

## from Introductory Lecture on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

*[A lecture prepared for English 200 and revised for English 366: Studies in Shakespeare, by Ian Johnston of Malaspina-University College, Nanaimo, BC. It was last revised slightly on February 27, 2001. This entire text is in the public domain and may be used free of charge and without permission]*

### One Interpretative Possibility

#### The Real Villain: The Condition of the World

A possibility to account for Hamlet's odd relationship with the court at Elsinore (there are others), and the one I tend to favour, is that this is a particularly bleak play in which all the characters, in one way or another, fail, because in the world of Elsinore there is no possibility for a happy fulfilled life; the conditions of life are loaded against the participants and, in a sense, they are all victims of a world which will just not admit of the possibilities for the good life in any creative and meaningful sense.

I find, for example, that in the world of Elsinore my sympathies are constantly aroused and then canceled out in various ways. I admire and respect Claudius at first, I respond with admiration to his evident love and affectionate and courteous treatment of Gertrude, but I recognize that he is an evil man, guilty of a horrible crime, and then I see him wrestling with an enormous guilt, which is a factor only because he is a deeply religious person who believes in his own damnation and will not take an easy way out. This is not a simple villain, but a complex human being locked into a situation where there is simply nothing he can do.

Hamlet, similarly, constantly arouses conflicting responses. One of the great attractions of this play is the protean quality of the Prince's character. His mind is always interesting, and his suffering is very genuine. Like Claudius he is wrestling with the world, and he is not being very successful. He does not see any way out of his distress, and when he reflects on the final meaning of everything, he can reach no joyful conclusion. All of this makes Hamlet an immensely interesting and sympathetic character. On the other hand, he is so often brutal, in language and deed, especially to those who love him, he is so deceitful and vacillating, that again and again I find myself questioning his moral sensitivity.

Gertrude also is in a similar situation. She genuinely loves Hamlet and Claudius. But the two men in her life are on a downward spiral and so is she. Life is too much for her. What she seems to want is something very basic: a happy family. But life is denying her that, no matter how she tries.

In this play, it doesn't matter how people try to deal with life: they all fail. Life is too much for them. Whether they embrace the conditions of Elsinore, like Polonius, and seek to operate by the Machiavellian principles of the political world, or seek for love, like Ophelia or Gertrude, or try to find some intellectual understanding of things, like Hamlet, life defeats all of them. They all die in the mass killing at the end. The two main survivors, Horatio and Fortinbras, are interesting exceptions. The first is essentially a spectator of life, a student, perhaps even a Montaigne like figure, a friend of Hamlet but unable to offer any useful insights into what might be done and

someone who initiates nothing. The other is a mindless romantic militarist, who defines his life in terms of pointless conquests in the name of glory. Life does not seem to trouble him because he comes across as an unreflecting man who asks nothing of life except that it provides him with some barren ground which he and his troops can fight over in the name of military glory.

Who is happy in this play? Who has life figured out? I can see only one character leading a fully realized happy life, and that is the gravedigger. He spends his life surrounded by death, by the disintegrating remains of his friends and companions. And what does he do? He sings, he jokes, he turns what he has into a joyous acceptance of the world. He is the only person in the play with a creative sense of humour, using language and wit, not to protect himself from encounters with life but to transform the horror of his surrounding into an affirming human experience. It's important to note that his humour is quite different from Hamlet's. The latter is essentially a rhetorical defense, often bitter and caustic, an expression of an unwillingness to engage the world. The gravedigger's humour, by contrast, is affirming and transforming, something playful, healthy, and creative. I don't think it's an accident that the gravedigger is the only person whose humour is clearly superior to Hamlet's. But he is only a gravedigger, and his spirit is entirely absent from the court.

When Fortinbras takes over Elsinore at the end of the play, what has been resolved? What sense of moral order does he bring with him? None whatsoever. This is a world which does not admit complex, peaceful, and satisfying visions of the good life. It answers only to the realities of military power. And those who try to demand more from life, as Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, and Polonius do, end up destroying each other and becoming victims in their turn.

