



ACT ONE – SOME CONSIDERATIONS

By the end of Act 1, a great deal is accomplished: both the main plot and two sub-plots are established. The main plot initiated by the ghost's confession to Hamlet is known as the **Revenge Plot**. The majority of the play's time and energy revolves around Hamlet's trying to figure out if a



ghost who appears to him claiming to be his recently deceased father is telling the truth, i.e. his uncle Claudius murdered King Hamlet in order to take the crown. Hamlet

cannot decide whether to

trust the ghost or not (devils come in all sorts of disguises

and can lead honest men to their destruction if they are not careful).

In addition to the main plot, two sub-plots are established: the first is called the **Norwegian or Fortinbras Subplot**. The Fortinbras Subplot becomes an important part of the play's architecture because it helps to direct events and propel characters into making decisions. For now, let us remember that this subplot revolves around a young prince (Hamlet) on a question to restore both his family and his nation's honor.

The second sub-plot is the **Romantic Subplot** involving the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia (and, by extension, her father Polonius and brother Laertes). The relationship of these three plots will become more apparent as the play progresses.

During Act 1 all of the play's key characters are introduced. Prince Hamlet, the protagonist, is a young man of formidable intellect and conscience. He is a man of letters (an intellectual)—a philosophizing prince who lives a life of the mind.¹ He is outraged at the marriage of his mother (Queen Gertrude) to his uncle, Claudius. No other character appears to have a problem with the circumstances or the appropriateness of the marriage. Hamlet's intense anguish is fed by his low opinion of Claudius and his exceptionally high opinion of the recently deceased King Hamlet. Gertrude forgetting her husband so quickly contributes to Hamlet's misogyny (hatred of women). His general disaffection with life is so profound he contemplates suicide.

The newly crowned King Claudius is depicted as a skilled politician: firstly, no one apparently has any problem with his marrying Queen Gertrude (except for Prince Hamlet); and secondly, he takes action to avoid a major war with Norway. If what the ghost of King Hamlet has said is true, Claudius is also a deadly usurper of the throne, a man who can fool others effectively. Putting Gertrude's ill-advised marriage to the side, there is no question Gertrude loves her son. She worries for her son who it appears cannot stop mourning for his father. Hamlet contemplates returning to the University of Wittenberg to

¹ The man who lives a "life of the mind" is a scholar who is content to intellectualize all things by organizing ideas and drawing logical conclusions about everything. Although this is a realistic and rational approach, living a life of the mind does not allow the intellectual to access and appreciate the simple things and wonder of life. This overly rational approach to living can cause the intellectual to drift away and lose touch with the world and the people who mean most to them.

continue his studies; however, Gertrude asks he remain in Denmark so she (and by extension an increasingly suspicious Claudius) can watch over her distressed son.

One of the key themes of the play is the disparity between appearances and reality; this theme is introduced through Hamlet's bitter observations of Gertrude, e.g. she displayed a torrent of tears as a grieving widow but betrayed the memory of her husband by marrying Claudius so quickly. According to King Hamlet's ghost Gertrude is an adulteress who married the King's



murderer. And this brings us to another dimension of the theme of appearances and reality: is the ghost really the spirit of King Hamlet? Are the claims of Gertrude's adultery and Claudius being a murderer actually true? And is the mission the ghost asks the Prince to undertake—to avenge the dead king by killing Claudius—morally defensible? Hamlet is a deeply passionate and committed intellectual: he refuses to act in any way contradicting his sense of honor and religious convictions.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS OF ACT 2

The act ends on a note of suspense and foreshadowing: the audience eagerly awaits the outcome of the play within this play. Although not especially prominent in the act, the fact is that *Hamlet* is also a detective story (motif); as the Prince makes clear in his soliloquy he is morally obligated to determine Claudius' guilt or innocence. Complicating matters further, once the mystery is solved, a new mystery emerges around Hamlet's madness and motivations.

Act 2 saw the advance of the theme of the disparity between appearances and reality, largely centering around the roles that people play (and how those roles do not reflect true intentions or true qualities).

