest of Hamlet's personal ordeal. Though he had sustained a paralyzing shock on his mother's second marriage, yet the seduction of the Ghost was of less consequence to him than the loss of the Kingdom. From the very beginning, Queen Gertrude becomes so mixed with the throne of Denmark that Hamlet diverted his resentment and expresses throughout the play a violent jealousy against his uncle's possession of Gertrude. The rationality is patent. His mother's remarriage was none of his concern while the *usurpation* of the Kingdom was. Yet throughout the play Hamlet is far more preoccupied with the seduction of his mother than the loss of the Kingdom. This confused jealousy lays him open to the injunctions and suggestions of the Ghost.²

Ghost: If thou didst ever thy dear father love

Hamlet: O God!

Ghost: Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

Hamlet: Murder!

*Ghost: Murder most foul, as in the best it is,
But this most foul, strange and unnatural.³*

*Ghost: The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown.*

Hamlet: O my prophetic soul!

My uncle!⁴

*Ghost: Ay, the incestuous, that adulterate beast,
Won to his shameful lust*

The will of my most seeming virtuous Queen.⁵

The shock of bereavement, sense of deprivation in being cheated of his hopes of the throne, anxiety for his own safety, and his disgust at the sight of his mother incestuous relationship to his despised uncle have added to the suspicion of murder and adultery by the Ghost assurance. For Hamlet this is the greatest horror that life can hold. The Ghost's revelation comes not only as a shocking surprise to Hamlet but also as a confirmation of his deep-rooted intuition of Claudius' wickedness. It also dawned upon him that the virtuous Queen and much-loved mother who chided him for the unnecessary grief, is a pernicious woman, a lewd adulteress and perhaps may have even consented to her husband's

murder, and that it occurred in such circumstances that his beloved father, having had no opportunity for the confession of his sins, is undergoing the torments of hell. This event has changed the whole of his life for him; the realization all that it seems to imply is poisoning his very soul.⁶

Hamlet's mind is reeling in the 'distracted globe' of his skull. Recognizing the impossibility of his holding his tongue, and knowing that he will be unable to behave normally till his vengeance is accomplished, he decides 'to put an antic disposition on' in order to attract the King's attention. This antic disposition will also serve, at the same time, to lure the King away from any suspicion of the great secret he has learnt from the Ghost lest the King should forestall his revenge. The antic disposition is not merely a defense mechanism, it also enables Hamlet to play the role of Fool and so to make remarks which will appear mad to everyone except the guilty king, and are means of undermining his self-control, so that his conscience will be caught.⁷

The Ghost succeeds in impressing its own account of Claudius's dangerous character. Claudius, usurper of the throne and the would be murderer of the Prince, is Hamlet's competitor; the Ghost is Hamlet's exploiter, and this relationship becomes the more devastating of the two. Hamlet is to be exploited for this purpose. As a dutiful son, he is to carry out his father's command and murder the usurper. The safest refuge from the paralyzing moral shock he has sustained is a sweeping skepticism. Evil can be averted by denying its objective existence.⁸ Even at the moment of the meeting on the ramparts, Hamlet wants to doubt the Ghost whose revelation he fears with all his 'prophetic soul.'

*Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee.*⁹

It is not his doubts about the Ghost's revelation which gives rise to his inability to act, but his inability to act which gives rise to his skepticism about the Ghost.¹⁰

Hamlet's misgivings about the possibility of the Ghost being the incarnation of the devil and his subsequent fears of damnation are genuine and sincere. Kenneth Muir remarks: According to the various beliefs current in Shakespeare's day, a ghost could be either an illusion, a phantom seen as a portent of danger to the state, a spirit come from the grave because of something left undone, a spirit come from purgatory by divine permission, or a devil disguised as a dead person in order to lure the living into the mortal sin.¹¹

He does not accept the disclosure as certain and suspects that the Ghost may be an evil spirit sent to lead him astray by a false accusation of his mother and his uncle.

*... The spirit that I have seen
 May be a devil; and the devil hath power
 To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
 As he is very potent with such spirits,
 Abuses me to damn me.¹²*

Hamlet's thinking leads him to the conclusion that he must test the reliability of the Ghost and find confirmation of his own conviction. So confused is he that he has forgotten his own highly rational suspicions based on direct observations of Claudius' behaviour, which the Ghost story merely confirmed. He confuses the evidence of his own eyes and common sense with that of the Ghost and must now resort to complicated indirect tactics of observations. He wants to obtain indirect evidence of Claudius' guilt by means of staging a play about fratricide which traps his uncle into betraying his guilt. He actually tries to disprove his own conjecture that Claudius killed his father. But this attempt is defeated by proving the Ghost right by a usual portrayal before his own eyes of the circumstances in which his father died. He seeks to recapture the resolution with which he at first met the Ghost's command. Hamlet scruples to trust the suggestions of the Ghost, contrives the scene of the play to have solid proof of his uncle's guilt, and then rests satisfied with the confirmation of his suspicions, and the success of his experiment, instead of its being acting upon.¹³