I sense that Fortinbras's triumphant entry at the end is a reassertion of the world of Hamlet Senior, who was, we know, also a warrior who devoted his life to military glories. My own sense of the ghost is that Hamlet Senior was something of a nasty piece of work--an egocentric, hard, and unforgiving misogynist--successful in the very narrow terms of this armour-plated world, which has little room in it for love, understanding, forgiveness, or anything but those pointless power exercises which increased his own glory. Once I have seen Hamlet Senior and heard him talk, I have immense sympathy for Gertrude and no difficulty at all in understanding how she could really love a man like Claudius. It also makes very suspect the extraordinarily idealized vision of the dead king which Hamlet carries around. The fact that Hamlet Senior is consistently motivated more by a desire to hurt Gertrude for loving another man than to avenge his own murder simply confirms in my mind the overwhelmingly hard egocentricity and misogyny of the famous king.

It may well be that Hamlet's distress stems, in large part, from a desire to see his father in an idealized light when part of him knows well enough that that's a fiction. As an obedient son, he wants to carry out the old warrior's commands; he is desperate to follow his father's wishes. But that requires him to see his mother as the guilty party, and part of him surely knows that the moral balance of his parents' marriage was not that simple. That's why he just will not listen to his mother. He will lecture her, but he doesn't give

her much of a chance to reply. If he starts to listen to her, he is going to have to rethink entirely his relationship with his father.

The one moment, in my view a decisively significant one, when Gertrude almost gets a chance to answer Hamlet's suspicions comes in 3.4, her bedroom, when his aggressive verbal attack on her drives her to shout "No more." I sense here that there's only one place for this conversation to go, that is, Gertrude will reply to Hamlet's charges with some important confessions about her past life, some truths about herself and Hamlet's father. This does not happen, of course, because the ghost enters at ends that part of the conversation.

There are two things about this entry of the ghost of Hamlet Senior I find intriguing (apart from the timing of his entrance). The first is that Gertrude cannot see him. How are we to interpret this point? My assumption is that the Ghost has some control over who sees him and who doesn't, and for some reason he does not want to confront his wife in their old bedroom. The second point is the stage direction, "in his nightgown." The authority of this stage direction is disputable, but I find it a fertile suggestion. He has abandoned his armour, the symbol of his warrior status, and is now dressed for bed. But he is not going to face his wife, let her see him and exchange words with her. Perhaps this is a place where he knows his authority is suspect, where he has failed. And he certainly does not want some revelation of his relationship with Gertrude to be given to his son Hamlet, the agent (let us remember) of his revenge. It's important, at this point, to recall that the Ghost also wants revenge against Gertrude. He may tell Hamlet not to harm his mother, but he also makes it clear that, as a result of the revenge against Claudius, Gertrude will have to sleep alone or, to use the Ghost's own language, that the only "prick in her bed" will be her conscience.

Why then has he come? The reason is clear. He wants to stop the conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude and get Hamlet back on the focused track of revenge. And his intervention is effective. Gertrude loses her growing emotional intensity (a quality which might well have led her, as I say, to answer Hamlet with some telling indication of her past life), and for most of the rest of the scene lets Hamlet do the talking.

I often wonder what might have happened (a fruitless but intriguing exercise) if Hamlet and Gertrude had been allowed to have a *real* conversation where Gertrude really confronted her son with the truth of her feelings about Hamlet Senior and Claudius, where she had at least once tried to make him see her side of the story and where Hamlet actually listened carefully. The fact that the Ghost makes sure that doesn't happen suggests to me that the results would not have been particularly flattering to him and might have acquainted Hamlet with some facts of life which would have made the revenge impossible.

My own view is that the ghost of Hamlet Senior and what that symbolizes are, more than anything else, responsible for the conditions in Elsinore and for the climate which makes everyone in this play a victim. Claudius and Gertrude tried to create a different form of life, Hamlet tries to sort out just where one might find a different form of life, but the ghost is ultimately too

much for them. Hamlet Senior, together with his reincarnation in Fortinbras, is the spirit of the world, and Hamlet's suspicions were right: the Ghost comes from the Devil, who is responsible for the world of Elsinore against which no one can struggle successfully.

I'm not suggesting that this particular reading of the play is especially privileged over any other. As I have said repeatedly, this is a very complex and ambiguous work which admits of many possibilities. But I like this possibility because it answers to my immediate response to the play, that combination of sympathy and distaste which every main character in it elicits from me, the sense that they are all in the grip of something which they cannot fully understand or fight successfully against. That interpretation makes this play a particularly bitter and despairing vision of life, without the potential affirmations of traditional comedy or tragedy. But for me it makes the best sense of the puzzling ambiguities at the heart of our most elusive literary work.