The instability of "Hamlet"
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When, at the end of King Lear, Lear utters over the dead body of Cordelia the words, ‘Pray you, undo this button’, there are two mutually exclusive dramatic realisations of the line. Lear may be asking, in a spirit of humility, for one of the onlookers to undo a button on his jacket to allow him to breathe more easily, or he may, under the delusion that Cordelia is still alive, be asking for a button on her bodice to be loosened. One or the other of these actions must be staged, as Lear goes on to say ‘Thank you, sir’, and one or the other would have been staged in the original production of the play; but the written text as we have it enforces neither realisation.

Such a moment, where the textual ambiguity demands an arbitrary realisation, is rare in King Lear, as it is throughout most of Shakespeare’s work, but in Hamlet what is incidental in King Lear becomes dominant and central. In that play, there are several scenes with problems similar to that of Lear’s ‘Pray you, undo this button’, and scenes which are, unlike the moment at the end of King Lear, crucial to the interpretation of the play.1

In Act II, scene 1, when Hamlet confronts Ophelia with her prayer book, with Claudius and Polonius hidden behind a curtain, there is the question of whether or not Hamlet knows they overhear his dialogue with Ophelia. This knowledge or lack of it on Hamlet’s part is crucial to how we interpret the action. Hamlet’s words have one kind of meaning if they are addressed to Ophelia alone, quite another if Hamlet is aware that they are being overheard by Polonius and Claudius. If Hamlet is aware that two spies are present, then it makes Ophelia’s betrayal of him more extreme. She has not simply agreed to desert Hamlet, a passive betrayal, but is actively colluding with his enemies.

When Hamlet delivers his ‘Now might I do it pat’ soliloquy to the back of the apparently praying Claudius in Act III, scene 3, is he the lily-livered, procrastinating, Renaissance intellectual who is inventing yet more specious reasons to delay the act of revenge, or is he now the bloody-minded revenger who means exactly what he says, and having newly confirmed that Claudius has murdered his father, intends not only to kill his uncle but to send his soul plummeting to hell?

In both these cases, the implications of the speeches and actions in the scenes are crucial, but we cannot begin to explore these implications before we arbitrarily impose on the text one or the other of two mutually exclusive dramatic renderings. If the play as a whole defined itself, we could interpret such scenes in terms of the larger
dramatic context. The problem is that there are just so many scenes like these, so many dramatic moments which aren’t resolvable from the words of the text.

There is Act III, scene 2, where the murder of a king by his near relation is acted out in a dumb show, before being partially re-enacted with the dialogue spoken. Claudius reacts part-way through the repeat of the actions. What, then, is he doing while the dumb show is being performed? Looking the other way for the whole time the mime takes place? Looking on in such dumbstruck and incredulous horror that he is only finally able to respond after the events begin to be repeated? Watching the first version with an icy self-control which only breaks down when he realises that he will have to sit through it all again? All these dramatic realisations of the scene are possible and credible, but not one of them is unequivocally confirmed by the text of the play.

In Act III, scene 4, when Hamlet confronts Gertrude in her bedroom, and the ghost of Old Hamlet appears once more, why doesn’t Gertrude see the Ghost? Is the Ghost real at this point in the play? Is Gertrude’s inability to see it an index of her moral blindness? If the Ghost is indeed real, why is it subverting its own purposes, since its appearance only serves to allow Gertrude to imagine that Hamlet is mad? The interpretative difficulties here are less specific than in the previous scenes I’ve alluded to, but still project the sense that there are, within the play of Hamlet as a whole, a multiple series of mutually exclusive dramatic renditions which can be extracted from it.

These, then, are a selection of the major dramatic cruxes of this text. All of them are integral to our interpretation of the play, and none of them can be resolved from the text of the play as it stands. In Hamlet, we do not read the play, but in the largest sense, we create it, and it is this that explains the nature and variety of the critical and interpretative disputes over Hamlet. These are not differing interpretations of one play, but interpretations of different plays. It’s rather like two people arguing over the meaning of a play called, let’s say, The Killing, when one has in mind Macbeth and the other is thinking of Othello. As a result, it’s hardly surprising that there isn’t much agreement.

