

HAMLET THE PATH OF ALIENATION

Shafik Fayad ★

★ Ph.D. Modern Drama, Manchester University, 1975.
Lecturer in The English Department, Kuwait University.

ABSTRACT:

The character of Hamlet lends itself to a subjectivity which is both remarkable and provocative. A critic's interpretation of Hamlet depends to a very large extent on his personal experience and private philosophy of life. That is why there are so many Hamlets, some so radically different that one wonders if the writers involved are referring to the same play or not. Yet the text is so flexible, so multi-layered, that no one interpretation can be taken to be the right one. One wonders who the real Hamlet was, the character who existed in Shakespeare's mind. Perhaps even Shakespeare saw him in such a complex way that he could not place him within the confines of any one particular temperament. Meanwhile, the challenge is there, and as long as the play is extant there will be readers to offer their view-points.

In this paper I have chosen to deal with Hamlet as a person alienated from those around him. It is an alienation which sets him apart, drives him into himself, and forces him to make choices. It is not an alienation in the Existentialist sense, for Hamlet does not experience the anguish of Kierkegaard nor does he have to make any leap of faith. In many senses his conflict is a moral conflict; he becomes the battle-ground for the forces of good and evil, and neither of them seems able to carry the day. At the beginning of the play he equates evil with the world outside himself, the world of the court, and he tries to escape, only to find that there is a reality inside him that is equally harsh. Through an act of fortune which makes him aware of his separateness, he suddenly feels that he is in some way different, and this is the assumption upon which he bases all his subsequent actions.

There are various ways of looking at this sense almost of superiority with which Hamlet deals with the people of his world. It can be seen as something imaginary, something the mind of Hamlet conjures up in order to cover up for his cowardice in taking revenge. On the other hand, there has been a certain amount of agreement among critics through the centuries that Hamlet is a unique individual who stands in direct contrast to the spineless emptiness of those around him. Certainly he towers above everyone in the play, appearing as a larger-than-life figure, while the others are mere shadows who have little life of their own.

One of the first critics to expound the essential divergence of Hamlet from the mainstream of life in Elsinor was William Richardson, who saw Hamlet as more refined ethically than the people he is in contact with: "He is moved by finer principles, by an exquisite sense of virtue, of moral beauty and turpitude." (Richardson, 1950:29) Similarly, Henry Mackenzie, writing in 1780, viewed Hamlet as a melancholic in possession of "delicate sensibility, impressed with a sense of sorrow, or a feeling of its own weakness". (Mackenzie, 1950:25) One of the best known interpretations of Hamlet in this vein is that of Goethe and the tree-in-expensive-jar parallel, out of which the Romantic concept of Hamlet's **Weltschmerz** arose. Coleridge, embodying English Romanticism, saw Hamlet as a powerful intellectual who keeps his mind in "a state of abstraction and beholds external objects as hieroglyphics" (Coleridge, 1950:31), while Charles Lamb regards him as "shy, negligent, retiring," (Lamb, 1950:42) thereby depriving him of the characteristics of the noble Romantic hero, though still keeping him within the traditions of Romanticism.

Closer to the twentieth century Turgenev holds that Hamlet is an egoist who "clings tenaciously to this 'I', this self in which he has no faith. It is a centre to which he constantly returns because he finds that in this world there is nothing to which he can cleave with all his soul". (Turgenev, 1954: 80) Arther Quiller-Couch, following Coleridge's interpretation, found in Hamlet "the prevalence of the abstracting and generalizing habit over the practical" (Quiller-Couch, 1950:551). In other words, Hamlet is a day-dreaming idealist. This does not seem to agree with G. Wilson Knight's reading, since for Knight Hamlet was a bitter, disillusioned man with a total lack of purpose in life, overwhelmed by a morbid melancholia. Almost equally critical of Hamlet, George Santayana compares his psychology with the Spirit of the World of the German metaphysicians "which is the prey to its own perversity and to what is called romantic irony, so that it eternally pursues the good in a way especially designed never to attain it." (Santayana, 1950:636).

Desperate though these views are, they all agree on one point: that somehow Hamlet has refused to accept the values of everyday life and decided to go his own way, free from their confines. His movement

through the play is a movement from isolation to the beginnings of interaction and absorption into society once again.

