

Shakespeare's Hamlet Who "Knows Not Seems"

Ali Ahmad Mahmoud*

* Ph. D. in English Drama, Ain shams University 1971.

Associate Professor, Department of English, Kuwait University.



Abstract

This paper argues that in "designing" **Hamlet**, Shakespeare injected his tragedy with highly sophisticated dramatic irony centring round the theme of art and nature or outward appearance and inward reality. Deeply involved in this conflict is Hamlet, the tragic hero who defies the world of appearances and champions that of nature and truth. In the course of his search for the truth and justice, Hamlet resorts to play-acting and theatre as well as to feigning madness. But he repeatedly betrays his genuine feelings and aims, and proves himself no such competent player as Claudius is, giving evidence to the difficulty of separating man's outward behaviour from his inner life.

The deepest dramatic irony in **Hamlet** lies in the fact that he, at the outset, despises his body and even contemplates committing suicide to get rid of it, but he gradually discovers the futility of his contempt and realizes the vital importance of intertwining the body and the mind for the fulfilment of any purposeful action. When he attains that kind of reconciliation, he becomes able to deal with a world of "seems", albeit his rejection of its ways and values. Only then does the tragic hero recognize, and become one with, human weaknesses, limitations and frailties. The dramatic irony permeating the play reaches its culmination when Hamlet attains his goal and becomes himself despite his plainness and lack of art, while Claudius is unmasked, utterly disgraced and severely punished in spite of his shrewdness and subtlety - a perfect fulfilment of poetic justice that gives Hamlet such ethical and religious dimensions that are not common in Shakespearean tragedy.

Introduction

Hamlet, upon receiving the revelation made by the Ghost of his father, gets greatly excited and shaken off, but his 'prophetic soul' has already intuitively made him suspect his uncle to be the murderer of his father, the seducer of his mother and the usurper of the throne of Denmark. Yet the complexity and uncertainty of the circumstances in which the tragic hero is placed are such that he - a young gentleman of the Renaissance, one with exact moral principles and great ideals - cannot take the revelation at face value:

The spirit that I have seen may be the
devil : and the devil has power to assume a
pleasing shape ;

(II.ii.594-6)⁽¹⁾

The problem of the relationship between appearance and reality in the world of **Hamlet** is initiated and intensified by King Hamlet's Ghost whose enigmatic nature embodies appearance and reality, body and spirit, this world and the other world. It is the instrument of retrospective analysis, a link between the past and the present, interchangeably revealing from the one to illuminate the other. Through its revelation Hamlet comes to know about the fearful gulf separating the glittering surface of the Claudian world from the ugliness of its reality. In confrontation with this seeming and dissembling world, for Hamlet to be able to reach the truth, he is driven to put an «antic disposition» on, and play the part of a madman.

This paper argues that in designing Hamlet Shakespeare injected his tragedy with highly sophisticated dramatic irony centring round the theme of art and nature or outward appearance and inward reality. Deeply involved in this conflict is Hamlet, the tragic hero who defies the world of appearances and champions that of nature and truth. In the course of his search for the truth and justice, Hamlet resorts to play-acting and theatre as well as to feigning madness. But he repeatedly betrays his genuine feelings and aims, and proves himself no such competent player as Claudius is, giving evidence to the difficulty of separating man's outward behaviour from his inner life.

The deepest dramatic irony in **Hamlet** lies in the fact that he, at the outset, despises his body and even contemplates committing suicide to get rid of it, but he gradually discovers the futility of his contempt and realizes the vital importance of intertwining the body and the mind for the fulfilment of any purposeful action. When he attains that kind of reconciliation, he becomes able to deal with a world of «seems», albeit his rejection of its ways and values. Only then does the tragic hero recognize, and become one with, human weaknesses, limitations and frailties. The dramatic irony permeating the play reaches its culmination when Hamlet attains his goal and becomes himself despite his plainness and lack of art, while Claudius is unmasked, utterly disgraced and severely

punished in spite of his shrewdness and subtlety - a perfect fulfilment of poetic justice that gives **Hamlet** such ethical and religious dimensions that are not common in Shakespearean tragedy

One scene already at the beginning of **Hamlet** focuses on one of the leading themes of the tragedy, namely that of art and nature. The scene (Act I, scene ii) takes place in the council chamber of Claudius, King of Denmark, where an implicit sharp contrast is drawn between the splendid brilliance of the court and its people headed by the king himself, on the one hand - and the melancholy and gloom of Prince Hamlet, standing uniquely at the other end of the stage on the other hand.

