

FROM SHAKESPEARE TO KIERKEGAARD: AN EXISTENTIAL READING OF *HAMLET*

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ABSTRACT: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* yields conveniently to an existential reading. Hamlet may be seen as the prototype of the modern European man who struggles in a "rotten" world. In Denmark, he finds himself in a Sartrean "void". As he struggles to overcome his "nausea" by trying to unmask men, strip them of their fine appearances and show them in their true nature, Hamlet passes through the three stages of life described by Kierkegaard: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Since these stages are in contradiction with one another, there is a basic choice, an "either/or" facing man. Hamlet's actions or non-actions in the play can be studied within the framework of this context.

Key words: *Hamlet / Existential / Kierkegaard / Tragedy / Shakespeare*

ÖZET: Shakespeare'in "Hamlet" oyunu varoluşçuluk felsefesi bağlamında yorumlanabilir. Danimarka'da, kendisini Sartre'in 'boşluk' ('void') olarak nitelendirdiği türde bir ortamda bulan Hamlet, çürümüş bir dünyada mücadele veren modern Avrupa'lı insan kavramının bir örneği olarak algılanabilir. Hamlet 'bulantısı' ('nausea') yenmeye, insanları maskelerinden ve yanıltıcı görünümünden arındırmaya çabalarlarken Kierkegaard'ın betimlediği üç yaşam evresinden geçer:estetik, ahlaki, ve dini. Bu evreler kökenlerinde birbirleriyle çelişki halinde oldukları için, insan temel bir seçim -- 'ya ... ya da' ('either/or')-- yapmak durumundadır. Oyunda Hamlet'in tepkileri ve tepkisizlikleri bu bağlam içinde incelenebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Hamlet / Varoluşçuluk / Kierkegaard / Trajedi / Shakespeare*

Hamlet is a play which defies characterization as a certain type of tragedy. It is a problem play by being one that is pregnant to several types of different interpretations but never fitting one conveniently. On the out-set, it is a tragedy of revenge. Yet, it departs from the conventions of the Elizabethan revenge tragedies in some rather significant aspects and one needs to be careful when assigning this title to the play. Likewise, it is very risky to apply the straightforward Aristotelian formula of tragedy to the play. Then, how should one approach *Hamlet*? One possibility is to approach it from an existential viewpoint for the play yields quite conveniently to an existential reading. However, one should not go so far to label the play as an 'existential tragedy" for technically, the term can be used in reference only to the literature produced after Kierkegaard's introduction of the concept and Shakespeare obviously neither used nor even knew the term himself.

A tragedy begins in prosperity and ends in misery: this is a simple tragic formula which does not fit revenge tragedies. In a revenge tragedy, the hero has not created the situation in which he finds himself and out of which the tragedy arises. When the action opens, the hero is seen in a situation which is horrible, but for which he has no responsibility.

In Elizabethan revenge plays the villain has two major functions: he creates the initial situation and the denouement comes about through his initiative. In other words, he unconsciously provides an opportunity for the hero. So, the revenger does not create the opportunity himself but forms his scheme on the spur of the moment. In the end, the villain - the initiator of the action - becomes the initiator of its resolution and the agent of his own destruction. In a way, he unconsciously gives a signal to the revenger, who, once the signal is given, produces a scheme of horror by which he destroys his opponent. But the point to be noted is that in doing so, the hero or the revenger becomes an agent. Invited by the villain to destroy him, the revenger descends to the moral level of the villain. So, the act of vengeance becomes as hideous as the original and the audience is morally perplexed at the end between feelings of satisfaction and outrage. But Hamlet is far more of an instrument and far less of an agent than are his fellow revengers and he never descends to the moral level of Claudius.

To make the point clearer, we can look at Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, which obviously is influenced by Seneca as a tragedy of blood. The audience sees how justice is brought about when it is left to mere human motives: not as heaven would bring it — cleanly and economically — but wastefully and brutally, hatred breeding hatred and contrivance countered by contrivance still the more ruthless. The vindictive bitterness of the avenger Hieronimo brings to the foreground the dilemma of revenge: from one perspective seen as a duty and from another as a sin.

