

A Study of the Play Scene in *Hamlet* (Part One)

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Part One : The Basic Assumption

1

This paper is intended to give some orientation to the understanding of the Play Scene in *Hamlet*. To do so, however, we must go rather a long way round, because this scene presents problems of which the solution is largely dependent on our basic attitude to, and our basic assumption of, the play as a whole. If we approach it in any other way, this scene will unavoidably confronts us with a formidable difficulty, i.e., the fact that "the play simply does not tell us," does not answer our question. In fact, this is always the case with any other matter in this play that invites our serious consideration.

W. W. Robson has described the formidable nature of the "Shakespearean difficulties" in *Hamlet* as follows :

Hamlet has more than its share of the usual Shakespearean difficulties — at any rate of those features that appear difficult when the plays are subjected to the kind of thoroughgoing analytic scrutiny that there is no reason to think the poet ever meant his work to undergo. Thus the play is silent on many matters that those who 'consider curiously' are curious about: for example, why Hamlet did not become King on his father's death; or whether the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius was regarded as incestuous by anyone besides Hamlet and the Ghost; or why Hamlet feigned madness; or — what for many people is still the problem of problems — whether Hamlet delayed his revenge because he was too weak, or because he was too wise, or for some other reason. Critics may try to fill in these gaps, but the fact is that the play simply does not tell us.¹

Now, this poses two fundamental problems concerning the matter of basic attitude, for the formidable nature of those difficulties is not inherent in the play itself, nor is it due to the "thoroughgoing analytic scrutiny that there is no reason to think the poet ever meant his work to undergo," as Robson puts it, but rather due to a fallacious attitude implied in that analytic scrutiny. In the first place, as we shall discuss later, those difficulties become formidable when we approach the play with our mind too much preoccupied with what really happens there. But there is another, more fundamental point here, in connection with the reticence of the play. If the play is silent on many matters, as Robson says, this silence is indeed the very nature of things in this universe. Everything in this universe will remain silent and will not speak to us unless we first take the initiative, unless we first throw into it our own idea there to be examined in its validity. It is only in this way that the play can be made to "tell us" about itself.

Thus, for example, before we take up the problems of the Play Scene in *Hamlet*, it is

essential for us to establish some basic assumption about what kind of drama *Hamlet* is. Although it is true that the reconstruction of the whole is impossible without some preceding examination of its details, it is also true that we cannot interpret any particular detail without some general idea of the whole. Our procedure, therefore, must contain continual collation of the whole and the parts. We must start from what obvious facts we can gather about the play as a whole and then proceed to the examination of particular details so as to clarify and substantiate our first assumption into a final understanding.

Taken in itself apart from the context of the whole, the Play Scene will only lead us to an ambiguous nature of what happens there. This is well illustrated in the clear-cut argument made by Robson in his inaugural lecture, entitled "Did the King See the Dumb-show?" The substantial conclusion of his argument is that we cannot decide upon the true nature of what really happens there; that it is essentially a "?", an enigma to us.² Although his argument is exact, impartial, and faithful to the text, yet it is to be noted that his discussion of the dumb-show is limited within a narrow context of the Play Scene, and does not refer beyond it, as he himself suggests when he says, "I do regret that the part of the text I shall discuss contains no poetry, only a stage-direction, and, in so far as it bears upon 'character,' seems to bear upon the character of the King rather than that of Hamlet."³

Is it true, however, that the dumb-show contains no poetry? Rather, does it not just by its dumbness refer us back to the poetry of the Ghost Scene? And also is it true that it has little bearing upon the character of the ingenious inventor of the "Mouse-trap"? It is this limitedness of the perspective, not the play itself, that has produced the enigma. Also it is to be noted that Dover Wilson's almost eccentric conclusion about the Play Scene comes partly from his confident belief that the accumulation of particular details examined separately can, and must, necessarily lead us to the whole picture of what happens.

And their examples point to another basic matter. As I just mentioned above, their interest seems to be too much preoccupied with what happens in the play. Taken as a basic attitude to the play, it is fallacious, because nothing there happens indeed that can be restored like some historical events. The world of the play is essentially an artefact designed by the author and existing as a real thing only on the level of our impression, not on any physical or historical level. This point has been made clear by E. A. J. Honigmann when he discussed the problem of the politics in *Hamlet*.⁴ So let us here take another instance which will be relevant to our later discussion.

Dover Wilson gives us an explanation of Hamlet's predicament, and one of the details articulated by Wilson is Hamlet's consideration of family honour. According to Wilson, it was a matter of silent understanding to the Elizabethan audience, though it is mentioned nowhere in the play, that

to preserve the crown as far as possible from public scandals was an elementary principle of policy, a patriotic obligation. No one in Shakespeare's audience who had ever thought about the affairs of state would need to have so obvious a point explained to him. Hamlet's predicament would be understood by all.⁵

His basic attitude implied here is fallacious, because, in the first place, it unwarrantably encourages the audience to bring its own standards into the world of the play. As Honigmann

says, an ideal audience "takes nothing for granted, but feels its way into the story as this unfolds."⁶ But more fundamental is his failure to recognize the nature of the play as essentially an artefact. Of course, taken as an actual event, Hamlet's task may have involved various physical and practical difficulties, as Wilson so rightly conjectures. Moreover, Hamlet's predicament is an indispensable factor in this play, because it serves as a kind of spring-board to drive Hamlet on to his subsequent spiritual journey. But the author's mirror is not held up to those minute circumstances. The solemn and oppressive atmosphere of the Ghost Scene is sufficient to make us feel that the Ghost's command has imposed a difficult task upon Hamlet and that it will prove to be an enterprise of great pith and moment. Any further articulation would be confusing and irrelevant to the author's design as well as to the audience's response.

