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Author(s): Robert Ornstein

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Teaching *Hamlet*

ROBERT ORNSTEIN

WHAT IS THERE LEFT TO SAY about *Hamlet*? The millions of words already written make cowards of us all when we try to discuss the play. For we wonder not only about the adequacy of our interpretations but also about the feasibility of presenting to youthful students a masterpiece that has baffled and bemused generations of scholars. A vast bibliography suggests that a lifetime spent on *Hamlet* would hardly suffice; but to some of our students a few class hours on the play may seem a lifetime.

Unless we are awed by *Hamlet* we probably cannot teach it well; but if we are too intimidated by its supposed problems, we will feel compelled to offer our students a relatively simple key or guide to the character of Hamlet and to the play. And any simple key to the "mystery" of *Hamlet* is bound to be an oversimplification of the play as a work of tragic art. One of the greatest mysteries of *Hamlet* is its ability to elicit completely contradictory responses. Even while we profess great reverence for its inexhaustible meanings, we would like to bound it in a nutshell, to pluck out the heart of its mystery by exhibiting to the world that single flaw, obsession, weakness, identifiable malady, or nobility which explains the Prince of Denmark. Even Olivier, we recall, prefaced his film with the portentous suggestion that *Hamlet* is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind, and then called attention to Shakespeare's notion of *hamartia*—the speech on the "dram of e'il."

While Olivier's capsule definition of Hamlet's problem does little good, it also does little harm, because it is forgotten as soon as the action of the film begins. It is another matter when we offer capsule definitions in the classroom, because they do not merely preface the reading of the play—they necessarily control and condition it. The play is not presented to the students but is rather schematized and explained for them. Moreover the play seems to exist for the sake of its "mystery"; and the "mystery" seems to exist in order to mystify. One hates to think of the many students who are given the shortest and simplest way through *Hamlet* as if they were rats being trained to thread a laboratory maze. Worse still is the thought that the maze would not exist if critics and teachers did not create it. I would suggest that if we ignored the problem of *Hamlet*, it might just go away, because students reading the play for the first time are not likely to be oppressed by Hamlet's inactivity when in almost every scene he is actively engaged in a duel with Claudius or his dupes. In a theater the problems which vex the critics of *Hamlet* seem even more artificial, because an audience is far too engrossed in what happens on stage to speculate about what does not happen, even though Hamlet at several points accuses himself of tardiness or inaction.

Of course, the very process of teaching literature involves the pointing out of questions which untrained readers do not perceive. But it is one thing to point out that almost every line of *Hamlet* poses a question in that it needs to be interpreted. It is another thing to insist that the main cruxes in *Hamlet*,

Mr. Ornstein, professor of English at the University of Illinois, presented this paper at the NCTE convention in San Francisco, November 1963.

though implicit in the dialogue and dramatic action, are concerned with facets of Hamlet's psyche or personality which the plot merely hints at. Although *Hamlet* is not an easy play, neither is it difficult to interpret or to follow scene by scene in the way that *Troilus and Cressida* is, and it does not require the sophisticated poetic responsiveness that *Antony and Cleopatra* does. We might well agree with Dr. Johnson that the primary characteristic of *Hamlet* is not a complexity that tantalizes the intellect but a variety and richness of imagined life—a multiplicity of character, theme, incident, tone, and mood which makes it the most fascinating of all dramatic actions.

Our task would be easier if we were less afraid of being superficial about *Hamlet*: if we did not feel slightly superior to its plot and imagine that Shakespeare felt the same way. We yearn for philosophical heights and psychological depths—we want to ponder those aspects of the play which seem to us to rise above its melodramatic tale of violence and revenge. How easy it is, in fact, to entertain a class by reciting the bare framework of plot in *Hamlet*, which gives no sense of the beauty or profundity of Shakespeare's art. But if the plot of *Hamlet* without the Prince or the poetry is an amusing oversimplification, so too is the Prince or the poetry of *Hamlet* without the plot—or rather it would be amusing if it were not so frequent a fact of modern criticism, which is intent on analyzing patterns of imagery or verbal and thematic structure.

