

HEAVEN HATH PLEAS'D IT SO (Hamlet)

1. So art thou to revenge when thou shalt hear

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of the world!
(Hamlet, 1.2.133-134)

William Shakespeare's (1564 – 1616) most famous play, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, first published in 1603, is a complex and many layered piece of literature.

Tremendous amounts of energy have gone into considering its possible interpretations, and the range of opinions on them is immense; as Oscar Wilde wittily put it, perhaps the greatest question raised by Hamlet is, 'Are the critics mad or only pretending to be so?'
(Boyce, 1996:236)

It can be viewed as a crime story, ghost story, murder mystery and psychological drama. And it is all this and much, much more besides. But first and foremost it is a tragedy and a revenge play, or revenge tragedy.

A tragedy is: "[...] the spectacle of a human being of nobility, idealism, and courage in conflict either with his or her own frailty or with a hostile or indifferent universe."
(Benét, 1998:1039) As with tragedy, revenge plays are a genre with its own conventions. It is "[a] form of tragic drama in which someone [...] rights a wrong."
(Cuddon, 1999:744) It is in this tradition William Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, but as has been the general consent since the Elizabethan age, he by far transcended all his predecessors.

Young Prince Hamlet is most certainly in conflict, both with himself and an indifferent or hostile universe and he is trying to right a wrong. At the very beginning of the play he meets his father's ghost who asks him to revenge him and put things right again. Whether he should act out this revenge and if the ghost is a divine or devilish being are questions Hamlet debates with himself as the whole story unfolds. It is in fact Hamlet's inner life that constitutes much of the play.

As much as Hamlet is in conflict with others he is also in conflict with his dual, if not multiple, self. Just as he sees evil in others he has to come to terms with the capability to do evil within himself.

2. In my mind's eye

It is the guards to Elsinore castle, Francisco, Barnard and Marcellus that first see the ghost of the old King Hamlet. Baffled by the sight, and not knowing if they see an angel or a demon, they take Prince Hamlet's friend Horatio with them on the night watch. He sees the ghost, too. But the spirit of the dead King Hamlet refuses to speak with them. Horatio sets out to tell the young Hamlet of his sighting but, as the crown prince tells his friend, he already sees his father; "In my mind's eye, Horatio." (Hamlet, 1.2.185) Hamlet's thoughts circle around his father's death even before the encounter with the ghost. He wears black mourning clothes and looks sad. His grief worries his mother, the Queen: "Do not forever with thy veiled lids / Seek thy noble father in the dust." (Hamlet, 1.2.70-71)

Even though Hamlet in meeting with his father's ghost calls his own soul prophetic (Hamlet, 1.5.41) when the ghost reveals the circumstances around his murder, Hamlet still has his doubts about the truth of the ghost. Some of this doubt is cast aside when he calls the ghost by name: "I'll call thee Hamlet, / King, father, royal Dane." (Hamlet, 1.4.44-45) But after the encounter the doubts linger on. At the end of Act Two, Hamlet has this to say about the ghost:
The spirit that I have seen / May be a 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.
(Hamlet, 2.2.585-590)

Not only does young Hamlet doubt if it is all in his mind's eye or for real, he also doubts if it is the good thing

to do to revenge his father, or if it is evil and damnable. If it really is his father asking for revenge, then Hamlet must go to action. He is not at all comfortable with the role of avenger and complains to the heavens: "The time is out of joint; O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (Hamlet, 1.5.196-197)

Hamlet has seen the ghost and feels duty bound to respond to the challenge but he is in the worst of situations to do so. Claudius, his uncle and the murderer of his father, has been enthusiastically accepted as king and Hamlet is powerless and discredited by his mourning that seems to be overdone by observers. Therefore, he is in the worst of situations to respond since he could be prosecuted for murder if he acts on the basis of some ghost's directive.

The time is indeed out of joint. It would have been better had he regained his throne and could operate with the power of kingship behind him. In this way, the time is indeed out of joint and he curses fate that put this awesome challenge upon him at such an inopportune time.

