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Hamlet's Concept of Christian Womanhood, the Major Motive-Force for His Actions

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HAMLET'S CONCEPT OF CHRISTIAN WOMANHOOD,
THE MAJOR MOTIVE-FORCE FOR
HIS ACTIONS

by

Charles J. Cagney, S.J.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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1950

LIFE

Charles J. Gagney, S.J. was born at Chicago, Illinois June 15, 1925.

He graduated from Our Lady of Sorrows Parochial School, Chicago, in 1939 and entered Campion High School, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin in the same year. Upon graduation in 1943, he entered the Jesuit Novitiate at Milford, Ohio and was enrolled in the College of Arts of Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio. In September of 1947 he transferred to West Baden College of Loyola University, from which he received the Bachelor of Arts degree in the following June. He immediately entered the graduate school of the same University to pursue his studies for the degree of Master of Arts.

"Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of hearts."

Hamlet

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The perennial popularity of the Shakespearean Tragedy of Hamlet among all ranks of society has again been confirmed and strengthened. The large and heterogeneous crowds that attended Laurence Olivier's screen production of Hamlet proves that Hamlet appeals just as strongly to people today as it did to the Elizabethan audience over three hundred years ago.

Rivaling its popularity, however, is the amount of literature that has attempted to explain the causes for this popularity. In all English literature there is perhaps no other topic that has been the subject of so many theories by so many critics. Hundreds of books have been written about Hamlet, and new ones are being published every year.

In spite of this abundance of material no theory has appeared that solves the problems presented by this modern sphinx to the satisfaction of the people. Modern critics, like Bradley and Quiller-Couch, have sifted the different explanations of past commentators and added their own original ideas.

They have offered interesting and important new aspects to the question, but even their interpretations still seem incomplete and imperfect.

The question that naturally arises in a person's mind is why is it that no explanation fully satisfies all. Dr. H. Ulrici has given the best answer, perhaps, to this riddle:

Since the genuine drama must reflect universal history "in concreto," and contain its whole treasury of thoughts, tendencies, and motives, it is evident that there may be manifold ways of viewing it, even though one only can be the true central and culmination point, of which all the rest are but secondary radiations. This remark is singularly confirmed by the tragedy of "Hamlet." If, in all Shakespeare's pieces, it is necessary to dig deep before we can reach to the lowest foundation on which the dramatic edifice is raised, this is the case especially in the present one. Every fresh commentator who studies and writes about "Hamlet," goes deeper and further than his predecessors, and thinks he has reached to the true foundation, which, nevertheless, lies all the while still deeper and far beyond his researches.¹

The popularity of Hamlet depends upon a combination of many points, but its fundamental reason lies too deeply implanted in the human heart for any critical genius to be able to analyse it. Nor is it intended in this thesis to solve the problem. The hope of the present writer is simply to throw a different and more penetrating light upon a particular aspect of Hamlet's character.

A person's environment plus his religious training and beliefs have an important influence upon the moulding of his character. The critics in their analysis of Hamlet's character have strangely shied away from mentioning this important factor. This work shall attempt to correct this defect, for it seems that much of the richness and aesthetic beauty of the drama depends upon it.

Throughout the drama, the nexus between the character of Hamlet and his actions are closely interwoven. It is extremely difficult to treat of one separated from the other. Hamlet's greatest struggles are within himself. His melancholy, procrastination, and frustration seem to be a result of his sharp mental struggles. In order to understand these interior struggles, a person must first clearly understand the principles and ideals that guided Hamlet's life. According to the position that will be defended in this thesis, the struggles have arisen from the destruction by his mother of certain ideals regarding womanhood. A close examination of the tragedy reveals that his mother's sinfulness weighs more heavily on his mind than his father's murder.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, will be to reveal the ideals of Hamlet touching womanhood. From a proper understanding of these ideals a deeper sympathy for Hamlet will be aroused when his mother shatters them as quickly and care-

lessly as one shatters the glass in a window. One method to discover Hamlet's ideals regarding womanhood is to study the status of married love and motherhood during the period of his life. Evidently he must have thought of all these things in the light of his training, environment, and background.

The historical period of the drama is in the earlier part of the eleventh century, for that is the period when England recognized the suzerainty of Denmark. Most critics agree, however, that Hamlet reflects the social manners and customs of a person in the Elizabethan Era. If this is true, it seems that Hamlet's ideals would be shaped according to those of the sixteenth century.

If Hamlet is thus considered as a gentleman of the sixteenth century endowed with a "noble mind" and with the "courtier's, scholar's, soldier's eye, tongue, sword,"² then his refinement, culture, and ideals arise from one of two sources. They are due to the environment and training, either of Christianity and its Renaissance, or of the pagan Renaissance.

Villare defines the pagan Renaissance as a "Prodigious intellectual activity accompanied by moral decay."³ Does Hamlet

2 W. Shakespeare, Hamlet, ed. Hudson, London, III, 1, 15.

3 W. Barry, "The Renaissance," Catholic Encyclopedia, New York, 1911, XII, 766, citing Villare.

display the influence of such a spirit? His character seems to agree with the first part of the definition, but scarcely with the latter. In so far as a gentleman of the Renaissance was "a man acquainted with the rudiments at least of scholarship, refined in diction, capable of corresponding or of speaking in choice phrases, open to the beauty of the arts,"⁴ Hamlet perfectly fulfills these requisites. Those traits, however, were also characteristic of the Christian Renaissance. The specific difference of the two Renaissances lies in the way the refined manners were employed. The gentleman imbibed with the spirit of the pagan Renaissance believed that:

Anyone who would recapture and hold the greatest charm in life must not prize the supernatural, the theological, or the ascetical above the natural, the human, and the sensual. Satisfaction is better than sacrifice, and self-gratification than self-denial. One should not look to the gods more than to one's self and one's fellows. Indeed, one should strive sympathically to enter into the life and enjoyment of one's contemporaries and, perhaps above all, into the life and enjoyment of ancient Greeks and Romans.⁵

As is evident, the pagan Renaissance tended to cause dissatisfaction with Christian principles and to foster ideals of pleasure radically at variance with Christian concepts. Hamlet

4 P. Smith, "The Renaissance," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 14th, London, 1929, XIX, 128.

5 C.J. Hayes, A Political and Cultural History of Modern Europe, New York, 1933, I, 103.

displays just the opposite spirit. From beginning to end, he reveals again and again that he values the supernatural over the sensual and natural. A course of self-denial, not self-gratification, is what he attempts to impress upon his mother. From this it seems that his culture and ideals could only be those of a Christian. The whole drama, especially Hamlet's soliloquies, is filled with religious thoughts and frequent allusions to an invisible power, supreme over human affairs. The tragedy opens "with a preternatural visitor from the spirit world, and closes with the supernatural idea of angels bearing away a human soul to eternal rest."⁶ Dr. Ulrici says that "the whole fable, as expressly intimated in the first scene, is based on the religious ideals and moral doctrines of Christianity."⁷ Almost all noted critics agree that Hamlet was a Christian and ruled his life by Christian ideals. A satisfactory explanation of many of his actions would otherwise be impossible, as when Hamlet says to his mother, "Confess yourself to Heaven; Repent what's past; avoid what is to come."⁸

The belief that Hamlet was a Christian is further substantiated by the fact that some commentators even make him

6 S.A. Blackmore, The Riddles of Hamlet and the Newest Answers, Boston, 1917, xviii.

7 Shakespeare's Dramatic Art, 218.

8 Hamlet, III, iv, 149.

a Catholic. That position may be justified from external and internal evidence. Historically the play is set in the eleventh century when the terms Christian and Catholic were synonymous. Because of Hamlet's social characteristics, however, the time of the play is more properly attributed to the Elizabethan Era. Even so, the opinion of those who believe that Hamlet was a Catholic may still be defended from evidence within the play. Hamlet's father speaks of purgatory, a doctrine which is believed only by the Catholic Church.⁹ At the time of Ophelia's death a reference is made about singing a requiem mass, which is another Catholic ceremony.¹⁰ Facts such as those made Blackmore feel justified in saying:

There can be little difficulty concerning Hamlet's religion.... Shakespeare...ascribes the existence of the personages of the drama to the age of the first crusade, and portrays them with beliefs and sentiments common to the Catholic world of that day. Hamlet in person reflects the social life and manners prevalent in the dramatist's own time. Yet his prince is strongly characterized as a Christian prince of Denmark, firm in his belief, and unswerving in adherence to its unchanging principles of morality. Hence, Gervinus, certainly an unbiased

9 The Anglican Church definitely denies the existence of purgatory in its twenty second of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion: "The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardon, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God." The Book of Common Prayer, Oxford, 1866, 314.

10 Hamlet, V, i, 229.

authority, could confidently affirm that "The Poet has in Hamlet expressly given prominence to the good Catholic Christianity of the acting personages."¹¹

Whether Shakespeare intended Hamlet to be a Catholic or not, scarcely affects the purpose of this thesis. The important factor is that Shakespeare made Hamlet a Christian with high ideals and principles that have an important influence upon the play. A.C. Bradley, one of the most popular Shakespearean critics today, recognized that the religious element in Hamlet is one of the leading causes of the popularity of the drama.

If these various peculiarities of the tragedy are considered, it will be agreed that, while Hamlet certainly cannot be called in the specific sense a 'religious drama,' there is in it nevertheless both a freer use of popular religious ideas, and a more decided, though always imaginative, intimation of a supreme power concerned in human evil and good, than can be found in any other of Shakespeare's tragedies. And this is probably one of the causes of the special popularity of this play.¹²

Thomas Carlyle goes further than Bradley and says that the popularity not only of Hamlet but of most of Shakespeare's works is due to a religious influence, in so far as they are based on Christian principles.

In some sense it may be said that this glorious Elizabethan Era with its Shakespeare, as the

11 Blackmore, Riddles of Hamlet, 14.

12 A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, London, 1914, 174.

outcome and flowerage of all which had preceded it, is itself attributeable to the Catholicism of the Middle Ages. The Christian Faith, which was the theme of Dante's Song had produced the Practical Life which Shakespeare was to sing. For Religion then, as it now and always is, was the soul of Practice; the primary vital fact in men's life.¹³

Bradley says that religious ideas in Hamlet are probably one of the causes for its popularity. Carlyle calls religion the "soul of Practice; the primary vital fact in men's life." These critics, and many of the others as well, would probably agree that a person's religious principles have a strong influence upon a person's actions. Nevertheless, when they explain the causes for Hamlet's actions, they rarely mention this aspect. This thesis will try to fill in that gap. Many of Hamlet's actions, unexplainable to many critics, find a satisfactory solution when studied in the light of his religious background and beliefs, especially regarding womanhood.

The qualities and features that win respect for womanhood today are the same traits that in the pagan world made woman the instrument for the pagan's gross passions. Owing to the influence of Christianity, however, the status of womanhood rose from a position of degradation and abjection to one of esteem and reverence.