For example, Hamlet plays the part of a madman who uses the appearance of madness to determine the truth about his uncle. He also uses insanity to disarm Claudius (making his uncle believe him vulnerable and weak). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play the role of concerned friends but, in reality, they are spies for Claudius; and the stock character Polonius plays the role of the stereotypical wise old counselor and doting father. Ironically, Polonius is neither wise nor a good father. Lastly, Claudius pretends to be the rightful King—despite murdering his brother—while pretending to show concern for his stepson, Hamlet.



The spying motif, much like the detective motif, is also developed in Act 2: Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on Laertes while trying to use Ophelia to spy on Prince Hamlet (and confirm his suspicion that the Prince suffers from unrequited love for her. Through Polonius' actions in this act the Romantic Subplot is developed.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS OF ACT THREE

By the end of Act Three Hamlet's detective work—using the play-within-the-play—pays off, i.e. he determines Claudius' guilt without a doubt. (As it turns out, the ghost spoke the truth after all.) However, despite determining Claudius' guilt Hamlet gets side-tracked: he begins to fixate and obsess about his mother's sin and infidelity. Hamlet turning his attention to his mother's actions is a logical progression: since the Prince is an idealist he cannot comprehend how a loving mother could possibly share a marriage bed with his father's murderer.



The Romantic Subplot plays a prominent role in Act Three, as well. Polonius' stubborn insistence Hamlet's mental decline is due to unrequited love leads to the death of the bumbling old man. Hamlet kills Polonius by stabbing a dagger blindly into the curtains where the old dotard stood hiding and eavesdropping on a conversation with Gertrude. This leads to events whereby the Romantic Subplot combines with the Revenge Plot, i.e. Polonius' death proves useful to King Claudius who uses the dead man's son Laertes to kill Prince Hamlet. The play's turning point is reached.

In Shakespearean tragedy, the turning point is defined as the moment in the play when the fortunes of the protagonist begin to decline, culminating in his eventual downfall. *Hamlet* actually contains three possible turning points:

- The first being Claudius' realization while watching *The Murder of Gonzago* that Hamlet knows of his crime
- The second is Hamlet's failure to kill Claudius at prayer
- And the third, the murder of Polonius.

Most Shakespearean scholars argue the final event is the true turning point; that is, the forces and personalities involved in the first two incidents do not gain a decisive advantage; nevertheless, the latter is the actual turning point, given that the forces arrayed against the Prince do not gain a decisive advantage in the first two incidents, but they definitely do in the third. As we shall see, the killing of Polonius spawns an entire series of developments making it easier for Claudius to try to dispose of Hamlet and will lead to the both the King and Prince's downfall.

SOME FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

By the end of the play Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius and Hamlet himself are all dead. Arguably, the only one who truly deserved his fate was Claudius. It is when we consider the other casualties that we are left with an inescapable conclusion: they all lost their lives as a result of Hamlet's delay. Hamlet's delay has fascinated critics and scholars alike; it is important to consider Hamlet's delay as a function of one of his tragic flaws.

Aristotle was the first to offer a detailed consideration of tragedy and the tragic hero. In trying to understand Shakespeare's characters, it is useful to first understand the classical tragic hero. If we heard of two traffic accidents, one resulting in the death of a very old man and the other causing the death of a young person, most would consider the latter situation the more tragic because the old man had lived his life and presumably reached, or at least had the opportunity to reach, his potential. The young person, on the other hand, had the potential of a full life, perhaps even achieving greatness in that life, but because of his/her early death, this potential is not realized. An essential element of tragedy, both Classical and Shakespearean, is therefore the failure to achieve some significant potential.

Historically, it was believed members belonging to the aristocracy possessed great potential: for example, just as most of us believe no dog or monkey can achieve either the moral goodness or the moral evil of a person, it was assumed society's wealthiest members were intrinsically greater than the lower classes. Subsequent social and cultural developments have changed the situation where people from humbler origins can experience tragedy; nonetheless, modern tragedies share one intrinsic thing in common with Classical and Shakespearean forms: the protagonist fails to achieve their significant potential.

