

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Lord Chamberlain's, Globe (1601)

There is something absurd, now, about a brief account of *Hamlet*. As the Polish critic Jan Kott pointed out a generation ago, a bibliography of writings on the subject would contain more entries than the telephone directory of a major city. It has been interpreted thousands of times; it has been mythologized by European intellectuals from Turgenev to Derrida; it has provided the standard *rite de passage* for English actors for over three centuries; today it is adopted and adapted all over the world. Is it possible to put this world-historical genie back in its bottle – to pretend that *Hamlet* is (as it once was) just another English Renaissance play?

In some respects it is a remake of *The Spanish Tragedy**. The older play, first staged in about 1587, seems to have been updated for the Lord Admiral's Men in the late 1590s; *Hamlet* was presented by the Lord Chamberlain's in 1601, and was soon equally famous. It recycles Kyd's main ingredients: the ghost, the father-son relationship, the delayed revenge, the journey through madness, the revelatory play within the play. Ironically, a play that has elicited a more personal response from readers and actors than almost any other seems, on the face of it, to have been made not out of personal experience but out of theatrical counters which were already in circulation.

Less strikingly but perhaps more significantly, the plays share the same social setting. In *Hamlet*, as in *The Spanish Tragedy*, and as in countless later plays in the genre they helped to establish, the action is immersed in the hierarchies and habits of a Renaissance court. This is insistent to the point of claustrophobia in *Hamlet*: virtually every scene takes place at court, and excursions into the outside world, like Hamlet's voyage or Ophelia's death, are brief, narrated and slightly phantasmagoric. The court is the world; nowhere else is altogether real. It is a surprisingly limited social and historical horizon for a play with – clearly – such universal resonance.

Two characteristics of court society are particularly interesting from the point of view of the theatre. One is that it is ambiguously public and domestic at once: it is the headquarters of the state, but also the home of the royal family. Space in *Hamlet* is intimate, but overdetermined as well. Hamlet's conversations are liable to overhearing, interruption,

concealed intention. Even the queen's 'closet' is not really closed, but penetrated by Polonius, by the ghost, and by the suspicion that she will report everything to Claudius. At court one is never alone. Consequently there are no purely private stories; they are all also stories about the society as a whole; the individual opens on to the political, and vice versa. And the other interesting characteristic of the court is its symbolic organization. One of its functions, I mean, is the ritual signification of war and peace, triumphs and humiliations, marriages and deaths. It is in this sense a ceremonial theatre, disposing its members in meaningful patterns, and deploying a theatrical means of expression – music, speeches, costumes, processions, dances, tournaments, masques. The court was an instrument for dramatizing the life of the state, as Shakespeare's company will have been aware (the official responsible for managing it was after all their patron the Lord Chamberlain).

One way to retrieve Hamlet from his Romantic myth, then, is to turn away from the prince and ask about his society instead. 'The Prince's consciousness', we are often told, 'is obviously the play's centre.'² He represents it as ineffable – 'I have that within which passes show' – and critics ancient and modern have tended to take him at his word. Few roles in drama imply so compellingly the presence of a *person*. But as Laertes reminds Ophelia, 'the Prince's consciousness' is not autonomous:

his will is not his own,
For he himself is subject to his birth.
He may not, as unvalued persons do,
Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
The sanctity and health of the whole state;
And therefore must his choice be circumscribed
Unto the voice and yielding of that body
Whereof he is the head. (1.3.17–24)

Let's see what happens, then, if we take it that the dramatic centre is not Hamlet after all, but 'the sanctity and health of the whole state'.³

² *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 37.

³ The phrase appears differently in different editions of this textually complicated play. The edition of Shakespeare which I am using throughout seems to me to have made the wrong choice here: I have given the line that appears in the 1623 Folio.

And in fact these are in question from the very start. When the court – including Hamlet – first appears, Claudius announces:

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
The memory be green, and that it us befitted
To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom
To be contracted in one brow of woe,
Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
That we with wisest sorrow think on him
Together with remembrance of ourselves.
Therefore, our sometime sister, now our queen,
The imperial jointress to this war-like state,
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
With an auspicious, and a dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife . . . (1.2.1–14)

What is the *ritual state* of this court? Is it in mourning for the loss of its old king, or is it celebrating its new king's wedding? In practical terms it appears to be in good order, but symbolically it is chaotic: as everyone remarks (even Claudius), the state is 'disjoint and out of frame'. His speech acknowledges this and simultaneously tries to resolve it, as an increasingly desperate series of oxymorons ('wisest sorrow', 'defeated joy', 'mirth in funeral') pulls the incompatible proprieties into a merely syntactic connectedness. Meanwhile, the whole court is clearly dressed for the marriage except Hamlet, who is in mourning. So the scene is a double image of dislocated ritual: the contradiction is present verbally in the king's tortuous rhetoric and visually in the prince's anomalous appearance. Denmark appears as a state which has lost the capacity to represent itself.

