



Guy Butler, circa 1980 (courtesy, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown)

THEMES IN HAMLET

The following address was prepared by the late Prof Guy Butler, former Professor of English at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, for a meeting of the Joint Matriculation Board in 1969.

This lecture must be about the millionth attempt to deal with two interrelated questions: How mad is Hamlet? and Why does he delay?

It is helpful to start by refreshing our memories about the world in which the action is set. If we do not, we will tend to skim over certain passages, either because we do not understand them, or because they do not suit our modern sensibilities. We must allow for cultural change, and give proper weight to the words on the page.

Religion

Most important of these factors is **religion**. First, the Elizabethans — and Hamlet — took the next life very seriously indeed — more seriously, sometimes, than this life. The next life was divided into Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven; which you entered, depended not merely on the manner of your living but the manner of your dying. To die without the last rites could make a great difference to your fortunes in the next World. One of the Ghost's chief complaints is precisely this:

Cut off even in the blossom of my sin,
Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,
No reckoning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head:
O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!

The Ghost is suffering torments in purgatory; he is 'confin'd to fast in fires,' and (he) could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres ...

The Ghost is suffering then, in the next world, as the result of the manner of his death. There was a, to us, strange convention in Revenge plays: to take the next world into account in planning the manner and the time of your revenge (e.g. *The Duchess of Malfi*). I think we have to bear this in mind when we listen to Hamlet's excuse for not murdering the King when he is praying.

Now might I do it pat . . .
Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.

The revenge, according to the convention, had to be "ripe" — apt, fitting. Hamlet Senior had made the point, explicitly, that he was sent into the next world without religious preparation. Hamlet Junior, according to the Revenge ethic, is right not to give the murderer a better entrée to the next world than he gave his own victim. The punishment must fit the crime.

This level is not the only level on which Hamlet is thinking, however; and While Shakespeare employs conventions, he is not their slave.

The other important point is this: ghosts could be either "spirits of health or goblins damned"; and Hamlet has to establish the Ghost's credentials:

. . . The spirit that I have seen
May be the Devil, and the Devil hath power
T' assume a pleasing shape . . .

It is important to note that he comes across Claudius at prayer **after** he has established the Ghost's credentials, i.e. after he knows who is responsible for his father's death and his suffering in purgatory.

That he does not kill Claudius While the latter is at prayer is, of course, ironical, as the prayer is, in fact, hollow, and has no 'relish of salvation' in it. The reasons he gives for not doing so are those of a conventional revenger. Perhaps the point of 'the scene is this: the convention of revenge is a poor guide, particularly when it starts seeking to damn souls forever. Hamlet has to grow beyond this view of his alien role. Don't we all feel that he is forcing his disposition here, and when he says

Now could I drink hot blood and do
Such bitter business as the day would quake to look upon?

Honour

So much for religion and revenge; now for **honour**. Honour is a word much used in the play: "High respect, esteem or reverence accorded to exalted worth or rank, deferential admiration or approbation as felt, rendered or received." For members of the male sex in Shakespeare's day, it was a product of their military prowess, their courage, their direct dealing and execution of promises. For women, it was closely linked with chastity, and fidelity to their marriage vows. A sense of honour varied considerably from individual to individual; for many it was simply a matter of keeping the 'public image' of oneself and one's family bright and unsmirched, even if one's family were engaged in secret dishonourable dealings. If one member of the family were dishonoured, all suffered. The family was particularly susceptible to wounds from its womenfolk. Any noble young man whose mother had behaved dishonourably was likely to feel it acutely, to the point of paralysis of will and physical sickness.

Thus Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*:

To see his nobleness!
Concerning the dishonour of his mother
He straight declined, droop'd took it deeply,
Fasten'd and fix'd the shame on't in himself;
Threw off his spirit, his appetite, his sleep,
And downright languished.

That is Hamlet's reaction, too. Laertes, on the other hand, had no such dishonour to digest; his father's death and higger-mugger funeral calls for revenge. If he does not revenge it, it will argue that he is not a true son of his parents, or that his mother was dishonourable.

That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard,
Cries cuckold to my father, brands the harlot
Even here, between the chaste unsmirched brow
Of my true mother.

We see, then, that family honour depends for its integrity upon the marriage; marriage, the basic human institution, the most important of human contracts. His mother's behaviour has struck a paralysing blow at the family honour, at the very generating point of all Hamlet's personal and social values.