The certainty of the King's guilt makes Hamlet furiously angry, and that anger provokes both the decision to kill the King when Hamlet sees him praying, and the realization that to do so would not satisfy the wish to revenge that has boiled up in him. Hamlet fails to do the obvious on account of his determination to ensure king's damnation. He must plunge Claudius in death; death absolute and eternal which is hell. Only then will Hamlet's revenge be commensurate with the hell he himself endures.

Hamlet has been represented as a brilliantly intelligent and brave Prince. Why can Hamlet not act for himself? Because Hamlet is not definite; he is unable to interpret himself even to himself, and because he is impelled to act for somebody else.

Why, look, you know, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass, and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'So blood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me, You cannot play upon me.'¹⁴

How is Hamlet to avenge his father and why does he do so in so inefficient, disastrous and suicidal a manner? Hamlet's hesitations show that he is not free to face his own personal problem and solve it on his own account. His life is one to be lived under the imposition of a great task, an imperious demand from outside.

Hamlet's intention throughout is less to kill Claudius than to make him admit his guilt. He wants to catch his conscience and make him writhe. In fact, Claudius is already secretly racked with guilt. The unacknowledged reason for sparing Claudius, when he was at his mercy, is that he needs Claudius alive to feed his own obsessive hatred, and that hatred has become his reason for existence.¹⁵ Claudius, stung into recognition of his guilt by the play-within-the-play and given the opportunity to repent by Hamlet's desire to see him damned, finds himself unable to pay the price that true repentance demands. All these exhibitions in spite of the Ghost's interposition urging revenge are surely meant to show us that his mother's act rather than the obligation to his dead father usurps the main part of his mind. Hamlet does not really believe that it is relevant to kill Claudius; that will not bring back his father. To awaken Gertrude's sense of guilt and leave her to the pricking of her own conscience is his fundamental need. But none of the form of Claudius remorse or Gertrude's sense of guilt would do anything at all to restore Hamlet's peace of mind, nor that everything occurs to him, from mourning to madness, from murder to suicide, does offer any cure at all for the sickness of the soul he feels. No wonder that he had 'lost all his mirth, foregone all customs of exercise', and that 'Man delights him not'; his father's murder has thrown him out of his element. He has developed his own moral perception of the world. He has discovered that human existence is not the way 'thinking would have it so' and he has no way either to eschew that knowledge or to cope with it.

Hamlet is too delicate or too subtle for the purpose. A less self-questioning hero would have been a better instrument. He even resorts to irrational self-criticism. To prove to himself that he is not his father's son, he even at one point accuses himself of cowardice and inaction.

*For it cannot be,
But I am pigeon liver and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave offal. Bloody, bawdy villain,
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain
O vengeance.¹⁶*

The Ghost of elder Hamlet simultaneously prevents Hamlet from harbouring murderous feelings towards Gertrude, and forbids any expression of this. He has also been explicitly commanded to stop the Queen's marital relations with Claudius.

*If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not;
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.
But howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught.¹⁷*

In the bedroom scene Hamlet carries out the contradictory injunctions of the Ghost. But his mind was caught by the idea of playing the matricide.

*... Soft; now to my mother
O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom;
Let me be cruel, not unnatural;
I will speak daggers to her, but use none;
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites,
How in my words so ever she be shent.
To give them seals never, my soul consent!¹⁸*

Hamlet, at least twice, refers explicitly to his having taken on unwillingly the task of the revenge whose narrower function may have been to avenge a wronged kinsman, but whose wider one was to purge from society the evil which it could not otherwise escape.¹⁹

*The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!²⁰*

And

*... For this same lord
I do repent; but Heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me
That I must be their scourge and minister.²¹*

The idealist refuses leadership because he is touselled with accepting the role of the exploiting father. 'To be or not to be' a replica of the elder Hamlet, an instrument for the acting out of his aggression, 'that is the question'. Because he cannot recognize this, and yet struggles, because he cannot recognize his father's utter unconcern with his son's own personality as such, the only path is suicide which appears to offer an escape from this impasse – and even that is hampered at the stage of this great soliloquy – for Hamlet must not die until he has served his purpose, as, in the end, he accomplishes the task at the cost of his own life. Nature ruins Hamlet's life in the cause of his father's death.²²

Notes & References

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