

Hamlet

W.Shakespeare

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Shakespeare is God¹. His plays are divine. And among the very best is supposed to be the tragedy of Hamlet. Why is that? Is it all a matter of convention? The commentaries on 'Hamlet' surely surpass in bulk many times over the poor play itself. More words have been wasted on it than one would ever care to count. Could it be that the play itself is but an excuse for artful speculation and penetrating philosophy? That the play is but a hapless string of words into which much has been read into? Far more than was ever intended? Hamlet has of course become an integral part of our culture and it is hard indeed to imagine that a mere four hundred years ago it did not yet exist. Montaigne never refers to Hamlet. Had it been written by his time surely he would have considered it in his writings. Or maybe he would never have heard of it, and even if so never suspecting it to be great. Dante did not know about Hamlet, certainly the latter is not to be found either in Heaven or Hell (will Purgatory be his permanent abode?). And the Ancients had no inkling. Were their lives not impoverished? In post-modernistic spirit is it all a kind of sham. Nothing canonical about the oeuvre of Shakespeare only a tacit consent that this is the very best there is? He could as well be ignored, or just the proper study of a few specialized scholars.

But Hamlet is indeed a suitable study for the literary scholar, his impersonation the pinnacle of many an acting career. Nowadays the cultured do a pilgrimage to a proper place to see him performed. Stratford-upon-Avon (where I went a couple of times) or the newly erected Globe by the Thames, built to put you in the appropriate mood. I must admit that so far none of Shakespeares plays has ever moved me. There are other plays by Strindberg, Ibsen and Checkov that have touched me deeply. Why this indifference? It is clearly not the case of literary insensitivity. Could it be because of a lack of adequate linguistic skill? I certainly would take offense at such a suggestion. It irritates me, as well as makes me suspicious, that so many swear by him and seem to get so much out of him, although I would certainly consider myself superior to them in literary appreciation and skill. Are they just putting on airs? What could I be missing?

I suspect that it is not so easy to find somebody advanced in years, as well as being literate, reasonably intelligent (maybe even unreasonably so?), knowledgeable, who is actually in the position to read 'Hamlet' for the first time and thus able to give a fresh unadulterated opinion of something already performed and watched to death. Just as the case of a jury in a highly-publicised murder trial, it is very hard to fill it with people innocent of the facts, unless they are innocent of minds as well. Something similar must be the case if 'Hamlet'- the play, would be put on trial. And as a prospective jury member I must admit that I am not entirely without prior encounter. Blind and deaf is that individual

¹ One may compare Harold Blooms 'Genius' consisting of one thumbnail sketches of one hundred exemplary minds. They are all stars, but for which Shakespeare provides the whole firmament

indeed who has never heard the supposedly immortal words 'to be or not to be'. That the action takes place in Elsinore is also hard to be ignorant of, especially if you have crossed countless times that sound that nowadays separates the Danes from the Swedes. That there are ghosts involved, or at least one, even children tend to know. And that Hamlet is resentful of his mothers hasty liason after the death of the king and his father we are taught to be the linch-pin of the drama. Ophelia is also a name that floats around, as well as her suicided body, the pre-raphaelite painting of which is indelibly imprinted on my retina. There is also some digging in a grave-yard. But this is essentially the extent of my previous knowledge. Now I can start to read it and get the facts straight.

The beginning is a bit confusing. Some guards are talking to each other, interchanging immortal words like 'Have you had a quiet guard?' or 'Well, good-night'. Then two more characters enter swelling the numbers to four. They are hard to tell apart. One of them is called Horatio, with such a name he is bound to play an important role later, one better pay attention to what he says. What is it all about? Some ghost! But it does not say anything, and seems to disappear. Maybe only an apparition. Now the interchanges are longer, all in verse no doubt. Then the ghost re-enters, still not speaking, only to disappear. Curtain descends.

When the curtain goes up again the main characters are present, in addition to Hamlet himself, also the King and Queen and various other personages, as well as unnamed attendants. It will be a pain to keep track of them all. The King starts out with a very long speech. Hamlet seems dejected, and the King and Queen are solicitous. Then they all leave and Hamlet is left to himself. A golden opportunity for a soliloquy, and indeed Hamlet takes advantage of it. Now three of the first characters enter. Conversation follows, the gist of it seems to alert Hamlet to the existence of a ghost, maybe that of the father. Naturally Hamlet gets excited.

New scene. A brother and a sister are conversing. The sister is Ophelia. Good I have heard of her. She seems involved with Hamlet, or at least he has intimated an amorous interest towards her, which excites her. Brotherly advice soon to be replaced by even more insistent fatherly advice, I assume Polonius, for so is his name, does have that very relation to her. She is being warned, after all the Prince may only be playing with her feelings. It is all about honor. So familiar to us.