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
Calls Virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love,
And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows
As false as dicer's oaths. O such a deed,
As from the body of contraction plucks
The very soul, and sweet Religion makes
A rhapsody of words.

A dishonoured man — dishonoured by a member of his own family — has lost one of the main motives for action. Now Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras are all very much concerned with family and personal honour;

with almost his last words Hamlet begs Horatio to report his cause aright, fearful of what a wounded **name** he might leave behind him. But unlike Laertes — his foil — he is concerned with honour before God, not as well as honour before men. Some of his difficulty springs from his concern for real honour, not the appearance of it. The King and the Queen have enough of the **appearance** to win the court; but it is a court of corrupt intrigue. (“There is something rotten in the state of Denmark.”)

Shakespeare had, in previous plays, puzzled long and hard over this matter of honour; and it might help to think of *Henry IV p. 1* here. There is much in common between Hotspur and Laertes: both are given a speech impediment by Shakespeare; both are impulsive and violent and both explicitly non-religious, non-speculative: Prince Hal, on the other hand, has a streak of speculation in him, and is confronted in the same way as Hamlet is by a rottenness in the state: in this case, his father an usurper, a king-killer, like Claudius. He has two temptations — to the hubris or romantic pride of Hotspur on the one hand, who is all ‘blood’ and no ‘judgement’ and the complete intellectual cynicism of Falstaff on the other: judgment divorced from blood. We see Hal move from his “Hamlet” phase to his “Fortinbras” phase in *Henry IV pt. i* and *ii*.

Far more searching an analysis of honour - male and female, will be found in *Troilus and Cressida*. It seems to me that Hamlet is a conflation of Troilus, Hector and Ulysses and Thorites! Young, passionate as Troilus; knightly and idealistic as Hector; intelligent as Ulysses, savage as Thorites.

We see what he **was** before his mother dishonoured him, through the eyes of Ophelia: the ideal Renaissance prince.

Kingship

I think that one must not lose sight of the large **political** element in this play, if only because Shakespeare gives so much time to it. It is part of Hamlet’s problem.

First, the Kingship is an elective one, within the limits of the royal family of **Hamlet**, i.e. the king is chosen by the nobles from the royal family, including the uncles, etc. It was, however, usual for the eldest son to succeed. Claudius’ succession argues that he had won to his purposes not only the Queen, but the nobles and the court — while young Hamlet was safely away at university; he returned, we remember, for his father’s funeral — and his mother’s wedding.

Now one of Hamlet’s really attractive qualities is that he never thinks of the “honour” of being a king himself; he is, as his father was before him, concerned for the honour of the realm, of Denmark. He has a duty to purge its rottenness: and to do it in such a way that, when the bad king is removed, a better will succeed him. It is not enough simply to kill Claudius: he must replace him. His last words show this concern about the succession:

But I do prophesy th’ election lights
On Fortinbras, he has my dying voice
So tell him with the occurents more and less,
Which have solicited. The rest is silence.

As Polonius points out, he is not a free agent. He is a prince. Conflicts within the royal family cannot be conducted as private vendettas, because the fate of the realm is involved. Neither in his love-making nor in his revenge is he free, as Laertes is.

Now Hamlet has to establish the guilt of the King - who is “innocent” and accepted by the court - if his revenge is to be acceptable. It is impossible for him merely to murder the king without having the means of persuading the court that he is justified: he might jeopardise his own succession, for one thing. Hence, in that court of intrigue, his need to swear his friends to secrecy, a move to which the ghost consents from the cellarage.

But why does he not raise a faction, a rebellion, like Laertes? Each has lost a father. But the circumstances differ. In one case, the ear of Denmark is abused, deceived, by a forged process of death. But only the ghost, Hamlet and Claudius know this; whereas, in the other case, everyone knows that Hamlet killed Polonius. The scandal is public.

Besides, a born prince, with the highest moral principles, would resort to open rebellion only as the very last resort.

