

## Public Awareness vs. Private Chauvinism in Quest of Political Justice

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It is quite evident that all critical interpretations of *Hamlet* present the idea that Prince Hamlet goes through a tragic flaw in his character; an imperfection that will lead eventually to the final devastation of the tragic hero. Yet, a more modernized psychological elucidation of Hamlet's actions throughout the play might inflict the idea that the young prince suffers from a kind of psychological disturbance that might even exceed the borders of Oedipus complex<sup>1</sup> to reach the more complicated schizophrenic character. The psychiatrists point out that the word "schizophrenia" is commonly misunderstood—to most people it has connotations of "split personality", while in actual fact the popular term "split personality" refers to a form of amnesia. Schizophrenia occurs when the individual finds himself incapable of communicating with the rest of society. It refers to the breakdown, for psychological reasons, of communications between the individual and the group.<sup>2</sup> However, Hamlet's behavior throughout the play seems to suppress the conclusion that he is a fragile character, but a dominating, manipulative one. The "flaw" that seems to constitute a reason behind the impediment of revenge is the amalgam of his tendency to perceive things more logically with an extent of moral potency which obliges him to act morally in a fundamentally corrupt world. Hamlet is a moral man in a malicious society which is urging him to carry out the most primal of all acts: revenge. Thus, the play is shaped to depend on "Hamlet's hesitation over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him; but its text offers no reasons or motives for these hesitations."<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the moral-philosophical interpretation seems to be vital as it is a "reflection on the fundamental questions of man's nature and destiny."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, *Hamlet* introduces an appreciation of the moral-philosophical aspects of Hamlet's behavior which requires a great deal of attentiveness to the constant and mounting relationship of character to action which is one of the unique qualities of Shakespeare's tragedies. Therefore,

adopting such an opinion requires, not the contemplation of *Hamlet*, but of Hamlet. Throughout the course of the play Hamlet is anxious with certain problematic issues which have a more universal consequence. He regards the central problem raised by these circumstances as something, not only crucial on the personal level, but also significant on the level of public awareness. In dealing with this facet of the play it is essential not to overlook the fact that Hamlet's reaction to these problematic issues are in one aspect a form of action on the part of the character. Moreover, Shakespeare, through Hamlet, seems to be quite responsive to the moments of political crisis and, consequently, his characters can be historicized precisely because they are the creations of his reflections on social and political crises of the time. With the deteriorating health condition of Queen Elizabeth, she told the Earl of Nottingham "I am tied with a chain of iron about my neck ... I am tied, I am tied, and the case is altered with me."<sup>5</sup> The Earl of Nottingham and Queen Elizabeth were anguished by the death of Nottingham's wife, who had been a dear friend of the Queen. Not long after Nottingham's visit, the Earl of Northumberland discreetly sent a letter pledging the impatient James VI of Scotland that Elizabeth's condition had been declining: Her Maiestie hathe bene euell now almoast one monthe. In the twelve first dayes it was kept secrett vnder a misprision, taking the caus to be the displeasoure she tooke at Arbella, the motions of taking in Tyron, and the deathe of her old acquaintance the Lady Notinghame. Those that were nearest her did imagine these to be the reasons. Moer dais told ws it was ane indisposition of bodie; siknes was not in any maner discerned, her sleep and stomak only bereft her, so as for a 20 dayes she slept very little. Since she is growne very weak, yet sometymes gives ws comfort of recoverie, a few hours after threatnes ws with dispaire of her well doing. Phisick she will not take any, and the phisitions conclud that if this contineu she must needes fall into a distemper, not a frensie but rather into a dulnesse and lethargie.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the historical aspect, the situation involves a compromised sovereignty, an authority endangered by being replaced and, consequently, about to be absent. It is apparent that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* reveals a steadfast concentration upon issues of absent sovereignty and

political justice. In this play, Shakespeare introduces the political circumstances of Denmark to be in havoc; a situation intensified by the absence of authority when King Hamlet is killed by the other authority-aspirant character, compromising the body politic of the kingdom, or at least, having some unconstructive influences on the "multitude". At the outset of *Hamlet*, long exposition is avoided; the drama begins at once without long explanations. The dramatic interest is brought immediately with the change of guards

**,Francisco: For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold**

**.And I am sick at heart**

.....

