HAMLET

The Prince Who Desired Not to Be King

Hamlet by William Morris Hunt circa 1864

An Essay by SMSmith

Poor, prophetic Hamlet! Moments before his death he cries out to his one loyal friend,

> "O God, Horatio, what a wounded name (Things standing thus unknown) shall live behind me!"[1]

In recent decades, this wounded name has been bleeding afresh—running the gamut from stage and screen interpretation to scholarly and sometimes comedic analysis. But is Hamlet really such a mystery? Or is the greater mystery, our failure to recognize the heart of his unbearable dilemma?

We first encounter Hamlet besieged by traumatic change. The familiar ground of normalcy and expectation has suddenly quaked and Hamlet has been cast, against his will, into an altered reality. Like similar souls, Hamlet has but three choices—1) to obsess and mourn over all that once was; 2) to end the pain of existence in some act of physical or mental oblivion; or 3) to accept transformation and enlightenment.

As the play unfolds, we witness his evolutionary progression as he wends his perilous journey through and beyond the black gravity-holes of the first two stages.

In his first stage response—obsessing and mourning his shattered world—he is not processing mere transitory shock or making mountainous sorrows out of common, every-life molehills. Rather, the integrity—the value-laden foundation—of his world has collapsed. The incestuous, "o'erhastey, marriage" of his mother to a despised, conniving uncle, following hard upon the untimely, shocking death of his kingly father has left him feeling utterly adrift.[2] The soundness of virtue, loyalty, honesty, integrity, truth, order, and beauty has proved ephemeral. No longer is Elsinore the Eden of former days. It, and the whole of Denmark, have become

> … an unweeded garden
> That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely. That it should come to this! (I.ii.135-37)

Perhaps worse even than rank, seed-dispersing weeds is the perceived neglect of the gardener. Where is the keeper, the defender, the arbiter of the order and integrity that once sustained his world?

Cover Art: Portrait of Hamlet, oil on canvas by Boston artist William Morris Hunt, executed about 1864. The painting descended in the Hunt family until being donated to the Museum of Fine arts, Boston, Massachusetts. This image is in the Public Domain because its copyright has expired. Wikimedia Commons. {{PD-1923}} – published before 1923 and public domain in the US.

As with every idealist, devastating, close encounters with a fallen world spell massive disillusionment, and Hamlet o'erflows with confusion and despair—like a Renaissance Job. In such inexpressible loss, his inky cloak shadows the whole world. Specifics flood into generalities. Sensitivities mount to a fevered pitch. Rage becomes tinder dry, sparked by a word, a look, the merest hint of another confirming corruption. Everything begins to reveal itself as appearance without substance: seeming-lawful, seeming-loyal, seeming-friendship, seeming-virtue, seeming-honest, seeming-love, seeming-grief. In this first, obsessing stage, second-stage oblivion seems to promise his only relief. And worse is yet to come.

Worse—because in a ghostly encounter in the midnight mists, Hamlet will learn that this shattering of his world did not begin with an unfortunate occurrence of natural consequence. Rather, the shattering commenced in the "unnatural" act of a two-legged serpent entering the royal garden with ambition to kill a sleeping king. And then in coverage of its poisonous crime, this walking serpent blamed its legless kin,

> … So the whole ear of Denmark
> Is by a forged process of my death
> Rankly abus'd. (I.v.36-8)

The cunning villain, the ambition- and self-obsessed Claudius—brother to the dead king, hasty husband to the dead king's wife—now wears the usurped crown.[3]

With such shattering news of utmost betrayal and with a terrible charge to avenge the murder, the already disillusioned prince is brought to an excruciating, unbearable, second crisis—unbearable because he, who is lawful heir to the crown of Denmark, has no desire—no ambition whatsoever—to assume that crown.