Hamlet's basic problem then is alienation **from others**. Somehow along the line, while leading a rather sheltered life in Wittenberg, he lost his contact with the real world of "too too solid flesh" (I.ii 129) and lost himself in a world where "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." (II. ii 251) His thinking is innocent, simple. His mother loves his father, Ophelia loves him, "and all's well with the world" in Browning's memorable words. But all is not well, Something is rotten in the state of Denmark, and Hamlet, returning after a long absence, wrapped up as he is in the black cloak of mourning, cannot understand it. He senses it with faultless intuition, but there is nothing he can put his finger on. In the first scene in which he appears he is stiff and formal, deliberately standing aloof from the rest of the court, who chooses not to question the King's marriage. Despite every effort of both Claudius and Gertrude to draw him into the circle he refuses to give way. He stands contemptuous and proud, refusing to allow the Elsinor world to stain him with its corruption and vice. With a wave of his hand he thinks to dispel the colourful world of "seems": "Seems, madam? Nay it is. I know not "seems"" (I.ii 76). His idealism stands as a barrier between him and the people around him, and since they cannot all change into Hamlets, he must adjust or be eliminated, with the ruthless logic of life itself. Yet Hamlet is no Gregers or Oswald: he does not champion the cause of truth. He brings with himself a destructiveness which must bring with it the downfall of others. He is powerful enough to drag other people down with him: Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, all non-entities who were unfortunate enough to fall within the orbit of Hamlet's passage through life.

Yet on emotional grounds Hamlet is justified. His mother has just married her husband's brother; that in itself raises questions regarding incest. But there is still the dead King to remember, a King whose body had barely started rotting in the ground, and yet Gertrude, "ere those shoes were old" with which she followed the body is now celebrating a wedding ceremony.

"Thrift, thrift" cries Hamlet with deeply bitter sarcasm, "The funeral bak'd meats Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables." (I.ii 180). Yet oddly enough, despite his apparent cynicism, **he does not believe** this. The thought that this could have possibly been the case does not enter his mind.

Not satisfied with what Hamlet regards as her shameless action, Gertrude takes it upon herself to chide him for grieving too long:

Do not forever with thy vailed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.

Thou Know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity. (I.ii 70)

The irony is intense. Hamlet, student of Wittenberg, is having philosophy flung at him by his own mother. One cannot but remember another character who, in dire need of understanding, receives 'philosophical' platitudes:

"Hang up philosophy"! (III,iii 57) cries young Romeo, and we would not blame the older Hamlet if he were to say the same.

Hamlet himself is no philosopher. He thinks because above all he feels. His reflection at all times stems from an emotional trauma; a bad experience which sets an intelligent mind thinking. All the time it is a struggle within himself, the struggle of "a man in plight, a mind resisting its body's destiny, a fighter against cosmic odds". (Levin, 1959:17) In Hamlet we see "Man in his aspect of bafflement, moving in a darkness on a rampart between two worlds, unable to reject, or quite accept, the one that 'to-shakes' his disposition with thoughts beyond the reaches of his soul.". (Mack, 1968:39).

What is this world that Hamlet must accept-not only accept, but also act in? Perhaps we should take as its representative Polonius, who typifies it almost to the extent of being a caricature. What kind of a man is Polonius?

When we first meet him, he is preaching to his children. And what advice! He hedges constantly, seeking an attitude which lies in between and yet leans towards both sides of a question: "Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar", and "Beware/Of entrance into a quarrel, but being in..." "Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement." (I.iii.61, 65, 69) It is a world of but's, of constant reversals. Polonius is willing to sacrifice the happiness of his daughter to curry favour - he, indirectly, causes her to lose it. He is not unwilling to blacken the reputation of his son simply to get some information on him. Reynaldo, of somewhat more moral stock, objects to the cold calculation of it, but Polonius never questions himself regarding the rights and wrongs. He simply does things when he feels they should be done. Laertes depicts this same trait when he plots against Hamlet at the end, thus bringing about his own death, as his father did before him, dying in the ignominy of treachery. Polonius's words, too, mean nothing. "Brevity is the soul of wit", he declares, yet he grasps every opportunity he can to hear his own voice. His mind can admit of no noble sentiments; he cannot conceive of Hamlet being honourable with Ophelia. He is constantly acting, with apparently no inner feelings. Not for a moment does he stop to think of anything but his own self-advancement.