A glance at the items of the King's unwritten agenda for his council meeting would clearly reveal his shrewdness, and his premeditated style betrays an ingenious attempt at justifying his overhasty marriage to his dead brother's widow and thus elevating himself to the Danish throne. These two events are tremendous enough to perplex Hamlet's mind and to call in question Claudius's motives and integrity of character. The fact that "discretion fought with nature" (I.ii.5), and that the former has obviously won the battle against the latter, is given evidence in the same scene when the king readily gratifies Laertes's wish to go back to France to resume his studies there while he firmly denies Hamlet's desire to go back to Germany for the same purpose. So the king's vain promise: "You are the most immediate to our throne" (I.ii.108-9) strikes Hamlet as mere deception and cunning; he discovers that almost nothing is what it seems to be in Elsinore, and hence his resort to punning and word-play.

Even before meeting the Ghost and receiving the horrid revelation about the nature of his father's death, his dialogue with the King, his uncle, and the Queen, his mother, abounds in bitter irony which points to a lack of communication between his plainness and the double-dealing of his uncle's court:

King: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

Hamlet: Not so, my lord; I am too much i' the sun.

(I.ii.66-67)

Being «Too much i' the sun», here, can best be explained by reference to the Prince's similarly ironical retort to the King, later on, when the latter intimates that Hamlet will leave for England for: his own «good» while he is planning to get him murdered there:

King: So is it, if thou know'st our purposes.

Hamlet: I see a cherub that sees them . . .

(IV.iii.46-7)

The King thinks Hamlet's sorrow is a matter of outward appearance and circumstances, and the Queen joins hands with her husband in bidding her son cast his black clothes off and thus stop being in grief. She reminds him that death is «common». Feeling insulted by his mother's remark, since "black" colour is "often associated with deceit and pretence"⁽²⁾, Hamlet is provoked by the hypocrisy of the court in terms of whose topsy-turvy values, as he will observe later on "Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg" (III.iv.154). Hence the commonness and the vulgarity which the prince derides in his retort against his mother's conception of his grief:

Hamlet: Ay, madam, it is common.

Queen: If it be, why seems it so particular with thee?
Hamlet : Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not "seems".
(I.ii.73-6)

Deeply concerned for the genuine feelings and the inward reality of his grief, and contemptuous of the false appearances of the surrounding world, he explains his concept of 'seems' in such theatrical terms and details that underline his great interest in the art of playing and theatre. It is not alone his solemn black dress, or his forced sighs and tears , nor the dejected behaviour of his face; together with all forms, modes and shows of grief that can denote him truly,

these indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play :
But I have that within which passeth show ;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe .
(I.ii.83-5)

It is significant that Hamlet is engaged in revenge, in the form of satire, as Professor Hedrick tells us, even before he knows Claudius's actual criminality:

He is in the occupational position of most satirists with respect to their audiences. The private crimes of the satirist's listeners, like Claudius' crimes here, are lashed unawares⁽³⁾.

Hamlet seems to have already lost the taste of life. In his first soliloquy he expresses his feeling of boredom and even disgust with a life that has declined into an unweeded garden "That grows to seed; Things rank and gross in nature/Possess it merely" (I.ii.136-7). He feels that his flesh has been 'soiled' through that of his mother's, as she fell from the ideal, true love of his great father to the incestuous bed of the inferior present King . Had the Everlasting not fixed "His cannon against selfslaughter!" (I.ii.132), he would have committed suicide and put an end to his suffering.