Yet, when one has said all this — and one could say more — one has not explained the delay, because Hamlet himself does not accept the excuses we are so ingeniously providing for him. These things impose limitations on his strategy; they do not prohibit action. Apart from staging the play, what does Hamlet really do? The initiative is in the hands of the King, who loses it only briefly (during the play scene) and maintains it until Hamlet's return. Even then, Hamlet seems curiously ineffectual; and the final denouement in which justice is done, is deliberately designed to show that the initiative is still not Hamlet's. It is the King's — in one sense; in another, it is God's: A point to which, time permitting, we will return.

Character and motivation of Hamlet

So much for preliminary skirmishing with background and plot. We now move to the fascinating centre of the play, the character and motivation of the Prince; and whenever I do this, I feel as uncomfortable as Guildenstern, who presumed to ask: "Good, my lord, what is the cause of your distemper?" He got as reply: "Why look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me; you would play upon me, you would seem to know my steps. You would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note, to the top of my compass ... Why do you think that I am easier to be played upon, than a pipe?"

Let us look at the facts as they are given to us, bearing in mind the points I have made about family honour.

A highly intelligent, sensitive young man is away at university, reading widely, speculating upon Man and the Universe. By virtue of his birth he is in the public eye. He admires his father, by all evidence an exceptional man and an excellent king. He is looking ahead, responsibly, to the kingship. His mother seems ideally happy and affectionate. He has grown up in a good Christian home, and has had a very sound Catholic upbringing, which laid great stress on loyalty to marriage vows, on the sacrament of marriage, and which, among other things, thought that widows should not remarry, and positively forbade marriages between brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, condemned them as incestuous. I think if we bear these simple facts in mind we will understand Hamlet better, and not accuse him of exaggerated sexual nausea, as some do.

This young man receives a message that his father has been killed by a serpent. He returns home for the funeral. He is, naturally, profoundly affected by the death of his father. But on top of that he has to watch with growing panic and despair, his mother "post with dexterity to incestuous sheets" — to marriage with his uncle Claudius, a smooth operator whom he has never liked anyway; he has found that, in his absence, the court has been won over by this man; that he himself is powerless, friendless, badly attended. His revulsion, his disillusionment, strike me as perfectly understandable, indeed, to be expected. And his desire to return to Wittenburg, to get away, is natural enough. But he is not permitted to return; he must stay and endure. Helplessness, revolt; despair, anger; — and a desire to escape — not merely to Wittenberg, but from a world suddenly rotten to the touch.

His first soliloquy shows him in a state of profound disturbance, of lack of inner poise, which results in rapid alterations of mood — between external world-weariness.

How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seems to me all the uses of this world
— and violent revolt and anger:
. . . Why she, even she,
(O Heaven! A beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourn'd longer) married with mine uncle,
My father's brother: but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month!
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing of her galled eyes,
She married

and then back again to the helplessness of

But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

This pattern of violent fluctuations of mood is important.

Yet shaken, as he is, he has got more coming to him. Not only has he to see his father's ghost in arms, but he has to hear that affairs are far, far more corrupt and demanding than he suspected:

His father has been murdered — poisoned.

His father is suffering — in fires, in purgatory.

His father demands justice — but in terms which make it quite clear that the justice must be done not merely as a family duty, but a duty to the kingdom of Denmark. And that, for good biblical reasons, Hamlet must not harm his mother: (Honour thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long.)

Nor let thy soul contrive

Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven,

And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,

To prick and sting her.

The effect of this is to push Hamlet into hysteria, brilliantly portrayed, I think — something which he may later control, but which is just below the surface, likely to erupt in savage verbal attacks (such as that on Ophelia) or manic outbursts of mirth (such as that after the play has 'caught' the conscience of the King).

Now no man in this state can understand himself; nor is he sufficiently in command of himself to control or plan rationally and coolly. He is passion's slave. He is so preoccupied with the abyss of evil, the vision of corruption, that all other concerns strike him as irrelevant. I am not in the least surprised that he does nothing.

To put his problem another way: He has been commanded to revenge his father: to act according to the Old Law: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But justice of this sort has, at this stage, in this state, no hold over him. He is beyond that category. To kill Claudius will not restore his dead father to life, nor release him from purgatory; nor will it restore his mother's innocence, nor close the abyss which yawns, sickening, at his feet. In other words, Hamlet is obsessed with 'sin' not 'crime'. A mere crime — a murder — can be expiated by law, even, perhaps, by the rough justice of revenge. But sin, and the sense of it, is peculiarly personal, and Hamlet cannot cope with it, cannot digest it, cannot live with it - in his family, in Ophelia, in Denmark, in "the corrupted currents of this world" — or in himself.