In other words, Polonius believes that it is the clothing which makes the man, as does everyone else in the court. No-one looks further-no-one

cares to. It is Hamlet who is plagued by the horrible filth inside, just behind the ornamented exterior. He has to learn early the bitter lesson that one can "smile and smile and be a villain" (II.i 108). To whom could he look in the court with something akin respect? Claudius? But then what was Claudius? A "vile politician" (I,iii 241) a murderer, a lustful deceiver who cannot stay his passions for a month. Obviously this was not the man to take as an example for good conduct. Should he then befriend Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have been sent for by the king to spy on Hamlet, and who did not even have the sense to conceal it? Whichever way Hamlet turns, he is faced with a reality which is as unalterable as it is ugly. After seeking to escape to Wittenberg, back to the safety of books and learning, and being expressly forbidden to do so, life in Elsinor becomes claustrophobic: "Denmark's a prison", and "one o'th' worst" at that. (II.ii 243,246). Whether his madness is real or not cannot be ascertained, but it definitely has a three-fold purpose: it gives him a breathing-space, a relief from the need to conform to everyday life, during which time he can sort out his thoughts and work towards his 'salvation' or rather his re-admission into society; secondly, it throws everyone off the scent while he carries out his revenge; and lastly, it is a form of escapism, a refusal to face facts by evading them completely. Sooner or later, however, events force themselves brutally upon him. He kills Polonius, and that is when he takes the first step downwards from the world of Goodness and Purity into that of ordinary life. The next step comes, and here the sense of compromising, of complicity, is stronger. It lies in his calm and deliberate killing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. True, it is not actually he who does the deed, but it makes no matter. The Hamlet of the first act could not have done it. He would have recoiled in horror even at the thought. Once he accepts the values of Elsinor, he is in effect casting off himself.

Yet even so he is alienated. He stands alone throughout the play, with the possible exception of Horatio, who can only inarticulately convey his loyalty to Hamlet. Horatio does not change during the course of the play, however, and oddly enough Hamlet seems to pity him: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy". (II i 166) There is in Hamlet's words the sadness of a man who has passed the stage of innocence yet still looks back at it with regret. He recognises in his friend a less experienced man, one who has never had to come to terms with himself or others. And thus even though throughout the play Horatio remains the single closest companion of Hamlet, there is no way Horatio can bring him out of his isolation. He could not begin to comprehend the turmoil, the "tooth-ache" of Hamlet's soul.

Hamlet therefore struggles on his own. There is, supposedly, one other person to whom he could turn for comfort, who would stand by him until

the crisis is over: Ophelia. But Ophelia can plead neither her own cause nor Hamlet's. A part from a weak protestation that Hamlet "... hath given countenance to his speech.../With almost all the holy vows of heaven" (I.iii 113) in the first scene, she submits to her father's decree: "I shall obey, my lord" (I.iii 136). She keeps her promise. Throughout the play she submits totally to her father's will. One is tempted to ask, has she no qualms as to the rightness of tricking Hamlet into revealing himself before her father? She has none. Though innocent and inexperienced, she accepts the mores of the court, and complies placidly to the behavioural code of her father. So dependent is she on her father's ways that when he is killed she falls apart. Yet she loves Hamlet, too. That is what Hamlet finds so hard to comprehend. Can it be that she is so fickle that from one day to another love turns to indifference? Suddenly, for no apparent reason, she refuses to see him. Then in the "Nunnery scene" she decides to return the love-letters and little tokens he has given her. Hamlet's reaction is to fall immediately away from her into the world of "seeming": he denies that he has given her anything.

It is a bad business on the whole. Small wonder that Hamlet's sense of alienation turns into something bitter:

God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another.
You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures
and make your wantonness your ignorance. (III.ii 142).

This is his angry stage, almost the stage of rebellion. Wherea he suffered in silence before,"... break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (I.iii 156) he now almost abandons the guise of madness. He lays direct accusations at his mother's doorstep, nevertheless he still does not kill the King, rationalizing that he will go to heaven if he is killed while praying, for Hamlet has not yet cast aside his ethical standards-he cannot, **sang froid**, stab a man in the back. Next scene he is prepared to kill Claudius; Polonius's death is a mistake Hamlet was after the king, not that "wretched, rash, intruding fool." (III.iv 31) He does not give a thought to "the guts" lying before him. His excited question "Nay, I know not, is it the King?" (III.iv 26) gives him away. Yet through at least the first part of the scene Hamlet displays a callous cruelty towards his mother which is somewhat disturbing:".... Peace, sit you down/and let me wring your heart" (III.iv 34) he says to her as she stares with dismay at the body of the courtier. There is no longer any room for doubt that Claudius murdered his father. Whereas before he could allow himself a little soft-heartedness, he can no longer do so. Just as deliberately as before he sets up a barrier between himself and those around him, but this time of a different kind. Previously, it had been the barrier of suspicion; now it was the barrier of bitter knowledge. Yet Hamlet still retains some of his previous idealism; in his attitude towards his mother it is almost as if he is following the Ghost's command: "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive/Against thy mother aught." (I.v 85). He is still on the side of the