In his sweeping and general accusation: "Frailty, thy name is woman!", where the focus is made on the sensuality of the marital relationship between his mother and his uncle, Hamlet has obviously grown to abhor physicality. Professor Hunt has called attention to the significance of Shakespeare's use of imagery in **Hamlet** which abounds in corporeality, coming to the conclusion that the dramatist seems to methodically deconstruct the body :

Shakespeare seeks to reduce life to its corporeal elements. His characters in this play think of every psychological quality, every rational deliberation or spiritual choice, in terms of the physical equipment that locates them in a world of action⁽⁴⁾.

From the "To be or not to be...." soliloquy, it is evident that Hamlet has been disgusted at, and even oppressed by, what he has discovered about life in Elsinore. He complains about "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune", and "The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks/ That flesh in heir to», (III.i.58-63). Faced with the death of his father, the corruption of his mother, and the naivety- if not the infidelity of- his beloved, he "confronts disillusionment, madness, and death to secure a more fully individuated ego identity", in a Jungian sense.⁽⁵⁾

In his famous dialogue with Horatio, Hamlet almost puts his finger on the source of his dilemma , namely his inability to take a decision and put it into effect. He praises and admires his only friend for having acquired that happy equilibrium between passion and reason, which makes his friend suffer nothing in suffering all:

; and bless'd are those
whose blood and judgment are so well co-mingled
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please.

(III.ii.68-71)⁽⁶⁾

Conceived in more concrete terms, the tragic hero's dilemma is a lack of harmony between body and mind which renders the one at odds with the other. Though he is fascinated by the wonderful piece of work a man is: "How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty!... the beauty of the world ! the paragon of animals!" Yet. . . . "what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me;..." (II.ii.303-9).

The sense of abhorrence with which Hamlet regards the human body, his own included, seems to have been intensified by the horrible revelation made by the Ghost about the infectious and corrupting poison on the wholesome body of King Hamlet. "The picture of the leprous skin disease", W.H.Clemen observes, "has buried itself deep in Hamlet's imagination and continues to lead its subterranean existence,...."⁽⁷⁾ . Its impact on his mind and soul is such that he decides to wipe away from his memory all trivial fond records, all saws of books, all forms, all past pictures,

That youth and observation copied there;
And thy [the Ghost's] commandment all alone shall live within the book and
volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter: . . .

(I.v.99-104)

"Baser matter", without doubt, has to do with corporeality, rather than with spirituality, and when the Prince cries out: "O most pernicious woman!/ O villain , villain, smiling damned villain!" (I.v.105-6), he seems to have contemplated "to smile , and smile, and be a villain;" (I.v.108). Hamlet's problem is a problem of time; upon his shoulders lies a task too heavy for his sensitive soul and his highly reflective mind to bear:

The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!

(I.v.188-9)

To make Hamlet's predicament still more serious and ominous, Shakespeare opens Act II with the spirit of espionage contaminating and undermining the world of the play. Polonius is setting his servant, Reynaldo, off to spy on his son in Paris. Nor is the King behindhand with this malicious practice in his detective conduct towards his stepson, for which purpose he, too, has set off Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, ironically Hamlet's old colleagues, to spy out his thoughts and motives.

It is at this most critical phase of the tragic hero's career that he resolves "To put an antic disposition on" (1.v.172), which may be considered the initiation of his deliberate

masking of his inner feelings and intentions . It is the beginning of his play-acting, an inevitable stratagem by means of which he may be able to understand and expose the dissimulations of the Claudian court. Having been caught in the deceptions of this distracted world, he finds himself on the verge of distraction himself. It is true that "Something in the anguish of Hamlet's situation drives him to pretending"⁽⁸⁾.