Wilson's attitude seems to assume that every logical inference we can gather about what actually happens there should be a constituent of the world of the play. The text is treated as a kind of documents from which our discursive reasoning is expected to reconstruct some historical or legendary event. But, approached in this way, that event very often presents to us contradictions which exist as indelible facts in the documents as such. An obvious example is the Queen's report on Ophelia's death. There, our logical reasoning would be entrapped by the apparent contradiction that she witnessed the scene and yet did nothing to save the poor maid. Indeed any instance will do, whether we take up the problem of Hamlet's age, or any one of other minute contradictions such as the inconsistency in the exact time and seasons of the events, Horatio's nationality, and so on. In all these instances, it is evident that the author counts upon our logical faculty being somewhat narcotized or at least kept within some narrow limits. And also we on our part can respond to his intention by the working of that mental faculty which is so characteristic to artistic appreciation, the faculty which always seeks for a sharp point of focus, dwells upon it and enlarges it so as to make everything else dwindle before it — the faculty, in short, described by Keats as "Negative Capability."

Irving Ribner ascribes such a contradiction to the tradition of Morality Play in which events are symbolic rather than realistic. He says, "An audience reared in the symbolic tradition of the morality drama would pay little attention to the logical inconsistency which has so troubled modern commentators."⁷ But then a similar inconsistency is present in almost every artistic masterpiece of every age. It occurs, for example, in the second book of *The Aeneid*. Aeneas returns to the palace, "determined to aid the palace, bring relief to the defenders and lend fresh vigour to the vanquished,"⁸ and witnesses there the whole scene of the cruel slaughter, but apparently does nothing to save the old king as if he were cowardly unable to face the raging enemy.

Indeed we ought not to be troubled by such contradictions, which become disturbing only when we treat the text as if it were a collection of some objective facts, or of some historical documents from which to reconstruct what happens as an actual event. Even if they exist as objective entities in the world of facts and documents, they must lose their reality in the world of artistic impression, because there, as Aristotle says, "the absurdity is veiled by the poetic charm with which the poet invests it."⁹ The world of the play is a world of charm, a world of sustained illusion, and the text is merely a set of physical

signs to bring that world into existence. It is essentially an artefact, and as such it cannot exist apart from the author's design, nor from the audience's response. *Hamlet* is an artefact, and so is the Play Scene. Our question "What happens there?" must be modified by our constant reference to this aspect of the play. And our first task is to set up an assumption about the whole picture of the play as an artefact.

2

One of the most obvious facts is that *Hamlet* is at once a revenge play and something more. There are two levels of movement in *Hamlet*. One is the movement of external actions leading to the final accomplishment of revenge, and the other is that of internal questionings leading to the revelation of the mystery of human existence. Of course, this does not mean any split of interest. These two are closely knit together with each other. They are both latent as potential energy in Hamlet's first soliloquy, and then they are set in motion by the Ghost's dreadful command of revenge. In the course of their subsequent development, they interact with each other in various ways. The most obvious of the results is the delay, or rather the suspension, of the final act. And after this process of interaction, they finally culminate in that superb denouement, which was hinted by one predecessor (i.e., Thomas Kyd), yet needed the hand of a far greater genius to be put into any artistic form:

Vindicta mihi.

I, heauen will be reuenged of euery ill;
Nor will they suffer murder vnrepaid.
Then, stay, *Hieronimo*, attend their will:
For mortall men may not appoint their time.¹⁹

Certainly, taken in itself apart from the spiritual movement, the denouement of external actions would appear a little melodramatic, and, as a matter of fact, Hamlet's final act is one occasioned more by accident than by anything. But, as it is, the fusion of the two levels of movement is so complete that we cannot but feel something spiritual in that final act. We think somehow that the final act is presented there as the fruit of Hamlet's spiritual journey, or as the justification of it, and we feel that we are invited to share its mystery.

Now, it is this spiritual journey that suspends and modifies the original revenge motive. This is the cause, if any, of Hamlet's delay. This journey is concerned with an unsolvable problem of the meaning of human existence. And this problem includes as its logical corollary the problem of the meaning of revenge — an enterprise of great pith and moment of life. As a matter of course, this corollary is equally unsolvable so long as the first problem remains unsettled. And naturally as a result, the final act is delayed or suspended, undermined at its very basis of meaning, until this spiritual journey finds out some settlement. This may be illustrated by referring to that problematic soliloquy uttered by Hamlet behind the kneeling Claudius. "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying" (III. iii. 73),¹¹ says Hamlet. And here — it is important to note — the subconscious reluctance mentioned by Bradley¹² is not so much Hamlet's as a spectator's own. It is a spectator, indeed, that

is most eager to be excused from this opportunity. Of course, it is not because he knows that this is only the middle part of a play in which revenge is its main interest, but because here he feels intuitively that this will not do, that this must not be the solution.