First, and before descending to details, we must observe that the grand ideas of Christianity

¹³ T. Carlyle, Sartor Resartus and On Heroes, London, 1921, 334.

with respect to humanity must have contributed, in an extraordinary manner, to the improvement of the lot of woman. These ideas, which applied without any difference to woman as well as to man, were an energetic protest against the state of degradation in which one-half of the human race was placed. The Christian doctrine made the existing prejudices against woman vanish forever; it made her equal to man by unity of origin and destiny, and in the participation of the heavenly gifts; it enrolled her in the universal brotherhood of man, with his fellows and with Jesus Christ; as the companion of man, and no longer as a slave and the vile instrument of pleasure. Henceforth that philosophy which had attempted to degrade her, was silenced; that unblushing literature which treated women with so much insolence found a check in the Christian precepts, and a reprimand no less eloquent than severe in the dignified manner in which all the ecclesiastical writers, in imitation of the scriptures, expressed themselves on woman.¹⁴

In England the elevation of womanhood until the sixteenth century received its strongest impulse from the example of the Blessed Virgin. Mary was the model to whom all women were compared. A woman was a good wife or mother in so far as she possessed the virtues of Mary, the model of wifeness and motherhood.

This high esteem for women reached its culmination in the sixteenth century, the period during which Hamlet lived. His ideals of womanhood were according to the Christian traditions and atmosphere of his times; and as a devoted son, he found the perfection of his ideals in his mother. When, however, his

14 J. Balmes, European Civilization, Baltimore, 1850, 136.

mother suddenly destroys these ideals by her incestuous marriage, Hamlet falls into the deepest melancholy and disgust with womanhood as a whole. His mother has outraged not merely a moral scruple, nor simply a mere aesthetic ideal; she has crushed utterly a high spiritual image which had been a guiding principle of Hamlet's whole life, an ideal "rooted in his intellect, enthroned in his will, and enshrined in his heart;"¹⁵ an ideal planted in his heart in earliest childhood and nourished into strength and beauty through youth and young manhood.

If this analysis of Hamlet's character is accepted, then an explanation of his actions--otherwise erratic and mysterious--easily follows. To prove the probability of this analysis will be the main burden of the thesis.

15 Blackwell, Riddles of Hamlet, xx.

CHAPTER II

THE BLESSED VIRGIN, THE CHRISTIAN IDEAL OF WOMANHOOD

During the Middle Ages England was noted for her zealous devotion to the Blessed Virgin and commonly called throughout Europe, "Our Lady's Dowry."

'The contemplation of the great mystery of the Incarnation,' wrote Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1399, 'has drawn all Christian nations to venerate her from whom come the first beginnings of our redemption. But we English, being the servants of her special inheritance and her own Dowry, as we are commonly called, ought to surpass others in the fervour of our praises and devotions.'¹

In the early seventeenth century Father Claude de la Columbiere, in a sermon preached before the English court, exclaimed:

O unhappy England!... I will not dwell on the honours received by the Mother of God at the hands of Englishmen in other days, nor speak of their devotion to the Queen of angels, so great that England in those days was called the portion or dowry of Mary.²

1 T. Bridgett, Our Lady's Dowry, 4th, London, 1.

2 Ibid., vii.

Father Edward Worsley in his book, A Brief Explanation of the Office of the Blessed Virgin, published in 1651, said:

I made choice to compose this work in honour of the most Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, whose dowry our own now distracted country was sometimes not undeservedly stiled, both in respect of the peculiar devotion our religious predecessors, above other nations of the Christian world, bore toward her, and her reciprocal procuring, by her powerful intercession, innumerable select favours for them³

In the British Museum is a manuscript, written early in the reign of James I, which likewise points out the strong devotion of the English to Our Lady. This leaflet describes a painting that hung before the altar of St. Edmund, a king of England:

In the middle pane there is a picture of our blessed Ladie. In the next pane upon her left hand, kneeleth a young King, Saint Edmund as it is thought, in a side robe of Scarlet, who lifting up his eyes and handes the globe or patterne of England: presenteth the same to our Lady saying thus:

'O blessed Virgin heere beholde this is thy Dowerie
Defend it now, preserve it still in all prosperitie.

His sceptuer and his crowne lying before him on a cushion, & St. George in armour standing behind him in the same pane, somewhat leaning forward & laying his right hand in such manner upon the Kings back: that he seemeth to present the King & his presents

3 Ibid., vii.

to our blessed Ladye. This may induce a man to thinke that it is no newe duised speeche to call England our Ladyes dowerie.⁴

That the English were strongly devoted to Mary is universally admitted. A few authors, such as Mr. Hallam, may call the devotion a 'monstrous superstition,' but no historian denies that the devotion existed. Most will even admit the influence of Mary's example in uplifting womanhood. Mr. Wright, who certainly does not favor anything Catholic, has written that while:

gross attacks on the character of the ladies are common in the Middle Ages, we also frequently meet with poems written in their defence, and in these a very common argument in their favour is founded upon the worthiness of the Virgin Mary.⁵

Some old poems found in the Reliquies Antiquae exemplify how devotion to Mary could uplift the honor of womanhood:

To unpraise women it were a shame,
For a woman was thy dame;
Our Blessed Lady beareth the name
Of all women where that they go.⁶

Christ to His Father He had not ane man;
See what worship women suld have than!
That Son is Lord, that Son is King of kings,
In heaven and earth His majesty aye rings.
Sen She has borne Him in her haliness,
And he is well and grund of all guidness,
All women of us suld have honouring,
Service, and love above all other thing!⁷

4 Ibid., v.

5 Ibid., 476.

6 Ibid., 476, (title or author not quoted in book.)

7 Ibid.

Mention of Mary may be found in many ancient manuscripts.

