

CHAPTER 5

Shakespeare's Tragedies I: 'Hamlet'

A well-known critic has written of Shakespeare:

Shakespeare's plays offer an experience that can only be lived into and understood to the best of our individual powers: there are no answers that the beginner can, as it were, look up at the end of a book.¹

This truth notwithstanding, some beginning has to be made by the new reader of Shakespeare and he needs some introduction. It was to fill this need that Charles Lamb, the 19th century critic and essayist wrote his "Tales from Shakespeare." Whereas they do not always present the events of the plays in the same order or with the same emphasis as Shakespeare himself, they are useful in orienting the new reader towards an understanding of the often very complex situations. The reader is advised to begin with them before going on to the difficult language of Shakespeare himself.

In 'Hamlet', the play opens in a most dramatic and attention-catching way. On the battlements of a huge and gloomy castle in Denmark, a man is keeping watch at night. The weather is bad and the watchman is expecting the appearance of a ghost which had previously been sighted. A few minutes after the curtain has opened, the ghost appears, but it does not speak, even when challenged.

It is not until the second scene that we meet Hamlet himself, and he is behaving extremely sadly. His mother the Queen tries to cheer him up. She says:

*Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
Do not forever with thy veiled lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
Thou knowst 'tis common; all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.*

Hamlet's father is dead, but his son cannot accustom himself to the fact. The new king, Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, now married to the Queen, adds his own attempt to change Hamlet's mood but it is only to his mother that he listens. When she says:

1 L. C. Knights: "King Lear" and the Great Tragedies.

Let not thy mother lose her prayer, Hamlet,

he replies,

I shall in all my best obey you, Madam,

making no mention of Claudius. One of the first things we notice about Hamlet, then, is his devotion to his mother, but as soon as he is left alone, he speaks his thoughts alone, revealing his disappointment and disgust at his mother's recent marriage. Such speeches, indicating the characters' inner thoughts, are called SOLILOQUIES, and there are a number of them in this play. In this first one, Hamlet expresses such deep disgust that he wishes himself dead:

*O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew;
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world.
Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this,
But two months dead: nay, not so much, not two.*

The source of Hamlet's "nighted colour" mentioned by the Queen is here made clear. His father has been dead only two months and already Claudius (it is probably he whom Hamlet means by "things rank and gross in nature" for he now "possesses" Denmark) is married to his mother. When his friends come to see him, he continues to complain to them of his mother's hasty marriage. When Horatio mentions that he has seen the spirit of Hamlet's father recently, Hamlet himself soon arranges to be at the place where the ghost appeared and this interchange takes place:

*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.
Hamlet: Haste me to know't that I, with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge.*

From these lines it is clear what 'Hamlet' is about: revenge, a common theme of drama of these times. "The Spanish Tragedy" by Thomas Kyd deals with the revenge of a son's death by his father, and revenge was often the motive for dramatic action. Revenge of a crime requires decisive action, however, and Hamlet seems unable to act in this decisive way. He is too prone to thinking, and his thoughts are usually tinged with melancholy:

*What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in
form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in
apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!
And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?*

If that last expression of disgust were not there, these words could be an expression of optimistic admiration of mankind, typical of the Renaissance spirit, which turned to find, within man him-

self, the manifestation of the divine. But those final words ('this quintessence of dust') reveal Hamlet's characteristic melancholy, his morbid, frequent insistence on the gloomier aspects of life, which seem to prevent him from taking action.

Another reason that he himself gives for his hesitation is his lack of proof. He is beset by doubts. How does he know that the ghost is really from his father? His preoccupation with these things causes him to seem mad, frightening the lady for whom he had formerly shown such love, Ophelia. In order to resolve his doubts, he gets an idea to use the strolling actors who arrive at the Danish court. He says:

*I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions.*

His idea is to show a play to Claudius which re-enacts the method of murder by poisoning through the ear, which his father's ghost had told him about. If Claudius is guilty, his reactions will show evidence of his bad deeds ('malefactions'). Joyfully, he shouts,

*the play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of king.*

(Notice that when Shakespeare wants a particularly important idea to stay in our minds, he writes it in rhyme)

But Hamlet's melancholy thoughts continue to obsess him:

*To be, or not to be: that is the question,
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing, end them. To die; to sleep*

He begins to think of suicide and death and the words of this soliloquy are very well-known.

He continues with his plan, however, and at the performance of a play in which Hamlet himself has inserted a scene of poisoning through the ear, Claudius, sitting in the darkened theatre, oppressed by the sense of his own guilt, jumps up and shouts:

Give me some lights; away!

Everybody then takes up the cry: "Lights, lights, lights," which Claudius needs to dispel the oppressive darkness. As the King hastens from the play, Hamlet is sure of his guilt. He has the double evidence of the ghost and the play. But he continues to hesitate. Even when he comes upon his uncle undefended and praying, he does not take his revenge.