The most biting dramatic irony in **Hamlet** , centring about the tragic hero, is that he must employ play-acting and even dissimulation in order to protect himself from the falsehood and the dishonesty of the surrounding world, and to finally fulfil his task of vengeance. His employment and practice of mere "Forms, modes, and shows" , mere "seems" and appearances which he actually derides and contemns, receive interesting and curious demonstrations in his odd behaviour toward Ophelia; his treatment of the King, Polonius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; his delight and interest in the world of drama and theatre as revealed in the passionate speech of the First Player and in the Mousetrap play itself. Thus the theme of "actors and acting" becomes one of the co-ordinating features of the play.⁽⁹⁾

Hamlet's strange and frightening behaviour toward Ophelia is understandable in the light of his disillusionment in her as a beloved who has let him down in the time of need. Her failure to understand him must have confirmed his belief in woman's «frailty»; no longer does he believe in beautiful faces reflecting inner beauty:

. . . for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness: This was sometimes a paradox, but now the time gives it proof .

(III.i.III-5)

In his severe attack on women's «paintings», he denounces their distortions of God's creation, but he significantly employs in his attack a terminology appropriate to the world of theatre and play-acting such as «jigging», «ambling» and «lispering» (III.i.I46).

In the scene where the King and Polonius conceal themselves behind the arras to eavesdrop an encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia, the Prince, still putting his antic disposition on, holds up a book, pretends to be reading from it, and ascribes to the "satirical rogue" (the writer) a humiliating description of Polonius (II.ii.196-204), a dramatic pose that the old man does not suspect. Similarly he cannot help despising and ridiculing his acquaintances, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, when they set to get round him and try to glean out his secrets. Instead of condemning them outrightly, he entreats Guildenstern to play on one of the pipes, but the latter apologizes for his inability to handle it, and after making ardent pleas to him for playing on it, Hamlet accuses him of trying to play on him by making him speak to abuse him:

'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.

(III.ii.362-5)

Immediately following this satiric encounter, Polonius enters to tell the Prince that his mother would speak with him, and Hamlet, as usual, cannot miss an opportunity for cracking a satiric joke at that charlatan of appearance and pomposity. In the dialogue that proceeds between them Hamlet shows how easy it is to play upon one like Polonius

who, bent on humouring his own belief that Hamlet is a madman, is foolishly ready to say and do whatever Hamlet would have him say and do; thus a camel and a weasel are made similar (III.ii.369-74)!

One of the major dramatic functions of the diversion about drama in **Hamlet** is to shed light on the character of the tragic hero whose fascination with fictitious play-acting must have been strengthened by his inability to act in reality. Anxious to know the secret of Hamlet's transformation, the King welcomes the arrival of the players in Elsinore, and the Prince's school fellows are ready to attract him to this "distraction" that goes in harmony with the dissembling world of Claudius's. "Heavens make our presence and our practices pleasant and helpful to him!" (II.ii.38-9), says Guildenstern, with the theatrical implications and, indeed, the "Machiavellian associations" of "practices" where Hamlet is offered "the most acute symbol of man's disingenuity, those professional dissemblers the players"⁽¹⁰⁾.

On meeting the players, from whose dramatic art Hamlet used to derive much pleasure and delight, he at once gets excited, warmly welcomes them to Elsinore, and asks them for a taste of their art - a passionate speech from Aeneas' tale to Dido which would well indulge his revengeful thoughts towards Claudius. His request that he set down a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines to be inserted in the Gonzago Mousetrap, designed especially to catch the conscience of the King, testifies to the fact that he strongly believed:

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 proclaim'd their malefactions;
(II.ii.585-8)

A goal which the Prince reaches at the close of the Mousetrap play when Claudius gets up alarmed and asks for lights. Preparing the players for performing that play to perfection, Hamlet, both as critic and stage-manager, sums up his instructions in the general principle that 'the purpose of playing' should and has always been "to hold, as it were, the mirror up to nature"; (III.i.21-3), and the passionate speech has reassured him of the validity and the effectuality of good dramatic art. In delivering this speech the First Player gives such an expressive and lively utterance to the pathetic death of old Priam, king of Troy, the cruel bloody hand of Pyrrhus, and the grief of Hecuba, Queen of Troy, that not only it draws real tears from the audience who feel they have seen the real scene, but the player himself "Could force his soul so to his own conceit" (11.ii.546) that he delivered it in real tears and broken voice.