In the eighth century St. Bede wrote that "the minds of the faithful are...confirmed in solid virtue by the frequent thought of the example of His Mother."⁸ Oelfric in the tenth century speaks of the Blessed Virgin as the "comfort and support of all Christian men,"⁹ who as the :

heavenly Queen...according to her womanhood,... manifested by her example the heavenly life on earth; for maidenhood is of all virtues queen, and the associate of the heavenly angels. The example and footsteps of this Maiden were followed by an innumerable body of persons in maidenhood, living in purity, renouncing marriage, attaching themselves to the heavenly Bridegroom Christ with steadfast mind and holy converse, and with white garments, to that degree, that very many of them suffered martyrdom for maidenhood, and so with two fold victory went glorious to the heavenly dwelling place.¹⁰

In the twelfth century St. Aelred calls the Blessed Virgin "the honour of virgins, the glory of women, the praise of men...the Queen of heaven."¹¹ He adds that "He truly praises her chastity who execrates and scorns all impurity and lust."¹² Also in the twelfth century Peter of Blois boldly proclaimed the spiritual power of Mary: "Let the sun be taken from the uni-

8 Ibid., 84.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 37.

11 Ibid., 103.

12 Ibid., 45.

verse, and there will be night. Let Mary be taken from heaven, there will be amongst men only darkness and confusion."¹³ In a thirteenth century document are found the words, "Our dear Lady St. Mary, who ought to be an example to all women."¹⁴

These extracts sufficiently indicate what spiritual sway Mary had over women as their model for imitation, over men as their ideal touching womanhood. Mr. Lacky's History of Rationalism summarizes most beautifully and completely the effects Mary's example had not only on the Middle Ages but also on the civilization which inherited its ideals and principles.

The world is governed by its ideals, and seldom or never has there been one which has exercised a more profound and, on the whole, a more salutary influence than the medieval conception of the Virgin. For the first time woman was elevated to her rightful position, and the sanctity of weakness was recognized as well as the sanctity of sorrow. No longer the slave or the toy of man, no longer associated only with ideas of degradation and of sensuality, woman rose in the person of the Virgin Mother into a new sphere, and became the object of a reverential homage of which antiquity had no conception.

The moral charm and beauty of female excellence was, for the first time felt. A new type of character was called into being, a new kind of admiration was fostered. Into a harsh and ignorant and benighted age this ideal type infused a conception of gentleness and of purity unknown to the proudest generations of the past. In the pages of living tenderness which many a monkish writer has left in honour of his celestial patron; in the millions who,

13 Ibid., 137.

14 Ibid., 104.

in many lands and in many ages, have sought, with no barren desires, to mould their characters into her image; in those holy maidens, who for the love of Mary, have separated themselves from all the glories and pleasures of the world, to seek, in fastings and vigils and humble charity, to render themselves worthy of her benediction; in the new sense of honour, in the chivalrous respect, in the softening of manners, in the refinement of tastes displayed in all the walks of society, --in these, and in many other ways, we detect its influence. All that was best in Europe clustered around it, and it is the origin of many of the purest elements of our civilization.¹⁵

The Protestant Reformation attempted to destroy devotion to Mary, but it could not be eradicated simply by proclamations and decrees. Deeply enrooted in their hearts, it was too much a part of the English people to be forgotten over night. Even centuries later traces of its influence were still visible among Protestants. Charles Lamb in the nineteenth century wrote:

Maternal Lady with the virgin grace,
 Heaven-born thy Jesus seemeth sure,
 And thou a Virgin pure.
 Lady most perfect, when thy sinless face
 Men look upon, they wish to be
 A Catholic, Madonna fair, to worship thee.¹⁶

William Wordsworth also felt Mary's influence, or else he would never have written his famous "The Virgin."

Mother! Whose virgin bosom was uncrest
 With the least shade of thought to sin allied;

15 Ibid., 475, (as quoted from Hist. of Rat., ch.III, 44.)

16 Walsh, The World's Great Catholic Poetry, N.Y., 1941, 456.

Woman! Above all women glorified,
 Our tainted nature's solitary boast;
 Purer than foam on central ocean tost;
 Brighter than eastern skies at daybreak strewn
 With fancied roses, than the unblemished moon
 Before her wane begins on heaven's blue coast;

Thy image falls to earth. Yet, some, I ween,
 Not unforgiven, the suppliant knee might bend
 As to a visible power, in which did blend
 All that was mixed and reconciled in thee
 Of mother's love with maiden purity,
 Of high with low, celestial with terrene.¹⁷

If Protestants were still singing the praises of the Blessed Virgin in the nineteenth century, how much stronger ought her spiritual power to have been felt in the sixteenth century. At that time both Catholic and Protestant ideals regarding womanhood, wifhood, and motherhood were still founded on the person of the Virgin Mary. The Protestant Reformation did not directly intend to destroy the honor and dignity of Mary's virtues, but only the Catholic's pious method of practicing his Marian devotion. Consequently, we find frequent praises of Mary even in the works of Protestant divines. In 1539, Hilsey, an Anglican Bishop, wrote a Primer for Cromwell which contained many lines as: "Holy Mary, most pure of virgins all, Mother and Daughter of the King celestial," or "O glorious Mother of God, O perpetual Virgin Mary, which did's't bear the

17 Ibid., 454.

Lord of all lords."¹⁸

In a book called, A Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for any Christian Man, set forth by the King's Majesty of England, published in 1543, are found such words as: "The Virgin laketh not her laudes, prayse, and thanks for her excellent and singular virtues."¹⁹ Its preface speaks of the:

Incarnation of Christ which is the ground of our salvation, wherein the Blessed Virgin our Lady, for the abundance of grace wherewith God indued her, is also with this remembrance honoured and worshipped.²⁰

Although King Henry VIII had decreed all statues and shrines to Mary to be destroyed, still his last will began with the words: "In the name of God and the glorious and Blessed Virgin, our lady St. Mary." This is later followed by the words, "Also we do instantly require and desire the Blessed Virgin Mary, His Mother, with all the company of heaven, continually to pray for us."²¹