Thus are Hamlet and Claudius "**of mighty opposites**" (V.ii.61). And therein lies the sum and substance of Hamlet's delay and the agonizing irony that propels him to "sometimes walk four hours together in the lobby" (II.ii.160). If Hamlet metes out justice (or vengeance) to this usurping king "elected" through contrivance and cunning, he, Hamlet, will become the king. He cannot do justice to his dead father without bringing upon himself the very thing he does not want—the crown of Denmark. He cries out in agony,

> The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
> That ever I was born to set it right!
> (I.v.189-90; comp. V.ii.65-6)

Stretched between polarities—to be king or not to be king—he weighs and counter-

weighs seeking the reasoned solution. He adds pros and cons in fits and starts, fashions excuses to justify delay, and laments,

> "How all occasions do inform against me
> And spur my dull revenge!"
> (IV.iv.32-3)

A revenge well within Hamlet's power to orchestrate as evidenced by Claudius (IV.iii.4-9; IV.vii.16-24) and the ease of Laertes uprising (IV.v100-6); but a revenge dulled by its inevitable consequence.

Thus, Denmark has become as a prison.

> HAMLET: … Let me question more in particular. What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?
> GUILDENSTERN: Prison, my lord!
> HAMLET: Denmark's a prison.
> ROSENCRANTZ: Then is the world one.
> HAMLET: A goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o' th' worst.
> ROSENCRANTZ: We think not so, my lord.
> HAMLET: Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison. (II.ii.235-247)

We have been informed even earlier that Hamlet's life is not his own.

> His greatness weigh'd, his will is not his own;
> For he himself is subject to his birth.
> He may not, as unvalued persons do,
> Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
> The safety and health of this whole state,
> And therefore must his choice be circumscrib'd
> Unto the voice and yielding of that body
> Whereof he is the head. (I.iii.17-24)

And yet as lawful head, he is not the head, neither wanting it nor feeling prepared for it.

The play is saturated with irony, for this prince who despises "seems" must sometimes put on an antic disposition before his adversaries as he struggles to reshape his world into a livable whole. It is ironic that a prince who feels such disillusionment with seems should have such passion for the illusion of theatrical performance. Ironic that the rightful, usurped heir should have to pretend ambition in order to satisfy his "piping" friends. Ironic that the royal advisor, for whom appearance is almost everything, should give utterance to a platitude that denies the fundamental dilemma of the kingdom's lawful heir. Both a truth and a seeming-truth that would split

irresolvablely in Hamlet's mind had he ever heard it.

> This above all — to thine own self be true,
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
> Thou canst not then be false to any man. (I.iii.78-80)

How can this former student of Wittenberg,[4] this soldier, this scholar, this "observ'd of all observers," be true to himself without being false to his deceased father? How can he be true to his deceased father without being triply false—to his own desired interests and to the interests, whether honorable or not, of his mother and of his uncle? How can he be true to his own birthright without being false to the most compelling interest—yea, the passion of his life?[5]

And what of the interests of Denmark? Despite Hamlet's transparent distain, Claudius is ever portrayed as a capable, intelligent, decisive, courageous administrator. Yet we are given defining glimpses of a master manipulator. We hear the Queen parrot words (that in great probability seduced her to an "o'erhasty marriage") as she seeks to cajole her son from his too mournful state.[6]

We hear Polonius say to the king,

> And, as you said, and wisely was it said,
> 'Tis meet that some more audience than a mother,
> Since nature makes them partial, should o'erhear
> The speech, of vantage. (III.iii.30-3)

A wisdom of eavesdropping, subterfuge, and artifice.

We hear snatches of how Claudius "counsels" with his council to secure their acquiescence to royal exemptions,[7] and we witness the king's masterful handling of Laertes' outraged grief.[8] Another great irony—that this seeming-perfect king holds within his heart that thing which "is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.90).

How is Hamlet to resolve this impasse of interests?

In the face of it, is it any wonder he has bad dreams (II.ii.251-2)? That a night- or day-mare could have propelled him from fitful rest, disheveled, half-dressed into Ophelia's room, seeking affirmation from a loved one, or perhaps for a perspective of innocence, or for some compass point to guide him through to resolution? But all he finds is a frightened, unresponsive child (II.i.77-100).

