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# 'Hamlet', Art and Practicality

Joost Daalder

Throughout *Hamlet*, the hero shows a persistent fascination with art. This fascination has received remarkably little attention, yet it seems to me one of the key issues of the play. Once we become aware of it, we shall understand the purpose of much that otherwise does not make sense or seems curiously extraneous to this enigmatic drama. This will be particularly the case if we are willing to make our concept of 'art' a large one, so that we can consider under one heading a number of things that are undoubtedly associated in Shakespeare's mind. For example, the way Hamlet sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths as described by him in V.ii can aptly be regarded as the action of an artist. In this instance, the action is of course practical as well, but the practicality is of a very strange nature if the execution of these courtiers were Hamlet's only aim. He takes the King's commission away from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern while they are asleep, from which he learns that Claudius has asked the King of England instantly to have his head struck off. Hamlet appears to believe, though without firm evidence otherwise provided by the play, that his former friends 'did make love to this employment' (line 57), and has no compunction about sending them to their death.<sup>1</sup> However, from a purely practical point of view, the method which he chooses appears indirect and characterized by a sense of drama and cleverness rather than good sense. Indeed, Hamlet's own words point in this direction. He explains to Horatio that he wrote a new commission, and that before 'I could make a prologue to my brains./ They had begun the play' (lines 30-31). His sense of theatre is such that before he could provide his brains with a prologue, they (i.e. his brains) had commenced writing the play itself. The new commission requests the King of England that

He should those bearers put to sudden death,  
Not shriving-time allow'd.  
(lines 45-46)

What Hamlet is concerned with here is not the effectiveness of his action,

but its effect, and its effect on his own mind at that. No-one else will ever know precisely what he has done, other than the unimaginative Horatio. Even if Claudius had still been alive when the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern gets reported he would hardly have been able to guess that the King of England had acted on Hamlet's instruction, not his own, and he certainly would not have realized that Hamlet's denial of 'shriving-time' is a way of retaliating for the fact that Claudius similarly deprived his brother of the last rites when he killed him. Alternatively, if Hamlet does expect Claudius to see the parallel, he is again amazingly indirect and stages a very dangerous play; in this case, the contrast between the artistic cleverness and the practical silliness of Hamlet's action is the more glaring.

Such a contrast is, I believe, what we have to see in the central part of the play where Hamlet renews his contact with the players whom he instructs to act the play-within-the-play.

In II.ii Hamlet reveals — probably without theatricality — the cause of what others see as the 'antic disposition' which he decided he might put on in I.v.180. He no doubt exaggerates, but genuinely believes himself, when he says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern such things as (II.ii.295 ff.):

I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory ...

Hamlet here appears to be in the state of despondency which one might readily associate with what the Elizabethans called melancholy, or perhaps more accurately with what we call manic depression. The manic depressive ranges easily from a low' to a 'high' — and this is what Hamlet does, his talk of losing all his mirth notwithstanding, as soon as he hears of the impending arrival of the players. From lethargy, his mind springs into action with a series of questions as to how it comes about that they are on tour, whether they are still as much esteemed as when he was 'in the city', etc. It is in this state of excitement that he welcomes the players.

His reaction is immediately one of intense involvement. He remembers how the first player once delivered a passionate speech, of which he manages to quote part, and which is then continued by the first player. This speech concerns the killing of the old Trojan King Priam. Shakespeare wishes us to believe in a play which includes an account, by the Trojan hero Aeneas, of the way in which Priam was murdered by Pyrrhus. The ultimate source for Aeneas' speech is to be found in Virgil's *Aeneid*, but

for our purposes all that matters is that the speech gives us a situation somewhat like, but also quite different from, particular situations in the play *Hamlet*. Old Priam is to be seen as the archetype of a father. He had, in fact, fifty sons. Pyrrhus therefore in part resembles Claudius. His method of attack is less devious than that of Claudius, but Priam becomes a helpless victim of his savagery, just as it was easy for Claudius to deprive Hamlet's father of his life. And there is a striking parallel contrast between Priam's wife Hecuba and old Hamlet's wife Gertrude. Both are widows, but, in contrast to Gertrude, Hecuba is presented as suffering from immense grief. Indeed, Hecuba's suffering brings tears to the first player's eyes. Viewed this way, the speech is more important for what happens to Hecuba than for its presentation of Pyrrhus. Presumably, Hamlet somehow found this speech peculiarly important as a comment on his own situation, and it does affect him greatly in that he comes to contrast the player's grief about Hecuba with his own inactivity.

