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## *Hamlet's Heroism*

by BERT G. HORNBACK

OF COURSE HAMLET ISN'T "delaying." Despite our critical heritage, that's utter silliness. To suggest that Shakespeare's great play is about such is to malign—by misreading—his most noble character. And part of Shakespeare's greatness, here as elsewhere, is that he makes character clear to us. "Delaying" is no more Hamlet's "tragic flaw"—whatever that means—than obesity is: but then E. Vale Blake was being satirical when he wrote "The Impediment of Adipose"<sup>1</sup>—and the object of his satire was, surely, our critical heritage.

The reader who says that Hamlet's problem is procrastination must think that Hamlet eventually will—or should—commit revenge. But Hamlet rejects revenge: his play is not a revenger's drama at all. Hamlet isn't delaying, out of laziness or cowardice; he is refusing—on principle—to commit an act which he considers wrong. Our understanding this is essential to our understanding his character and our making sense of Shakespeare's play.

Hamlet is a young man who abhors violence. That's why his murder of poor, stupid Polonius is such a painful thing, and why the cruelly capital trick he plays on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is so disturbing. In some lesser play—in any of the "revenge" plays popular on the Elizabethan stage—we might see the trick that gets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed as examples of a grimly just or morally serious wit; but in this play, Hamlet's claim of something like poetic justice is unacceptable. The callousness with which he sends them to their deaths is an aberration: he acts *out* of character—and, despite their falseness to him, his act is wrong.

In a simpler play, Hamlet's murder of Polonius might have had some melodramatic shock value. But for it to have such, the dramatist would have had to let us see the violence, experience the act. Shakespeare is capable, certainly, of creating such a scene: consider, for example, the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*. But Shakespeare writes the murder of Polonius differently, so that the horror of the deed has as its focus, not the act of murder or Polonius' death, but Hamlet's response to what he has done. What Shakespeare asks us to consider—and try to understand—is the effect of this act on Hamlet.

The young man who has so earnestly, so poignantly refused to obey his dead

1. E. Vale Blake, "The Impediment of Adipose," *Popular Science Monthly* XVII (May 1880), reprinted in *Hamlet: Enter Critic*, ed. Claire Sacks and Edgar Whan (New York, 1960), 8-15.

father's ghost and enact revenge, who has argued with himself so carefully to keep from doing what—on principle—he doesn't want to do, murders Polonius without thinking, impulsively. A voice cries out from behind the arras, and Hamlet strikes. "Is it the King?" he asks. If it had been Claudius, Hamlet would—or could—have excused the act: it would not have been revenge, but something like self-defense. And without violating his own conscience, he would have satisfied his father.

But no: his thoughtless act has not been so lucky. He has murdered poor, stupid Polonius.

For this same lord,  
I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd it so,  
To punish me with this, and this with me.

.....  
I will bestow him, and will answer well  
The death I gave him.

(III, iv, 172-77)

And then: "Thus bad begins," he says, "and worse remains behind" (III, iv, 179). He can't excuse what he has done by blaming Polonius, though he will later try such a tactic to justify his sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern off to death in England.

But Hamlet knows—feels in his mind—that he has done a terrible thing, a "bad" thing, in rashly drawing his sword and stabbing blindly through that drapery. And he fears that the next step will be his succumbing to his father's ghost's demand for intentional, calculated revenge: an even "worse" thing.

When the ghost appears after the murder of Polonius, it says it comes "to whet [Hamlet's] almost blunted purpose" (III, iv, 111). Hamlet knows as much even before the ghost speaks:

Do you come your tardy son to chide,  
That, laps'd in time and passion, lets go by  
Th' important acting of your dread command?

(III, iv, 106-08)

He fears that his father's ghost will make him change his mind: that the ghost, with his "pale . . . glares" and "piteous action," will "convert" Hamlet's principled intentions (III, iv, 125, 128).

At the end of Act I, Hamlet complains bitterly at what is asked of him. "The time is out of joint," he says, recognising the evil that has been done, and that it goes unpunished. But then, understanding what he is expected to do, he cries, "O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (I, v, 189-90). As Kittredge noted, Hamlet's words indicate that "he is too highly civilized to welcome the duty that the savage code of his nation and time imposes."<sup>2</sup>

Hamlet's response to his father's demand for revenge is at first to find excuses

2. George Lyman Kittredge, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (New York, 1936). Kittredge's note for *Hamlet* (I, v, 189-90) reads: "Hamlet is resolved to avenge his father, but he is too highly civilized to welcome the duty that the savage code of his nation and time imposes."

not to follow that "savage code." To understand what is called his "delaying"—and to credit it properly for what it is, a thoughtful and principled young man's earnest defense of his own conscience—we need only compare it to Laertes' later response to Claudius. Claudius goads him—Hamlet has murdered Laertes' father—and Laertes is immediately eager for revenge.