Having stressed all the unresolvable ambiguities of the play, it is worthwhile turning to some things about which we can be certain, even though there has on occasion been critical disagreement over them. Two of these are the nature of the Ghost, and the nature of the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude. To take the question of the marriage of Hamlet’s mother and his uncle first, who is right in their view of this? Hamlet, who rejects it as obscene and evil, or the mass of the court who, apparently, find it quite acceptable? Here, quite simply, we have to say that Hamlet is correct in his estimation of the nature of the marriage. In both the civil law of England, and that of most other Christian countries, and in the religious or canon law of both the Catholic and the Protestant churches, the marriage of a brother to his deceased brother’s wife was as much an act of incest as if a brother and sister who shared the same mother and father had married. Gertrude, in marrying Claudius, has committed an act of incest, an act more extreme in that, involving as it does the Christian sacrament of marriage, it also perverts that sacrament. Add to this that the incestuous and invalid marriage
takes place within a month of the death of her previous husband, that the partner with whom she chooses to commit incest is also the murderer, as we discover, of her previous husband, and that he is the usurper of her previous husband’s throne. Taking all this into account, Hamlet’s reaction to his mother’s ‘marriage’, and his subsequent behaviour towards her in attempting to convince her of the reality of her conduct, is positively mild.2

When we come to the Ghost, we are initially presented with a range of possibilities. Is it a fantasy of an individual mind, a mass hallucination, a demon, an angel, or in actuality the Ghost of old Hamlet—and in this last case, is it a Protestant or a Catholic ghost? The play initially raises the possibility that it is simply an individual fantasy, when in Act I, scene 1, line 23, Marcellus says to his fellow sentry Barnardo, in the presence of Horatio, ‘Horatio says ‘tis but our fantasy.’ This particular possibility is excluded when the doubting Horatio, in the company of Barnardo and Marcellus, himself sees the Ghost. By the end of the scene, Horatio and the others seem prepared to accept the figure they have seen as a ‘spirit’, but exactly what kind of spirit, good or evil, angel, demon, or human ghost, is left open. Perhaps at this point, Horatio’s definition of it as ‘this present object’ (I.1.157), in its neutrality and ambiguity, is the best resolution of the nature of the image which can be reached thus early in the play.

When Hamlet himself encounters the Ghost in Act I, scene 4, his first speech to it begins by deploying a polarity—is it a good or evil spirit?—and continues with his decision to speak to it as if it were his father, addressing it thus as a provisional assumption, to be confirmed or denied as later events will indicate:

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. I’ll call thee Hamlet,
King, father, royal Dane.

(I.4.39–45)

Under the immediate impact of the appearance of the spirit, Hamlet is convinced of its authenticity as the ghost of his father—‘Touching this vision here,/ It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you’ (I.5.137–8)—but later, in cooler blood, he changes his ground and resolves to test the validity of what the spirit has said by putting on The Mousetrap before Claudius. If it turns out that the spirit has spoken the truth with regard to the murder committed by Claudius, then Hamlet will finally accept it as the ghost of his father. But until the Ghost has been tested, Hamlet cannot simply accept it at face value.

Of course the play of The Mousetrap confirms what the Ghost has said, and of course the figure which first appeared in the very first scene of the play is the ghost of Hamlet’s father, and has been all along. The point I would make from the sheer weight of references and the variety of possibilities raised is that our certainty as to its nature only gradually comes about in the course of the play.
Accepting then that the Ghost is the spirit of Hamlet's father returned from the grave, has it returned from a Protestant afterlife or a Catholic afterlife? The question is crucial to what happens in the play and how we respond to this. Again, there's a simple answer to the question: the Ghost has returned from a Catholic afterlife, since it describes itself as suffering the pains of purgatory, being purged of sins committed in its life on earth. The very existence of purgatory defines the afterlife as Catholic, since one of the crucial doctrinal divisions between Catholic and Protestant theology was over this very point. For Protestants, there was only heaven and hell, with no intermediate state; for Catholics, there was the intermediate state of purgatory. Why is this so important, why does Shakespeare go to such pains to establish so prominently the fact that the Ghost emerges from a Catholic afterlife? Coming as it does from purgatory, being in a state of sin, but not absolute damnation, the Ghost's words have the same authority that they would have if they were uttered by the living father of Hamlet. What this means is that even having solved the problem of what the Ghost is, Hamlet is still left with the further problem of what to do about what the Ghost says: should he do what it advises, or not? What we can finally be sure of in the presentation of the Ghost is that it is the ghost of Hamlet's father, returned for a space from a Catholic purgatory, but equally, that Hamlet must prove this for himself before he even begins to act. Given the play's stress on the dubiety of the nature of the Ghost when it is first encountered, it would be quite wrong for Hamlet merely to accept the spirit's estimate of itself without testing this estimate.3