Is it any wonder he would, at times, teeter at the brink of hysteria as he did in the cellarage scene? His predictable world

is gone, with distress so encompassing that nothing in grounded. Everything is confused, mingled, and meshed: laughter, tears; rage, calmness; reason, passion; wisdom, foolishness. Perhaps it is true that in an insane world, the only sanity is seeming-insanity. But Hamlet never descends into disassociative madness, as does Ophelia. We see his moods vacillate wildly between extremes of scorn for a pathetic world and hope for some redemptive purpose. But this wildness is sane enough to keep Claudius and Polonius on edge, yet consuming enough to confuse. In this quaking space between worlds, is it any wonder there would be talk?

> Of Hamlet's transformation. So call it,
> Sith nor th' exterior nor the inward man
> Resembles that it was. (II.ii.5-7)

His antic disposition—sometimes assumed, sometimes impulsive—is perhaps the one thing that keeps Hamlet sane. He is freed from "seems-normal" as he wrestles the paradoxes that permeate his world.

So, if the once guileless[9] Hamlet seems harsh, cruel, insensitive, and over-bearing perhaps it is because sanity demands that he hold a mirror up to his broken, duplicitous world. And what of his treatment of Ophelia? Is it not probable that Hamlet should interpret the overheard plan for "loosing" Ophelia to him to include all three conversants as eavesdroppers? Is not the Queen's voice heard immediately prior to Polonius' "Be you and I behind an arras then. Mark the encounter" (II.ii.161)? And when Hamlet becomes aware that the "accidental" encounter, with attendant eavesdroppers is in process, is it any wonder he lashes out at his supposed[10] eavesdropping mother as much as at the fickle[11] Ophelia? Does she not, in her clumsy attempts to elicit avowals of love, accuse Hamlet of the very unkindness she herself perpetrated in unexplained obedience to her father? It is too much. Even fair Ophelia is part of the hypocritical world. Nothing is real.

Not even the seeming-attention of the players to his acting instructions. They add one more nail in the coffin of the miserable world when they inexplicably strut their dumb-show and prologue almost ruining his well-ordered plan to trap the (fortunately distracted) king from "seems guilty" to "is guilty"? No wonder Hamlet mutters and fumes in dismay at the offending actors (III.ii.131-45).

His tolerance for "seems" grows thinner and thinner and more hostile while at the same time he flaunts his seeming-ambition,

as if holding a mirror up to the king's nature. He lashes out at the least hint of the corruption and hypocrisy that have forced him to a polarity he can scarcely endure. He berates himself for failing his father, even for failing his own destiny. (And yet, has he really failed that destiny? Can he not delay until the time is right—as it surely would have been at the natural end of his father's days? But now, "The time is out of joint.") He resorts more and more to speaking in riddles as if riddles are somehow the sanity hinges between corrupted reality and integrity.

And so Hamlet swings pendulum-like between competing wills—the will of his destiny (forced to his attention by the command of his deceased father) and his own self-will. This contest of wills reaches its climax en route to England where "in my heart there was a kind of fighting That would not let me sleep" (V.ii.4-5). And in that awakened state, Hamlet makes his choice—one that transcends even the will of his father, for at core, Hamlet's battle was never to avenge or not to avenge. It was to be the king or not to be; to be accepting of his birthright or not to be; to be an enduring champion of shattered ideals or to let himself be consumed. Vengeance was only the seeming choice (another irony), powerful enough to counter other passions.

If death had been his obsession, the sealed commission to England could have been the answer to his woes and his soliloquies—death by another's hand. He could have journeyed on in acquiescence to the fatalism and dissolution he thought was consuming his life. But in that precipitous moment, he was given to see beyond the confusions; to recognize that destiny—the ordination of his life—was not compelling him, but rather calling him. Unlike his mother, who presumed there was nothing beyond what she could see (III.iv.133), Hamlet sees beyond seeming. He finally makes the critical distinction between submitting in faith and succumbing to fatalism. The choice had always been there—to be or not to be what he was born to be. At last he chose to be—to submit to a will higher than his own, whatever the consequence.