But this is not the only comparative strand. For it is also necessary for us to see Pyrrhus as a revenger. Pyrrhus was the son of Achilles, hero of the Greeks in the Trojan war, and Achilles had been slain by Priam's son Paris. So, when Pyrrhus seeks Priam's death, he seeks to avenge the death of his father. We need not assume that Hamlet himself is initially aware of all the parallels which the speech provides, but we can be sure that Shakespeare is, and that the effect of the parallels on Hamlet shows the impact of art on him. In the speech, Pyrrhus is shown as capable of hesitation, just like Hamlet, but able, nonetheless, to carry his intention into effect, which Hamlet has not been capable of doing.

Thus, at the end of the speech, Hamlet may be supposed to know, even if not wholly consciously, that there is a marked contrast, not only between Hecuba and his mother, but more importantly between himself and the active revenger Pyrrhus as well as the grief-stricken first player. That the effect of art is not lost on him is obvious from his soliloquy at the end of II.ii.

Indeed, what is striking about this soliloquy, in which he exclaims 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!' (line 544), is its preoccupation with the relation between art and reality, and particularly with the former. Significantly, it is particularly the first player on whom Hamlet comments. Initially, it seems that he may have learned a practical lesson from the first player's passion. For he finds it remarkable that the player reacted so strongly to fiction, while he, Hamlet, has a motive and a cue for passion

in reality. But the conclusion which Hamlet draws from this comparison is an odd one. His mind does not move towards his own reality, but away from that, towards what the player would do if that person were in Hamlet's position. And the answer, as Hamlet sees it, is that the player would 'drown the stage with tears' (line 556). So strong is the lure of art that Hamlet comes to believe that he will serve his practical situation best by putting on the play-within-the-play. His naivety in this decision is most striking, if only we reflect upon it. He thinks that a play is needed to reveal the king's guilt, and he now suddenly invents, as a further reason for putting on his performance, the notion that the ghost which he has shown no evidence of distrusting may, after all, be a devil.

The play-within-the-play is presented in III.ii. A contrast between the play-within-the-play and the earlier speech concerning the killing of Priam is that we can see the play-within-the-play as wholly within Hamlet's control. We are justified in believing that Hamlet himself is responsible, not only for its art, but also its practical effect.

At the beginning of the scene, his concern for the method of acting to be used is usually regarded as showing Shakespeare's own interest in such things, but the fact remains that it is Shakespeare's character, not Shakespeare, who insists on the most natural mode of delivery, so that art will hold the mirror up to nature. The point here is that Hamlet wants to make sure that his art is going to be good art, which it can only be if it is so natural that it cannot fail to affect reality itself. In this emphasis he does not divorce art from nature as something comparatively unimportant, but claims for it a position entirely consistent with his belief that Claudius may confess his crime if only the world of art presents him with it. What, in contrast with Hamlet, Shakespeare shows to us is that indeed the power of art is formidable, but that Claudius' real reaction could not be foreseen by Hamlet or any other artist. Hamlet, therefore, is wrong in his assessment of the impact of art on Claudius. It is true that Claudius' guilt is confirmed in the eyes of Hamlet and Horatio, who already knew about it anyway. But in reality Claudius does not confess his guilt, and reacts in a way that Hamlet had not anticipated.

The first thing that goes wrong for Hamlet, I take it, is that the King does not see the dumb-show. Hamlet's purpose in his staging of both dumb-show and play is no doubt that the former must reveal to the King that Hamlet knows how the King killed his brother, while the latter indicates that Hamlet will use the same method against Claudius in his revenge. His object is ostensibly to ensure that the King will reveal his guilt when the revenger announces his plan — i.e. 'Upon the talk of

poisoning' (line 283).

The dumb-show is thus not essential in provoking an immediate reaction from Claudius, but it *is* essential for Claudius to see it if Claudius is to get the full message which Hamlet is trying to signal to him. Without it, the King will partly misunderstand the message, and will certainly not confess his crime in public, as Hamlet hopes.