The assumption that the greatness of *Hamlet* exists apart from, or even in spite of, its plot is the first step on the road to sophisticated error. For if this assumption is correct, then *Hamlet* is not a masterpiece of tragic art; it is instead a brilliant tour de force which somehow accomplishes the impossible task of wedding a supremely civilized tragic idea to a brutal story. And once we think it

is legitimate to distinguish the primitive and sophisticated levels of meaning or motive in *Hamlet*, we begin to sympathize with a Shakespeare who had this really marvelous tragic idea—the Renaissance Prince, “What a piece of work is a man,” and all that—but in order to please his audience fleshed it out in conventionally melodramatic form. Now we cannot ignore the tragic contrast between the nobility of Hamlet's thoughts and the savagery of some of his actions. But we must decide whether, in this regard, it is Shakespeare's play or Hamlet's time that is out of joint—whether Shakespeare achieved a great tragedy in spite of his plot or, like the Athenian dramatists handling their ghastly legends, worked easily in his tragic fable by continually molding it the highest artistic purposes.

My point is that *Hamlet* is not a savage tale uplifted by a noble hero or redeemed by a somewhat incongruent philosophical idealism. Its incidents of plot are not only more credible than the incidents of plot in other Elizabethan revenge tragedies, but, more important, they create a totally different impression of the world of human action. The universe of *Hamlet* is not the nightmare world of Kyd or Webster where the vicious and the insane seem the norm of existence. For all its violence and use of the supernatural, *Hamlet* is the Shakespearean play which comes closest to mirroring the random casual form of daily experience which turns on unexpected meetings, conversations, and such accidents as the arrival of the players. And if we do nothing else in class but convey as accurately as we can the immediate sense of life which *Hamlet* offers, we will perform a valuable service because so much of recent criticism falsifies it.

To convey the tragic sense of life in *Hamlet*, however, we must be willing to teach the play carefully and patiently scene by scene—and that's hard. For how pleasurable it is to bestride the dramatic

action like a Colossus (or like a modern critic), pointing out recurring themes and motifs, fascinating parallels and contrasts of character and action. Moreover when we compare the leisurely unfolding of the plot, which continually wanders into such apparent detours as the speech to the players, with the superbly organized verbal patterns disclosed by recent criticism, we almost conclude that Shakespeare's artistic energies were more engaged in constructing an intellectual drama of language and theme than in constructing the dramatic action which unfolds upon the stage.

Modern criticism can be justly proud of its discovery of the thematic patterns of death, disease, ulcer, poison, painting, acting, and seeming in *Hamlet*; but it has yet to assess the extent to which it artificially amplifies reverberations of language by uprooting them from the dialogue. Too often the supposed drama of image and theme in *Hamlet* loses contact with the more immediate drama of character in action. We smile at romantic nineteenth-century versions of *Hamlet*; and yet there is nothing in nineteenth-century criticism quite so Gothic as G. Wilson Knight's spectral, death-ridden Hamlet, who seems to materialize from the misty forests of an Ingmar Bergman film. There is a touch of intellectual melodrama in many thematic interpretations of *Hamlet*, because the attempt to establish its universe by tracing recurrent patterns of language or action leads easily to the conclusion that in *Hamlet* life is seen as a dark and deadly conspiracy against virtue: to the left a poisoned cup, to the right a poisoned rapier; behind the arras the lurking spies; all about the rottenness of the court. (An accurate epitome of the dramatic scenes of Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, such a montage falsifies Shakespeare's play.) Because modern criticism often treats Shakespearean dialogue as if it were a direct channel of communication between dramatist and audience, we must

remember in class that the primary function of dialogue is to create the individual worlds of the characters' thoughts—worlds that may be eccentric or clouded over with melancholy. We must remember also that while a playwright may use thematic imagery to universalize his necessarily confined dramatic action, he creates his dramatic world primarily through character and scene, not through patterns of language.

The modern concern with the world of *Hamlet* is salutary, because much of the drama springs from Hamlet's bitter reaction against the world in which he finds himself. If we do not pay sufficient attention to the various characters who make up Hamlet's world, we cannot grasp the drama of his struggle to come to terms with it and to decide upon the alternatives of action and resignation. If we see the court of Denmark as merely corrupt or decadent, if we view the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude as wholly vile and disgusting, what shall we think of a Hamlet who, at last, not only accepts the evil of his world but apparently makes his separate peace with it—who is no longer horrified by his mother and no longer driven by the need to cleanse the filthy sty of the throne?