New scene. In search of the ghost. Hamlet with companions. Hamlet gives some long speeches, but will the ghost appear? He is talked to a lot, or at least in front of. Eventually the ghost starts to speak itself. He tells the truth of his unfortunate fate to Hamlet, his son. Some long speeches it gives occasion to. Pretty awful story, Hamlet must be very upset and feel upon himself the duty to take vengeance.

Now there is a new Act. The difference between acts and mere scenes has always puzzled me. I guess the intrinsic distinction is arbitrary, but after each act there may be a pause for the audience to stretch their legs and collect their wits. Now we are back in Polonius house. And a new character. They seem to be scheming. Some money is to be changed hand. Polonius is refering to his son, giving this other man some obscure instructions to cast doubt on the character of his progeny, but not overdoing it. Very strange, maybe I am missing the point. Now Ophelia enters. She has a strange tale to tell about the indecent behaviour of Hamlet. She is affected but not repelled. The general

conclusion is that Hamlet is mad.

New scene and we are reintroduced to the King and Queen. The King seems pretty pleased with himself. Kings usually do. Two characters with long names are being welcomed. One imagine them rather short and always sticking together. They are asked to do a service, to cure Hamlet of his melancholy and madness. They seem pretty confident that they will manage and exit. And now this Polonius character enters instead. He talks about Norwegian ambassadors who presently enter. One of them gives a long speech. What is it about? Something about the Norwegian king and the Polish and some assurance of never taking arms against. Then they leave and Polonius is left alone with the royalty. He talks about his daughter and the strange behaviour of Hamlet. And then they see him coming, and Polonius bids them to hide with all their attendants. Clearly Hamlet is being tricked into something. This Polonius character is clearly up to no good. Hamlet reads a book but is distracted by the presence of Polonius. Apparently they are not expected to know each other personally. What can they have to talk about? Not much apparently, but Polonius gets in some word about his daughter. Now those two guys with the long names appear again, and Polonius finds it convenient to leave. Hamlet seems delighted to see them. Old friends? They have a long and lively interchange, but what is the gist of it? It is not so easy to make out. Now Polonius enters again. A real busy-body. Some acting-company is about to visit the court. In fact a few of the actors enter already. A lengthy interchange between Hamlet and one of the players. Hamlet seems to get an idea of how to get back at the King. A play to be performed with clear references to the crime he has performed. A seemingly round-about way to get a message across, although not unprecedented.

So the plot thickens in its way. Now we are ready for the third act. The King and Queen along with the two long-named ones. Ophelia is there as well, not to mention her father. He seems to be everywhere. So what about the professional verdict on Hamlets state? On the surface sane, but surely this is but a sign of a deeper more profound madness. They also mention the troupe of players and the play to be performed, to which the royal couple is invited. So innocent, but we know better. Their mission completed the long-named duo leave, as always in tandem. The King asks the Queen to leave as well as there has been arranged a confrontation between Hamlet, soon to show up, and Ophelia, to be witnessed in secrecy by the King and her father. Ophelia seems not to mind being set up as a bait, and the Queen, genuinely concerned about her son seems to hope that the young woman will have a beneficial effect. And so Hamlet enters. This surely must be a key scene in the play, we better be very attentive. And lo and behold, those immortal words 'To be or not to be, that is the question'. And he goes on and on, has he discovered Ophelia yet? In his concluding words he acknowledges her and an quick interchange follows, in which he appears somewhat deranged much to her consternation. Soon after he has disappeared the King and Polonius step out of their hiding place giving a diagnosis. The advice of Polonius is to confine the madman or send him to England (to a certain death?).

A new scene, a big hall, and Hamlet, who now seems perfectly sane, converses with the players in anticipation of their performance giving instructions. Polonius, enters with the duo. Hamlet asks whether the King and Queen will attend, Polonius assures and leaves, and the duo promises to hasten the proceedings leaving as they do so. There is a lot of coming and leaving, and it does not stop, now it is the turn of Horatio, clearly a friend

of Hamlet, he surely needs one. And so the play is to be performed. The play within the play. Double make-believe. Hamlet takes a very active part. The King and Queen listen attentively. The message is very clear. The King does not appear to be pleased. But exactly how displeased? Let us wait there is another scene.