To see just what happens we have to pay some specific attention to the text. The dumb-show presents a King and Queen very much in love, like Hamlet's father and Gertrude. The King falls asleep on a bank of flowers (like old Hamlet in his orchard). He is killed by another man who pours poison into his ears. The Queen expresses grief (unlike Gertrude), but, after receiving gifts, is persuaded to accept the murderer's love.

We can see this as statement A. Hamlet's message to Gertrude is presumably that she has been won over to Claudius' love yet more easily than the Queen in the dumb-show. But his message is in the main aimed at Claudius, and it says, in effect: 'The circumstances here are very similar to yours. I know that you killed my father and how you did it.'

If the King had seen this dumb-show, he would undoubtedly have understood the parallel with his own situation. It would not, of course, have been necessary for him to *show*, in any way, that he was aware of the parallel. But it would have been possible for him to see the link between statement A and what statement B amounts to, viz.: 'I, Hamlet, not only know what you have done, but I am going to kill you in the same way.'

But the King does not receive statement A. Ophelia, who does see the dumb-show, asks Hamlet what it means, to which she receives a reply which she does not comprehend. She is in part right, however, to conjecture that the dumb-show may import 'the argument of the play' (line 136), i.e. that it may serve to indicate the plot of what is to come. Claudius, however, not only does not see this dumb-show, but also misses out on most of the ensuing action, for he only takes part in the conversation concerning the play when the King on stage is asleep and Hamlet has asked his mother how she likes the play. Claudius then says: 'Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in 't?' (lines 227-8). If Shakespeare had wanted us to believe that Claudius was watching the proceedings throughout, there would have been no reason for this question on Claudius' part.

What the dumb-show does not indicate, and what is also omitted from the ensuing dialogue between the Player King and the Player Queen, is

the identity of the killer. In other words, while the King is no doubt meant to guess that Hamlet knows that *he* is a murderer, he could have refused to show any reaction even if he had seen the dumb-show. But he would no doubt have been truly shocked by what now follows. For, after the King has become a spectator, Hamlet announces that a new player who has arrived upon the scene is 'one Lucianus, nephew to the King' (line 239). And soon afterwards he stresses that this Lucianus is a revenger.

What Hamlet intends is quite different from what the King perceives. Hamlet had put on the dumb-show to indicate to Claudius that he knew how Claudius killed his father. He had left the identity of the killer unknown, however. No-one else could see a parallel with the King, and even the King himself could not be positive that Hamlet identified *him* with the murderer in the dumb-show. Now, however, Hamlet announces that there will be a Lucianus, a nephew of the King in his play, who will act as a revenger. If Claudius had seen the dumb-show, he would have concluded that Hamlet had, in that dumb-show, revealed that he knew that Claudius was his father's murderer, and that now Hamlet is signalling to him that he, Hamlet, will act as a revenger against his uncle, just as Lucianus will do in the play. And if everything had gone according to Hamlet's plan, Claudius would have been able to put the whole pattern together once he sees Lucianus pour poison into the sleeping King's ears.

What happens in practice, however, is that the King does not know anything of the dumb-show or the ensuing action until he asks whether there is no offence in the argument. He is then told by Hamlet: 'No, no, they do but jest — poison in jest. No offence i'th' world' (lines 229-30). Hamlet also explains that the play, which he calls *The Mousetrap*, is the image of a real murder, and adds that no doubt the King and other guiltless people will not be affected by it. Such remarks may well make the King wonder, but the real bolt out of the blue for the King comes when Hamlet mentions that Lucianus is the nephew of the King in *The Mousetrap*, and is a revenger, and when that Lucianus proceeds to poison the King in the play. It of course still remains possible that Claudius quickly realises that Hamlet sees him as a murderer. In that case he is likely to be in much greater confusion than if he had seen the dumb-show. More probably, Claudius does not see all the intended connections at once, but feels immediately and strongly that Hamlet is playing a trick upon him, by letting all and sundry know that he has some grievance against the King for which he is seeking revenge, and that he will proceed to poison the King in just the way Lucianus has done. Or maybe the King does not even

see quite such a serious plan in what Hamlet does, but interprets the Lucianus episode as some sort of sick joke.<sup>2</sup>

It seems clear that Claudius does not immediately fear for his life. He has already decided in III.i that he would send Hamlet to England, when he had overheard him speak with Ophelia. In other words, he does not need *The Mousetrap* to make him feel that Hamlet may pose a danger. And immediately after III.ii, when Claudius comments on Hamlet following *The Mousetrap*, he talks in fairly vague terms: 'I like him not, nor stands it safe with us/ To let his madness range' (III.ii.1-2). It is only when Hamlet has killed Polonius that the King explicitly says 'It had been so with us had we been there' (IV.i.13), and it is not until the end of IV.iii that we learn that Claudius plans to have Hamlet killed by the English King.