Laertes, however, is a fool. At the beginning of the play he is headed off to Paris to live; Hamlet wants to go back to Wittenberg—to study. And whereas Hamlet works to understand things, Laertes—according to Claudius—"Feeds on his wonder, keeps himself in clouds" (IV, v, 87). Laertes is a typical revenger: when he returns to Elsinore he is wound up and ready for violence. Whereas Hamlet, sworn to revenge, questions the moral validity of his oath, Laertes rejects "conscience," and in order to "be reveng'd" will "dare damnation" (IV, v, 131-33).

Laertes is a fool, a dangerous young man available in his foolishness to be used. Hamlet is a thoughtful young man whose determination to protect his own honor—to maintain his morality—becomes, for Shakespeare, the heroic *social* triumph of the play.

Hamlet is Shakespeare's absolute hero. He is heroic even in the Greek sense: he is larger than life. Though "Something [was] rotten in the state of Denmark" (I, iv, 90) at the beginning of the play, all that rottenness is dead at the end—and Hamlet's story remains. By his *act* of refusing to become the revenger he saves the idea of society, raises us above that "savage code."

And his refusing to become a revenger is indeed an act: an act of principle. In a play so much about thoughtfulness, an act of consciousness and conscience is most certainly an act. To live a life of principle is not to be inactive. Hamlet's life becomes meaning: it becomes the tragic "story" which *he* insists be told.

Everybody in Denmark knows when Hamlet was born. We don't find out, as readers or viewers, until late in the play, when the clown casually reminds Hamlet that everyone knows that date: "the day that our last king Hamlet overcame Fortinbras" was the "very day that young Hamlet was born" (V, i, 132-36). But why should either Dane or Shakespeare's audience need to know this? What does the date of Hamlet's birth have to do with this tragic story? And why should Shakespeare bother to tell us that Hamlet is thirty years old?

Let me take the long way around in trying to answer these questions.

In Act Two, the players arrive in the midst of Hamlet's playing, first with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and then with Polonius. From his ironic teasing of Polonius, Hamlet turns to serious plotting. The scene is a long one—nearly six hundred lines. It begins with Claudius importuning Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet, and Polonius volunteering to spy. It concludes with Hamlet—"rogue and peasant slave" (II, ii, 534)—planning to spy on Claudius.

Claudius' plot has as its motive self-defense: he is afraid of Hamlet, and looking for an excuse to remove him from Elsinore in one way or another. Polonius' plot is simpler: he thinks Hamlet is mad, and would prove it. Hamlet's plot proves both his sanity and his morality: he wants to prove—to himself—Claudius' guilt. Through his use of the players, he will "catch the conscience of

the King" (II, ii, 591).

In this long soliloquy which takes fifty-eight lines—"To be or not to be" and "How all occasions" are both thirty-four, "O that this too too solid flesh" thirty-one, "'Tis now the very witching time" but twelve—Hamlet considers his failure to enact the revenge required of him by his father, but rejects the self-accusation of cowardice: "Fie upon 't. About, my brains!" (II, ii, 574). And then, using his brains to act, he creates the plot to "observe" Claudius, and "test him to the quick" (II, ii, 582-83).

When the players expose Claudius and he runs, "frighted" —accused, and known—Hamlet has the evidence he needed, or claimed to need, of Claudius' guilt, and is free in conscience to fulfill his oath: "Now could I drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on" (III, ii, 372-74). But he knows what such revenge would mean, or be: the reference for his immediately preceding remark that "hell itself breathes out / Contagion to this world" (III, ii, 371-72) is the act of revenge which now—according to the "savage code"—is justified.

But Hamlet doesn't enact revenge—and that is what is most startling and wonderful about this play. Midway through the third act Hamlet knows, most certainly, that Claudius murdered his father. And he knows that Claudius knows he knows it. But Hamlet makes no effort to kill his father's murderer, uses his "brains" to conceive no plan for revenge: threatens Claudius' life in no way.

Why?

Hamlet is not Laertes—nor is Laertes Shakespeare's hero. Stupid, mad impulsiveness is not heroic: it is stupid, and mad. Shakespeare's hero is thoughtful—he is, we remember, a student—and because of and through his thoughtfulness he is heroic.