Tragic heroes possess a fatal or tragic personality flaw. Tragic flaws are not usually obvious qualities like being conceited, arrogant, proud or selfish. (There's no tragedy in proud people being knocked down and humbled.) On the contrary, in the majority of Shakespeare's heroes possess good, even admirable, qualities that become their undoing. For example in *Julius Caesar* the hero Brutus' undoing is a result of his integrity and sense of honor. He becomes easy to manipulate by lesser men who have no problem with lying and deceiving to achieve their goals. A feeling of tragedy is achieved in the audience when they witness a good, noble, or honorable hero fall prey to circumstances and fail to meet their potential.

If we draw from our own experiences, this is an easy to understand concept: for example, it is universally agreed generosity is a good character trait to possess. However, should a person be too generous, he or she might not have sufficient funds left to support their family. Also, although kindness in a teacher is considered an indispensable trait when teachers are too kind—regularly giving marks exceeding what the student actually deserves—they will never be able to teach students to value self-discipline or develop an appreciation for the importance of hard work. In the end, a good trait which pushes out other good characteristics is a fatal flaw.

The tragic hero cannot be one who is essentially evil, despicable or worthless; otherwise the audience would be indifferent to or relieved at his death. Moreover, the tragic hero does not go to his death without some sort of insight and understanding. Usually at some point early in the play, the audience becomes aware that tragic hero themselves have become aware of their own shortcoming (which will ultimately lead to their downfall). In the resultant creative tension, we might feel the hero should have known better or avoided the tragic mistake; yet, given their character flaw there is a sense the hero could not have avoided their downfall without somehow diminishing himself. In the case of Prince Hamlet, he possessed deeply held Christian convictions making murder—even if justified—essentially

unthinkable; his hyper-sense of morality, combined with his philosophical idealism, contributed to Hamlet's tendency to delay action (which eventually lead to so many characters dying).

Through the course of the play, the tragic hero usually gains new insight into their own condition, and his death, although not wholly deserved, elicits sympathy from the audience. Nonetheless, the hero's death does not leave the audience depressed. Aristotle insists tragedy is morally uplifting because the audience, who identifies with the hero as a fellow human being, first experiences both pity over the hero's lost potential and then fear we could suffer a similar fate. In other words, in the hero's situation we see ourselves and we are reminded of how unfair human existence really can be. This is followed by a catharsis in the audience; that is, the audience moves beyond their emotions and learn from the hero's failure; people then leave the theatre morally uplifted by their new insights. As we shall see, much of the Aristotelian concept of tragedy is directly applicable to *Hamlet*.

WHAT IS HAMLET'S TRAGIC FLAW? WHY DID HE DELAY?

Any discussion of Hamlet's tragic flaw ultimately becomes the question, "Why did Hamlet delay?" Without doubt it is this delay that allows evil to continue in the kingdom, ultimately claiming the Prince's life. To identify the reason for Hamlet's delay is to identify his tragic flaw. That we are meant to consider this delay is inescapable, given the attention Shakespeare pays to it via Hamlet's own reflections, reflections that never yield the final answer, even to the Prince himself, who seems puzzled by his inability to do the deed. We will recall, for example, after his encounter with Fortinbras' troops crossing Denmark on their way to Poland, he says, "...I do not know/Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do'" (IV. iv, l 43-44). At another time he suspects himself of "thinking too precisely on the event," a tendency that he equates with cowardice. But is the answer as simple as that?

How many of us can say, for example, that we completely understand ourselves, our motivations, the reasons for our perspectives, etc. Certainly, we do and should have insights into our own natures, but that is a far cry from complete self-knowledge. So if we can't have total insight into our own characters, how can we ever expect to understand a creation as complex and as human as Hamlet?