This response of the audience has long been prepared by the author. We must trace his intention back to the soliloquy "To be or not to be." The author inserts this soliloquy deliberately between the two scenes in which the hero is quite absorbed in a practical activity, the scheme of the "Mouse-trap." This arrangement emphasizes the overriding importance of the spiritual quest all the more forcefully by showing that even so absorbing a matter cannot but be interrupted by it. (There is no doubt, by the way, that the First Quarto's arrangement is either a corruption of the text, or else belongs only to an early draft.) It is not our intention here to dwell upon this soliloquy, but, to put it briefly, its peculiar power comes partly from the ambiguous nature of the words and phrases. Through Hamlet's words and phrases, two distinct propositions seem to appear alternately, changing places with each other, in so complicated and chameleonic a way that we cannot even identify them. Because of this ambiguity it is almost hopeless to unravel the tangled threads of argument of this soliloquy; it is essentially poetry, not argument, after all. Yet it seems to be obvious that its ambiguous expressions are designed to point to those two unsolvable problems mentioned above: the meaning of existence and its subordinate corollary, the meaning of action. And equally obvious is the fact that this argument is here simply dropped or suspended halfway without ever leading to any conclusion.

And it is this inconclusive quality, this pending nature of the argument that draws a magic circle of activity around the protagonist in the next Play Scene. It is as if some voice were speaking to him before he sets about practical activity: "To test the truth of the Ghost's story? Well, yes, you may go on with it. It does not come under the shadow of my pending question. It is merely an observation of facts. It may produce some data for action, but surely in itself it does not bear the name of action. Besides, who knows if it may throw some light upon my way? Go on with it. I will not disturb you. I can take a rest here and wait for a while." And then the voice adds rather emphatically, "But, look here, I say, you must not go beyond it. If you are going to undertake some action after it, it will offend me greatly. You cannot do so without my consent. Remember it."

The Play Scene arrives, and we are temporarily freed from the oppressive weight of those questionings, also forgetful of that inhibiting voice, and have some three-quarters of an hour's pure joy, giving up ourselves entirely to the sheer enjoyment of the ingenious "Mouse-trap." And after it comes the said scene. "Now might I do it pat." But the spectator then remembers at once that this was the very purport of that inhibition. He is perfectly aware that the solution attained by the "Mouse-trap" was after all a factual one, and has not offered any solution to those spiritual problems, only making them more urgent by adding the weight of facts to them. This stagnation weighs on his mind more heavily than any delay of action. An action under such a circumstance would seem to be an act of self-deception no matter how easily it may release his mind from that oppressive weight. Quite naturally now he wants to be excused from this offered opportunity. He jumps at the idea which the clear-headed prince hits upon:

And now I'll do 't. And so he goes to heaven ;
 And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd :
 A villain kills my father ; and for that,
 I, his sole son, do this same villain send
 To heaven.

O, this is hire and salary, not revenge. (III. iii. 74-79)

He is even thankful that Hamlet could find it. Now any excuse will do. The cruelty implied in it does not in the least disturb him, because there is not yet established, so he feels, any standard by which the ethical quality of revenge is to be measured ; not merely a moral but also a more fundamental standard which will comprise it in a larger context is now submitted to radical investigation and remains suspended halfway.

Now, such is the way how the spiritual journey delays or suspends the action. We may notice that it is largely the matter of our own response rather than that of Hamlet's actual motive. For it is not any actual event nor any actual person that is concerned here. The event as well as the character is essentially an artefact. It is an artistic mirror designed to be held up to Nature — Nature as meant to refer, not to the physical world, of course, but to the spiritual reality of our existence which cannot be intimated to us by any other means.

Thus the spiritual journey stands at the centre of the design of this artefact. And the external movement serves as an objective correlative to it. We cannot take out its purport from the matrix in which it is embodied. But it seems clear that the main drift of this journey is concerned with some significant change, a change from fretful questionings to a sober acceptance, or, to put it in another way, a change from "the respect / That makes calamity of so long life" (III. iii. 68-69) to the recognition that "a man's life 's no more than to say one" (V. ii. 74). It is a drastic change, at any rate.

About this change John Vyvyan once remarked as follows :

Critics who think they see signs of regeneration in the course of *Hamlet* are ignoring the symbolic indications that Shakespeare gives. *Hamlet* is a study in degeneration from first to last, and that is the tragedy.¹³

Hamlet becomes more and more degenerate, Vyvyan asserts, because "He has killed fidelity to the higher standard" (which is symbolized by Polonius), "and he has discarded love" (which is symbolized by Ophelia), and "Where Fidelity and Love had been, unbounded Revenge has replaced them."¹⁴ But about at the same time those critics refuted by Vyvyan found their defender in Irving Ribner, whose assertion that Hamlet's change is a regeneration attained by the stoic-Christian resignation to Providence¹⁵ may not need much comment here.