Hamlet is different from other revenge plays because the whole story turns on the peculiar character of the hero. Hence, to ask why Hamlet delays the action and does not act at once is to fail to understand his unique character. Hamlet's agony of mind and indecision are precisely the things which differentiate him from the smooth, swift plotter Claudius and from the coarse, unthinking Leartes, as well as from all other common Elizabethan revengers. It is Hamlet's delay which prevents him from descending to the moral level of his opponent. We do not want Hamlet to stab the defenseless, praying Claudius. That is an opportunity, all right, but if Hamlet would have made use of that opportunity, he would have descended to the moral level of Claudius and the act of vengeance would not have satisfied the audience. Hamlet will destroy Claudius in his own characteristic way: by "rashness" and "indiscretion", and not by "deep plots". He will catch him at the moment when his guilt has been made clear to everyone. So, Hamlet becomes an executioner, not an assassin.

The tragedy of Hamlet does not lie in the unfitness of the hero for his task or in some fatal flaw; the tragedy lies in the nature of the work which is exposed to the hero's contemplation and in his sense of responsibility to the world in which he

finds himself. It is beyond dispute that Hamlet is unfit for his task as a revenger but that is not the point from which the tragedy arises. The tragedy is not that of a man who cannot kill; the tragedy is that of a sensitive man who has an existential outlook onto life. Hamlet towers above other plays of its kind through the nobility of its hero, his superior power of insight into, and reflection upon his situation and his capacity to suffer the moral anguish which moral responsibility brings.

Hamlet is the modern European man who struggles in a 'rotten' world. The play opens with tension and trouble in the air: the second line of the very first scene establishes the mood of the play: "Stand and unfold yourself", Francisco shouts. He means to ask the question "Who are you?", which later will become the core of Hamlet's dilemma. "Who am I?", Hamlet will ask himself; "Who are you?" to his mother and to Ophelia. And these questions will lead up to the final, unanswerable question: "Who or what is man?" - the existentialist's main concern. Man is not what he seems to be and the world is not how it seems like. As Hamlet, the student at Wittenberg, returns to Denmark as the Prince, he is born into a new personality. The young and idealistic student is in the real world now. He will start to discover the discrepancy between appearance and reality and between the ideal and the real. In Sartre's vision, man is born into a kind of void, a mud. And Hamlet is soon to realize that such is the world into which he is born. He has the liberty to remain in this mud and thus lead a passive existence in a semi-conscious state in which he is scarcely aware of himself or to come out of his passive situation, become increasingly aware of himself and experience terrible agony of mind. And that is exactly what Hamlet chooses to do. He refuses to be "bounded in a nut-shell and count [himself] a king of infinite space" for he is a thinking man and his "bad dreams" prevent such a vision (Shakespeare, 1983, Act II, Scene 2 : 252-254).

Hamlet is a thinker; yet this statement needs elaboration. Some critics regard this aspect of Hamlet as his flaw: he thinks too much so he is not a man of this world and this brings about his downfall. Disagreeing with such a view, I would like to argue that Hamlet is a thinker not in the sense of an abstract philosopher living in a different world but in the sense that he is a thorough existentialist. Hamlet exemplifies the existential concept that only when man thinks and imposes meaning onto life does life become worth something. As Hamlet points out, "there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it [Denmark] is a prison"(Shakespeare, 1983, Act II, Scene 2 : 250). Later on he discusses the emptiness of a life when man avoids imposing his own attitude on to it:

... *What is a man,*
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure He that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability of godlike reason
To rust in us unused. (Shakespeare, 1983, Act V, Scene 4 : 33-39)

Hamlet's brilliant imagery is worth noticing because it helps reveal the worldview through his eyes and shows us that whenever Hamlet thinks or speaks, he is at the same time a visionary, a seer, for whom the living things of the world embody and symbolize thought. He does not speak in terms of poetic images but in terms of keen observations of reality ('Gertrude's shoes', 'funeral baked meats'...). The absence of hyperbole and great dimensions in his speech establishes an inevitable comparison with such characters like Othello and Lear who awaken the heavens as they talk. But Hamlet prefers to keep his language within the scope of reality; yet, his images always hit their marks. He is a man gifted with greater powers of observation than others. He is capable of scanning reality with a keener eye and penetrating to the very core of things.