During the reign of Elizabeth, the Anglican Bishop Sandys wrote in April, 1560:

The queen's majesty considered it not contrary to the Word of God, nay, rather of the advantage

18 Bridgett, Our Lady's Dowry, 42.

19 Ibid., 412.

20 Ibid., 411.

21 Ibid., 443.

of the Church, that the image of Christ crucified, together with Mary and John, should be placed as heretofore in some conspicuous part of the Church, where they might readily be seen by all the people.²²

In an epistle of King James I of England to Cardinal Perrone are found the following words:

His most serene Majesty declares that the ever-glorious Virgin is indeed the most Blessed Mother of God, and has no doubt that she has been raised to the highest degree of honour that could be given by the Creator to a human creature.²³

Thus, there seems no reason to doubt that Mary was still the model for women in the sixteenth century. According to one sixteenth century poet Mary ought to have been the model not only for middle and lower class people but especially for queens and the nobility who are "daughters, wives, and mothers... of Kings":

In that (O Queen of Queens) thy birth was free
From guilt, which others do of grace bereave,
When in their mothers' womb they life receive
God as his sole-borne daughter loved thee.
To match thee like thy birth's nobility,
He thee His Spirit for thy spouse did leave
Of whom thou didst His only Son Conceive,
And so wast linked to all the Trinity.
Cease then, O Queens who earthly crowns do wear,
To glory in the pomp of worldly things;
If men such high respect unto you bear
Which daughters, wives, and mothers are of Kings,

22 Ibid., 412.

23 Ibid., 450.

What honour should unto that Queen be done
Who had your God for Father, Spouse and Son.²⁴

These words could easily enough be the echo of a prince's thoughts. It seems possible that a deeply religious prince during that age would naturally compare his idolized mother to Mary whom Richard Crashaw called the "crown of women, queen of men."²⁵ It is probable that he would find in his mother, herself a queen, all those virtues to be found in the "Queen of Queens."

As a final step, let this prince be personified in the person of Hamlet, the prince of Denmark. His deep love for his mother made him idealize her moral character, and he placed her virtue on a plane far above her merits. Suddenly an open scandalous sin causes it to fall from such a height. Hamlet finds his life-long ideals lying at his feet, shattered beyond repair. In the meantime, his mother remains completely indifferent towards her sin and the scandal it is causing. That intense melancholy and emotional disorder should so grip his character as to cause him to act from a fiercely vindictive spirit, is hardly surprising under such circumstances.

²⁴ Henry Constable, "To Our Blessed Lady," The World's Great Catholic Poetry, 177

²⁵ R. Crashaw, The Religious Poems of Richard Crashaw, St. Louis, Mo., 1914.

CHAPTER III

THE ANGLICAN AND CATHOLIC VIEW OF MARRIAGE

Simply to say that ideals touching womanhood in the sixteenth century were high, is vague. "High" is a relative term, and until it is specifically determined by concrete examples and principles, it cannot convey any definite meaning. In this chapter an attempt will be made to specify the high ideals concretely.

The Church's attitude towards womanhood, especially in regards to marriage, will be discussed first. Then it will be seen whether the Church's ideals in this regard were the layman's ideals, and whether they were ever realized in the actual lives of the people.

In regards to their principles on marriage in the sixteenth century, the Anglican and Catholic Church were identical. They differed on the point of whether it was a sacrament or not, but in all other respects their spirit and attitude towards marriage were the same. Even the words in their marriage ceremony were similar. It hardly could have been otherwise. The Anglican Church had only recently seceded from the Catholic

Church, and it naturally retained many practices and prayers based on the Catholic formula. So to use the words of one is to express the thought of the other concerning marriage.

They both attached a high degree of sacredness to marriage. This is expressed in the Anglican services in the opening prayer:

holy Matrimony...is a honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of Man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought, --in Canaof Galilee; and is commended of Saint Paul to be honourable among all men.¹

The same comparison of the union between the married couple and that of the Church and Christ is later stated again in order to impress upon the couple the holiness and sacredness of marriage.² The Church also advised that marriage should only be entered upon after a period of betrothal. It was not to be undertaken:

unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly and in the fear of God.³

1 The Book of Common Prayer, Oxford, 1866, 180.

2 "O God who hast consecrated the state of Matrimony to such an excellent mystery, that in it is signified and represented the spiritual marriage and unity betwixt Christ and his Church." Ibid., 182.

3 Ibid., 184.

Hamlet almost seems to be echoing that thought when he cries out against his mother's hasty marriage that within:

A little month, or ere those shoes were old
 With which she follow's my poor father's body,
 Like Niobe, all tears: --why she, even she, --
 O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason
 Would have mourn'd longer, --married with my uncle.⁴

The hastiness of the marriage, however, did not grieve Hamlet as much as the fact that it was an unlawful marriage. His mother had married her husband's brother, an act expressly forbidden by scripture⁵ and by a law of the Church.⁶ The queen was as much aware of this impediment as Hamlet, (this point will be proven later;) yet, she must have remained silent about it when the following appeal to their conscience was made in the marriage services:

I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgement, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it. For be ye well assured, that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God's Word doth all are not joined together by God; neither is their marriage lawful.⁷

4 Hamlet, I, ii, 147-151.

5 "And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is impurity; he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness."
Bible, Douay version, Lev., 20.21.

6 "A woman may not marry with her Husband's brother," taken from a "table of kindred and Affinity Wherein whosoever are related are forbidden in scripture and our laws to marry together."
The Book of Common Prayer, 318.