There is the King with the duo. He is mighty upset. Some scheme of sending off the mad Prince on a voyage. To his death? The duo will oblige the wishes and so assured the King dismisses them, and instead the ever present Polonius enters. He has some news of the Prince going to his mother and proposes to hide behind some curtains and give a full account of what will transpire. Why not the Queen herself? Does the King not trust the Queen, or is it the matter of a contrived plot? The King is now alone, and he takes the opportunity to give a long speech, at the end he kneels down to pray, and now Hamlet himself sneaks up. What is he up to? A long speech. Something about doing it now. Doing what? He seems to rage against the King, almost as if he wants to kill him. But what of it? It all trails off and he disappears again, and the King rises, if not to heaven, and gives vent to a few thoughts, or at least words.

The plot thickens. We are now in the Queens bedroom. Polonius is there. He is everywhere. Was there ever such a busybody. Then the approaching steps and concomitant words of Hamlet are heard, and the Queen warns her companion to hide. And there follows a brief interchange between the mother and the son, with the latter accusing her of betrayal, going so far in his rage that the mother fears for her life, cries for help, her cries being echoed by the hidden Polonius. Hamlet smells a rat, so to speak, and thrusts his sword through the curtain. Polonius is slain, at least he tells us so, and then as his identity is revealed to Hamlet, the latter shows no regret but adds some sarcastic words. No love lost apparently. The conversation between the mother and her son is being enlivened by the event, and the ghost of the father enters too with a few well-chosen mots. Hamlet takes farewell reminding the Queen that he is set for England.

And so the penultimate act, with a succession of scenes, the gist of which is the dispatch of Hamlet to England, made the more urgent because of his murderous act, which is also disclosed to the children of the murdered. The son naturally wants to avenge. And we are set for the climax, the final act.

The first scene takes place in a churchyard where the newly returned Hamlet learns that Ophelia has committed suicide, her grave being dug. In the second and final scene Hamlet is informed that her brother wants to duel him to death, and the climax soon follows at final banquet, in which the Queen mistakingly drains a poisoned cup, Hamlets adversary is about to stab him from behind but dithers at the last moment and both get engaged in a scuffle wounding each other, but as it turns out with poisoned weapons, dooming both to death. But before Hamlet succumbs he stabs the King and then drains another poisoned cup to hasten the inevitable. Before the curtain makes its final fall, Horatio makes a few speeches and some arrangements and the dead bodies, four in toto, are being brought away.

So there it is, the crude outline of a plot. A rather melodramatic one, with many loose threads and contrived passages. Why should this be so great? True, a plot is but an excuse, and like with most of Shakespeares plot, I guess, borrowed. Why is it so difficult to come up with original plots? Are there so few in numbers? The consensus seems to be that

true creativity does not exist in a vacuum, but builds on what actually exists. The story itself can be crudely told, as above, holding the attention of no-one. Or it can be told in an inspired way, as to make even the most prosaic of events gripping. What is the nature of a great play? Clearly to spellbind an audience, and in the case of Shakespeares plays a rather vulgar one to boot if we choose to believe historical scholars. True at the time there were not much competition for entertainment. To mans basic need beyond those of the body is the craving for stories and the imaginative flights those invite. This is as true for the low-brow as well as the high-brow. In fact one can argue that the craving in the first case is purer unsullied by detachment, cleverness and pretense. But nowadays attending a Shakespeare play is definitely considered high-brow, the low-brow entertainment nowadays being of a racier and technologically more advanced kind. What enthralles the high-brow audience, clearly it is not the suspense of the play, but its poetry that is attached to the plots scaffolding like flowery decoration, as well as the puns and innuendoes, some of them requiring some erudition (easily borrowed) to make sense. All of this, with one obvious example, is deliberately absent from the crude review above, but even to those indifferent to the charms of poetry, some of the lines, and also some of the ideas expressed by them, are exceedingly beautiful. It would take me too far afield to make a list, maybe almost as long as the play itself. Let me just pick one out, that strikes the mind even on a first reading

*Imperious Ceasar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole and keep the wind away.
O, that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall t'expel the winters flaw!*

Act V, scene i

The meaning being too obvious to render commentary necessary, yet the temptation to provide some is irresistible. It points out the great gulf between the dead and the live body, the latter transcends itself and can literally move mountains, while the former is good for almost nothing, except possibly that of obstruction. When expressed thus it becomes almost trite, when phrased in poetic garbs it may almost become divine. I can see though how people may be tempted to gush. Why could one not dispense with the stupid plot and instead just have a collection of bon mots, a sequence of unrelated poetry readings? To some extent this is actually the case, because Hamlet is never referred to in toto, the myth of the play is transmitted through selected and unrelated quotations. Yet scattered references to a person are of no interest, unless we know that there is a real person behind with its own corporal coherence. The same thing with a play, without the plot, the concomitant suspense, the lines deprived of a context, would fall if not flat, at least flatter. No statement is deep by itself, it needs a context on which to reflect. Of course given the context provided by the plays of Shakespeares, it would make Hamlet intriguing, would it only survive in fragments, or just by obscure allusions, which in fact has been the fate of most of those few treasures of the ancients having survived total obliteration.