**Horatio: What, has this thing appeared again tonight? <sup>7</sup>**

The worried exchanges of some characters, the appearance of the ghost would highlight the political situation in Denmark: a king recently dead, turmoil at the absence of authority that might lead to a grave threat that Denmark might be invaded

**,Marcellus: Good now, sit down, and tell me, he that knows**

**Why this same strict and most observant watch**

**,So nightly toils the subject of the land**

**,And why such daily cast of brazen cannon**

**(And foreign mart for implements of war. (I.i.74-78**

Immediately after announcing his marriage to the widow of the dead king, his brother, the new king assumes power and deals with the state business by sending letters to the old king of Norway to restrain Fortinbras's imminent invasion of Denmark; the new authority tries to restore order, to replace the atmosphere of insecurity and bewilderment with a sense of confidence and order. Claudius redirects Fortinbras's invasion of Denmark by persuading the Norwegian king to send him to Poland instead. Yet, Fortinbras's later appearance at Elsinore, giving "warlike volley" (V.ii.350-352), suggests that Claudius has bought the Danes only

time, not stablesafety from Fortinbras's attack. The attempt to inflict order proves to be futile due to the verity that the new king is the complete opposite to the old one. Claudius is the overall inversion of King Hamlet; an awareness that is recognized and emphasized in Prince Hamlet's first soliloquy: "Soexcellent a king, that was, to this/ Hyperion to a satyr"(I.ii.139). Claudius's self-indulgent nature, contradictory to that of king Hamlet, aggravates the increasingly festive and too much drinking of the Danes. When Horatio asks prince Hamlet if such manners are a tradition, Hamlet acknowledgesdisappointedly that:"Ay, marry, is't, / But to my mind, though I am native here / And to the manner born, it is a custom / More honored in the breach than the observance" (I.iv.13-16).Also, Hamlet depicts this defect of Danish convention as a "vicious mole of nature" that conceals out their good reputation. It is the one mistake that ruins the fineachievements of many fine qualities.“*Hamlet* dramatizes the hard process of moving beyond self-concern through shame. The prince is ashamed... but he comes to terms with this only at the end.”<sup>8</sup> What intensifies this trait is the new king's behavior. His self –centered character does not recompense for this deterioration with other qualities such as honor, sincerity and integrity, and, for this reason, the new authority fails to inflict order within the state and to avoid the unconstructive influences of the absent authority on the "multitude". It is quite obvious from Hamlet's speech that the “mole” of corruption has become an integrated characteristic feature of the Danish character and this inclination tends to nurture to become an exacerbated norm that overwhelms the Danish king and people similarly. The radical transformation of the Danish body politic starts with the unnatural death of Old King Hamlet. Claudius's action of killing his brother demonstrates a contravention, not only of laws of nature, but a grave violation of the system of power by depriving the principle successor – Prince Hamlet - from his right, abusing the system of rankness and threatening the security of the state. Keeping these points together and turning to the Ghost's story when he first meets :Prince Hamlet, the play suggests that Claudius intrudes upon the king's security

**,Sleeping within my orchard**

**,My custom always of the afternoon  
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole  
,With juice of cursed hebona in a vial  
And in the porches of my ears did pour  
The leperous distillment, whose effect  
Holds such an enmity with blood of man  
That swift as quicksilver it courses through  
,The natural gates and alleys of the body  
And with sudden vigor it doth posset  
,And curd, like eager droppings into milk  
,The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine  
And a most instant tetter barked about  
Most lazarlike with vile and loathsome crust  
.All my smooth body  
Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand  
.Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched  
(I.v.60-76)**

So, the "secure hour" of King Hamlet and, consequently, the security of the state have been jeopardized by "a brother's hand". Issues of household conflict, problems of infidelity, adultery, and a son's anguish for a lost father seem to overwhelm the play's concentration on issues like the political justice. Yet, recurrent indications to Denmark's wellbeing throughout the play make the audience more and more vigilant that the acts of assassination and disloyalty in the play, and revenge for them, are themes of public implication. "It is a characteristic of Shakespeare's conception of Hamlet's universalizing mind that he should make Hamlet think, first, of the general rottenness."<sup>9</sup> Hamlet's public function is highlighted from the outset when Laertes advises Ophelia about her affair with Hamlet. He tells her that Hamlet is not a private man; he "may not, as unvalued persons do, / Carve for himself"--may neither choose a wife nor carve Claudius's hide for himself--"for on his choice depends / The safety and the