7 Ibid., 180.

This may appear to be a minor impediment and of little consequence to many people today, but just the opposite feeling prevailed during the sixteenth century. Incest was considered one of the worst immoral acts possible. It had a shocking effect upon Christians and was considered a most disgraceful and scandalous sin.

A marriage with a deceased wife's sister was not legalized in England until the twentieth century; and even a union with a deceased wife's sister's daughter, or any union within three degrees of relationship, was against the law. James I classified incest with witchcraft, sodomy, poisoning, and false-coinage, as "horrible crimes" that he instructed his son, "ye are bound in conscience neuer to forgive." In Scotland, it was punishable by death, and so also in England in 1650 when the civil courts took over from the ecclesiastical authority the enforcement of morals. It was "wicked" and "should not once be accounted under the name of marriage." Shakespeare again and again reflects this utter horror of the crime; in Lucrece, it is "that abomination"; it is "foul" in Pericles; Measure for Measure uses it as a comparison of the deepest infamy; and it supports the climax of Lear's curse addressed to the "great gods." Surely, such a violation of decency accounts for Hamlet's bitterness and for Gertrude's sense of sin.⁸

Shakespeare intended the incestuous marriage to have an important influence upon Hamlet's actions and character. The ghost explicitly refers to it twice, and Hamlet at least three times during the drama. This point, however, will be more fully developed later.

⁸ J.W. Draper, The Hamlet of Shakespeare's Audience, Durham, North Carolina, 1938, 115.

A striking similarity can be found between some of the prayers used in the marriage ceremony and the words of Hamlet about marriage. Shakespeare when he wrote the play certainly did not go through the Church's prayers, but he was conscious of the Church's doctrine on marriage. This would seem to imply that it was so interwoven into the lives of the people that they did have to go to a book to find out their obligations. In the marriage service the groom is asked:

Will thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?⁹

Hamlet tells how scrupulously his father fulfilled the vow. His father was so

loving to my mother,
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly.¹⁰

The ghost also affirms how faithfully these vows were kept. In simple but beautiful words he says his

love was of that dignity,
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage.¹¹

9 The Book of Common Prayer, 180.

10 Hamlet, I, ii, 140-143.

11 Ibid., I, v, 49-50.

The king fulfilled his obligation to "perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made,...and remain in perfect love and peace together, and live according to thy laws."¹²

The queen had also vowed to "live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony."¹³ Yet, she failed to "keep the vow" because she had failed to "live according to thy law," a law which explicitly forbade a woman to marry her husband's brother.¹⁴ Because of the queen's disregard for this sacred law of God, Hamlet bitterly complains that she has made "marriage vows As false as dicers' oaths."¹⁵ Hamlet's pain was increased when he would remember that at one time the queen

would hang on him (the king)
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on.¹⁶

In caring for her appearance, the queen was not so interested in deepening love between them as in obtaining praise. How different that is from the motives put forward by the Church.

Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible; even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.¹⁷

12 The Book of Common Prayer, 180

13 Ibid., 180.

14 Ibid., 318.

15 Hamlet., III, iv, 45.

16 Ibid., I, ii, 144.

17 The Book of Common Prayer, 183.

Instead of showing "a meek and quiet spirit," instead of being "loving and amiable, faithful and obedient to her husband; and in all quietness, sobriety, and peace, be a follower of holy and godly matrons,"¹⁸ the queen performed

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty;
Calls virtue hypocrite; takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love,
And sets a blister there; makes marriage-vows
As false as dicer's oaths: O, such a deed
As from the body of contraction (marriage) plucks
The very soul, and sweet religion makes
A rhapsody of words! Heaven's face doth glow;
Yea, this solidity and compound mass
With tristful visage, as against the doom
Is thought-sick at the act.¹⁹

Hamlet refused to recognize Claudius as his father and told him that "father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh."²⁰ In these words Hamlet once again seems to be echoing the Church's command that "they two shall be one flesh," and "that it should never be lawful to put asunder those whom thou by matrimony has made one."²¹

Up to this point the prayers from the Anglican services have been employed to point out the sacred obligations of marriage. That the Catholic Church regarded marriage with the same

18 Ibid., 182.

19 Hamlet., III, iv, 40-51.

20 Ibid., III, vii, 52.

21 The Book of Common Prayer, 182.

degree of sacredness as the Anglican is immediately revealed in the opening words of its service.

You are about to enter into a union which is most sacred and most serious. It is most sacred, because established by God Himself; most serious, because it will bind you together for life in a relationship so close and so intimate, that it will profoundly influence your whole future. That future, with its hopes and disappointments, its pains, its joys and its sorrows, is hidden from your eyes. You know that these elements are mingled in every life, and are to be expected in your own.²²

To quote any more of the Catholic service would be merely to repeat what has already been said from the Anglican ceremony. As has been pointed out before, the two are alike, for the Anglican services derived almost all their prayers from the Catholic formula. Both express the sacredness of marriage by comparing the union of husband and wife to the mystical union of Christ and His Church. Both express its indissolubility by adopting the words of Christ, "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." Both stress the need of sacrifice and generosity based on conjugal love in order to overcome difficulties and to fulfil the solemn obligations imposed on them by their marriage vows. Both make the couple vow "to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."²³

²² Priest's New Ritual, Rev. P. Griffith, Baltimore, 1939, 206.

²³ Ibid., 210.