forces of good. He pleads with Gertrude for her to reform. When the Queen cries that he has "cleft her heart in twain" (III.iv 156), he responds immediately with a warmth that is the awakening of a sudden hope in him - a last glimpse of the world which will be shattered completely as he is dispatched to his death in England:

O throw away the worser part of it,
 And live the purer with the other half.
 Good night, but do not go to my uncle's bed...
 and: Confess yourself to heaven,
 Repent what's past, avoid what is to come,
 And do not spread the compost on the weeds
 To make them ranker. (III.iv 149)

One senses in this a new understanding, a forgiveness, almost. The appearance of the ghost this second time marks a turning-point in Hamlet's development. Hamlet reacts to the ghost immediately with guilt: "Do you not come your tardy son to chide" (III.vi 106). But the Ghost is also concerned with Gertrude: "... step between her and her fighting soul/... Speak to her Hamlet" (III.iv 112,114). Hamlet knows she is not going to change. It is his last attempt to be the "scourge and minister" of heaven. His treatment of the body of Polonius indicates both a strange contempt for death and an intense awareness of it, a foreshadowing of the Gravedigger's scene. Hamlet has hidden the body in the lobby. When the King asks him where Polonius is, Hamlet replies that he is at supper. Where at supper? "Not where he eats", replies Hamlet, "but where he is eaten; a certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him." (IV.iii 20) As always, he is standing apart. Yet it is a far cry from the scene in the first act when he is lectured at for taking death too seriously. Here it is almost the other way round. Even Claudius, murderer that he is, is shocked at his **utter disrespect** for the dead. Claudius killed the King, but he did not drag his body around the palace and at least he gave him a decent burial. Once again Hamlet is defying the world of "seems". Not for a moment does he try to conceal that it was he who killed the old man. Claudius to the last moment keeps up appearances. When Hamlet calls him his mother, Claudius corrects him pointedly: "Thy loving father, Hamlet" (IV.iv 50), even though as he is uttering his words he is sending Hamlet off to be executed.

Hamlet ruthlessly disposes of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, hoisting them with their own petards. When he returns from England we find that he has undergone another change. He is in a reflective state of mind, but gone are the soliloquies which make up such a large portion of the earlier scenes, Hamlet now addresses his observations to Horatio. During his absence some kind of bond seems to have been created between the two. In Hamlet's words now there is a new note of sadness which was previously lacking. He does not mention revenge; there seems to be no

conflict within himself. There is a sudden awareness that life is short, almost as if he has a premonition of his approaching death. His thoughts go to his mother "get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come." (Vi 192). But he is not speaking to himself. He mentions Horatio's name at the beginning of the speech and again at the end, and there is resignation in his voice. "To what base uses we may return, Horatio!" he says (V.i 201). What happened to Alexander, and to Caesar? In the final run, all is vanity. Hamlet at last has come to identify himself with the human race. All of us, the great and the small, come to the same end. A.C. Bradley describes his mood: "that kind of religious resignation which, however beautiful in one aspect, really deserves the name of fatalism rather than that of faith in Providence, because it is not united to any determination to do, what is believed to be the will of Providence." (Bradley, 1949:143).

Ophelia's funeral brings about one of his last attacks on the world of appearance. He cannot bear the sight of the hypocrisy of these people who are mourning for the death of the one person whose delicate nature could not endure a life of deception and pretence. This is what Hamlet realizes in a flash and the thought that he himself had doubted her contributes to his fury. He recognizes suddenly the depth of his feeling for her, expressing it with the utmost simplicity: "I lov'd Ophelia". His anger dies out as quickly as it started, as he understands that what he is saying is incomprehensible to those he is addressing. "This is mere madness" says the Queen. "O, he is mad, Laertes" asserts the King (V.i 284, 273). Once again the world of appearances rejects him, and the gulf widens, though it is not he this time who is setting himself apart. What he says springs from his soul. In the next scene he apologizes to Horatio for forgetting himself: "for by the image of my cause I see/The portraiture of his." (V.ii 78). Then, for the last time, he mocks the world of the court. This is the old Hamlet again, manipulating the toadying sycophancy of Oseric, deriving pleasure from watching him fall into the traps he has set him. Again, Hamlet expects Horatio to share his pleasure, and though he baits Oseric on, it is for an audience, and as such provides a contrast to the similar scene with Polonius.