It is one thing to say that there *is* something rotten in Denmark. It is another thing to turn poetic suggestion into literal dramatic reality by picturing the Danish court as a nest of corruption offset only by Hamlet and Horatio, the two Wittenberg scholars. Shall we read *Hamlet* as a tribute to the moral benefits of a higher education by a man who never went beyond grammar school? Shall we add to every line of the minor characters a foppish tinge and a knowing leer so that all the courtiers are like Osric and Osric is worse than his lines could possibly suggest? Remember that the action begins not quite two months after the death of Hamlet's father, a Hyperion among rulers, and that the first court scene makes evident that the men

surrounding Claudius served the former ruler and elected Claudius as their new king. If the court is decadent, then Shakespeare asks us to accept a fantastic *donné*: namely, that Claudius' secret crime has literally, and not merely symbolically, poisoned the wellbeing of Denmark. Not even the mythic Greeks deal in such fantasies. The plague that descends on Thebes during the reign of Oedipus is an act of the Gods, not a symbolic consequence of the unsolved murder of Laius. Moreover, to look back to the reign of Hamlet's father is not to step outside the artistic reality of Shakespeare's play, for Shakespeare in various ways emphasizes how brief a time it is since the death of Hamlet's father; and he makes the past and the memory of the past a vital part of the present scene.

Sometimes Shakespeare asks us to accept the traditional *donnés* of folk and romantic imagination: he asks us to "believe" in ghosts and fairy kings. But he never asks us to accept an implausible situation for purposes of plot. We do not enjoy *Othello* in spite of our common sense, which says that a young, protected Venetian heiress would not elope with a much older stranger of a different race, culture, and color. We accept the elopement of Desdemona and Othello because their love seems to us completely natural and plausible. The idea that their love is unnatural is a *donné* that exists only in Iago's obscene imagination, even as the idea that the world is vile and corrupt exists only in the melancholy imagination of the early Hamlet.

If like Francis Fergusson we wish to make *Hamlet* an analogue of *King Oedipus* then we must see Denmark as infected by a mortal sickness which only a ritual sacrifice will cure. But the price of squaring the world of Denmark with Hamlet's melancholy imagination is a heavy one. It involves not only an unwarranted stress on the cynicism or de-

viousness of the court but almost inevitably an attempt to discover beneath the surface of Shakespeare's action a submerged drama of evil that supports our hypothesis of corruption. We cannot accept the comedy of the Osric scene as a prelude that heightens the poignancy of Hamlet's death. No, we must ask if Osric is really as fatuous as he seems or whether there is not something dark beneath his simpering appearance because he brings in the foils. This kind of speculation about Osric is worse than irrelevant: it substitutes for the great simplicity of effect which, I think, Shakespeare intends something at once more complex and more pedestrian. In place of Shakespeare's superbly varied plot, in which light alternates with darkness, laughter with grief and pain, it offers a dramatic action more consistently and conventionally sinister, in which appearance always masks a vicious reality.

Our students should realize that there is a difference between the unknown and the ambiguous in literature as in life. The former is not always the latter, for though ambiguity depends upon some final doubt about a character's nature or motives, that doubt is created by our *knowledge* of the seeming contradictions in a character, not by our ignorance of his possible relationships with other characters in the play. Osric is not ambiguous because we do not know what he might have known of Claudius' plot, any more than Gertrude is ambiguous because we do not know whether she was unfaithful to her husband before or after his death. Regardless of her past, Gertrude is not a question mark, for we know all too well her complacency, shallowness, obtuseness, and kindliness. It is also worth noting that when a character like Laertes is party to Claudius' treachery, the information is not withheld from us.

A primary tenet of critical faith is that a dramatist, in one way or another,

gives us all the information necessary to understand his work. And yet for a century and a half criticism has been engaged in speculating on what Shakespeare supposedly withholds from us—the cause of Hamlet's inability to take revenge. We do not hear so much today about the delay of revenge because we are no longer certain that *delay* is the right word or the actual impression of Hamlet's behavior. But to an extraordinary extent modern views of *Hamlet* are still shaped by nineteenth-century assumptions. Sometimes modern criticism suggests that what happens in *Hamlet* is not crucially important, because the greatness of the play lies in its presentation of an eternal, insoluble human predicament or dilemma. Sometimes it suggests that nothing can happen in *Hamlet* because the hero is paralyzed, not by a Coleridgean intellect, but by neurotic obsessions with evil and death, or by his Oedipal fixation.