Considering these things, I would like to present a simpler, more straightforward play than many which are offered, and furthermore a play which isn't so much concerned with psychological as with moral insights and explorations. My starting point is that Hamlet is, before anything else, a revenge tragedy, perhaps the only Renaissance revenge drama not simply to confront, but to a degree resolve, the paradox which lies at the heart of the impulse to revenge.

The topic of revenge in Renaissance drama was productive, among other reasons, because it presented a complex moral dilemma. A crime had been committed, and in some way had to be redressed, but could not be redressed without further crimes being committed, usually because there was no appeal possible to due legal process. The revenger can neither ignore the crime, since this would leave the crime unpunished, nor can he do anything proper about it, since any course of action will involve the commission of further crimes. The usual dramatic solution to the problem was to have the revenger respond actively to the crime, kill the criminal (and perhaps others), and be himself killed in the course of the play. Less usually (Cleremont in The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois is a rare example), the revenger does nothing but wait for providence to take its course.4

We have shadows of these two revenge scenarios in Hamlet itself, in the figures of Laertes and Fortinbras, who are each, like Hamlet, confronted by the problem of what to do about a dead father. Laertes acts out, in miniature, the scenario of a typical revenge drama, moving bloody-handedly and single-mindedly towards the moment when he can bring about Hamlet's death, and dying himself in the process. Fortinbras, in contrast, does nothing himself directly to revenge his father's death,
simply waits on providence and passes the time killing off a few thousand Polacks: and of course survives the dénouement of the play to inherit the kingdom of Denmark over the dead bodies of Claudius, Hamlet, and Laertes, having managed to keep his hands notably clear of blood. The play demands that we see Hamlet himself in terms of these two figures, the characters who act out alternative possibilities of revenge. Hamlet himself draws attention to the parallels and contrasts between his situation and theirs, in IV.4 in regard to Fortinbras, and in V.2.75–8 in regard to Laertes.

What we’re shown in these two alternative perspectives on Hamlet’s own situation is that neither of them provides an adequate model for Hamlet. Laertes, the impulsive revenger, is too crude, too glib in his response to his situation, and is shown as finally manipulated by Claudius rather than performing even his own distorted will. Similarly, Fortinbras is able to leave it all to providence since his father hasn’t, when all’s said and done, been murdered, but was killed in fair fight by Hamlet’s father who is, anyway, himself dead.

What must Hamlet do? The Ghost has a simple, straightforward view of what should be done:

If thou did’st ever thy dear father love
...  
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

(I,5,23,25)

A simple request, a simple piece of advice: Kill Claudius, and do it as soon as possible. From one perspective, this is what Hamlet promptly goes off and does. Does Hamlet delay? There are various time-schemes which can be predicated for the first three Acts of the play, but if we concentrate simply on the figure of Hamlet—and it is Hamlet, after all, who makes the greatest impact on an audience actually watching the play acted—then the events appear to take place in an extremely short space of time.