Recently, G. F. Waller once more took over Vyvyan's contention and objected to the "regeneration" theory. He does not find any religious regeneration in Hamlet's final attitude, because "Hamlet's praise of rashness, indiscretion, and murder committed under the compulsion of events is hardly the prayerful resignation of man's will to God's purpose." "The divinity Hamlet is now allowing to shape his ends is not watchful Providence, but blind

Fortune," and Hamlet's change is a degeneration into "a resigned fatalism."¹⁶ On the other hand, Lee Sheridan Cox is of the opinion that these two opposite aspects are both present side by side in the character of Hamlet. We are given, she explains, "a protagonist who expresses views that are polar opposites." The one pole is the "code of revenge" with all its cruelty and immorality, and the other is the "rule of charity," a higher ethical standard, which he expresses when he says to Polonius, "use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty" (II. ii. 555-558).¹⁷

I am not going to be taken too much with this controversy, for their discussion seems to be rather fruitless. It is so for two reasons. In the first place, these critics are too much preoccupied with the ethical or moral side of the matter. Whether they take it to be regeneration or degeneration makes little difference in this respect. In both cases it is implied that Hamlet is morally more or less degraded during one or the other half of the journey. Quite naturally as a result they try to find out various moral defects in the character of Hamlet, though their purposes are different. But these moral concerns unavoidably divert our attention away from the true nature of Hamlet's spiritual quest. Exactly speaking, it is not directly concerned with the problems of what is wrong and what is right. Its real concern is directed to a more fundamental level — the meaning, or the mystery, of existence. Its basic question is not "What conduct is morally right?" (which is derivative rather than fundamental in nature), but "What conduct is truly human?" (which will directly lead us to the most fundamental question, "What is man?"). Of course, when this primary subject is submitted to investigation, problems of moral conduct, too, will suffer to be comprised in it, but they do so only as a subordinate corollary. To be too much preoccupied with the moral aspect is, therefore, to miss the centre of the matter.

Another defect of their discussion is their common assumption that Hamlet must have reached some final solution, fatalistic or religious, which can be somehow paraphrased in terms of a system of belief. The most tolerable paraphrase, in this respect, will run somewhat like this: "The protagonist finds a peace of soul and mind only after he accommodates himself to a will and purpose greater than his own, and it comes only with the purgation of an ego that at the outset prompts him to judge all else in terms of his own frustration and despair."¹⁸ We had better not articulate the "will and purpose greater than his own" or the "purgation of an ego" any further than this, though it might be interpreted in terms of Christianity or of fatalism, or in a more modern way, in existentialistic terms, for it is left there, as it were, open to our own contemplation. "What is Man, that can be so glorious and yet is nothing but dust?" — this fundamental question remains to be an unsolved mystery throughout the whole journey. It is no more solved in the Graveyard Scene than in Hamlet's harangue in the Second Act, and his final comment "the readiness is all" is not so much a solution as a *catharsis* of questionings, an indication that they simply came to a stop after getting around the mystery.

And, therefore, even that paraphrase can be misleading if it means to say that the goal is more important, more valuable than the journey itself. For if it does not aim to convince us of any final solution, then it is essentially a matter of showing, a matter of getting around of an object, and as such it can have meaning only as the whole. In fact, can we choose

in our preference, for instance, between that part of the journey in which the protagonist challenges the mystery with his "To be or not to be," and that part in which he simply accepts it with his "the readiness is all"? However wide their difference may be, they are just of the same value, just of the same importance to our appreciation after their respective manners. (This is a point where the two issues discussed above meet and become one.) This spiritual journey is indeed an intimation of the mystery as seen by the protagonist in his long journey around it — the mystery which is so fundamental, so innate, and so urgent as well, to the mind of man that it detaches itself from the protagonist's own personal context and becomes an eternal burden destined to human mind, which it "cannot bear and must not cast away."

And Hamlet the protagonist is an artistic mirror designed to reflect this burden. Thus we are led to our next problem — a study of the character, not as a real person, but as an artefact.

3

We expect that any revenge story should go through three stages; a foul murder committed by the antagonist, a process of delay on the part of the protagonist, and the final accomplishment of revenge. The middle section is as essential as the other two, because if revenge is accomplished easily and speedily, then nothing will be left to the story except a bare report of an event and we will have no substantial story. The author, therefore, makes this section as exciting as possible by creating a state of continued suspense. And it is attained by means of the balance or tension between the protagonist's task and his ability to deal with it. His task is difficult because the enemy, being a king or a person of high rank, is always surrounded by guards, cannot be submitted to law, or is so powerful and crafty that the protagonist is even in a continual danger. The lack of adequate means tortures him and delays his revenge. He calls for the help of his friends, and devises crafty plots with his allies to entrap and kill the enemy. Being thrown into an urgent and even dangerous situation, he is all intent upon his revenge. As a result, our attention is entirely focused on the manner how he accomplishes his task under such difficult circumstances. The moral quality or the meaning of his revenge simply does not come into our interest. Such a matter is taken for granted by the hero, who does not need, nor can afford (quite naturally under such circumstances), to stop and consider it.

Now such is the characteristic feature we find common both to the original Hamlet story (i.e., Saxo's narrative in *Historia Danica* and Belleforeste's *The Hystorie of Hamblet*) and to those Senecan revenge plays such as Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. And some traces of it are to be found also in *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* and the First Quarto of *Hamlet*.