Necessarily, all interpretations of *Hamlet* are speculative; all are hypothetical ways of seeing the play and of relating its various parts. But critical speculation and hypothesis should be continually informed and corrected by the lines and scenes of the play, not in control of our response to them. We should be particularly wary when speculation builds upon speculation, as in Ernest Jones's *Hamlet and Oedipus*, which ingeniously stretches the play between the romantic hypothesis of Hamlet's inability to act and the Freudian hypothesis of Shakespeare's unconscious realization of the Oedipal complex. Once the assumption of Hamlet's paralysis of will takes hold, we easily turn scene after scene into an indictment of his failure to act. The ability of Laertes to burst in on Claudius at the head of a mob becomes proof of what Hamlet could have done had he been more a man of action. But the rash, shallow, easily corrupted Laertes is hardly a standard by which to measure Hamlet's failings. It would seem just as

reasonable to argue that here Shakespeare's point is that had Laertes been more like Hamlet he would not have been so easily duped by Claudius. Most unfortunate of all is the critical hypothesis that Shakespeare was more interested in hypothetical ideals and abstractions than in living personalities, because it leads to attempts to synthesize an ideal courtier, man of action, or revenger out of bits and pieces of Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras.

Instead of seeing Shakespeare's genius as dedicated to the negative end of postponing the act of vengeance in *Hamlet*, we should rather focus on what does happen in the play—the absorbing drama of the struggle between Hamlet and Claudius. And we need to emphasize in class how uneven the struggle is between a Hamlet armed only with the doubtful message of the Ghost and a shrewd, suspicious, ruthless Claudius, armed with the power and authority of the throne, and surrounded by a court which sees only the surface irrationality and recklessness of Hamlet's actions. Even against a less able opponent than Claudius, who so cleverly thrusts many others between him and his nephew, Hamlet's task would be difficult, because he must forfeit his only advantage—that of surprise—in order to be certain of Claudius' guilt.

The secret duel between Hamlet and Claudius which breaks to the surface at last in the deadly fencing match is similar to the plot line of many Elizabethan revenge tragedies. But the bitterness of the struggle in *Hamlet* is not, as in other Elizabethan plays, the consequence of savage or sadistic personalities. Most of the brutal acts that take place in *Hamlet* are unpremeditated or unintended. We are touched not only by the death of an innocent Ophelia, crushed by a conflict of which she knows nothing, but also by the constant yearning for love and affection which is expressed even in the midst of mortal enmity. We recall Hamlet's cherishing of Horatio, his

delighted greeting to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his moments of tenderness for Ophelia, his hunger for Laertes' pardon and love, and his response to his mother's affection in the fencing match. And equally moving is the desire for Hamlet's affection expressed not only by Ophelia but also by Gertrude, by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, by the dying Laertes, and even by Claudius himself. We hear much of Hamlet the reluctant revenger, but what of Laertes, who almost draws back from his vicious plot, and of Claudius, who hesitates to act lest he pain his beloved Gertrude?

Less savage in his acts than Macbeth, Claudius is more contemptible in that his emotions are more shallow and commonplace. He has committed a crime viler than the murder of Duncan, but he has no need to wade on in blood because he can live with the memory of murder; he can enjoy the throne he seems able to possess and the Queen whom he loves. He can even hope to befriend Hamlet, whom he adopts as his heir. When threatened by a past that will die only when Hamlet is destroyed, Claudius is once again ruthless in his passion for safety. Yet he plots Hamlet's murder only after Hamlet, in murdering Polonius, has revealed his own readiness to kill.