Once Hamlet has proved, to himself, that Claudius is his father's murderer, he should be ready to fulfill his oath. But he doesn't even try. True, in the next scene but one he kills Polonius; the thrust of his sword is impulsive, however, not intentional. That it could have meant revenge—had Polonius been the King—is but an aspirant afterthought.

Hamlet berates himself for the "craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely," and calls such scrupulosity "one part wisdom / And . . . three parts coward" (IV, iv, 40-43). But the occasion which would "spur [his] dull revenge" (IV, iv, 33) is young Fortinbras' arrival, on his way to attack Poland—and Hamlet is disgustingly critical of Fortinbras' war. Asking himself to think—for God "gave us not . . . godlike reason / To fust in us unus'd" (IV, iv, 37-39)—he sees "examples" for such violence as he is sworn to, but finds them "gross as earth" (IV, iv, 46), not heroic. The context for his ironic cry, "O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (IV, iv, 65-66) is his caustic and belittling representation of war's senseless carnage: Fortinbras' adventure means but "The imminent death of twenty thousand men / That for a fantasy and trick of fame / Go to their graves" (IV, iv, 60-62).

When Hamlet has explained Claudius' villainy to Horatio, he asks, rhetorically, "is 't not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arm?" He must be

“damn’d,” he says, if he allows Claudius to commit “further evil” (V, ii, 67-70).

Immediately after this, Osric arrives. For several moments—for ninety-five lines—Hamlet plays with this “waterfly.” When Osric is finally allowed to say what he has come to say—that Claudius invites Hamlet to “play” (V, ii, 185) with Laertes—Hamlet accepts: he will fence with Laertes, for the amusement of the king.

Why? Why should Hamlet play, to please Claudius? Hamlet understands full well that Claudius isn’t interested in play: after all, Claudius knows that Hamlet knows his guilt, and Hamlet has but now avoided one plot on Claudius’ part to kill him. Hamlet is fully aware that the game is but another such plot—yet all he says is that “the readiness is all” (V, ii, 208). He does not try to defend himself, nor does he plot to do any harm to either Laertes or Claudius. He makes no move “to quit” Claudius, or to prohibit by force his enacting “further evil.” Rather, it seems that he *submits* to “further evil,” knowingly, in acceding to Claudius’ request that he “play” with Laertes.

And yet Hamlet does, in a sense, avenge his father’s death before he, too, dies. When Laertes, dying, explains how the one rapier’s point has been “envenom’d” as part of Claudius’ plot, Hamlet turns upon the king. He merely says, “Then, venom, to thy work” (V, ii, 308). It is not passion that Hamlet speaks, but logic. And he doesn’t attack Claudius, or run him through as he did poor Polonius. Shakespeare’s stage direction says that Hamlet “Hurts the King”—no more. A prick is all that’s called for, a touch—as though this were but a game, after all, mere “play” at fencing. Claudius cowers; Hamlet extends the foil, and poisons Claudius with his own poison, kills him with his own villainy. To double the effect, Hamlet also requires Claudius to drink his own poison: “Drink off this potion!” (V, ii, 312).

Shakespeare has made Claudius his own punishment, and thereby lets Hamlet save his own principled, moral honor and at the same time bring to justice his father’s murderer. But that’s not the same thing as revenge—and *Hamlet* is not a revenger’s story. Shakespeare could easily have written a revenge play, but he didn’t. Unless we recognise this, we lose perhaps his most beautiful and important work.

Hamlet’s story needs to be told—as Hamlet himself insists. He won’t let Horatio commit suicide, to join his friend in death. “Thou liv’st,” he insists; “report me and my cause aright” (V, ii, 325). Again: “in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story” (V, ii, 333-34).

Hamlet dies, Fortinbras enters, and Horatio outlines the story he will tell:

you shall hear  
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts;  
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters;  
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc’d cause.  
(V, ii, 366-69)

But that’s not the story of this play: it is neither the story Hamlet wants told nor the story Shakespeare has given us. Horatio—alas—has missed the point. The story he will tell is one of meaningless violence, and would fit much better one

of the many bloody revenge tragedies written by Shakespeare's contemporaries.

Hamlet needs to have *his* story told. Without it, since all the actors from his father's time are now dead, history will collapse upon itself. Unless Hamlet's story is told—unless a story is told that is worth the telling, and worth our remembering—the Hamlet part of Danish history will disappear. And the thirty years from the old King's triumph over the elder Fortinbras on the day of Hamlet's birth to the entrance of the younger Fortinbras, reclaiming Denmark on the day of Hamlet's death: that thirty years will disappear from history.

