

## HAMLET, POST-REFORMATION TRAGEDY

Francisco, an 'honest soldier', only has eight lines, but he sets the tone for the whole play when he says, in Act I, scene 1 of *Hamlet*, that he is 'sick at heart'. He doesn't say why. Marcellus, who with Bernardo is the first to see the Ghost, says, 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.' He doesn't say what. Hamlet's way of putting it is no more specific than Francisco's 'sick at heart' or Marcellus's 'something rotten'.

*The time is out of joint:—O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right.*

This sense of nameless unease permeates the play. Shakespeare took an ordinary revenge tragedy and turned it into a play about pretence and prevarication. Why? What was he trying to say?

One way of answering that question is to consider it against the background of the state of post-Reformation England, as opposed to the state of medieval Denmark. Shakespeare didn't re-tell old stories for the sake of it, he used them in the way Hamlet does in the play, 'to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.' The last, I think, was uppermost in his mind when he wrote *Hamlet*.

Each of Hamlet's soliloquies is a meditation on aspects of the 'very age and body of the time'.

*How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on't! O, fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,  
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely.*

Shakespeare's audiences were familiar with sermons, in which bible readings were meant to make you think about yourself. What would the image of an unweeded garden mean to audiences in post-Reformation England?

*That it should come to this!  
But two months dead!—nay, not so much, not two:  
So excellent a king, that was, to this,  
Hyperion to a satyr...*

First Catholic, then Protestant, then Catholic again, then Protestant. And when the Queen dies, what then?

When the Ghost leaves him with 'Remember me!' he puts his promise in writing.

*...meet it is I set it down,  
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;  
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark.*

Or England.

*Hamlet's* next soliloquy comes after his first meeting with the Players and a demonstration of their theatrical talent.

*What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,  
That he should weep for her? What would he do,  
Had he the motive and the cue for passion  
That I have?*

How can you be sure that people say what they mean, mean what they say? How do you know they are what they say they are? Catholic or Protestant?

*Yet I,  
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,  
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,  
And can say nothing...*

Would the Catholics in Shakespeare's audience have seen in Hamlet's self-accusation a mirror of their own? If Guy Fawkes had been among them, he would have had no time for the self-doubt in the next soliloquy.

*Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;  
And enterprises of great pith and moment,  
With this regard, their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action.*

Even so, the plot, barely five years later, came to nothing.

Later in Act III, coming upon the King kneeling in prayer, instead of taking the opportunity of avenging his father's murder, Hamlet rejects it on theological grounds. His father, he argues, was murdered without the opportunity of confessing his sins and purging his soul before his death.

*...and am I, then, revenged,  
To take him in the purging of his soul,  
When he is fit and season'd for his passage?  
No.*

The audience, having heard the King's own soliloquy, knows that he doubts his prayer will be answered.

*But, O, what form of prayer  
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?—  
That cannot be; since I am still possess  
Of those effects for which I did the murder,—  
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.  
May one be pardon'd, and retain th'offence?*

No sooner has Hamlet put up his sword and made his exit, than the audience sees the King stand up and abandon his attempt at prayer.

*My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.*

The plot in *Hamlet* never progresses, just goes round in circles. Hamlet's cowardly or conscience-stricken failure to avenge his father's murder is followed in the very next scene by his own pointless murder of Polonius. Pointlessness is the theme of his next soliloquy, the last before his departure for England and lucky escape from his uncle's plan to have him murdered. It follows a brief conversation with a captain in the Norwegian army on its way to attack a piece of land which is of no use to anyone but which will be fiercely defended anyway by the Polish army.

*How stand I, then,  
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,  
Excitements of my reason and my blood,  
And let all sleep? while, to my shame, I see  
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,  
That for a fantasy and trick of fame  
Go to their graves like beds.*

If we are any closer to finding out what it is that is rotten in the state of Denmark and why its people feel sick at heart, it is only in Hamlet's increasing tendency to see the funny side. He jokes about the unfortunate murder of Polonius and takes his own ineffectualness as an unexplained but unavoidable fact of life.

*I do not know  
Why yet I live to say, 'This thing's to do;'  
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means  
To do't.*

This soliloquy ends in bluster.

*O, from this time forth,  
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.*

We know him too well by now to expect anything to come of this.

Another pointless death, that of Ophelia, follows, and is followed in turn by the comedy of the gravediggers. Then comes the comedy of Hamlet leaping into Ophelia's grave and brawling with Laertes. No more soliloquies now, just bluster. I loved her more than you did!

*I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers  
Could not, with all their quantity of love,  
Make up my sum.—What wilt thou do for her?*

This childishness is not the stuff of tragedy, though it is pathetic. And that, perhaps, was the state of England, the very age and body of the time. Something rotten. Sick at heart. Torn between two religions. At war with itself. Anxious about the future. Civil war not far off.

*Hamlet* came immediately after *Twelfth Night*, comedy verging on tragedy leading to tragedy verging on comedy. Viola went round in circles too. Hamlet was her ineffectual male counterpart.

*O Time, thou must untangle this, not I;  
It is too hard a knot for me t'untie!*