The Ghost appears to Horatio, who tells Hamlet about it. On the evening of that day, Hamlet confronts his father’s ghost, learns that not only, as he knows, is his mother living in an incestuous union with his uncle, but that that same uncle, unknown to everyone, had actually murdered his father. At this stage, there are still doubts as to the Ghost’s status. Only when the players arrive can Hamlet arrange to test the validity of the Ghost’s information by staging The Mousetrap. Having had the Ghost’s information confirmed by the performance, Hamlet leaves to have a chat with his mother in her bedroom, passes Claudius at prayer and determines not to kill him then, and while talking to his mother, hears a sound behind the arras, assumes this is Claudius eavesdropping, and kills, as it turns out, Polonius. Immediately after this, he’s hustled off to England.

From this point of view, Hamlet acts out the complete pattern of a revenge tragedy. He discovers the existence of a crime which he is called on to do something about, confirms that this crime has indeed been committed, passes over the first opportunity to kill Claudius at prayer since this would be inadequate to his purposes, and promptly does kill him at the next available opportunity—except, of course, that he then kills the wrong man. Hamlet, up to the end of Act III, scene 4, enacts an entire
revenge drama, but one with a curious climax, the wrong corpse. The first dramatic solution to the problem of revenge has been demonstrated to be inadequate, an inadequacy dramatically focused when the body which falls from behind the arras at Hamlet's feet is not the body of Claudius but the body of Polonius.

Between this point and Hamlet's return from England, Shakespeare deliberately shifts the focus to the nature of the action. Hamlet is absent from the play from Act IV, scene 5 until part of the way through Act V, scene 1, and when we see him again, he is radically changed. In the scene with the grave-diggers after his return from England, he is able, for the first time that we have seen, to deal with the nature of death and the afterlife without a sharp sense of his own possible damnation. Once Hamlet sets off for England, and, in a curious sense, it is quite another Hamlet who returns. Shakespeare makes this possible, even plausible, by his use of the image of the sea voyage, an image with powerful associations for the human imagination. Psychologically, the sea voyage takes Hamlet outside the claustrophobic atmosphere of the Danish court, and allows him to gain a fresh perspective on events. Regardless of the literal length of time that Hamlet has been away on the voyage and how long it takes him to return, dramatically he has been off-stage for some considerable time, throughout the period of Ophelia's madness and Laertes' fire-breathing return to court. Taken together, the symbolic, psychological, and dramatic aspects of the sea voyage make plausible the marked change which we find in Hamlet.

The focus of the changed perspective, a change in both Hamlet himself and the way in which he views the reality around him, can be found in one particular speech which he addresses to Horatio in the last scene of the play, a speech in which Hamlet summarises how he now sees his position and what he is called on to do about it:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath killed my King and whored my mother,
Popped in between th'election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

(V.2.63–70)

It is now his king, not his father, who has been killed—the activity which he is now contemplating is no longer a private action but a public duty; justice, not revenge. Claudius has 'Whored my mother', a simple, unadorned, even understated, statement of the facts. Hamlet also now for the first time chooses to stress his own legitimate right to the throne, a right which had been his all along, but which Shakespeare earlier in the play had been careful to keep in the background. Claudius has tried to murder Hamlet, and a response, therefore, will be in some degree simple self-defence. Finally, there is the question of damnation. Earlier, Hamlet had been puzzled as to how to act without damning himself by whatever action he took to avenge his father's murder. Now, in contrast, he sees damnation as the consequence of a failure to act:
And is't not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

This is the perspective through which we pass to the final scene: a Hamlet of authority, competence, power, who dominates events by trusting to a providence to provide him with an opportunity of action.

In the latter part of the play, after Hamlet's return from England, the play has shifted its balance. Shakespeare's initial exploration of the revenge motif had concluded with the killing of Polonius, a dramatic icon illustrating the misdirection of the typical revenger, a misdirection which is picked up later in the play in the figure of Laertes. Shakespeare ‘solves’ Hamlet's problem over whether or not to revenge his father by changing the situation: what Hamlet is called on to do now is not to revenge his father but, as the legitimate ruler of Denmark, to bring to justice the murderer of the previous king. The Ghost had asked for a simple thing. ‘Revenge me’, he had said, kill Claudius. But in the terms that Shakespeare finally deploys in the play, the killing of Claudius is at once wrong and insufficient. It is wrong, because as long as Hamlet sees this action as a son’s private revenge for a murdered father, he himself will be performing an act, if not as evil as Claudius’ initial murder, yet evil and damnable nevertheless. It is also insufficient, since the killing of Claudius alone would not resolve the corruption in the state of Denmark. The canker of Claudius’ evil has already spread too far to be removed by the simple excision of Claudius himself.