Hamlet's use of imagery reflects both his ability to penetrate to the real nature of man and things, and his relentless determination to break down the barriers raised by hypocrisy. Hamlet's boredom and disgust with the corrupt life, in Sartre's terminology his "nausea", can be linked to his desire to find out the underlying reality behind the appearances. Many of his images seem in fact designed to unmask men, to strip them of their fine appearances and to show them in their true nature. Moreover, Hamlet needs images for his 'antic disposition': he would betray himself if he used open and direct language. Hence, he must speak ambiguously and hide his meaning under images, puns, and parables.

Starting with his first soliloquy, Hamlet emphasizes the disrupting dimensions of life:

... *O God, God,*
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah, fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed. The things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. (Shakespeare, 1983, Act I, Scene 2 : 132-138)

Hamlet rebels against the chaotic life which faces him and regrets his being in a position to deal with it, saying: "The time is out of joint. O, cursed spite, /That ever I was born to set it right"(Shakespeare, 1983, Act I, Scene 5 : 189-190). But before doing so, he has to solve the problematic nature of reality and reevaluate his trust in human nature. He has seen that "one may smile, and smile, and still be a villain"(Shakespeare, 1983, Act I, Scene 5 : 108). Where is truth to be found, then? The ghost is somewhat real, indeed the vehicle of realities. Yet, it may be an apparition, a devil who has assumed old Hamlet's shape. From this point on, doubt pervades Hamlet's actions. After his return to Denmark, he senses some evil and the ghost confirms it ("O my prophetic soul"). This haunts him even in his dreams turning everything into filth and corruption. His trust in man and in life is shaken. What a shock that is for an idealistic young man of his age! And on top of all, it is expected from him that he act in this commotion. Being the skeptic that he is, he chooses to test the truth value of what the ghost claims and decides to put an antic disposition on.

Hamlet's loss of faith in humanity starts with the unexpected behaviour of his mother. He considers her hasty marriage as the fall from goodness and purity; humanity has fallen in the form of his mother:

*What a piece of work is a man, how infinite in
faculties, how noble in reason, in form and moving
how express and admirable, in action how like an
angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of
the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me
what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not
me - nor woman neither...* (Shakespeare, 1983, Act II, Scene II : 313-310)

Human beings, situated in the hierarchy between angels and beasts, exercise their beastly characteristics and their godly parts are dominated and repressed. That is how Hamlet starts to see humanity.

Disappointment often brings with it pessimism and even cruelty. After his disappointment with his mother, Hamlet begins to suspect everyone. He wants to find out if Ophelia is what she seems to be. She seems to be the image of innocence and devotion. Yet, like his mother she is a woman. Hamlet is uncertain regarding the true nature of Ophelia, and his cry - "Get thee to a nunnery" - reflects the anguish of this uncertainty. If Ophelia is what she seems, then this ugly world is no place for her. But if not, then a nunnery, in its other sense of brothel, is appropriate to her.

Hamlet's attitude to Ophelia has been quite controversial in Shakespearean criticism. With each type of different reading imposed upon the play, the interpretation of the relationship changes. According to some critics, Hamlet's misogynistic tendencies are clearly displayed in this relationship. Of course, misogyny is not pure hatred of women. Indeed, love and misogyny are not mutually exclusive concepts: one may love and need women but hate and detest the fact that he is dependent on them. The concept is linked to man's desire to be self-sufficient and independent. In other words, Hamlet may desire Ophelia but hate the fact that he needs her, and that may account for why he treats her so badly.