How can justice of this 'tit-for-tat' kind be taken seriously when the whole world has suddenly become a sterile promontory, an unweeded garden, a prison? And it is his mother's behaviour which turned the world into that — his father's murder is simply additional evidence of the horror of reality. I simply do not agree that the Oedipus complex is necessary to explain his delay. His prime occupation is his mother's guilt, and there is nothing abnormal in that. He will not be fit for action till he gets over it. A man who is teetering on the brink of Hell, is likely to be obsessed with that, and simply not capable of practicalities of politics, intrigue, the precise how and when of an extremely difficult political assassination.

One of the acknowledged psycho-somatic symptoms of certain types of disorder is a feeling of divorce between mind and body. The body is a 'machine' to such people, as it is for Hamlet. The intense spiritual drama results in an utter physical carelessness and lassitude. One is mentally aware of the world, but withdrawn from it. One makes efforts to establish contact, to get back in the swim, but with very limited success — particularly if your erst-while friends are quislings.

I have of late, but wherefore I know not,
lost all my mirth, forgone any custom of exercise, and
indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition, that
this goodly frame the earth, look you,
seems to me a sterile promontory . . .

Such people cannot act until body and soul function together — or, to take an important antithesis from the play itself — until 'blood' and 'judgment' are properly 'commingled' once more.

What we watch in Hamlet, it seems to me, after the play scene, is a restoration of the balance between blood and judgment; the violent hypocritical alternations between lassitude on the one hand, and desperate verbal activity on the other, become less and less violent. He gradually gets back on to an even keel, and he goes to the duel all of a piece, poised, charming, courteous, aware — and **ready**.

To trace this progressive restoration in detail would take too long: but I shall throw out certain hints, which you should test against your own reading of the play.

Stage in recovery

Some of the 'stages in his recovery are:

Firstly, his talk with Horatio — he makes contact, effective contact. with a good man. He trusts him, and together they move against the King, and to establish the ghost's credentials.

Secondly, the success of the ruse gives him great confidence: his hostility to the King becomes open, he no longer hides his contempt for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Thirdly, most important — he has it out, as we say, with his mother. For the first time since his father's death, mother and son meet in private and have a 'heart to heart'. This is, in many ways, the psychological turning point of the play. If we read it with care, I think we will detect the enormous relief he gets out of it. He certainly does speak daggers at her. But in the process he reveals the real cause of his melancholy, which she has long suspected — "the o'er' hasty marriage." That is one aspect of his catharsis here.

But we must notice:

- That he did not arrange the interview — he has obeyed the ghost — not contrived anything against her.
- That his **real** concern is not simply the smirching of her social image, her public honour, but her sin: she is

. . . steeped in corruption,
Honeying and making love over the nasty sty.

She is guilty of bestial lust:

You cannot call it love; for at your age
The heyday in the **blood** is tame, it's humble
And waits upon the **judgement** —

And the Queen responds satisfactorily to his assault upon her conscience; he is successful here too:

O Hamlet, speak no more,
Thou turnst mine eyes into my very soul
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave this tinct.

But by now Hamlet has got into one of his manic verbal syndromes, and rages against her husband, the murderer, the usurper, revealing to the Queen the full horror of her position as his **wife**:

The ghost enters:

Do you come your tardy son to chide
That lapsed in time and passion, lets go by
The important acting of your dread command?

Ghost:

This visitation
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose
But look, amazement in thy mother sits;
O step between her and her flying soul —
Conceit in weakest bodies, strongest works.
Speak to her, Hamlet.

And what does he say to her? He gives her good Christian advice: 'Confess yourself to Heaven'. This is the only machinery known to him to deal with sin as distinct from crime, the only way to get to the root of evil—the 'rank corruption mining all within'. He also advises her to have nothing to do with the 'bloat King'.

This scene ends with Hamlet and his mother having made real contact — the old 'empathy' is back; and the son has established some sort of moral ascendancy over her. In terms of mere plot Hamlet has suffered a reverse — by killing Polonius: in terms of his inner life, he has won a considerable victory. After this we have little savagery directed at women and sex; he has dealt with her, done all he can to redeem this fallen woman; he is, through his Christian faith, coming to terms with this aspect of man's fallen state.