Ironically enough the First Player's passionate speech that Hamlet "Chiefly loved" and has ardently liked to have recalled betrays his inner feelings of indignation at the thought of ruthless revenge which the Ghost of his father commanded him to perform. Hamlet has, indeed, chosen "a passage which indicts revenge and does not justify it"⁽¹¹⁾.

The soliloquy which ends Act II, from which the above mentioned line is quoted, represents a turning point in the protagonist's detective conduct against the antagonist of the play. Hamlet has obviously been aware of his delay in taking the revenge. Lapsed in

time and passion, as Professor Gurr puts it, "he delays by his inability to make the transition from words to deeds, from passion to action, from playing to murder"⁽¹²⁾ But one can now add that the tragic hero's stoic heroism would not have him take revenge on Claudius through an abominable act of ruthless murder. Significantly he surveys and examines his situation in theatrical terms and sets up a "Mousetrap" for Claudius which depends for working out its desired effect on dissimulation and deception, essential ingredients in the art of playing and theatre. A great admirer and advocator of drama, he thinks and behaves with a stage metaphor lurking at the back of his mind. Contrasting the Player's active playing which moved him to passion with his own inability to do so, although he had the "motive" and the "cue" for "passion" which the Player did not have, makes Hamlet condemn himself for a dull-spirited rascal. Though "prompted" to his revenge by heaven and hell, he, like a drab, cannot but "Unpack [his] heart with words" (11.ii.580-1). The Ghost which he saw may be the devil assuming fair appearance, as Claudius, Ophelia and others- all in the dissembling ways of Elsinore. Thus: "the play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King".

While the murder of Gonzago is being performed, Hamlet becomes so excited and enthusiastic that he has to put his antic disposition on. To the king's enquiry about how he fares, he retorts "Excellent, i' faith; of the chameleon's dish : I eat the air, promise-crammed; you cannot feed capons so" (III.ii.93-4). Then he plays the satirical commentator on the incidents of the playlet and keeps embarrassing and perplexing the minds of Ophelia, the Queen and the King by his antics. When the Playlet has succeeded in catching the conscience of the King, Hamlet enjoys the success of his role as dramatist and player, turning to Horatio with his complimentary remark : "Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers, ..., get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?" (III.ii.272-5), thus he takes the word of the Ghost for a thousand pound.

It is noteworthy that Hamlet cannot give direct and simple expression to his inner feelings and thoughts; he would betray himself if he does so, thus: "he must speak ambiguously and cloak his real meaning under quibbles and puns, images and parables"⁽¹³⁾. Yet, his plainness of nature and integrity of character are such that he almost unmask himself and betrays his secret intentions to Claudius and the whole court. Earlier in the play he greets the players with such excitement and zeal that reveal how little he is an actor. It does, indeed, fill him "with happy almost childlike absorption, the apposite of playing any role"⁽¹⁴⁾.

The theme of appearance and reality, a basic theme in **Hamlet** as has been discussed, is given further fascinating dramatic illustrations in Act III. When Claudius and Polonius, as "Lawful espials", make Hamlet and Ophelia meet to glean out his secrets, Polonius makes his daughter hold a book and pretend to be reading on it to colour her loneliness since "Tis too much prov'd, that with devotion's visage/And pious action we do sugar o' ver/The devil himself" (III.i.47-9). Polonius here admits the inevitability of putting a good face and smile on things in the world of Elsinore - an admission that makes Claudius, for the first time in the play, disclose, to the audience only, his inward feeling of guilt. He is a competent and shrewd actor, a foil of Hamlet, whose unmasking would require that he himself should take off his own masks and reveal his own guilt and criminality. Claudius's ironical self-betrayal in this scene paves the way for two of the

most crucial scenes in the tragedy: the Prayer scene and the Closet scene . Skilfully preparing for the dramatic effect of the former, Shakespeare emphasizes the Elizabethan belief in the royal prerogative which makes Hamlet's attempt to take bloody revenge on the King , the murderer of his father, extremely difficult, if not impossible, because "to rebel against him is to rebel against God"⁽¹⁵⁾. Having been shaken off by the Mousetrap play, which has almost succeeded in divulging his guilty conscience, Claudius attempts to repent and plead for mercy, but he realizes the futility of his attempt, because:

In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,

and "the wicked prize itself" may buy the law, "but 'tis not so above"; (III.iii.57-60). The King is not in fact as happy as he has seemed; inwardly he is a suffering man, too weak to give up the fruits of murder, "My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen" (III.iii.55), for forgiveness . In this highly ironic situation, where both Hamlet and Claudius are victims of the dramatic irony, the former thinks that the latter has prayed well and been forgiven. Consequently Hamlet shrinks from taking the revenge lest he should reward and not punish the King.

In both the Murder of Gonzago and the Prayer scene the dramatist excels not only in humanizing the character of the king , but also in underlining the limitations and infirmities of mankind. He does make **Hamlet** hold the mirror up to nature as the tragic hero unmasks the king's guilt by making the players put the Murder of Gonzago on the stage. Similarly, at a moment of great suspense the King is made unable to have his "stubborn knees" bow, while he still has a "bosom black as death" inside, thus:

My words fly up, my thought remain below :
Words without thoughts never to heaven go. (III.iii.98-9)

In moving scenes like these, abounding in most revealing and sophisticated irony, Shakespeare indeed "explores the difficulty of keeping outer role separate from inner life".⁽¹⁶⁾

Hamlet's argument for sparing the life of the King at prayer, and for postponing his revenge to a moment when the King will be tripped at an act "That has no relish of salvation in't;" (III.iii.92), need not be interpreted as "savage refusal to kill Claudius at prayer" and thus reduce Hamlet's struggle for self-integrity into a cynical act.⁽¹⁷⁾ "Do we really want to see Hamlet stab a defenceless kneeling man?" Helen Gardner wonders, finding it no "opportunity" at all for Hamlet because, although Claudius is corporeally within touching distance of him, he is morally and religiously out of reach⁽¹⁸⁾. What really happens at this moment is that Hamlet does not act on the spur of the moment, as passion's slave, but he actually lets his judgement prevail on his blood:

Out of respect for himself he cannot trivialise his task or the scale of Claudius's crime with a piece of fortuitous bloodletting. After the success of the Mousetrap Hamlet feels he is strong, knows he is a match for Claudius, and wants the full scale struggle to prove it⁽¹⁹⁾.

In the Closet scene between Hamlet and his mother the Prince takes a further step towards the accomplishment of the task of revenge. Though he stabs the concealed old man, Polonius, dead and becomes a murderer himself, his sudden emergence from mere "acting" into "action" witnesses the beginning of a newly acquired reconciliation

between his body and mind. The murder of Polonius indicates that Hamlet's case is not a case where reason stays passion, but more specifically where momentary passion sometimes "absorbs him to the exclusion of all else. He acts quickly at the command of passion or not at all"⁽²⁰⁾. After the success of the Mousetrap Hamlet wants to speak to his mother, though at the latter's request, to show her the enormity of her "deed" and to make her repent her past incestuous relationship with his uncle. The scene also fulfils another equally important dramatic function in accelerating the Prince's progress from doubt to confidence, and from the stage of passion to that of action. He at last succeeds in awakening Gertrude's conscience, gaining her loyalty to him, and thus releasing his troubled mind and tormented soul from the heavy burden of the "too too solid flesh" that made him loathe life and the world. Having arrived at a sort of familial reconciliation with his mother, he welcomes his voyage to England despite his awareness that his school fellows will marshal him to knavery, and resignedly he accepts the challenge:

Let it work :
For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
Hoist with his own petar : and't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon .

(III.iv.205-9)

Henceforward Hamlet seems to enjoy the deeply ironic situation which Claudius and Laertes have created for him, but to which they will ultimately fall victims. It is superb ironic comedy, too, that while Hamlet has started to steadily become more confident and aware of the King's villainy, the latter continues to believe Hamlet to be "remiss/Most generous and free from all contriving" (IV.vii.133-4), a Claudian wishful thinking which will be shattered at the end of the tragedy.