The challenge is made; the plot hatched, and Hamlet moves towards his doom. Humbly he faces Laertes. With complete sincerity he asks the young man's forgiveness: "Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong" (V.ii 226) and Laertes, true to his world of seeming, immediately puts on a show of cordiality. Hamlet already has his misgivings. The intuition which told him at the start of the play that there was something dubious in the marriage of Claudius with Gertrude once again rears its head: "Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart-" (V.ii 213) he says to Horatio. He does not, however, suspect foul play of Laertes. It is an indication of the inherent goodness of his nature that he must always see the other person as innocent until he is proven guilty.

Only when his mother is poisoned does the truth dawn on him, and for the last time he is driven to the brink of madness by the horror of what he sees. At last, Claudius receives his due. With the death of Claudius, the old world of Elsinor collapses, and Hamlet suddenly acquires a new freedom; the ability to look around him and be aware of others. He has achieved an insight which cost him dearly and has come too late, but he has left someone behind to try to communicate it to the "unsatisfied", those who pass through life ever asking questions, looking for the reality behind the external form.

It is a rough course that Hamlet has chosen through life's "sea of troubles", and at all times he is "painfully aware of the baffling human predicament between the angels and the beasts, between the glory of having been made in God's image and the incrimination of being descended from fallen Adam." (Tillyard, 1968:29) Taking the side of the angels, he refuses for a time to accept the existence of the beasts. Slowly, however, as he recognizes that he, too, is prone to make mistakes, to commit acts intrinsically evil, he begins to come out of the prison of himself and to be more sympathetic towards the imperfections of others. Alienation, "the inevitable state of the man who values the inner life and truth to self above all else" (Dillon, 1981:107) must sooner or later transform itself into something else. It is unfortunate that the Hamlet who emerges at the end of the play far wiser, far more **complete** as a man has to die at the point when the world he had sought to destroy is being superseded by another. But that is, after all, why the play is a tragedy in the Greek sense, and that is why we feel that on more than one level, "we are the spell-bound witnesses of the crucifixion of the godlike in man." (Walker, 1948:11).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bradely, A.C. "Shakespearean Tragedy," cited in *The Time is out of Joint*, Roy Walker, London: Andrew Dakers, 1949.
- Coleridge, Samuel. "Notes and Lectures Upon Shakespeare" in Claude C.H. Williamson (Ed.) *Readings on the Character of Hamlet*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1950.
- Dillon, Janette. *Shakespeare and the Solitary Man*, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981.
- Lamb, Charles. "The Tragedies of Shakespeare", in Claude C.H. Williamson, (Ed.) *Readings on the Character of Hamlet*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1950.
- Levin, Harry. *The Question of Hamlet*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Machenzie, Henry. "The Mirror", April 22, 1780, in Claude C.H. Williamson, (Ed.). *Readings on the Character of Hamlet*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1950.
- Mack, Maynard. "The World of Hamlet", *Twentieth Century Interpretation of Hamlet*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968.
- Quiller-Couch, Arthur. "Shakespeare's Workshop", in Claude C.H. Williamson, *Readings on the Character of Hamlet*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1950.
- Richardson, William. "Essays on Shakespeare's Dramatic Characters", in Claude C.H. Williamson, (Ed.) *Readings on the Character of Hamlet*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1950.

- The Riverside Shakespeare.
The Riverside Shakespeare.
Santayana, George,
Tillyard, Eustace M.W.
Turgenev, Ivan.
Walker, Roy.
- **Hamlet**, G. Blackmore Evans, (Ed.) Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974. (All Quotation are taken from this text).
- **Romeo and Juliet**, G. Blackmore Evans, (ed) Boston: 1974.
"Obiter Scripta" in Claude C.H. Williamson, (Ed.) **Readings on the Character of Hamlet**, London: Allen and Unwin, 1950.
Shakespeare's Problem Plays, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968.
"Hamlet and Don Quixote", cited in L.C. Knights **An Approach to Hamlet**, Stanford University Press, 1959.
The Time is Out of Joint, London: Andrew Dokers, 1948.
-