The Freudian reading of the play sees Ophelia not as a character on her own right but as a representative of the mother. Hamlet loves what any Freudian man loves: the image of authority - the dead father - and the object of the dead father's love - the mother. So, his apparent hatred of Ophelia can be seen as the manifestation of the hidden outrage and perhaps even hatred towards his mother. Identifying Ophelia with Gertrude, Hamlet wants to punish her for having betrayed his father.

The existential reading would assign a more logical and straightforward interpretation to the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship. Hamlet is the model of the existential man who lives in a symbolic exile, alienated from others. Like Camus' stranger, Hamlet can passionately desire Ophelia, but now that nausea has pervaded his world, he can never truly love her.

Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech is a clear manifestation of the existential man's concern with the arbitrariness involved in the human condition - that "thrownness" in Kierkegaard's terms. Man is thrown into life with no purpose at all and there is no distinction between existence and non-existence - 'to be' and 'not to be' in Hamlet's words - unless the individual imposes his own subjective meaning onto life.

Hamlet's growth throughout the play can be studied in terms of the threefold stages of life described in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. According to Kierkegaard, there are three 'stages' or 'spheres of existence' in life: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. There is no inevitable passage from one to the next, but rather a constant tension between them. The stages are contradictory with one another and therefore there is a basic choice, an "either/or" facing man (Kierkegaard, 1992 : 134). Either he could concentrate on personal aesthetic enjoyment - including the search for pleasure - or he could adopt a general impersonal ethical ideal which places universal law and duties above personal preference. In this context, Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia may be interpreted in terms of Kierkegaard's either/or. In other words, his acceptance of Ophelia's love - with its implications of physical and spiritual pleasure- and his devotion to the ethical ideal being mutually exclusive, Hamlet chooses the ethical life style, which has quite a few intersection points with Stoicism. The reader can infer that Hamlet, the student at Wittenberg, practices the aesthetic life style, for the pursuit of learning is itself some kind of a search for personal enjoyment and pleasure. However, it is quite clear that Hamlet, as the Prince of Denmark, shows preference for the practice of the ethical life style and devotes his life "to set things right".

The existential hero is an outsider and so is Hamlet. After the appearance of the ghost, Hamlet puts an antic disposition on and alienates his authentic self from the "mass", not permitting anyone to cross the bridge between the "I" and "they". The only exception, of course, is Horatio, who can be regarded as Hamlet's alter-ego. Hamlet's alienation or spiritual exile, which later combines with the physical, is illustrated by the pretended madness which is the result of the cosmic estrangement of the self from an nonunderstandable world. This apparently real world is ruled by Claudius; it is rational, common-sensical, and clear. It establishes a sharp contrast to the blurred and intangible world of the ghost, made up of apparitions. Hamlet's dilemma has its roots in this basic choice he has to make. He suffers from the existential 'angst' and feels the tragic tension between possibility and freedom to choose, on the one hand, and the limiting factors of the human condition, on the other. He knows that if he chooses to believe the ghost and trust the truth value of the seemingly unreal world represented by the ghost, he will be disqualified in the seemingly real world represented by Claudius. Yet, by remarkable contrast, the ghost is the agent of reality and truth, as opposed to Claudius, who is the embodiment of falsehood, hypocrisy and double-dealings.

Hamlet's madness is a revolt of authenticity against inauthenticity which masquerades as sanity in the world of Claudius. Both Polonius and Claudius - the two exponents of the 'sane' world - are champions of greed, ambition, and hypocrisy. So are the interchangeable figures of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They are all masters of manipulating circumstances. Hamlet's encounter with this false world

and his subsequent madness can be seen in terms of the existential man's letting go or self assertion against the absurdity of his surroundings. Although 'letting go' and 'self assertion' seem at first sight to be contradictory, they are not. They both lead to the existentialist's stubborn demand to have license to say anything he wants. Thus, Hamlet, the Prince, acts as Hamlet, the fool.