health of this whole state" (I.iii.19-21). Not only are the Ghost's and Hamlet's souls in jeopardy; the country's sacredwellbeing is as well. The king is not just a man but the he represents the embodiment of the nation. He is frequently called "the Dane," or : Denmark," (I.i.17, 52; I.ii.44, 69, 125; I.iv.45; IV.v.21; V.i.258, V.ii.325). Moreover, Old dead Hamlet, whom the guards still call "the Dane" or "buried Denmark" (I.i.15, 48), may be redeeming the crimes done "in his days of nature," yet he faces continuing obligations that complicate his spiritual task. The responsibility of claiming justice is Hamlet's. It is his duty to find a solution for the dilemma with which his ghostly father has presented him. He must set things right in Denmark through violence, yet must avoid "coupling hell" by engaging in private vengeance.<sup>10</sup>The devout impulse inside Hamlet constitutes a predominant motive that has power over him throughout the play. He is set in a Christian realm where he sincerely trusts the idea that "my soul ... Being a thing immortal as itself" (I.iv.66-67). "In fact, it is remarkable how many of the complications of Hamlet's situation can be traced to the impact his belief in an afterlife has on his thinking."<sup>11</sup>In the soliloquy of "To be or not to be" he dreads the possibility of :being damned if he would make a further step in the path of revenge

**There's the respect**

**.That makes calamity of so long life**

**,For who would bear the whips and scorns of time**

**,Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely**

**,The pangs of dispraised love, the law's delay**

.....

**When he himself might his quietus make**

**?With a bare bodkin**

.....

**But that the dread of something after death**

**The undiscovered country from whose bourn**

The same impulse motivates him to scheme "*The Mousetrap*" to protect himself from being damned by the devil that might assume a divine image that might have  
:the ability to damn him

**The spirit that I have seen**

**May be the devil, and the devil hath power**

**,T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps**

**,Out of my weakness and my melancholy**

**,As he is very potent with such spirits**

**Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds**

**More relative than this. The play's the thing**

**(Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king. (II.ii.599-606**

Late in Act III, he declares himself not a private revenger but an agent of public morality when he tells the Queen that "heaven hath pleas'd it so... / That I must be their scourge and minister" (III.iv.179, 182). In addition to his desire that "a divinity ... shape his ends" and his growing belief that Providence guides him (V.ii, 220), Hamlet steadily confirms that he is eager to redeem, not only the integrity and honor of his family, but that of the kingdom; a burden and a responsibility that his father was supposed to maintain. Here, Shakespeare thrusts an atmosphere of self-assurance over Hamlet, yet it is not based on a fixed plan of action, rather on a supreme reliance on providence. "His lack of plan and thus his insistence on providence arises from his confidence in Heaven. This is not religious commonplace, but the very heart of the matter."<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is Hamlet who complains of Denmark's bad international reputation, who calls Claudius not just murderer but "cutpurse of the empire," who intensifies that aspect that someone can "smile and be a villain ... in Denmark" (I.v.109-110), and who in Act V presents himself as the true ruler of and spokesman for the country: "This is I, Hamlet the Dane!" (V.i.257-58). To Hamlet Claudius is not "he that hath killed my father" but "He that hath kill'd my king" (V.ii.64). The impediment in

the achievement of revenge is reasonably logical for the verity that Hamlet's public consciousness is in unceasing struggle with his individual private instinct for revenge. Despite the fact that designing the *The Mousetrap* is a time-consuming scheme to confirm Claudius's guilt, but also it makes it possible to Hamlet to render his doubts to those whom Claudius has called "your better wisdoms" (I.ii.15): the Danish court, whose endorsement Hamlet totally looks for. Furthermore, *The Mousetrap* exposes the conflict by exposing Hamlet to Claudius, even showing Hamlet's intimidating purpose. So, the ultimate aim of Hamlet's "delays," most notably *The Mousetrap*, is to present that conflict to the "better wisdoms" of the court. Hamlet dies addressing himself to the Danish observers, "mutes or audience" to the violence in the play's final scene, and charges Horatio with the public justification of regicide: "Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied" (V. ii. 341-342). Horatio, "more an antique Roman than a Dane," would evade this civic responsibility through suicide, but Hamlet the Dane prevents him (V.ii.343-344). Therefore, personal prejudice and egoistic act of retribution has been eliminated for the sake of public awareness in quest of political justice; an impulse that should overcome Hamlet's personal passions. "Hamlet's difficulties are not merely personal, but reflect the fundamental issues of the era in which his history is set."<sup>13</sup> Claudius, on his part, aspires that Hamlet would be entrapped by his own conceit which might lead him spontaneously into the ultimate fatal destiny. He tells Laertes that Hamlet is so "envenomed with envy" of Laertes' skill at rapier that he will not be able to resist Laertes' challenge (IV.vii.104). His father's son, Hamlet should be "prick'd on by a most emulate pride, / Dar'd to the combat," as was Old Hamlet by Old Fortinbras in the pre-history of the play (I.i.87-88). But Claudius's aspiration proves to be wide of the mark. Hamlet's extensive mockery of Osric, who delivers Laertes' defiance, reveals that Hamlet is not motivated by envy or any such private feeling to go through this struggle. Praising Laertes, Osric's attempts to instigate Hamlet's :resentment and jealousy prove to be futile