Both Churches put the eternal seal upon the marriage by the invocation of the Blessed Trinity. Both use the ring as a token and symbol of the vow between the newly married couple. Finally, both pray that God will protect and bless them "in the holy bonds of matrimony."²⁴

That was the Church's doctrine regarding marriage in the sixteenth century. The next question to be asked is whether the Elizabethan people actually believed and practiced these ideals. That step was skipped over when Hamlet's thoughts were compared to the Church's regarding marriage. Now it ought to be proved. The proofs will be explained in the following order. It will be shown: first, that English noblemen held marriage and womanhood in high esteem; secondly, that they expected the women among the nobility to live up to their ideals; and thirdly, that women actually lived up to these ideals and reached this perfection. For proof resort must be had to different works written about womankind during the period itself.

Some good examples can be found in two of Spenser's poems, his Amoretti and Epithalamion. The Amoretti was addressed to the lady who did become his wife, and the thoughts expressed in it arose from their actual courtship, just as the thoughts in his Epithalamion arose from their marriage. Because of their

24 Ibid., 211.

autobiographical nature, it may be believed that the expression of Spenser's feelings was genuine, that he actually believed and felt what he wrote, and that he honored and respected her as deeply as he claimed.

The fortunate man, Spenser says, is he who has won for himself the love of a woman with high ideals:

Thrise happie she that is so well assured
 Unto her selfe, and settled so in hart,
 That nether will for better be allured
 Ne feared with worse to any chauce to start:
 But like a stedy ship, doth strongly prt
 The raging waves, and keepes her course aright...
 Such selfe assurance need not feare the spight
 Of grudging foes, ne favour seek of friends:
 But in the stay of her owne stedfast might,
 Nether to one her selfe nor other bends.
 Most happy she that most assured doth rest:
 But he most happy who such one loves best.²⁵

Like the Church, Spenser believed that marriage should not be hastily undertaken. A reasonable amount of time ought to be allowed to pass so that the love may be proven to be real love and not just infatuation. Former suitors for his fiancée's hand had complained of her seeming coldness and indifference towards their profession of love to her. They thought it was due to her pride and love of herself. Spenser, however, believed that her unresponse to the lover's pleas was her way of safeguarding her honor and high ideals. She believed that true

25 E. Spenser, Amoretti, in The Complete Poetical Works Of Edmund Spenser, ed. Dodge, Boston, 1908, stanza lix.

love was something more than an emotion or passion. A married couple ought to have a union of mutual esteem and appreciation for each other that will help them achieve harmony in the vast community of interests that make up a married life. Love of this type grows slowly, but once it has taken root, it is all-consuming and eternal. Because of those reasons Spenser experienced more happiness than pain in her seeming coldness.

Be nought dismayd that her unmoved mind
 Doth still persist in her rebellious pride:
 Such love, not lyke to lusts of baser kynd,
 The harder wonne, the firmer will abide.
 The durefull oake, whose sap is not yet dride,
 Is long ere it conceive the kindling fyre:
 But when it once doth burne, it doth divide
 Great heat, and makes his flames to heaven aspire.
 So hard it is to kindle new desire
 In gentle brest, that shall endure for ever:
 Deepe is the wound that dints the parts entire
 With chast affects, that naught but death can sever
 To knit the knot that ever shall remaine.²⁶

In almost every verse he expresses deep reverence for the lady of his love, but the important thing to notice is on what his love and reverence is founded. He praises her physical beauty, but "That which fairest is but few behold, Her mind, adorned with virtues mainifold."²⁷ Because she is "adorned with honour, love and chastity,"²⁸ Spenser says, "Deepe in the closet

26 Ibid, stanza vi.

27 Ibid, stanza xv.

28 Ibid., stanza lxix.

of my parts entyre, Her worth is written with a golden quill."²⁹
 Her innocence made their wedding day "holy"³⁰ when "Clad all in
 white, that seemes a virgin best"³¹ "she before the altar stands,
 Hearing the holy priest that to her speakes, And blesseth her
 with his two hands."³² Because of her moral integrity and good-
 ness he extols her as a model for other women.

Tell me, ye merchants daughters, did ye see
 Sofayre a creature in your towne before,
 So sweet, so lovely, and so mild as she,
 Adorned with beautyes grace and vertues store?

.....
 But if ye saw that which no eyes can see,
 The inward beauty of her lively spright,
 Garnished with heavenly guifts of high degree,
 Much more then would ye wonder at that sight,
 And stand astonisht lyke to those which red
 Medusaes mazedful hed.

There dwels sweet Love, and constant Chastity,
 Unspotted Fayth, and comely Womanhood,
 Regard of Honour, and mild Modesty;
 There Vertue raynes as queens in royal throne,
 And giveth lawes alone,
 The which the base affections doe obay,
 And yeeld theyr services unto her will;
 Ne thought of thing uncomely ever may
 Thereto approach to tempt her mind to ill.³³

"Sweet Love," "constant Chastity," "Unspotted Fayth," "Comely
 Womanhood," "Regard of Honour," "mild Modesty" --these are the

29 Ibid., stanza lxxxiv.

30 Epithalamion, from Spenser's Complete Works, line 246.

31 Ibid., line 151.

32 Ibid., lines 224, 225.

33 Ibid., lines 167-222.

virtues that formed Spenser's highest ideals of womanhood, the virtues that made him call his loved one "My soverayne saynt, the idoll of my thought."³⁴ They are the virtues that won for womanhood so high a throne in men's mind, for they are the virtues that the Blessed Virgin, the model of all women, possessed in the highest degree. Finally, they are the virtues that Hamlet had always believed his mother to possess until his great disillusionment.

The moral excellence which "raynes as queene" within Spenser's loved one is the constant theme interwoven into every stanza. True beauty exists, he says, not in the flesh but in a virtuous mind, for all perfect beauty is derived from God, whose beauty is His goodness.

