

# Hamlet's characteristics as a dutch prince

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Hamlet is the most baffling of the great plays. It is the tragedy of a man and an action continually baffled by wisdom. The man is too wise. The dual action, pressing in both cases to complete an event, cannot get past his wisdom into the world. The action in one case is a bad one. It is simply murder. In the other, and more important case, it is, according to our scheme, also a bad one. It is revenge, or, at best, the taking of blood for blood. In the Shakespearean scheme it is not revenge, it is justice, and therefore neither good nor bad but necessary. The situation which causes the tragedy is one very common in Shakespeare's system. Life has been wrenched from her course. Wrenching is necessary to bring her back to her course or to keep her where she is. Hamlet is a man who understands too humanly to wish to wrench either this way or that, and too shrewdly to be himself wrenched by grosser instruments of Fate.

The action consists in the baffling of action. Mostly, it consists in the baffling of life's effort to get back to her course. All through the play there is the uneasiness of something trying to get done, something from outside life trying to get into life, but baffled always because the instrument chosen is, himself, a little outside life, as the wise must be. This baffling of the purpose of the dead leads to a baffling of the living, and, at last, to something like an arrest of life, a deadlock, in which each act, however violent, makes the obscuring of life's purpose greater.

The powers outside life send a poor ghost to Hamlet to prompt him to an act of justice. After baffled hours, often interrupted by cock-crow, he gives his message. Hamlet is charged with the double task of executing judgment and showing mercy. It is a charge given to many people (generally common

people) in the system of the plays. It is given to two other men in this play. It is nothing more than the fulfilling of the kingly office, so bloodily seized by Claudius before the opening of the play. At this point, it may be well to consider the society in which the kingly office is to be exercised.

The society is created with Shakespeare's fullest power. It is not an image of the world in little, like the world of the late historical plays. It is an image of the world as intellect is made to feel it. It is a society governed by the enemies of intellect by the sensual and the worldly, by deadly sinners and the philosophers of bread and cheese. The King is a drunken, incestuous murderer, who fears intellect. The Queen is a false woman, who cannot understand intellect. Polonius is a counsellor who suspects intellect. Ophelia is a doll without intellect. Laertes is a boor who destroys intellect. The courtiers are parasites who flourish on the decay of intellect. Fortinbras, bright and noble, marching to the drum to win a dunghill, gives a colour to the folly. The only friends of the wise man are Horatio, the schoolfellow, and the leader of a cry of players.

The task set by the dead is a simple one. All tasks are simple to the simple-minded. To the delicate and complex mind so much of life is bound up with every act that any violent act involves not only a large personal sacrifice of ideal, but a tearing-up by the roots of half the order of the world. Wisdom is founded upon justice; but justice, to the wise man, is more a scrupulous quality in the mind than the doing of expedient acts upon sinners. Hamlet is neither "weak" nor "unpractical," as so many call him. What he hesitates to do may be necessary, or even just, as the world goes, but it is a defilement

of personal ideals, difficult for a wise mind to justify. It is so great a defilement, and a world so composed is so great a defilement, that death seems preferable to action and existence alike.

The play at this point presents a double image of action baffled by wisdom. Hamlet baffles the dealing of the justice of Fate, and also the death plotted for him by his uncle. His weapon, in both cases, is his justice, his precise scrupulousness of mind, the niceness of mental balance which gives to all that he says the double-edge of wisdom. It is the faculty, translated into the finer terms of thought, which the ghost seeks to make real with bloodshed. Justice, in her grosser as in her finer form, is concerned with the finding of the truth. The first half of the play, though it exposes and develops the fable, is a dual image of a search for truth, of a seeking for a certainty that would justify a violent act. The King is probing Hamlet's mind with gross human probes, to find out if he is mad. Hamlet is searching the King's mind with the finest of intellectual probes, to find out if he is guilty. The probe used by him, the fragment of a play within a play, is the work of a man with a knowledge of the impotence of intellect. Our wills and fates do so contrary run That our devices still are overthrown" and a faith in the omnipotence of intellect " Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.