Some practical difficulties are mentioned at every opportunity. In *The Spanish Tragedy* we see the protagonist driven to half madness on account of the lack of adequate means of effecting his purpose. His mention of suicide or of the doctrine of "Vindicta mihi" is only a reminder of his helplessness. Also in Belleforeste's story, Hamblet's predicament is

explicitly presented to us, for instance, in his piteous appeal to the Queen, the main drift of which is marked by his bitter feeling that his mother did nothing for him in his extreme danger and difficulty :

it is not the parte of a woman, much lesse of a princesse, in whom all modesty, curtesse, compassion, and love ought to abound, thus to leave her deare child to fortune in the bloody and murtherous hands of a villain and traytor. Bruite beasts do not so, for lyons, tygers, ounces and leopards fight for the safety and defence of their whelpes ; and birds that have beaks, claws, and wings, resist such as would ravish them of their yong ones ; but you, to the contrary, expose and deliver mee to death, whereas ye should defend me.¹⁹

His mother's conduct is bad because it has endangered him. In spite of his appeal to the conscience of his mother, the moral standard claimed here is no higher than that of beasts; so engrossed is he with his own situation, which is after all more important and more urgent a matter to him than his mother's virtue.

At any rate, "Help me ! Defend me !" is their constant cry. Help of others, therefore, is essential to their task. Hieronimo conspires with Bel-Imperia, Vendice with his brother, and Hamblet with the repentant Queen. Also essential to their aim is the plotting of some crafty means to approach their enemy and so to kill him. Hieronimo's staging of "Soliman and Perseda," Hamblet's secret devices leading to his revenge (i.e., hanging of tapestry in the hall, and celebration of his own funeral) — these are essential to their final action. And in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the series of crafty strategems devised by Vendice and his brother are almost all that attract our interest.

Now, returning for a moment to Shakespeare's play, we find this common feature quite dropped away from it. Even in the midst of the delay process, the hero himself denies flatly and explicitly any practical difficulty, any lack of means: "I have cause and will and strength and means / To do 't" (II. iii. 45-46), and here we are expected to respond to it readily without raising any doubt. Certainly, at the beginning of the play, we are invited to assume, as Dover Wilson insists, that Hamlet had some practical difficulties which went to make up his predicament. In fact, his melancholy and half-genuine madness would otherwise have appeared a little absurd. But as we are gradually led, partly enticed by the equally puzzled observers within the play (Ophelia, for instance, among them), to enquire into the cause of Hamlet's melancholy, we become more and more conscious of something more fundamental which wholly occupies his mind. And once we become aware of this, our first supposition is sent away far into the background and quite disappears from our sight. At the same time, the author on his part contrives, as we shall see in a moment, to impress on us that Hamlet's ability would be more than enough for his task if his obstacles were all of a practical nature and could be overcome in the manner of traditional revenge heroes.

We have been thus prepared to accept that speech of Hamlet's at its face value. Somehow we feel that practical difficulties count little or nothing to him. And this impression is also in keeping with his utter indifference to conspiracy and plotting. As far as his final action

is concerned, Hamlet does not seek any help, nor does devise any plot. It is the antagonist, on the contrary, that is so busily intent upon conspiracy and plotting.

In short, that tension between the protagonist's task with its various practical difficulties and his ability to deal with it, which was so characteristic to those revenge stories, has been simply discarded in *Hamlet*. And it was Shakespeare's intention. This point will become more conspicuous if we turn to *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* and the First Quarto of *Hamlet*. Whatever bearing these plays may have on the final version of *Hamlet*, the slight but unmistakable traces, which they retain, of the common feature of those revenge stories are illuminating in that they bring into relief the peculiarity of *Hamlet*, all the more clearly because of their kinship with it.

In *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*, Hamlet, in his soliloquy after his return to Denmark, hints at a practical difficulty for which he complains he has not any adequate means: "Hither have I come once more, but cannot attain to my revenge, because the fratricide is surrounded all the time by so many people."²⁰ Also in the First Quarto of *Hamlet*, Hamlet's appeal to the Queen in the Closet Scene culminates in an appeal for help: "And mother, but assist me in reuenge, / And in his death your infamy shall die," and this leads to her consent: "I will conceale, consent, and doe my best, / What strategem soe're thou shalt deuse."²¹

Slight though they may appear to be, their effect is unmistakable, and enough to reject any supposition which regards these plays as belonging, in some way or other, to the truly authentic. In *Hamlet*, we have two important scenes after Hamlet's return to Elsinore; the Graveyard Scene and the scene immediately preceding the sword game, in which we are shown a hero who is alleged to be a revenger and yet is quite indifferent, in his leisurely talks with an intimate friend, to his own physical situation, which we know has now become urgent and dangerous to the utmost. And this indifference in face of urgency all the more forcibly makes us aware of the overriding urgency of that spiritual quest, which is now nearing its completion after pursuing its superb course. Any mention of a practical difficulty here would mar its effect upon our appreciation.

The same is true with the Closet Scene. Here, as in his first soliloquy, Hamlet's accusation centres round only one aspect of his mother's sin — the motive which is hidden behind her conduct. Indeed, from first to last, Hamlet's response to her remarriage is characterized by his clinging to this one aspect. As Patrick Crutwell rightly points out, "What really catches him on the raw about this is neither its incestuousness (though that certainly counts for more than the modern reader is likely to allow), nor the fact that it is with a man whom he detests, but the fact that it, and its hastiness; prove Gertrude's sexuality to be rampantly alive."²² To put it in another way, Hamlet is obsessed with the fact that his mother quite neglected her sacred marriage-vow and replaced it with the lust which was latent in her mind. "This virtue having been discarded, what on earth can be left to man by which he may surpass a beast?" — this question was almost an obsession with Hamlet. And this problem is taken up by him, not as a matter of an established moral code, nor of an ecclesiastical law, which would simplify the matter immensely, but as a matter of mind, of conscience — as a matter which belongs properly to the invisible world of "the inmost part" of our human heart. Hence the Queen's repeated perplexity: "What have I done . . . ?"