It is, therefore, possible to exaggerate the harm that Hamlet does to himself as well as his mission as a revenger by staging the play-within-the-play. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly the case that he strengthens Claudius' conviction that he may be a danger if he is not sent to England. And although Claudius has responded to *The Mousetrap* by rising, it is not conclusively the case that he does so because he feels guilty, leave alone that he confesses his crime in public as Hamlet had hoped. The fact that Hamlet and Horatio assume that Claudius' reaction shows his guilt is not by itself a reason for assuming that they are right. And even if they are, little of practical worth has been achieved, as their conclusion is based on guesswork, not proof, and as the King is now extremely displeased with Hamlet.

The whole play-within-the-play episode, therefore, is something of an artistic triumph in that Hamlet does manage to spark off a reaction in Claudius, but from a practical point of view Hamlet's use of art is harmful rather than effective. His enjoyment of what he sees as a triumph at the end of *The Mousetrap* is largely beside the point except in a world which sees art as something to retreat into even if it damages one in reality. It is this world which, at least at times, Hamlet appears to inhabit, even to the extent that he does not really ask himself what the practical consequences of his play-within-the-play may be.

Hamlet's interest in art rather than practicality is also something which lies behind his adoption of the 'antic disposition', his guise of madness which is sometimes seen as a mere act, sometimes as an outlet for real madness, or at other times as a mixture of the two. It is not at all impossible to see Hamlet as actually *enjoying*, with artistic relish, his role as a

madman, and to stress that he shows, in this role, the same peculiar mixture of sophistication and silliness as he does in for example his staging of *The Mousetrap*.

There is support for the view that the adoption of the 'antic disposition' is in any case psychologically convenient to him in the kind of language which he uses just before he announces this strategy, for example when he says, hearing the ghost cry 'Swear', 'Ah ha, boy, say'st thou so? Art thou there, truepenny?' (I.v.157-58). Yet, bizarre and stressful though the words seem, they are probably also to be regarded as evidence of clowning, and zestful clowning at that.

But the first clear instance of behaviour compatible with the adoption of the 'antic disposition' (line 180) would appear to occur in II.i. Ophelia reports here that she has been much frightened, and offers the following account by way of explanation to her father:

My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,  
 Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac'd,  
 No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,  
 Ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ankle,  
 Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,  
 And with a look so piteous in purport  
 As if he had been loosed out of hell  
 To speak of horrors, he comes before me.  
 (II.i.77-84)

It is not difficult to see Hamlet's behaviour as evidence that he is mad on account of his love for Ophelia, as both Polonius and she guess. This is the more plausible because she says a little later that, as Polonius had commanded her, she 'did repel his letters and denied/ His access to me' (lines 109-10), which Polonius at once asserts 'hath made him mad'. In other words, Hamlet's pretended madness here would quite naturally fit his psychological state, and therefore be the easier for him to act.

But it is not necessary, and would probably be incorrect, to assume that the *only* significance of this love-sick behaviour is that it provides a fitting psychological outlet, tempting though it is to see the image of the hero as 'loosed out of hell', too, as a sign of stress — not, in that instance, the stress of rejected love, but presumably the stress of having met the ghost. No psychological explanation does justice to the likelihood that Hamlet *is*, after all, putting on an act.

Why, we must ask ourselves, would Hamlet choose to adopt this

particular mode of conduct, and not show his madness elsewhere and in a different form? The form does not perhaps matter so much, for it is reasonable to suppose that his behaviour would have seemed mad anywhere. But it must be significant that Hamlet displays it in the presence of Ophelia.