> When our deep plots do pall: and that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will —
> (V.ii.9-11)

This divinity that shapes ends has parallel in the life of Saul of Tarsus, of Jonah, and of countless others.[12] In times

of great pith and moment, plots do pall, divinity is manifest, and choice is made. As Paul, the Apostle says:

> For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of *his* good pleasure. (New Testament: Philippians 2:13)

For Hamlet, the acceptance of this divine working proves another great irony—for what seems deterministic and fatalistic, ("The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune") is but a transcendent act of trust in omniscient providence. It is to arrive naked at the throne, having given up the only thing he truly owns—his self-will.[13] In this about-face, neither omens nor fears will govern him—only the *readiness* to accept whatever divinity ordains.

> Not a whit, we defy augury: there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? (V.ii.205-10)

Clearly Hamlet is a play brimming with religious themes; and Hamlet, in semblance of every soul, has had to choose (or not) his "readiness." Perhaps that is the ultimate question: To be or not to be in readiness to accept the divine will. As it were, ones own road to Damascus, ones own Mount Moriah, ones own Gethsemane.

The remarkable—the divine—thing about Hamlet is that even in his readiness, he does not take up the oft-times "rank and gross" ambition of kings. Instead of returning covertly with concealed sword, or overtly with an entourage of outraged citizens, he sends a quiet epistle to the usurping king announcing his return to Denmark, naked (IV.vii.43-4). (A king without a crown? A king without self-will?) In that anonymous, unassuming return, he pauses at a graveyard to contemplate the commonality of all things. And in that burial setting lays his reticence to rest, and declares: "This is I, Hamlet the Dane (V.i.243-4)."

He is profoundly different—not that he changes who he is, but that he adds to what he was. He still has low tolerance for "excess" and holds a mirror up to Laertes, as if to "out-herod Herod."

He knows he has weakness and feels sorrow for overreacting to Laertes' seeming-excess.[14] He fears his impulsivity. He admires those who act out of reason, controlling their passion, not yet realizing that passion, not methodical reason, drives men to greatness. Though perhaps he

understands that virtue, not passion, sustains it.

Hamlet dies because he chooses to once again live without guile in a world that scorns trust. As Claudius predicted, Hamlet approaches the sporting match without contriving. Only as each man's guilt reveals itself, does Hamlet mete out justice (as well as forgiveness to the one who asked). And in fascinating irony, he receives what he gave away—his desire not to bear the mortal crown.

The real tragedy is not that Hamlet dies. It is that a seeming-virtuous world will always seek to destroy, whether in body or spirit, its idealists. The final irony is that Fortinbras, the veritable man of action, received not only the lands his father lost in foolish combat, but the crown and possessions of his father's victor—all without the slightest need for action. By deferring his self-will to the will of his lawful king,[15] Fortinbras was gifted the very thing he had first thought to take by force. Perhaps there is parallel to both Hamlet and Fortinbras (and indeed, Claudius and Ophelia[16]) in paraphrase of Jesus' words to his disciples: "… If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his [self-will] shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his [self-will] for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 16:24-5). There is also like-affirmation of the "readiness" principle in Jesus' submissive words, "nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matt. 26:39)

Perhaps Fortinbras' *gifted* ascension to the throne of Denmark is not the final irony. Perhaps it is that Hamlet's victory in the supreme test of mortal life has been, so long, paraded as failure. O, *what a wounded name* he has suffered in the mad, failed prince!

Of course there are peripheral mysteries in Hamlet that will be debated forever because we do not fully understand Shakespeare's staging or intent.[17] But this we can know. Hamlet finally recognized the supreme test—the test of readiness—and when all was said and done, he was borne from "the battlefield" as a hero worth remembering—in manner befitting a warrior-king.