Hamlet devises the play-within-the-play to test the ghost and indirectly the validity of the world he has adopted. The result of the contrivance assures him that Claudius is guilty of murder. Now there are no obstacles on Hamlet's way; he can avenge his father and indeed, he does seem determined to do so. Yet, he cannot. Hamlet's overt reason for not killing Claudius is quite persuasive; yet, we may infer that Hamlet is more willing to wait than to get it over with. According to the Italian Revenge Code, if you kill a man, you must kill his soul and he should know you are the one doing it. So, Hamlet once again delays killing the king - the man who sent his father to hell. He starts waiting for an appropriate moment when he will have no time to ask forgiveness for his sins. Of course, Hamlet, seeing himself as an Italian revenger, is his own antithesis. He still has not worked through his dilemma; he does not know who he really is.

It is only in the last act that we find a Hamlet who knows who he is and who is quite at ease regarding his relation with the world. Hamlet of Act V is a changed man: mature rather than youthful, certainly quieter, and more attuned to divinity. Perhaps the truth is that he is at last himself, no longer afflicted by mourning and melancholy, by murderous jealousy and rage. Certainly he is no longer haunted by his father's ghost. It may be that the desire for revenge is fading in him. In all of the last act, he does not speak once of his dead father directly. The urgency of the early Hamlet is gone. He forms no plot and is content with a wise passivity, knowing that Claudius must act. A mysterious and beautiful disinterestedness dominates this truer Hamlet: "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (Shakespeare, 1983, Act V, Scene 2 : 215-216).

Hamlet has now passed on to Kierkegaard's third sphere of existence - the religious. According to Kierkegaard, man at this stage must suspend abstract, impersonal ethical rules in the interest of his free, personal religious growth, which requires a choice without outside criteria; that is, a leap of faith. Hamlet, the existential hero, could find no meaning in the universe except as he makes a leap of faith. Evidently, Hamlet has gained a crucial knowledge, but knowledge of what? And faith in whom?

This brings us to the longstanding critical debate about Hamlet and Christianity. Obviously Hamlet expresses some kind of a resignation. But the question is whether it is of a religious kind or not. Or is it mere fatalism? Is it an absolute faith in Providence? What is it?

After he returns from England, Hamlet does not do anything through his own initiative. The peculiar calm and serenity he radiates may signify Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith' onto some outside entity which governs the world. It should be noted, however, that Kierkegaard does not attribute any 'godliness' to this outside entity;

instead, he prefers to leave it ambiguous and does not throw any religious or mystic light onto it. We may see Hamlet's resignation in this context, or we may say that throughout the whole of the last act, Hamlet is dying. Feeling so close to death, he does not fear it any more; instead, he awaits it as a welcomed guest: "We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come..." (Shakespeare, 1983, Act V, Scene 2 : 213-215).

To the Elizabethans, *Hamlet* appeared to be a Christian play. Like the contemporary audience, they too saw in Hamlet man's feeble attempts to act purposefully in a hostile world. The failure of such feeble attempts may similarly be observed in *Oedipus Rex*. But what they perceived as the working out of God's mysterious providential plan strikes us as bitterly tragic. To the modern eye, the play is the negation of optimistic humanism. Even a man of Hamlet's intelligence and sensitivity cannot assert himself in this world and gain a workable degree of self-sufficiency, but is overwhelmed by emotional turmoil and the follies and crimes of his fellow men. When Ophelia laments his instability - "that noble and most sovereign reason/Like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh" (Shakespeare, 1983, Act III, Scene 1 : 157-158) - she draws attention to the collapse of a whole world view.