Still the fact that Shakespeare wrote in verse has its drawbacks. Poetry and Prose differ. The latter does not need to be prosaic and dry limited to manuals and factual presentations, but can often be as striking as poetry. But in prose it is the thought that

matters, words are but vehicles subordinate to the message, while in poetry words also protrude as words. This means that they tend to have a musical cadence, lulling sense to sound, and soothingly send a listener to sleep. Thus the contents of the famous soliloquy of Hamlet may on first or second exposure completely escape the reader as well as the listener, something that would never had been the case had they been presented in bare and powerful prose. It is like music, the first few listenings normally give little to the unaccustomed ear, they need to be listened to over and over again to grow.

We do all, or used to at least, retain from childhood a treasure trove of fairy tales. A few of them stand out, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and a few others. They appear ancient, although only collected about two hundred years ago² Why could not some of the plays of Shakespeare, suitably retold, be part of that treasury? How would a fairy-tale rendering of Hamlet look like. Maybe something like this.

Once upon a time there was a King and a Queen living in a dark castle next to a deep sea. The Kings younger brother found his sister-in-law very beautiful, and she was also quite taken by his advances. One dark night they had the King killed in a tower and thrown out into the waters below into which he sank like a stone. The brother married the Queen and became a King in so doing, and they had a big banquet and invited everyone in their Kingdom. They were very happy and would have remained so, had it not been for the son of the Queen, a young man of brooding temperament, who a few months later, walking one chilly moon-lit night along the ramparts of the castle was alerted to a ghost that had risen like mist out of the cold sea below. The ghost told the Prince that he was in fact the vapours of the dead father of the Prince, and that he had been killed by the new King, and now had only one request before he would for ever return to the dark sea below, and that was to have his death avenged.

The Prince became very upset and did not know what to do, and everyone became concerned for him, not only the Queen, his mother, but also a young beautiful girl Ophelia to whom he seemed to have taken a fancy, and who was aghast by his confused love-making. It was decided that he must be mad and to cure him the King sent for two dwarfs who assured the King that they would put his wits back into his head again. But at the same time a travelling troupe of actors visited the city, and they were invited to the castle and Hamlet got quite interested in them and they eventually agreed to set up a play in which they would disclose the terrible secret of that crime that the ghost had revealed to Hamlet. A play to be performed that very night in front of the King and the Queen and their entire entourage. Evening came, and the play was performed and the King was mighty angered but did not let on his displeasure. But later that night the King conferred with Ophelias father to send the mad Prince far away across the sea, so that he may never come back again. Ophelias father proposed to hide in the bedroom of the Queen when Hamlet was about to take farewell of his mother. But the Prince had decided to kill his fathers murderer, and when the King was alone again, praying with his back to the door, Hamlet sneaked in and was about to stab him in the back with a long knife, but at the last moment his nerves failed him and instead he rushed into the bedroom of her mother.

² The Brother Grimms tended to embellish the stories with each edition, enhancing their literary sophistication at the expense of their artful authenticity.

He was very upset, told her what the ghost had revealed to him some time ago, and the Queen became so upset in her turn that she feared for her life, calling for help. Something stirred behind a curtain, Hamlet noticed it right away and drew his sword and thrust it through the curtain and right through the old man. And the old man shrieked and died and Hamlet ran away and left on the ship to take him over the seas and he was never heard of again for many years.

But one day he came back and chanced upon some grave-diggers who were busy digging a new grave. It turned out to be the grave of Ophelia, who had pined for her Prince and gone mad and finally killed herself. Her brother, who had lost both his sister and his father due to the doings of the Prince swore to kill him. And a few days later at a banquet, he had prepared in cohorts with the King a chalice of poisoned wine for Hamlet to drink. But as fate would have it, the Queen drunk of it by mistake and fell to the floor like a stone. The brother of Ophelia then drew his rapier to stab Hamlet as the Prince was leaning over his dead mother, but was unable to act so deceitfully, instead he and Hamlet got engaged in a fencing engagement causing blood to trickle on both. But their rapiers tips had been dipped in poison and they were both doomed to death. When Hamlet realised that his life was at its end, he walked up to the King and took a long knife and stabbed him through his heart. Then he emptied the rest of the poisoned chalice and fell dead over his mother. And that was the end of that, the King and the Queen and the Prince, and the old Castle by the deep sea.

So would it have worked as a fairy-tale? That is the question. And how would the play have been written, had it been fashioned by a Strindberg, an Ibsen or a Chechov? None of those felt inspired to try their wits. Maybe because they had their wits intact.

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