[1] William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, edited by George Lyman Kittredge / revised by Irving Ribner: (Waltham, MA: Blaisdell Publ. Corp., 2nd ed., 1967), V.ii.330-331.

[2] As to the Freudian / Oedipal interpretation, this author suggests that, considering the religious nature of this play, Hamlet might be expected to be conversant with the imagery of infidelity used so liberally by the prophets including, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, etc.

[3] See John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, 30ff for a persuasive discussion on the usurpation argument.

[4] There is strong contextual evidence that Hamlet is not a recent student of Wittenberg. See A.C. Bradley's points on the matter in *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, MacBeth*, MacMillan & Co Ltd: London 1969, pp.403-406.

[5] The author recognizes that the following interpretation may be controversial, but suggests that the clues to Hamlet's passion permeate the text. It is a passion that exacerbates the crisis of his life because it is a passion he cannot pursue. It is not an option for one of royal birth, let alone for one who is heir to a throne. His passion is for the theatre. Whether in writing or acting, it is not clear, but what is clear is how versed he is in theatre and theatrical texts, how confident he is in directing theatre players, how familiar he is with the actors, how exultant his success of "The Mousetrap," declaring "if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk on me," he could with a little costuming "get me a fellowship in a cry of players." (III.ii.263-266)

[6] I.ii.72-3; compare with the King's remarks at I.ii.87-106

[7] I.ii.14-16; IV.i.38-44

[8] IV.v.118-149; 196-214; IV.vii.1-147

[9] See, IV.vii.135, "Most generous and free from all contriving."

[10] Even if Hamlet does not so surmise, is there any doubt that his "mad" diatribe will be relayed?

[11] She will certainly be seen as fickle to Hamlet because by participating as decoy she demonstrates only seeming-loyalty and seeming-integrity. But Ophelia is also an idealist—a fragile one—who has not the wherewithal to cope when honorable love is mocked as seeming-love by her father and brother, and then as no love at all by a disillusioned Hamlet.

[12] New Testament: Acts 9:1-22; 22:1-21; Old Testament: Jonah. Also numerous stories of people whose lives have been redirected by seemingly chance encounters with some person, object, event, or bit of information.

[13] In the words of an insightful religious leader, "... the submission of one's will is

really the only uniquely personal thing we have to place on God's altar. The many other things we 'give,' ... are actually the things He has already given or loaned to us. However, when you and I finally submit ourselves, by letting our individual wills be swallowed up in God's will, then we are really giving something to Him! It is the only possession which is truly ours to give!" Neal A. Maxwell, "Swallowed Up in the Will of the Father," *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 24.

[14] Some weaknesses, he does not seem cognizant of, like his propensity to impulsive, unexamined judgment, to romanticizing his father's life, and to denying his mother her humanity, frail or not.

[15] Some have suggested that Old Norway was a usurper like Claudius. In the author's opinion this is not tenable. Had the elder Fortinbras been king of Norway before his death, this combat between kings would probably not have been for mere parcels of land (I.i.80-95). But if the combat were between a king and a blustering heir to Norway (i.e. Fortinbras, brother to Old Norway), parcels of land may have been a plausible wager. It seems clear that young Fortinbras is heir to his uncle, Old Norway for three reasons: 1) we twice hear that Old Norway is "impotent" which in the context of the play imports more than just an aged condition; 2) the character of young Fortinbras is such that his energies would have been directed against his uncle's rule if it were a usurping one; and 3) it is unlikely that Old Norway would have given young Fortinbras the kind of reinforcement he did if the kingship was not lawfully held (II.ii.69-76).

[16] Ophelia's downfall was in subsuming her truth and integrity to her father's erroneous pretensions and contrivances. Her self-will was given to a false god.

[17] E.g., Is Hamlet's apology to Laertes disingenuous or an honest acknowledgment of his instability, impulsivity, or wild passion in a time of confused turmoil? Was Hamlet's sealing the death-sentence of seeming-friends a just and appropriate act?