The German poet and writer Johann Goethe (1749-1832) felt Hamlet's was too sensitive and tender to rise to the task of killing Claudius (despite the obvious justification to do so). While much is made of what a noble and widely admired person Hamlet was before the play's beginning, and his sensitivity is quite evident in his reaction both to his father's death and his mother's incestuous marriage, the Hamlet we see throughout most of the play is anything but noble, tender or sensitive. Doubtless as a reaction to the reality he sees around him, he quickly emerges as a bitter, caustic, and callous individual. It is not a tender soul who confronts Ophelia in the nunnery scene, nor is there any nobility in his mockery of Polonius via his madman's persona. And certainly, his reaction to the discovery that he has murdered the father of the woman he claims to love can only be described as heartless. As well, as discussed earlier, even Horatio is shocked by Hamlet's unnecessarily sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths in England, his justification being that they got what they deserved. So to suggest his nature was too noble and sensitive to kill the one person deserving of death seems to require that we overlook vast swaths of the play.

Another theory that has been advanced over the years is that Hamlet is the victim of the Oedipus Complex², that subconsciously he is in love with his mother, and that to avoid consciously confronting this desire, he avoids killing the man he wants to replace. As I indicated earlier in the commentary, I

² The Oedipal Complex was first introduced by the pioneer of psychology Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in 1899.

have never had much patience with this idea for a number of reasons. First, I don't think there is any real textual support for it, with the possible exception of his strange preoccupation with Gertrude's sexual relationship with Claudius as revealed when he confronts her after the play within the play. Very early in the story, he expressed deep disappointment and disgust with his mother, not because he wanted her for himself, but because her subsequent hasty remarriage to Claudius made a mockery out of her union with King Hamlet, the man that the Prince adored. Surely if there were an Oedipal undercurrent here, some emotion other than deep sadness over his father's demise would have manifested itself. As well, Shakespeare was writing long before Freud and the advent of psychological theory, so the entire point seems invalid.

Others, such as the poet Samuel Coleridge (1772-1834), argued Hamlet's propensity for thinking too much—his tendency to philosophize and over analyze—is the reason for his delay. Hamlet himself considers this, and comes to the conclusion that this capacity for reflection is really cowardice in disguise. I think we can discount Hamlet's self-deprecation here, as there are too many times in the play when he acts as a person without fear, for example when he rashly follows the ghost, ignoring his friends' warnings of the inherent danger. As well, if we accept as incidental the encounter with the pirate ship, Hamlet seems to have bravely acquitted himself. Ironically, when Hamlet does take direct action—stabbing blindly into the curtains killing Polonius—he is propelled by emotion, not intellect.

Yet to suggest that the Prince can act only when under strong emotion is not correct either. If this were the case, his elaborate plan for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths would not have arisen. Of course, one could argue here that he is not actually killing them directly, but rather only arranging their deaths as a result of some considerable thought. Another theory, advanced by the well-respected academic, A.C. Bradley (1851-1935), is that Hamlet was the victim of a paralyzing depression brought about by his discovery of the true nature of the world.

As indicated in earlier commentary, Hamlet must have had an idealistic view of the world prior to the events of the play, a view that was shattered by his father's death, his mother's incestuous remarriage, and the discovery that his father was a victim of fratricide (brother killing brother). As well, his early soliloquies suggest a deep weariness of the world consistent with a depressed state of mind. But ultimately we have to ask ourselves whether that depression and weariness is sufficient to paralyze him.

The evidence of the play suggests it is not. Were he thus disabled, it's doubtful he could enjoy the lucidity and range of thought he evidences throughout the play. His eloquent and philosophical reflections, although often of a rather morbid variety (like when he talks to Yorick's skull), do not suggest someone who is immobilized by his depression. His ability to plan seems unimpaired as well. For example, his decision to pretend to be crazy presumably serves a purpose (perhaps part safety valve and part detective tool). Similarly, Hamlet's plan to determine Claudius' guilt, which includes the writing of some lines to be inserted into *The Murder of Gonzago*, suggests his imagination and resourcefulness are not impaired. So in conclusion to this theory, one can only say this: depressed, yes; disaffected, yes; disabled, no! Perhaps, in the final analysis, none of the theories about Hamlet are correct; nonetheless, perhaps all of them contain some element of truth. Ultimately, his precise tragic flaw remains elusive.

The rest is silence.