(III. iii. 39), "Ay me; what act . . . ?" (III. iii. 51). But we know the heart of the matter. We know that Hamlet takes it up as a problem closely connected with his spiritual quest which is crying so urgently in his mind, "What is truly human in its true sense?" To him, any other aspect of his mother's sin is trifling compared with it, and rather belongs to "baser matter," however glaring it may be in the eyes of law, civil or ecclesiastical or moral. In this Closet Scene one more aspect of her sin has just been added with irrefutable evidence; the fact that she is married with a murderer of her husband. But even this, of course, cannot stop him for any moment from dwelling and harping on that one point.

We can dismiss any theory which holds that Hamlet's purpose was to inform his mother of the murder, only to be prevented by the Ghost. In order to refute it, it is sufficient for us to examine the tone of his last speeches and to ask ourselves whether there is anything that suggests dissatisfaction, or frustration of purpose, on the part of Hamlet. Rather we find there a tone of some satisfaction, suggesting that he has said all that he wanted to say, and done all that can be done, the rest being entrusted to her conscience, which is certainly not an object of compulsion.

Indeed, a help of a repentant Queen fully informed of Claudius's guilt would make a most effective ally, and it is what the Hamlet of the First Quarto sought for. But the Shakespearean Hamlet must not do so. Hamlet's mind must be, in face of an offered opportunity, and also in spite of his being so fresh from his success in the "Mouse-trap" plot by which he has overcome one practical difficulty — in spite of, and after, all these, his mind must be here again flown high back on to that spiritual level of his questing mind. And the essential culmination of his accusation uttered from that height must be no other than "O throw away the worsè part of it, / And live the purer with the other half" (III. iii. 157-158). In fact, in answer to the Queen's expectant "What shall I do?" (III. iii. 180), he simply replies with "Not this, by no means, that I bid you do" (III. iii. 180), implying that this is not a matter of asking help, but essentially a matter of her conscience which he holds to be vital to his own spiritual Utopia, indeed, but which he has no intention to exploit for any practical use. Here, any mere mention of "Help me!", which the First Quarto dared to do, would be to pull down our attention from that height of Utopia.

Now, in both cases examined above, we find that, as far as revenge motive is concerned, our expectation suffers a kind of frustration. It is not satisfied in the manner of the ordinary revenge stories, at any rate. It is pent up, as it were, in an air-tight box, increased and compressed in it, and then transformed into the energy which carries us away up to the level of Hamlet's spiritual journey. Any mention of practical difficulty, any mention of help or plotting would be to spoil the whole mechanism by making a hole in that air-tight box. It is significant, in this respect, that Hamlet's great soliloquies, which work as the most important device for directing our attention to his spiritual journey,²³ are quite absent in *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*, and present only in mangled forms in the First Quarto.

Now, up to this point we have dwelt upon the peculiarity of *Hamlet* as a revenge play. This peculiarity is closely connected with, and, in fact, effected by, the characterization of the protagonist, chiefly in two respects — his greatness and his nobility. This point will become clear when we compare him with the heroes of those revenge stories we have

discussed. It will be found that the common characteristic of revenge stories works somehow as a detractor in our impression of the personality of heroes. It is not in an author's intention, but the physical or practical difficulties which frustrate the action of a revenge hero inevitably impress on us a certain limitedness or pettiness of his practical ability, and also the figure of a hero resorting, urged by hatred, to conspiracy and plotting to kill his enemy gives us an impression which certainly detracts something from his moral character. Indeed, this seems to be an unavoidable fate destined to a revenge hero. The balance of task and ability, which is so essential to the whole plot, simply assigns it to him.

We see him standing there in front of his difficult situations, complaining, appealing and whining, even driven to half madness. And even if he can manage to display and demonstrate his ingenuity and ability in overcoming those obstacles in his final action, it is achieved more or less at the cost of his moral stature. It is for this reason that the author of *The Revenger's Tragedy* was obliged to have the two brothers arrested to be put to death in the final scene of his play. Unexpected though this ending is, any other solution would not have satisfied the audience, because in the course of events the very ingenuity of their stratagems gradually reduces their moral stature in our eyes and makes them appear even more vicious than their enemy. In short, they come very near to Iago. The hero of *The Spanish Tragedy* is certainly not such a villain; perhaps he is an upright man. But then it does not especially enhance his character in our eyes. He is a whining, complaining figure, frustrated by lack of means, and hatred is his only motive to drive him to the final action. Both "greatness" and "nobility" are the last words to be applied to him. Also for the same reason we suspect something amiss when the Hamlet of the First Quarto appeals to the Queen, "And mother, but assist me in reuenge," or when the hero of *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* ascribes the main cause of his delay to the fact that "the fratricide is surrounded all the time by so many people."

It is a dilemma, indeed, for any emphasis upon difficulty detracts from our impression of a hero's ability and any emphasis upon ability detracts from our impression of his nobility. But this dilemma was solved perfectly by Shakespeare. At every opportunity he impresses on us that Hamlet's practical ability is far above his physical situations, and this is done just in such a way as to enhance our impression of Hamlet's nobility. Here, ability and nobility do not contradict each other, but are conducive to each other.