It goes on. When Polonius is killed his body is dragged indecorously round the building, and eventually buried 'hugger-mugger'; this second ritual failure precipitates Ophelia's madness, in which she performs an opaque funeral ceremony of her own. And then her burial is a deliberately incomplete occasion (a 'maim'd rite', like all the others), prefaced by a mocking epitaph for a dead fool, and profaned by the spectacle of two young men fighting in her grave. Like Ophelia herself, Gertrude improvises her own ceremony, again in terms that recall Claudius's

opening mix-up of death and marriage, scattering flowers on Ophelia's corpse and saying: 'I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid, / And not have strew'd thy grave' (5.1.245–6).

Denied ceremonial representation, death infiltrates the ceremonies that are supposed to compose the court's life. The play, an official occasion of delight, is twisted into an accusation of murder and broken off in confusion. And the drama ends in a fight to the death disguised as a sporting contest, while the royal family drink to one another's health with poisoned wine. Only when it is over does Fortinbras arrive, to survey the carnage, deplore its indecorum, and give orders for the proper ceremonial treatment of Hamlet's body, thus restoring the symbolic order of the court.

This ritual confusion is not a mere question of etiquette. The court's ceremonial breakdowns generate other, menacing modes of representation. The dead king, not having been laid fittingly to rest, walks the battlements at night. His son's mourning, with no communal observance in which it could be grounded, takes the aberrant forms of melancholy and madness. Polonius's children are similarly alienated in their mourning, Ophelia in madness and Laertes in insurrection. Even the players take on some of the undischarged ritual energy, presenting Claudius with a spooky reenactment of his fratricide, and offering the prince an identification with Pyrrhus, the vengeful son of a dead hero, butchering a king. These wild languages overlap despite their diversity. The ghost is a *likeness* of the king, assuming his shape as the player does in *The Murder of Gonzago*: spirit world and theatre are not quite separate. Theatre and madness similarly merge: Hamlet's antic disposition is, with famous ambiguity, both a psychological state and a piece of play-acting. Haunting, madness, theatre and rebellion bleed into one another because of their common function in the economy of the play: together they form the court's obverse, nocturnal, dangerous and illusory, disconcerting the dramatic unity with unconformable registers – the ghost's antique magniloquence, Hamlet's 'mad' clowning, Ophelia's songs. What the court fails to represent is represented in spite of it, spectrally, behind its back.

So the dramatic grammar splits repeatedly: official and illicit, day and night, face value and hidden value. These oppositions run through its micro-structures as well as its larger patterns. Take one example, almost at random:

Hamlet: My father – methinks I see my father.
Horatio: Where, my lord?
Hamlet: In my mind's eye, Horatio.
Horatio: I saw him once, 'a was a goodly king.
Hamlet: 'A was a man. Take him for all in all,
I shall not look upon his like again.
Horatio: My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.
Hamlet: Saw, who?
Horatio: My lord, the King your father. (1.2.184–90)

The expression 'to see him' sounds straightforward, but this exchange relentlessly defamiliarizes it. Seeing him in imagination, seeing him in public, never seeing the like of him again, having seen him last night – every touch on the phrase gives it a new turn, so that when Hamlet says 'Saw, who?' it is as if he has momentarily lost track of what the words mean. The sudden appearance of the ghost in the conversation (like his appearance on the stage) shakes its codes, opening up gaps in its coverage of the world. A similar disjunction reappears much later as a joke, when Claudius asks Hamlet where Polonius is, and Hamlet offers him a range of answers: at a worms' supper; in heaven; in the lobby. Here, again, the court's incapacity to represent itself in the face of death appears in the minutiae of its language as much as in the incoherence of its state occasions.

The splittance is not something the writing observes from an Olympian standpoint that keeps its own coherence intact. It is itself subverted by it. Take for example the representation of Claudius. For two acts he maintains a rhetoric of state so blandly official that it seems possible that he is just an ordinary king and his nephew strangely deluded. Then, without warning, he turns to the audience and says:

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word. (3.1.50–2)

The lurid and pedantic simile is like something out of a book of emblems; the register is utterly distinct from the worldly cleverness which is Claudius's prevailing tone. His reign is thus two incompatible things, corresponding to the two different codes: it is a normal instance of monarchical government; *and* it is a grotesquely false cover for murder

and incest, a dystopian court like the ones in the Italianate tragedies of the next few years. No single sign can fix its unstable being; its time is out of joint.

At every level, then, *Hamlet* exploits the narrowness of its courtly setting to elaborate the image of a society failing to represent itself. But to say that is not to deny that the play stages the lives of individuals, including the one whose individuality has become so famous. Rather, the point is that the syntax of court society ties individual and communal languages intricately together, so that the symbolic breakdown of the community breaks down its members too, precipitating them into madness, violence and self-division. In that sense the 'consciousness of the Prince' – his addiction to soliloquy and the extraordinary illusion of his independent subjectivity – is a by-product of catastrophe. It is because he is not making sense in his own world that Hamlet speaks to ours.

Further Reading

- Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
Arthur McGee, *The Elizabethan Hamlet* (Ithaca, NY: Yale University Press, 1987).
Alexander Welsh, *Hamlet in his Modern Guises* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).