One of the most crucial tragic moments of suspense in **Hamlet** occurs when the Prince is presented "guarded" to the King for having murdered Polonius. Yet the shrewd King dares not make Hamlet stand by a trial and thus betray himself in the attempt. So the only way workable for him is to send his stepson to England to be secretly murdered there. Hamlet's unexpected return to Elsinore confuses the mind of the King and urges him to put his cunning design on his stepson into effect.

The experience which the tragic hero has gone through on his sea voyage, "marshalled to knavery" by his old school fellows, is basic to the overall dramatic irony of the play. His narrow, almost miraculous, escape from death there, and his sending of his old colleagues to it instead, foreshadow the final scene of the tragedy when Hamlet emerges as a commanding figure exacting on Claudius the public punishment he deserved.

More significant in this connection is Hamlet's swordsmanship displayed on board the pirate ship, a prologue to the omen coming on when the Prince uses his sword as the instrument of God's minister falling on falsehood and criminality in perfect fulfilment of poetic justice. The new self-knowledge which Hamlet has acquired on the sea voyage has taught him that, for a man to be able to fight evil and to accomplish any decisive, purposeful action, he should function as inseparably both mind and body. The "compelled valour" he had to put on there gave him an invaluable service. Reality and

experience have shown him the absurdity of his old contempt for physicality, insisting, as Professor Hunt observes, that "the body must be central to his being, not something inessential that can be thought into irrelevance and violently discarded"⁽²¹⁾. His new belief in the vital role of his body is implicitly emphasized in his answer to Horatio's "You will lose this wager, my lord" that since Laertes went into France, "I have been in continual practice" (V.ii.201-3).

More importantly, Hamlet has further learned, from his sea voyage, that his valour alone could not have saved him, had it not been for the right guidance and real support of divine Providence:

Rashly,-
And prais'd be rashness for it, let us know,
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
When our deep plots do pall; and that should teach us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will .

(v.ii.6-11)

The final scene of **Hamlet** is a masterly piece of dramatic art, highly permeated with the dramatic irony which recalls Hamlet's earlier "let it work;...", contemplating, then, "to have the engine/Hoist with his own petar:" (III.iv.205-7). Armed by his newly-acquired self-knowledge, and having submitted himself to the will of God, he is now no longer "playing", hesitant or irresolute, but a resigned man who believes that..., "there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (V.ii.211-2). His apology to Laertes for the wrong he once did him points to the Prince's tolerant and noble nature. He enters the fatal duel while the King is ready with his poisoned cup, Laertes with his envenomed and unbated rapier, and the whole courtly world of seeming and dissembling witnessing the sport.

In this magnificent scene the world of "seeming" and that of "being" meet and clash, the one with the other, with the former utterly unmasked and disgracefully exposed when Claudius's villainous plotting backfires. As the minister of God , rather than the scourge or revenger , Hamlet accomplishes his life's task : stabbing the King with the envenomed sword and forcing the poisoned cup into his lips. Laertes admits his "foul practice" and dies penitent, his last words significantly incriminating Claudius and acquitting Hamlet of his and his father's deaths:

He is justly serv'd;
It is a poison temper'd by himself.
Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet:
Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,
Nor thine on me !

(v.ii.319-23)

Hamlet is the most sympathetic of Shakespeare's tragic heroes; his death is read as triumph, the triumph of honesty and nobility over villainy and bestiality. "Now cracks a noble heart", bemoans Horatio, "Good-night , sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (V.ii.350-2). In the final moments of the play he dies sword in hand and is, indeed "the most life-affirming of all Shakespeare's tragic protagonists"⁽²²⁾. He

deserves the tribute paid to him by Fortinbras:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage;
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have prov'd most royally: . . .
(v.ii.387-90)

Hamlet is a fascinating drama which has through the centuries received so many interesting and diverse interpretations, and yet no one particular interpretation of it has proved to be definitely the most satisfactory one. This is so because of the vastness of its scope of values, the urgency of its themes and problems, the vividness of its imagery and the vigour and eloquence of its poetry. Most outstanding among the secrets of its charm is the highly controversial character of its tragic hero, Hamlet, "who knows not seems", one with whom audiences and readers have identified themselves and will continue to identify themselves so long as there will be men and women who loathe falsehood and hypocrisy, and aspire to truth, honesty and beauty.