In this scene too, we see that he is capable of precipitate action. In the hope that the voice behind the curtain is the King's, he stabs Polonius.

He is now sent into exile; and on his way he sees the army of Fortinbras. In this famous soliloquy there is no talk of suicide, no world weariness, no 'sterile promontory' talk, but all his energy now is given to attacking not the world, but himself for his inaction; and he is now concerned not with the honour of his mother and the opposite sex in general, but honour as a princely virtue, his own in particular. The last sentence of the soliloquy reads,

O from this time forth
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.

He does not mean this as we usually take it. This line must be read together with:

The native hue of resolution (red-blood)
Is sickled o'er with a pale **cast of thought**, and with:
Yea, this solidity and compound mass
With tristful visage as against the doom,
Is **thought sick** at the **act**.

"My thoughts be bloody" reveals a desire to re-integrate the two divorced portions of his being — body and soul - blood and judgment — so that they will act in unison.

This is, significantly, his last soliloquy. The account he gives of his behaviour on board the ship is of a man acting with decision in a curious way, almost by instinct. This is so unusual in himself, that he calls it "indiscretion".

When we see him again, in the graveyard scene, he is a changed man. He has already written a bold, aggressive letter to the King and made contact with his ally, Horatio.

He now considers the pathos, not the corruption of human life; or rather, the corruption viewed with irony and compassion, not despair and revolt. The note of bitterness has gone. Death puts paid to hypocrisy and vanity.

One can assess the change by imagining the Hamlet of Act 1, sc. i, in the graveyard. Imagine the taut, charged, hysterical verse he would have spoken — as compared with this subtle, easy, conversational prose, It marks a further turning outward: a feeling for the suffering of others, a general compassion for humanity in its folly — from poor Yorick, to Caesar and Alexander; and a detachment from this world and its pretensions.

But the funeral of Ophelia administers a cruel shock. Remember, this is the first he hears of her death. The scene is important for two reasons:

1. 'This is I, Hamlet, the Dane.' He knows who he is; he is at one with himself; and the sentence is a direct challenge to Claudius.
2. He leaps into the grave after Laertes:
I loved Ophelia, forty thousand brothers
Could not (with all their quantity of love)
Make up my sum.

This is a public declaration of a love which he had, in his disillusionment, denied. He now accepts love, which he previously rejected because of its intimate and its inextricable alliance with a greater or less measure of that lust which had corrupted his mother. This acceptance of love is another step in his restoration. Hamlet cannot behave properly among men until he has a mature, rational attitude towards women.

But his new-found poise is gone; he is knocked off his perch by the death of Ophelia, and the assault of Laertes. The Queen partly grasps the nature of this outburst:

This is mere madness.
And thus awhile the fit will work on him:
Anon as patient as the female dove,
When that her golden couplets are disclosed,
His silence will sit drooping.

Hamlet has completely recovered his poise when we see him next. He is quite convinced, now, that "There's a Divinity that shapes our ends, Rough hew them how we will."

The conversation with Horatio and the treatment of Osric suggest a poised personality, even though troubled by "such a kind of gain giving as would perhaps trouble a woman.

"If it be now, 'tis not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all."

The "it", is of course, Death. "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow."

This surely, is the orthodox Christian view; readiness to die, to face one's Maker: the readiness denied his father.

We notice too, that his love of physical exercise has returned, a small interesting point; and he does, in fact, beat Laertes in the duel. But he is "ready" in another sense: ready to be truly, "Heaven's scourge and minister", an instrument of Providence.

It is noticeable that the King is publicly hoisted on his own petard. His deep plot palls and catches him; his guilt is made manifest to the court by Laertes's accusation, and by the Queen's; and his public execution is performed by Hamlet. There is no 'relish of salvation' for Claudius as he dies; the revenge, in terms of the convention, is ripe.

But infinitely more. The rottenness is purged from Denmark; and Fortinbras, a tender and delicate prince, succeeds to the throne.

Hamlet, has, in a sense, taken all their sins upon himself, to his heart; and risen above the consequent revulsion and disillusion to an acceptance of their and his humanity. He is, in some sense, a willing sacrificial victim; and it is fitting that Horatio should say:

Good night, sweet Prince
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.