The device adopted by Shakespeare to solve this dilemma is the use of the magic circle to which we referred earlier. He prepares a magic circle for his hero's activity, and gives him, all within the scope of this circle, every possible opportunity whereby he can display his overflowing ability and ingenuity without reserve. This circle sets a limit on his activity by shutting out his final action from its scope, demanding him never to step beyond it. But, at the same time, this limiting circle, far from being restrictive to his activity, gives him a wide range of activity, all the more wide because it enables him to act temporarily freed from the impending command of his motive. It is due to this that he can so often dwell leisurely upon topics which have no immediate effect on his final action. Within this circle he can act freely displaying his superb ability in everything. And he can do so without the least danger of staining himself, because that final act (which would be the fulfillment of

his original motive, indeed, but, at the same time, would be only an act of hatred) is always suspended by the limiting circle, or, to put it in another way, is always enclosed there within brackets merely as a provisional goal of action.

The best example is the Play Scene. Here, Hamlet comes to grips with one obvious difficulty, needs help desperately (i.e., help of the Player and Horatio), and sets his "Mouse-trap," which is indeed the most ingenious plot ever conceived in revenge stories. In other words, all the essence of revenge stories is condensed here in this one scene, in which, of course, Hamlet brings his ability into full play, surpassing any revenge hero in it. And yet his conduct does not invite any blame on his character in our eyes, because it does not lead beyond its own circle, because it is severed, as it were, from the final act of hatred. The reason of inaction which Hamlet mentions behind the kneeling Claudius serves only as a reminder of this limiting circle. However cruel its purport may be, it is only a resetting of the provisional goal of action, which, of course, cannot be put into practice until the limiting circle is finally removed, when that goal, too, will have undergone a drastic revision in its turn. And as such it cannot in the least touch the hero's nobility.

As a result, we have a prince before us who is endowed with superb ability, and also with nobility. About the first virtue, R. A. Foakes observes that Hamlet

seems to combine the active and passive life as soldier and swordsman on the one hand, scholar, student and statesman on the other, and in both capacities he is, in the play, supreme. He defeats the expert, Laertes, in the swordfight, and his 'noble reason' readily outmanoeuvres the wiles of the court's elder-statesman, Polonius. His wit is too sharp for the skilful Claudius, his philosophy too deep for the scholar Horatio; he is supreme in all things. . . .²⁴

He looks almost like a hero of a melodrama. And to this another virtue is added — nobility, which is to furnish a central theme for Horatio's eulogy. This virtue is emphatically impressed on us when we see him hesitating (in spite of his superb ability) before his task just on account of the limiting circle imposed on him. We know that the author of this circle is not any external compulsion but his own spiritual searching. Before setting about his task, he wanted to stop and consider the nature of his conduct; he wished that his conduct should have meaning, that it should be truly human in its truest sense. Moreover, he wanted to solve this problem, not simply by referring to any established moral code, but by digging far deeper into the nature of human existence. This is truly the image of "a noble heart." As Foakes puts it, "he seems potentially to be a figure like Sir Philip Sidney." At any rate, the supreme ability matched with nobility — that is what constitutes the character of Hamlet.

Not that he is actually free from all blemishes, of course. He himself says, "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in" (III. i. 126-129), which is certainly not to be taken as feigned madness. We witness his harsh treatment of Ophelia, his half-genuine madness, his excessive accusation against his mother, involuntary manslaughter (inflicted upon that lovable Polonius), and, above all, we hear constant expression of hatred from him, such as "bloody, bawdy villain, / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless

villain! / O Vengeance!" (II. ii. 608-610), or such as is best illustrated in the cruel excuse he mentions when he lets his victim go unpunished. Indeed, all these would be grave and glaring blemishes on his character, if he were to act with hatred as his sole motive, as Vendice did, for instance. But, so long as his action is severed from his final act of hatred by that magic circle, that is to say, so long as he is faithful to that spiritual quest for what is truly human, he is justified in our eyes in all his doings. All his violent deeds and fatal errors may make his own situations more and more dangerous to him (and it will be so much the better for our appreciation because the balance of task and ability can be achieved only in that way in the case of this hero who is endowed with so great ability), but they never spoil our impression of his noble highness. On the contrary, they work to emphasize all the more forcefully the overriding urgency and importance of the spiritual quest which is taking hold on this noble heart.

Such a thing would be impossible if he were a real person living in a real world. Hamlet says, "O good Horatio, what a wounded name, / Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!" (V. ii. 355-356). Indeed, such is the way of "this harsh world." But here in the world of the play we have looked into "the life of things," into the core of his "story," and in this vision of ours he is simply an object of our admiration. After all, he is a character living in the world of the play which is essentially an artefact and exists as reality only in our impression. And this point now brings us to the conclusion of our discussion concerning the character of Hamlet.

This rather romanticized picture of Hamlet is indeed a faithful reflection of Shakespeare's own intention in his characterization of Hamlet. Certainly, a Hamlet so perfect would be the most fitting object of our wish fulfilment or of our admiration. But Shakespeare's intention does not end there. His intention is that his hero should be the most fitting receptacle for, and the most lucid mirror to reflect, that universal burden of the Mystery to which human mind is destined, the burden which it "cannot bear and must not cast away."