From a Christian perspective, Hamlet may be seen as the collapse of both the Stoic ideal and the existential ideal. For Seneca, the man who achieves Stoic self-mastery is godlike:

*The wise man is next-door neighbour to the gods
and like a god in all save his mortality. As he
struggles and presses on towards those things that
are laudable, well-ordered, undaunted, that flow on
with even and harmonious current, that are
untroubled and kindly adapted to the public good,
beneficial both to himself and the others, the wise
man will covet nothing low, will never repine.*

(Seneca, 1958 : VIII, 2)

Hamlet is disillusioned at the failure of this ideal in others and in himself. He could not achieve the Stoic self-mastery and act purposefully with that. Only at the end does he display the Stoic tranquillity in the face of death. And that is the very passivity and disinterestedness that we have discussed. Hamlet values Horatio because he is unlike himself:

*A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Has taken with equal thanks;... not a pipe for
Fortune's finger,*

To sound what stop she please ...

not passion's slave. (Shakespeare, 1983, Act III, Scene 2 : 65-70)

By subduing his emotions, Horatio frees himself from the effects of fortune and becomes the Stoic's wise and happy man.

In the Christian context, we should not be surprised at the collapse of the Stoic ideal in Hamlet because according to Protestant thinkers, it is absurd for the fallen man to strive blindly to achieve rationality and equanimity, let alone be godlike.

Hamlet fails as an existential hero. The tragic tension between freedom and the limiting factors of human condition is finally lost in Hamlet with the clear acceptance of the very limited human condition. Hamlet could not manage to impose meaning onto life and so the only way out for him is death. He no longer expects to achieve mastery of himself and his circumstances. In the graveyard he meditates upon a jester's skull, an emblem of the limits which confound mortal aspirations.

In full recognition of his weakness or nothingness in the face of the greater powers, Hamlet does not need to do anything on his own for it will be a futile attempt. He was able to seal the altered instructions and send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death, but it was not an exercise of his own free will: it was 'heaven-ordained'. At this point, Hamlet seems to have been purified of any hubris he might have had; his humbleness can be analyzed either in reference to the Christian doctrine or the ancient Sophoclean doctrine regarding the impossibility of man to be self-sufficient and independent. To me, it seems more apt to apply the latter instead of the former. Saying, "there is a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (Shakespeare, 1983, Act V, Scene 2 : 10-11), Hamlet acknowledges divine determination of events, but without enthusiasm, because he, as an existential hero, has failed.

At the end of the play, as Fortinbras succeeds the throne, the order seems to be restored, but the order is a rather superficial one. An existential interpretation would consider it to be ironic or absurd. The admirable characteristics of the existential hero are not replaced by the new leader. Fortinbras could be a good warrior-king, a capable statesman like Claudius, a revenger ... but can never achieve the existential ideal.

Hamlet is no typical Aristotelian hero, whose downfall is brought about through some flaw in his character. The tragic hero, when confronted by certain circumstances, predictably acts in a way that will bring him to his ruin. For example, Coriolanus' hubris causes his downfall and being fit for his role as victim, his ruin is found plausible and acceptable by the audience; Hamlet's fall, however, is not a consequence of a flaw in him. We love Hamlet for what he is. We admire his reflectiveness, his sensibility, and all the other qualities that cause the procrastination. Hamlet is what we would like to be or indeed are in our ideal selves. If Hamlet were not Hamlet, he would have avenged his father right away. But, what would happen then? We would have no tragedy. That is to say, what causes the tragedy in Hamlet is the hero's possession of certain qualities for which we admire him. Thus, Hamlet's downfall becomes our downfall.

The tragedy ends with the failure of a whole world view, and with the collapse of our idealistic trust in human freedom and humanity. For the modern reader, there is no deep-felt catharsis at the end. Feelings of bitterness and even revolt pervade us, instead. And the new order is far from our expectations. It is true that Fortinbras will be a much more capable king than Hamlet and from a very narrow perspective, it can even be claimed that Hamlet's sacrifice is necessary for the welfare of Denmark. Yet, that is not primary issue. We are much more concerned with the fall of humanity in Hamlet and we are completely disillusioned.

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