Despite his hatred of Claudius, it is not until the last moment of the play that a dying Hamlet carries out his revenge. We can hardly say that Hamlet is too noble, too weak, or too intellectual to carry out a bloody deed when the play reveals him capable of killing without compunction when his life is threatened. But though he speaks to the Ghost of sweeping to his revenge, soon after he speaks of the cursed spite of his task; and only at the end of the play when he is no longer driven by thoughts of vengeance, does he seem at peace with himself and with the world. If Shakespeare gave us a hero who, without inner struggle, deliberately accomplishes his

revenge, then we might say that in *Hamlet* characterization, philosophical theme, and tragic action do not totally cohere. But Shakespeare did not have to compromise his idealizing hero to make him play the primitive role of revenger, because Hamlet, though savage when provoked, is still in moral outlook superior to the code of vengeance that enables Claudius to corrupt Laertes. To put it differently, Shakespeare is concerned with a human impulse more fundamental and universal than Renaissance codes of vengeance. In Hamlet, Claudius, Laertes, and Fortinbras as well, he portrays that need to shed blood, that hunger for destruction—even for the imminent death of 20,000 men—that springs from wounded honor or vanity, lust or ambition, or from unbearable memory and sense of loss.

Even as the thought of killing Hamlet warms the sickness in Laertes' heart, so earlier the thought of killing Claudius gives the brooding Hamlet a reason to live, a dedication, an outlet for the bitterness and disgust in which he is drowning. And there are times when Hamlet is overwhelmed by the emotional need to kill. Having spared the kneeling Claudius, he must release the pentup fury in his mother's closet; he must lash out even if the victim be only the foolish Polonius. At the beginning of the play Hamlet needs to pursue a Claudius who would put aside his murderous past. More ironic still, at the end, when Hamlet no longer needs to shed blood to be at peace with himself, when Laertes is beginning to draw back, the fearful Claudius brings destruction on them all.

Because of its secrecy, the struggle between Hamlet and Claudius is drenched in irony. Masquerading under the innocent forms of daily life, it takes place in seemingly casual encounters or recreations; it is shaped by such accidents as the arrival of the players or a cup wrongly taken up. But dwarfing these immediate ironies is the vaster

irony, which Hamlet alone perceives, of the pettiness and blindness of human calculation and intent in a world where destiny is molded by forces beyond man's control or comprehension. And with Hamlet we wonder if any struggle of man against man matters when placed against the vast stream of time that flows endlessly towards oblivion.

As Hamlet finally realizes, the great questions of love, of belief, and of acceptance are not to be settled by a sword stroke. Except for the finality of the grave, all else—his father's life and his mother's love—is as ephemeral as memory itself. But though forgetfulness is dwelt upon in *Hamlet*, as in *Troilus and Cressida*, as the very essence of human frailty, it is also seen as natural, inevitable, and healing, because only the fading of tormenting memory can release the present from the burden of the past. The Ghost begs Hamlet, "Remember me"; but as Hamlet walks through the graveyard meditating on death, he does not think of his father. He has not forgotten, but neither is the memory of his father's death a sickness in the heart that only another death—his or Claudius'—will cure.

In *Hamlet* few plans or stratagems are realized as purposed; most often the contrivers are hoisted with their own petards. The bitterest ironies, of course, dog the steps of Hamlet, who would be

scrupulous in his revenge, yet lashes out in a blind fury at Polonius, shatters Ophelia's sanity, and falls in the ghastly sweepstake slaughter of the last scene. But the ironies of *Hamlet* do not always mock human intentions; sometimes they mock our critical folly. If we continue to brood over the physical act of vengeance which does not occur as planned, we will continue to speculate about Hamlet's inability to act. But if we attend to what does happen in the play, we realize that the great question is not whether Hamlet can cut a throat with malice aforethought, but whether he can take the course of action that is *nobler in the mind*. Ultimately thought and action are one in *Hamlet* because Hamlet's crucial act is a spiritual choice—of life (to be) and of the readiness that is "all."

We might profit, then, in our teaching from Hamlet's experience. Instead of insisting on the need to pluck out the heart of every mystery, we might more willingly surrender to the beauty and power of a dramatic action which defies our attempts at logical analysis. Indeed, like Hamlet, we might conclude that our task is not to analyze or dissect but to comprehend—to gain that sense of the whole of the dramatic action, and of the meaning of the whole, which makes so many of the speculations and hypotheses of the past seem irrelevant.

*'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world: now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. Soft! now to my mother.*