To this man, five minutes after the lines have exposed the guilty man, comes a chance to kill his uncle. Hamlet " might do it at"- while he is at prayers. The knowledge that the sword will not reach the real man, since damnation comes from within, not from without, arrests his hand. Fate offers an instant for the doing of her purpose. Hamlet puts the instant by, with his baffling

slowness, made up of mercy and wisdom. Fate, or the something outside life which demands the King's blood, so that life may go back to her channel, is foiled. The action cannot bring itself to be. A wise human purpose is, for the moment, stronger than the eternal purpose of Nature, the roughly just.

It is a part of this play's ironic teaching that life must not be baffled; but that, when she has been wrenched from her course, she must either be wrenched back to it or kept violently in the channel to which she has been forced.

In Macbeth , a not dissimilar play, the life violently altered is kept in the strange channel by a succession of violent acts. In Hamlet , when Hamlet's merciful wisdom has decided that the life violently altered shall not be wrenched back, his destroying wisdom decides that she shall not be kept in the strange channel. The King, just in his way, seeks to find out if Hamlet be sane. If Hamlet be sane, he must die. His death will secure the King's position. By his death life will be kept in the strange channel. Polonius, the King's agent, learns that Hamlet is sane and something more. Fate demands violence this way if she may not have it in the other. She offers an instant for the doing of her purpose. Hamlet puts the instant by with his baffling swiftness, which strikes on the instant, when the Queen's honour and his own life depend on it. The first bout in this play of the baffling of action falls to Hamlet. The second bout, in which the King's purpose is again baffled, by the sending of the two courtiers to their death in England, also falls to Hamlet. The bloody purpose from outside life and the bloody purpose from within life are both baffled and kept from being by the two extremes so perfectly balanced in the wise nature.

Extremes in the Shakespearean system are tragical things. In Shakespeare, the pathway of excess leads, not as with Blake, to the palace of wisdom, but to destruction. The two extremes in Hamlet, of slowness and swiftness, set up in life the counter forces which destroy extremes, so that life, the common thing, may continue to be common. The mercy of Hamlet leaves the King free to plot his death. The swiftness of Hamlet; gives to the king a hand and sword to work his will.

In other plays, the working of extremes to the punishment dealt by life to all excess is simple and direct. In this play, nothing is simple and direct. Fate's direct workings are baffled by a mind too complex to be active on the common planes. The baffling of Fate's purpose leads to a condition in life like the "slack water" between tides. Laertes, when his father is killed, raises the town and comes raving to the presence to stab the killer. He is baffled by the King's wisdom. Ophelia, "incapable of her own distress," goes mad and drowns herself. The play seems to hesitate and stand still while the energies spilled in the baffling of Fate work and simmer and grow strong, till they combine with Fate in the preparation of an end that shall not be baffled. Even so, "the end men looked for cometh not." The end comes to both actions at once in the squalor of a chance-medley. Fate has her will at last. Life who was so long baffled, only hesitated. She destroys the man who wrenched her from her course, and the man who would neither wrench her back nor let her stay, and the women who loved these men, and the men who loved them. Revenge and chance together restore life to her course, by a destruction of the lives too beastly, and of the lives too hasty, and of the

lives too foolish, and of the life too wise, to be all together on earth at the same time.

It is difficult to praise the poetry of Hamlet. Nearly all the play is as familiar by often quotation as the New Testament. The great, wise, and wonderful beauty of the play is a part of the English mind for ever. It is difficult to live for a day anywhere in England (except in a theatre) without hearing or reading a part of Hamlet. Lines that are little quoted are the lines to quote here this fell sergeant, death, Is strict in his arrest. O proud death! What feast is toward in thine eternal cell, That thou so many princes, at a shot, So bloodily hast struck? The last speech, great as the speech at the end of Timon, and noble, like that, with a music beyond the art of voices, is constructed on a similar metrical basis. Let four captains Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage; For he was likely, had he been put on, To have proved most royally: and, for his passage, The soldier's music and the rites of war Speak loudly for him. Take up the bodies: such a sight as this Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss. Go, bid the soldiers shoot.

Masefield, John. Shakespeare. New York: Holt, 1911