3. Murder most foul, strange and unnatural

If it is reason to doubt that the ghost is real, then there also is real reason to doubt the ghost's story of the murder. And if there really is a ghost, Hamlet is still the only one to hear it speak. But Hamlet is already mad with his mother and uncle, and the thought of revenge probably do not come fresh with the sighting of his father's spirit. So the ghost of King Hamlet does not tell him anything that has not already occurred to him. But the meeting with his dead father urges him to put his thoughts into action. It gives him some much needed purpose in life, a life that is bereft of meaning since his father's death:

I have [...] lost all my mirth [...] and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory,

this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. (Hamlet, 2.2.291-298)

At least we can assume that Hamlet feels like his uncle Claudius has "murdered" his father, by taking his father's place in his mother's marriage bed. And he is most certainly heartbroken over his mother's hastily re-marriage so soon after his father's funeral.

Hamlet believes he has been called on by a higher power to action as a result of seeing the ghost of his father. If he rejects the communication, he must regard himself as insane. He does believe he is prompted by this higher power but he mistrusts it since, as he says, he does not know whether it is a demon tempting him "by a pleasing shape" to commit a rash action and thereby get himself condemned to hell. That is why he says he needs evidence more relevant than what the ghost said and he adopts the course of staging a play to test the king's reaction: "I'll have grounds / More relative than this. The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of a king." (Hamlet, 2.2.590-592)

Claudius is angered and leaves the play, thus proving to Hamlet and us, his guilt. But not to the court, who at this stage in the play are oblivious to the ghost's and Hamlet's accusations. Hamlet is of course outraged by this proof and wishes eternal damnation on his uncle: "Tis now the very witching time of night, / When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out / Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood, / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on." (Hamlet, 3.3.372-376)

That he wishes his uncle to hell and through the same horrible purgatory as his father must undergo, hinders him from acting when the first opportunity shows up. Hamlet overhears his uncle confess the

murder while he is praying, and could easily have killed him but by doing so, would have sent Claudius to heaven since being able to pray he is in a state of grace. That would not be the revenge he seeks. Still only Hamlet, and his confident Horatio, knows of this brother murder. But after overhearing Claudius' confession, Hamlet no longer needs to doubt the truth about the murder.

4. O cursed spite, That ever I was born

There is a religious aspect to Hamlet, and young Hamlet probably believes in both heaven and hell. At least both heaven and hell are real to him as he believes his father to be in purgatory, and that killing his uncle during prayer will send him to heaven. The most famous line in world literature must be "To be or not to be, that is the question [...]" (Hamlet, 3.1.56), it is the opening of Hamlet's soliloquy on suicide in which he dismisses the idea on the grounds that one cannot know what waits in the afterlife. Also, much earlier in the play he dismisses suicide because the bible forbids it, when he wishes: "that the Everlasting had not fix'd / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God! God!" (Hamlet, 1.2.131-132) Hamlet does believe in a power outside himself, which guide and direct him.

Hamlet is caught in the middle of Catholicism and Protestantism, he believes in the catholic idea of purgatory, where his father must stay until he has avenged him, and he has studied at Wittenberg. The university in Wittenberg was both an intellectual centre and the centre for the reformation. In the catholic view one could achieve salvation from inner justice, as a gift of grace from god. Luther's view, on the other hand, was that faith alone could lead to salvation and was it received passively from god; this led to a view that the world was empty and meaningless. Value was placed on the inner life and the external was the place where death reigned. Here laid the grounds for a divide between the external and internal, a divide Hamlet combats with.

5. There's a divinity that shapes our ends

There is no reason to doubt that Hamlet himself believes that he has received a calling from a divine authority. He also believes that there is a god that determines our lives and that we only can live our lives freely within those bonds given: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will- " (Hamlet, 5.2.10) As we have seen, his doubts are mostly about whether this calling is of good or evil. And if there is a conclusion, it is that sometimes evil must be countered with evil.

Based on the internal evidence of the play one must probably give Hamlet right in his claims about receiving a calling from a divine authority, if the reader or the audience believes in ghosts, or even a god, privately, is not of much interest. Either way we can appreciate the inner struggling of Hamlet, which these external circumstances manifest. We, as an audience, believe in the ghost, its divinity and authority when we watch Hamlet, no matter what our theological view might be. The combat between good and evil that the prince undergoes seem real to each and one of us. This is the greatness of the character Hamlet and of Shakespeare's play Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.

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