But Hamlet insists—and so does his creator—that something important has happened between Fortinbras and Fortinbras. That something is Hamlet's thoughtfulness, his moral, civilized, principled response to violence. By refusing to enact simple revenge, Hamlet has *changed* history—if only we will listen, and understand.

Hamlet's story is one of civilized *human* triumph over evil. Maybe that is why the play is so hard for us to read, and why we have spent so much time and energy (particularly in this modern age) trying to simplify it. Meaning is hard to pay attention to when we don't want to understand. The thoughtful, principled individual is hardly the hero in our time—and therefore we resist Shakespeare. His *Hamlet* is too difficult for us; in our silliness, we prefer the simple thrills of Horatio's version.

The lesson of Shakespeare's play is clear, if we will see it. The Hamlet who complained at the beginning of the play about the evil in Denmark which he was required "to set . . . right"—who saw murder as "bad" and revenge as "worse"—has managed to make evil judge itself, and punish itself. The "savage code" that Kittredge remarked on is superseded, in the end, by the greater, nobler example of Hamlet's principled moral courage. Or, rather, it could be—if we would only pay attention, and agree.

In Aeschylus' *Oresteia* it takes the intervention of the god, Athena, to stop the tumbling dominoes of revenge in the House of Atreus. In Christian mythology the god comes himself to teach against revenge: his text (which we ignore) is "turn the other cheek."<sup>3</sup> Instead of responding to violence with violence—instead of letting corruption corrupt its victim—the Christian god accepts injustice in order to preserve his own integrity, and by that example to teach us ours.

Hamlet is not a god; he is a student. He is one of humanity's greatest students. What he learns—on his own, without divine intervention—in his thirty years makes that short time a significant part of human history.

When we think of students, we usually make them somewhat younger than thirty years old: twenty, perhaps, or twenty-one. The same was true in Shakespeare's day. Most of us, however, haven't learned everything by the time we reach twenty or twenty-one. In making Hamlet thirty—a fulcrum time for our age as well as for an earlier age, perhaps—Shakespeare makes this play not just

3. Matthew 5:39.

a young man's play but a sort of everyman's play.

Hamlet is what we all could be, if we would think, and live, according to our best thoughts. Hamlet's heroism is in his careful thoughtfulness, in his valiant determination to live by principle rather than by passion.

The one poet whose work best compares with Shakespeare's is Homer. But Homer never wrote a *Hamlet*. In the *Iliad*, Achilles—a young man, maybe twenty years old—learns the folly of violence, the futility of revenge, but he can't keep his learning. At the end of the poem, after the truce which he declares for Hektor's funeral, he will go back to fighting. The last line of the *Iliad* is pathetic: "Thus was the funeral of Hektor, the breaker of horses."<sup>4</sup> Homer stops there—because, I suspect, the next line was too painful to think of: "And then they began to fight again."

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus—forty, perhaps?—comes home, having lost a whole generation of Ithakans through his adventuring. Then, avenging himself, he slaughters all their younger brothers in clearing his palace of Penelope's suitors. In the final scene of the poem he tries to kill their doddering fathers, the old men who have come protesting against him. He chases them, despite Athena's warning to stop. At last Zeus casts a thunderbolt at him to make him quit his violence.<sup>5</sup> Odysseus, reputed to be the wise man, hasn't learned a thing.

But Hamlet learns, and remains true to his learning. Shakespeare's vision is different from Homer's. Homer's seemingly cynical irony pushes *us* to learn what his heroes can't keep or comprehend. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's hero teaches us by his example. Hamlet lives—and dies—by his wisdom. "To thine own self be true" (I, iii, 78) was silly Polonius' advice to his son: good advice, to be sure, if the self is worth being true to! Hamlet's self is thus worthy: his self is thoughtful, principled, and wise. And he remains nobly, heroically true to it.

The great thing about *Hamlet* is that it won't submit to our smaller morality, our simple-minded reading, our easy-headed acceptance of the "savage code" of revenge. *Hamlet* stands—between Fortinbras and Fortinbras, two soldiers—waiting for us to understand it and its thoughtful hero's greatness.

Hamlet isn't "delaying"—and that isn't at all what his play is about. But we have been delaying for years and years. In doing so we have been as false to Hamlet as Horatio was.

4. *Iliad*, Book 24.

5. *Odyssey*, Book 24.