NOTES

- (1) William Shakespeare, **Hamlet**, ed. George Rylands. London : The New Clarendon Shakespeare, O.U.P., 1968.

All subsequent references to the play will be made to this edition.

- (2) Brower, Beuben A., **Hero and Saint : Shakespeare And The Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition**, Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1971, 282.
- (3) Hedrick, Donald K., "It is No Novelty For a Prince to be a prince" : An Enantiomorphic Hamlet', **Shakespeare Quarterly**, Washington : The Folger Shakespeare library, Vol. 35, 1984, 71.
- (4) Hunt, John, "A Thing of Nothing : The Catastrophic Body in **Hamlet**", **Shakespeare Quarterly**, The Folger Shakespeare library, No. 1, vol. 39, 1988, 30.
- (5) Driscoll, James P., **Identity in Shakespearean Drama**, London and Toronto : Lewisbury, Bucknell Univ. Press and Associated Univ. Press, 1983, 58.

Professor James P. Driscoll offers a very interesting and illuminating study of "Hamlet's Quest for self-knowledge" from a Jungian perspective according to which Hamlet attains his ideal identity by uniting Horatio's thoughtfulness and self-command with Fortinbras's active prowess. Thus the tragic hero can make up for his mother's and Ophelia's failure to support him in his search for truth and in his struggle to live as Hamlet.

- (6) Professor Gupta suggests that these lines and the remainder of Hamlet's speech betray, in their extravagant praise of Horatio, a secret desire to escape from the Ghost's command and to suffer nothing in suffering all (S.C. Sen Gupta, **Aspects of Shakespearean Tragedy**, Calcutta : O.U.P., 1972, rep. 1980, 167). This interpretation, however, does not contradict the argument of this paper, since Hamlet is not seeking mere personal, limited revenge.
- (7) Clemen, W. H., **The Development Of Shakespeare's Imagery**, London: Methuen, 1951 (rep. in Univ. Paperback, 1966), 113.
- (8) Bush, Geoffrey, **Shakespeare And The Natural Condition**, Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1956, 128.

- (9) Watts, Cedric, **Hamlet**, Hertfordshire : Harvester - Wheat-sheaf, 1988, 66.
- (10) Gurr, Andrew, **Hamlet And The Distracted Globe**, Edinburgh : Scottish Academic Press, 1978, 78.
- (11) Watts, op. cit., 51.
- (12) Gurr, op. cit., 53.
- (13) Clemen, op. cit., 110.
- (14) Bayley, John, **Shakespeare and Tragedy**, London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981 (rep., 1982), 182.
- (15) Badawi, M. M., **Background To shakespeare**, London and Basingstoke : The Macmillan Press LTD, 1981, 131.
- (16) Brower, op. cit., 298.
- (17) Ornstein, Robert, **The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy**, Madison and Milwaukee : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965, 235.
- Except for this remark, which is refutable, the criticism of **Hamlet** offered by professor Ornstein is highly perceptive, especially in its realistic interpretations of the problem of action and the moral vision of the play.
- (18) Gardner, Helen "Hamlet And the Tragedy of Revenge" O. U. P. 1959, in **Shakespeare : Modern Essays in Criticism**, ed. Leonard F. Dean, New York: O. U. P., 1967, 222.
- (19) Gurr, op. cit., 52.
- (20) Compbell, Lily B., **Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes**, Cambridge: C. U. P., 1930 (rep. London: Methuen, 1982), 138-9.
- (21) Hunt, Op. cit., 42.
- (22) Fly, Richard, "Accommodating Death : The Ending of **Hamlet**", **Studies in English Literature**, 24, Houston, TX : Rice University, 1984, 273.

* * *