As to the reason why his purpose needed so perfect a hero, I would like to dismiss its explanation lightly by resorting to an analogy. Hamlet is the most lucid mirror for us almost for the same reason that Newton was the most lucid mirror to reflect the mystery of the universe when the famous words were put into his mouth: "I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."

So it is now with our picture of Hamlet. Even this man so supreme in ability and so noble in character, even this man so perfect as a man could not but recognize the mystery, could not but bow to the "will and purpose greater than his own," to some eternal Being which alone can reveal, so it seems to us, the meaning of the ultimate mystery. This is the source of our awe. Thus we feel admiration and awe in the hero's fate, instead of pity and fear. And we have here a sublime drama (not necessarily a religious drama, for the reason examined earlier) rather than a character tragedy.

Here, any character study which tries to find out some tragic flaw in Hamlet's personality cannot help collapsing. Its fallacy comes from the failure to recognize the essential nature

of the character as a receptacle, as a mirror, that is to say, as an artefact. Even the present-day criticism, leaving Bradley so far behind, is far from having dropped such character studies. On the contrary, more and more personal defects have been piled on the character of Hamlet, so much so that we have now something like a decline of Hamlet's reputation, as T. J. B. Spencer suggests.²⁵ But the fact is that Hamlet is intended so as not to have any defect, any defect in the sense that it is personal to the character. If there is any *hamartia* in this tragedy, it is not, at least, Hamlet's personal defect, but rather a fate innate to man. Even Bradley's "melancholy" will not do in this respect. We may go back over a century and find a more potential answer, in spite of Bradley's objections, in the picture of Hamlet described by Goethe: "a lovely, pure and most moral nature . . . sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away."²⁶ Only he should have added that this burden is not a physical, but a spiritual burden, not personal, besides, to Hamlet, but innate and destined to the nature of man. Also he should have added that Hamlet does sink beneath it, not as a personal figure, but as a symbolic figure of man, and that his weakness is nothing but a weakness of man.

NOTES

1. W. W. Robson, *Did the King See the Dumb-show?* (Edinburgh, 1975), pp. 1-2.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
4. J. R. Brown & B. Harris (eds.), *Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies*, 5: *Hamlet* (London, 1963), pp. 129-147.
5. J. D. Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge, 1935), p. 49.
6. *Stratford-Upon-Avon-Studies*, p. 136.
7. I. Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy* (London, 1960), p. 80.
8. Virgil, *The Aeneid* (trans. W. F. J. Knight, Harmondsworth, 1956), p. 64.
9. S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York, 1939), p. 97.
10. Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (ed. F. S. Boas, Oxford, 1901, 1955), III. xiii. 1-5.
11. The text of quotations from *Hamlet* is that of the Globe Edition.
12. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1904, 1963), pp. 107-108.
13. John Vyvyan, *The Shakespearean Ethic* (London, 1959), p. 55.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
15. Ribner, p. 80.
16. G. F. Waller, *The Strong Necessity of Time* (The Hague, 1976), pp. 128-129.
17. L. S. Cox, *Figurative Design in Hamlet* (Ohio State Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 64-65.
18. Larry S. Champion, *Shakespeare's Tragic Perspective* (Athens, 1976), p. 135, but slightly modified and curtailed by me to fit my purpose.
19. H. H. Furness, *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: Hamlet* (New York, 1963), II, p. 99.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 72 (11. 1542-1547, according to the lining of Furness).
22. *Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies*, p. 125.
23. According to Champion's explanation (*op. cit.*, pp. 113-114), the soliloquy in Shakespeare's plays usually serves for two purposes: (1) it "establishes for the spectators a pattern of anticipated action," and (2) "it sketches the inner struggles. . . by which the spectators are made to share the struggle and to anticipate the future events of the plot occasioned to a large degree by the decision of such moments." It is not difficult for us to find that these two types are essentially of the same kind. They are both related to the level of external action, whether directly or indirectly — that is to say, directly in the case of the former type, and indirectly (i. e., through the character's states of mind) in the case of the latter.

Iago's soliloquies largely belong to the former type, and Othello's soliloquy (III. iii. 262-283) in the Temptation Scene, for example, belongs to the latter. At any rate, since they are related to the external level, they necessarily take on an expository nature and as such aim at clarity.

After this, referring to the peculiarity of Hamlet's soliloquies, Champion says, "In effect, they function in this play as a device for complication, not for clarity." He thinks that they do not "establish a vision of a consistent personality" because they contradict each other ("the decision of one moment is forgotten or ignored in the next"). But this generalization is not exact. For one thing, the last part of Hamlet's fourth soliloquy – that part which begins at "About, my brain!" (II. ii. 617) – certainly belongs to the usual kind, particularly to the first type. It is expository and aims at clarity. Therefore, the fact is rather that there are in this play two kinds of soliloquy; the usual one, expository and related to the external level, and another one, related to the spiritual level. Of course, the latter has a fundamental connection with external action, but it is never expository to it. Rather it stands *per se*, even predominating over external action. If we try, as Champion did, to see the soliloquies of this kind too much in connection with the external level, we will be confronted with their inconsistency and obscurity. But as a device for directing our attention to that spiritual journey, they are consistent and clear.

24. *Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies*, pp. 150-151.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 185-199.

26. Bradley, p. 80.

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