**Osric: Sir, here is newly come to court Laertes, believe me, an absolute gentleman, full of most excellent differences, of very soft society and great ..showing**

**Hamlet: Sir, his definement suffers no perdition in you, though I know to divide him inventorially would dozy th'arithmetic of memory, and yet but ... .yaw neither in respect of his quick sail**

**.Osric: Your lordship speaks most infallibly of him**

**Hamlet: The concernancy, sir? Why do we wrap the gentleman in our more ?rawer breath**

**Osr: Sir?**

**((V.ii.106-123**

Accordingly, instead of provoking Hamlet into a kind of personal vanity, the fruitless attempt of the perplexed Osric has only given Hamlet a more appropriate situation in which he can eliminate the Danish oppressor in full view of the gathered "better wisdoms", i.e. the court. As usual, Hamlet restrains personal eagerness and behaves logically, forgetting all about personal retribution for the sake of a greater cause: the quest of justice to serve the kingdom. This constitutes a crucial aspect of disparity between Hamlet and other characters like Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Laertes, and even King Hamlet. These characters' attitudes are provoked by personal passions and obsessions like desire, greed, and "emulate pride," while Hamlet has never been motivated by such personal defects. To intensify this point, telling the story of a previous political conflict between Denmark and Norway and speculating about the appearance of the dead King's Ghost, Horatio's account reveals both Old Fortinbras and Old Hamlet with egoistic conceit: Old Hamlet "Was ... by Fortinbras of Norway, / Thereto prick'd on by a most emulate pride, / Dar'd to the combat"). and this account thrusts the trustworthiness of the two kings into the shadows of doubtfulness. Old Hamlet's victory resulted in Denmark's assumption

of lands which should have gone to young Fortinbras. Consequently, the Norwegian prince's birthright has been jeopardized and would motivate him "to recover of us, by strong hand / And terms compulsory, those foresaid lands / So by his father lost" (I.i.106-108). Despite Horatio's description of the "seal'd compact, well ratified by law and heraldry,"(I.i.90) with which the dueling kings justified their single combat, the tale told is of an elder generation risking the royal patrimony of the younger on a fight provoked by "most emulate pride"--that impulsive personal vice to which Claudius and Laertes will try to tempt young Hamlet. The guard Barnardo supposes that Fortinbras's restless aggression, motivated by the taking of his lands, is connected to the armed Ghost's own restless walk on the battlements. "Well may it sort that this portentous figure / Comes armed through our watch so like the King / That was and is the question of these wars" (I.i.113-115). Though the Norwegian business is forgotten in the horror of the king's tale of murder and adultery, it resurfaces in Fortinbras's martial appearances in the play's last two acts. In act IV, due to Claudius's temporary solution to Fortinbras's aggression, Fortinbras has been diverted to the conquest of worthless territory, "a little patch of ground" in Poland "That hath no profit in it but the name" (IV.iv.18-20). It is not surprising that Fortinbras, unsatisfied with this conquest, returns aggressively to Denmark in Act V, and that Hamlet, aware of Fortinbras's situation, rectifies the old kings' wrong against him, avoiding war by supporting Fortinbras's aspiration for his lost lands and his election as Denmark's new king. "I do prophesy th'election lights / On Fortinbras, he has my dying voice" (V.ii.357-358). In finally delivering Denmark to Fortinbras, Hamlet rectifies both Old Hamlet's foreign usurpation and Claudius's more insidious domestic one. Thus, it is Hamlet's burden to rectify things committed in his father's "days of nature", a formidable task in which he proves to accomplish fruitfully. Ironically, it is Laertes who states the distinction between personal revenge and honorable, overtly accepted violence. In the play's last scene, accepting Hamlet's apology for the accidental slaying of Polonius,