The reason would appear to be that the choice is not only fitting to Hamlet's state of mind, but that, insofar as he does have control over his actions, he wants Polonius to conclude that he is love-sick, and presumably hopes that Claudius will agree. For the ultimate purpose of the antic disposition must surely be, as has frequently been assumed, that Hamlet wants to mislead the King, so that he can carry out his revenge under cover. If so, Hamlet succeeds with respect to Polonius but, characteristically, fails in his attempt to delude the King. His acting is brilliant, obviously, in persuading others that he is indeed mad, but, like *The Mousetrap*, it does not succeed in the way intended. Nor is the outcome of this incident harmless to Hamlet and his cause. Polonius persuades the King to join him behind an arras in order to overhear an encounter between Ophelia and Hamlet, and he thus promises to produce evidence of Hamlet's love-sickness. The plan is suggested in II.ii.160 ff., but carried out in III.i. The beginning of that scene by itself shows that the King has some doubt about Polonius' explanation, for he says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (who have been hired to spy on Hamlet):

And can you by no drift of conference  
 Get from him why he puts on this confusion,  
 Grating so harshly all his days of quiet  
 With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?  
 (III.i.1-4)

The expression 'puts on' does not have to mean 'feigns', as Jenkins explains, but he concedes that it shows suspicion on the King's part. And although he is right to gloss 'confusion' as 'mental disturbance', he might have added that it could also have its modern sense; in other words, the King wonders why Hamlet is throwing him into confusion, as well as why the method adopted is that of pretended madness.

It is thus hardly surprising that he does not see the Ophelia-Hamlet encounter as revealing some supposed madness on account of love. Indeed, he wonders whether Hamlet should be seen as mad at all:

Love? His affections do not that way tend,  
 Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,  
 Was not like madness. There's something in his soul  
 O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,  
 And I do doubt that the hatch and the disclose  
 Will be some danger ...

(III.i.164-69)

It is interesting to see the King make a distinction between madness and melancholy. Obviously, he sees Hamlet as in principle coherent and 'normal', but guesses — not unreasonably — that he is the victim of some obsessive depression which may culminate in a dangerous outcome. He decides immediately, here, that he will send Hamlet to England, and his quickness may well be his response to Hamlet's imprudent words to Ophelia: 'Those that are married already — all but one — shall live ...' (lines 149-50).<sup>3</sup> If so, it is even possible that the King finds it merely convenient to refer to Hamlet's 'melancholy', but does not actually believe in it.

The antic disposition, in other words, like *The Mousetrap*, misfires on a practical level, and indeed is detrimental to Hamlet and his mission as a revenger. One may in fact conclude that the more artistically impressive Hamlet's devisings seem, the less wise they are from a practical point of view. Or, to put the emphasis and causal connection a bit differently, one may suppose that Shakespeare gives us a picture of a man who seeks escape from reality in a world of make-believe which he finds more appealing.

It is not as though Hamlet himself does not see that he should confront his task, for he repeatedly rebukes himself for not doing so. And we would be more escapist than Hamlet himself if we believed that Shakespeare approves of his preference for the world of art — a preference which, after all, not only takes Hamlet away from his mission but which is a serious impediment to it.

Should we believe, then, that Shakespeare wants us to see such things as Hamlet's *Mousetrap* only in a negative way?

That would not seem reasonable either, for if Hamlet had killed Claudius soon after the ghost told him to there would not have been a play, and it is impossible to see Hamlet's creative energy, however misdirected, as merely bad. As I see it, Shakespeare presents us with an irreconcilable dichotomy. He acknowledges fully the claims of a practical reality with which his hero obviously can hardly cope. Yet the world of art, despite its very real practical limitations, constantly provides its own fascination,

and offers material for reflection on the 'real' world even if it is otherwise ineffective in its dealings with it.

## NOTES

I quote from Harold Jenkins' Arden edition (1982), which, particularly in its wealth of interpretative material, seems to me superior to that by Philip Edwards (Cambridge, 1985), or G. R. Hibbard's (Oxford, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> If the King had believed that Hamlet intended to kill him he could have commented on Lucianus' action as signalling such a message, without revealing his own guilt. But in fact his reaction — which appears to be shared by others — is more in keeping with that of someone who sees himself as the victim of a prank. Thus Guildenstern reports him as 'in his retirement marvellous distempered' (III.ii.293); Rosencrantz says that Hamlet's behaviour has struck Gertrude 'into amazement and admiration' (III.ii.317-18); and according to Gertrude, Hamlet has his father 'much offended' (III.iv.8).

<sup>3</sup> There seems to be no evidence for the supposition that Hamlet wants these words to be overheard by the King, or even that he knows that the King is close at hand. We can, however, assume that the King is listening attentively, and cannot fail to pick up anything that might threaten his safety.