Who dies in the play? Claudius, who obviously deserves to do so, fratricide, regicide, and incestuous usurper; Polonius, who spies on the rightful ruler on behalf of the usurper; Gertrude, who has incestuously married the murderer of her husband; Laertes, the bloody-handed revenger who would happily cut Hamlet’s throat in church; Rosencrantz and Guildernstern, who are Hamlet’s gaolers on his voyage to England, ‘Why man, they made love to their employment’, who carry, whether knowingly or not, Hamlet’s death warrant in their pocket. All these figures are condemned for three reasons. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, they are culpable of extreme crimes: they commit themselves to Claudius; finally, they each and every one, in their various ways, betray Hamlet, the figure who is not simply an individual but the rightful ruler of their state.

Ophelia is the only figure whose death Hamlet regrets, and the one for whose death he is least directly responsible. And Ophelia too, under whatever pressures and with whatever justifications, fulfils all of the criteria I’ve outlined, except perhaps the first. In colluding with Claudius and Polonius to spy on Hamlet, she does not simply reject him at a time when his isolation is greatest, but actively sides with his enemies. All these deaths are not just a side-effect of Hamlet’s delay. They are, in themselves, the necessary price which must be paid to purge Denmark.

In these terms, Hamlet himself pays the price for the killing of Polonius. Polonius deserves to die, in a sense must die for the logic of the purgation of Denmark to be carried out, but the manner in which Hamlet kills him makes his death an act of
murder, not of justice. This murder of Polonius is an act which must finally be paid for, but it is paid for by Hamlet's death, not his damnation.

The final speech of the play is delivered by Fortinbras:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage.
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royal.

(V.2.389–92)

Fortinbras is wrong. It is not that Hamlet, had he lived, would have proved most royal, but that in the final Act of the play, Hamlet has assumed his royalty, has taken up his proper role as king of Denmark. It is only for a short time, but it is long enough for him to re-establish the harmony of the kingdom. To renew the health of the kingdom, Hamlet pays the price of authentic royalty—he sacrifices his life for his people.

1 Every play is a dramatic realisation of a verbal text, and all Renaissance plays are obviously open to a range of such dramatic realisations. My point is that Hamlet is unusually open to mutually contradictory dramatic realisations. It is worth remembering, however, that as Shakespeare was part of the company when Hamlet was originally staged, he would have been there to resolve such ambiguities in the course of the original production.

2 The issue is most clearly put in Ronald Mushat Frye, The Renaissance Hamlet (Princeton, New Jersey, 1984), pp. 76ff. The most notable recent occurrence of such a remarriage was that of Henry VIII to his deceased brother Arthur's 'widow', Catherine of Aragon. This remarriage could only have taken place under the argument that Arthur had never consummated the marriage, and that it was therefore null and void. Since Hamlet's existence all too obviously shows that Old Hamlet's marriage to Gertrude was consummated, the parallel, insofar as the audience were aware of it, would go to confirm Hamlet's view of the situation.

3 The status of the Ghost is perhaps not as clear-cut as I have suggested. However, the full account of Robert H. West, Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery (Lexington, 1968), pp. 56–68, in stressing the final ambiguity of the figure, like my own account places the weight of judgment squarely on Hamlet.

4 Most accounts of the morality of revenge in the Renaissance stress that it was seen as morally unjustifiable. This, however, leaves open what was to be done about the unpublished crime. My own account of the play will go on to suggest that Shakespeare shifts the focus from the idea of private (and unjustifiable) revenge, to Hamlet's final activity as an act of justice performed by the legitimate ruler of Denmark.

5 Hamlet for the first time in the play takes up his status as legitimate ruler of Denmark when, in his intrusion into Ophelia's funeral in V.1.250–1, he announces himself as such: 'This is I, Hamlet the Dane.'