:Laertes states

**,I am satisfied in nature**

**Whose motive in this case should stir me most**

**To my revenge, but in my terms of honor**

**I stand aloof, and will no reconciliation**

**Till by some elder masters of known honor**

**I have a voice and president of peace**

**.To keep my name ungor'd**

**(V.ii.242-248)**

Bearing all the confirmations of Ghost's story, the outcome of the "Mouse Trap", and, eventually, that of Laertes saying "the King's to blame" (V.ii.323) in his mind, Hamlet does kill Claudius. As a result, Laertes finally says, the usurper is "justly served" (V.ii.329). Afterward it is Hamlet rather than Laertes who submits his case to "elder masters" to restore his "wounded name" (V.ii.346). Horatio's telling of Hamlet's story will both restore and reunite Hamlet to that court, and his own prayer, Horatio hopes, will aid the prince's reconciliation to heaven. "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" (V.ii.361). It is necessary to establish that Hamlet really has a strong moral character. It is easy enough to show that Hamlet is not a coward, that he does not suffer from any weakness of will or inability to act, that he does not lack the ability to think clearly and that he does not suffer from any mental disorder. He might have a moment of madness, but mental illness is not a permanent factor in his makeup. There are a multitude of factors pointing to the strength of Hamlet's character. Throughout the play, he displays a gentility and moral sense superior to that of any other person, and there is no valid reason for taking the "tragic flaw" concept as the sole basis for tragedy; on the other hand, taking the point of view that Hamlet is forced into a schizophrenic isolation from society provides an unreliable explanation of his actions. Certainly, the revenge motif is not sufficient foundation for the universal and lasting significance that the play holds for its audiences. It seems logical, then, to believe that Hamlet's problem might be .different in degree, but not in kind, from the dilemma of modern man

## NOTES

Freud argues “that *Hamlet*, a play now over three centuries old. I have followed<sup>1</sup> the literature of psychoanalysis closely, and I accept its claim that it was not until the material of the tragedy had been traced back by psychoanalysis to the Oedipus theme that the mystery of its effect was at last explained.” Cited in Philip Armstrong, *Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* ( London: Routledge 2001),p.21

<sup>2</sup>C. PAichinger, . *Hamlet and the Modern Dilemma*. *Culture* 29.2 (June 1968): .142-149. Rpt. in *Shakespearean Criticism*. Ed. Dana Ramel Barnes. Vol. 35 .Philip Armstrong,p.23<sup>3</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Moody E.Prior, *The Thought of Hamlet and the Modern Temper*. *ELH* 15.4 (Dec. 1948): 261-285. Rpt. in *Shakespearean Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. .92. Detroit: Gale, 2005,p.4

<sup>5</sup>Christopher Hibbert, *The Virgin Queen* (London: Viking, 1990),p. 231

Correspondence of King James VI of Scotland with Sir Robert Cecil and Others<sup>6</sup> in England, During the Reign of Queen Elizabeth. (Westminster: J. B. Nichols and Sons for the Camden Society, 1861), 72. Reprinted in BenjaminParris, . "The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body': sovereign sleep in Hamlet and Macbeth." *Shakespeare Studies* 40 (2012): 101+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 24 Jan. 2013

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<sup>7</sup>William Shakespeare (edited by David Bevington and David Scott Kastan), *Hamlet* ( New York: Bantam Dell 2004),p. 48

.All the subsequent quotations are taken from the same source

.Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare*. (London: Routledge 2002),p.112<sup>8</sup>

Theodore Spencer, *Hamlet and the Nature of Reality* in David Bevington's<sup>9</sup>

(ed) *Twentieth Century interpretations of Hamlet: A Collection of Critical Essays*. ( Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1968),p.39

<sup>10</sup>Tiffany, Grace. *Hamlet, Reconciliation, and the Just State*. *Renascence* 58.2 (Winter 2005): 111-133. Rpt. in *Shakespearean Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 102. Detroit: Gale, 2007. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 Feb. 2013

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<sup>11</sup>Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare Hamlet* ( Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004),p.38

<sup>12</sup>Fredson Bowers *Hamlet as Minister and Scourge* in in David Bevington's (ed) *Twentieth Century interpretations of Hamlet: A Collection of Critical Essays*. ( Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1968),p.91

<sup>13</sup>Paul A. Cantor,p.24

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