*Now might I do it pat, now he is praying
And now I'll do't; and so he goes to heaven;
A villain kills my father; and for that,
I, his sole son, do the same villain send
To heaven.
Why this is hire and salary, not revenge.*

So, even when the opportunity presents itself so conveniently, Hamlet hesitates and stops to think. His active intellect perceives the consequences of his action so that the action itself does not occur. Hamlet continues on his way to visit his mother, and there follows one of the

most powerful and painful scenes in Shakespeare: a man forcing his own mother to acknowledge her sin, a son treating his mother, not with loving respect but with unnatural cruelty, and when Hamlet, in an impetuous moment, hears somebody behind the curtain and stabs his sword through it, he makes it clear why:

Polonius (behind the curtain): O! I am slain.
Queen: O me! what hast thou done?
Hamlet: Nay I know not. Is it the king?
Queen: O what a rash and bloody deed is this!
Hamlet: A bloody deed! Almost as bad, good mother,
As kill a king and marry with his brother

Hamlet thinks he has killed Claudius, finally achieving his revenge, and he then makes it clear to his mother that he knows of her sin. (And notice, again, Shakespeare's use of a rhyme to emphasise an important idea.) When Hamlet has revealed to his mother that he knows of her crime, he continues to reproach her with it, until she can bear it no longer. She begs him:

O speak to me no more!
These words like daggers enter in mine ears;
No more, sweet Hamlet.

But Hamlet has no mercy; he cruelly continues to express his contempt for her present husband, in comparison with his father:

A murderer and a villain;
A slave that is not worth the twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;
A cut-purse of the empire and the rule
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole
And put it in his pocket.

Again, the Queen cannot bear it. "No more," she pleads. And then, as Hamlet mercilessly continues, there is a dramatic change in him from cruel contempt to awe and terror as the ghost appears to him:

A king of shreds and patches
(enter Ghost)
Save me and hover o'er me with your wings,
You heavenly guards.

He calls on the angels to protect him. The ghost has come to remind Hamlet of his solemn promise of revenge which he has almost forgotten, "thy almost blunted purpose," he calls it. But it is still to be a long time before it is accomplished.

Claudius arranges that Hamlet should travel to England, accompanied by two hypocritical courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern armed with letters, commanding the king of England to take Hamlet's life. This cunning plan never comes to fruition because Hamlet discovers the letter, changes his own name to those of the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and later, when the ship is attacked by pirates, returns with them to Denmark, leaving the two courtiers to their well-deserved fate.

He returns to find Ophelia dead and, in a graveyard, as her grave is being dug, he again finds occasion for his gloomy reflections. As he is looking at a skeleton unearthed by the gravedigger, he says:

*Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play loggats with 'em; mine ache
to think on't*

As he is standing near the graveside, the funeral procession arrives and Ophelia's brother Laertes throws himself in the grave, lamenting his sister's death. Hamlet is so angered by this loud display of grief that he jumps in after Laertes and they begin to quarrel.

It is this enmity between Hamlet and Laertes of which Claudius, whose plan for getting rid of Hamlet has failed, takes advantage. He arranges a fencing-match between the two men and provides Laertes with a poisoned sword. For good measure, he plans to put a poisoned ring in a cup of water near Hamlet, so that if one fails, the other will succeed.

The last few moments of the play, then, in contrast to the long hesitations of Hamlet, are packed with action. In the space of a few moments of these lines for example, three people die:

*(LAERTES wounds HAMLET; then, in scuffling, they exchange rapiers and
HAMLET wounds LAERTES)
King: Part them! They are incensed.
Hamlet: Nay, come again!
(the QUEEN falls)*

Shortly after this, Hamlet, his own life now inevitably lost, stabs the king with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink the poison he himself has prepared. When Hamlet himself dies soon after, the stage is littered with bodies.

But at this point, as so often in Shakespeare's tragedies, the action does not end. Fortinbras, the young prince of Norway, comes on stage and Hamlet's friend Horatio, prevented from killing himself by his beloved friend, explains the carnage. Fortinbras then speaks the closing lines, and the curtain closes. The audience leave the theatre not on a note of tragedy and death, but of continuation after the holocaust, of normality returning. Such a final moment is characteristic of the tragedies.

This inadequate account of the main lines of the play may encourage further reading of 'Hamlet'. Let us look at a few of the phrases contained in it which have become so common in English that they are almost clichés. No single writer, unless it be the translators of the authorised version of the Bible, have had such a strong influence on the English language as Shakespeare. Here are fifteen phrases (there are many more) which most English people would know, whether they have read the play or not:

*More in sorrow than in anger.
The apparel oft proclaims the man.
Neither a borrower nor a lender be.
To thine own self be true.
To the manner born.
Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.
That one may smile and smile and be a villain.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in thy philosophy.
Brevity is the soul of wit.
Nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so.
I must be cruel only to be kind.
The dog will have his day.
There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.
The rest is silence.*