Men call you fayre, and you doe credit it,
 For that your selfe ye dayly such doe see:
 But the trew fayre, that is the gentle wit
 And vertuous mind, is much more praysd of me,
 For all the rest, how ever fayre it be
 Shall turne to nought and loose that glorious hew:
 But onely that ispermanent, and free
 From frayle corruption, that doth flesh ensew.
 That is true beautie: that doth argue you
 to be divine, and borne of heavenly seed,
 Derived from that fayre Spirit from whom al true
 And perfect beauty did at first proceed.
 He onely fayre, and what he fayre hath made;
 All other fayre, lyke flowers, untymely fade.³⁵

Spenser loves his lady passionately, but his love mainly flows from what he calls her "true Beautie," that is, her

virtue. Her presence always uplifts him. Her face inspires him not to longing but to renunciation, not to lust but to purest love. Her friendship never pulls his ideals down but rather lifts them to the pure heights on which she stands:

The soverayne beauty which I doo admyre,
 Witnesse the world how worthy to be prayzed;
 The light whereof hath kindled heavenly fyre
 In my fraile spirit, by her from basenesse raysed:
 That being now with her huge brightnesse dazed
 Base thing I can no more endure to view;³⁶

You frame my thoughts, and fashion me within,
 You stop my tounge, and teach my hart to speake,
 You calme the storme that passion did begin,
 Strong through your cause, but by your vertue weak.
 Dark is the world where your light shined never;
 Well is he borne that may behold you ever.³⁷

Let not one sparke of filthy lustfull fyre
 Break out, that may her sacred peace molest;
 Ne one light glance of sensuall desyre
 Attempt to work her gentle mindes unrest:
 But pure affections bred in spotlesse brest,
 And modest thoughts breathd from wel tempred sprites.³⁸

Because they had learned the true meaning of love from Christ, Spenser knew that their love for each other would be pure and eternal. Their love was not Eros, which is understood as love of the flesh, but Agape or love of God. Their love arose from and was united to a love that was greater than their own

35 Ibid., lxxix.

36 Ibid., iii.

37 Ibid., viii.

38 Ibid., lxxxiii.

love. Their love was a spark issuing from the great flame of the God of love:

And grant that we, for whom thou didest dye,
 Being with thy deare blood clene washt from sin,
 May live for ever in felicity:
 And that thy love we weighing worthily,
 May likewise love thee for the same againe;
 And for thy sake, that all lyke deare didst buy,
 With love may one another entertayne.
 So let us love dear love, lyke as we ought:
 Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught.³⁹

Love that flows from Divine Love is a sacred love, and as such, it is a means created by God to help souls reach Him. It is intended to terminate in marriage, which of its very nature is a state of moral perfection. Spenser thus pays his greatest tribute to his beloved by a beautiful comparison:

This holy season, fit to fast and pray,
 Men to devotion ought to be inclynd:
 Therefore, I lykewise, on so holy day,
 For my sweet saynt some service fit will find.
 Her temple fayre is built within my mind,
 In which my thoughts doo day and night attend,
 Lyke sacred priests that never think amisse.
 There I to her, as th' author of my blisse,
 Will builde an altar to appease her yre;
 And on the same my hart will sacrificise,
 Burning in flames of pure and chast desyre:
 The which vouchsafe, O goddesse, to accept,
 Amongst thy deerest relicks to be kept.⁴⁰

But imagine what would happen if Spenser were suddenly to discover that his fiancée's moral character was base and

39 Ibid., lxviii.

40 Ibid., xxii.

sensual, that her love went no deeper than the flesh, that she had committed openly some incestuous act. Confusion, frustration, bewilderment, melancholy, hysteria, perhaps even the temptation to commit suicide would seize his soul. Yet, commentators as Stoll, Robertson, Schucking, and others think that it is strange that such a disposition could take possession of Hamlet's mind at the discovery of his mother's base sensuality. They seem to forget, or have never realized, that Hamlet has also built within his mind a Christian temple to womanhood just as glorious as that of Spenser's. They forget that Hamlet has given his mother, as the ideal model for women, the place of honor within this temple, and that his "thoughts doo day and night attend Like sacred priests" with reverence and honor upon this "sweet Saynt."

Spenser's wife stands not alone in the sixteenth century as a woman of high ideals. Other examples may be drawn from the nobility of England, such as Margaret of Beaufort, the mother of King Henry VII. In speaking of her nobility of soul, Cardinal Fisher said in her funeral eulogy that "She had in manner all that was praysable in a woman eyther in soule or in body." He gave examples to show that she was bounteous, affable, gentle to all, unkind to none, nor forgetful of kindness, "which is no lytel parte of veray nobleness."⁴¹ He praised her virtues, her

⁴¹ Mayor, The English Works of John Fisher, London, 1876, 291.

power of forgiveness, her tender mercy for the suffering, and her compassion for the poor, whom she would visit and comfort in their sickness. As regards obligations touching her own person, she was

to God & to the chirche full obeyent & tractable serchynge his honoure & pleasure full besyly. A warenes of herself she had always to eschewe euery thyng that myght dyshonest ony noble woman, or dystayne her honour in ony condycyon.⁴²

After her husband's death she renewed the vow of chastity that she had taken with her husband's consent shortly before his death.⁴³ The cardinal concluded his eulogy by saying that if the poor to whom she was so generous, the students of the universities to whom she was a mother, and all the virtuous and devout persons to whom she was a loving sister felt so deeply the loss of their close friend, then with much more reason did "All the noble men and women to whom she was a myrroure and exemplar of honour" have cause to mourn her death.⁴⁴

The cardinal stressed that last point. His purpose in praising her virtues so highly was "not vaynly to extol or to magnifye aboue her merytes, but to the edefyenge of other by the example of her." Cardinal Fisher realized that good example

42 Ibid., 291.

43 Ibid., 294.

44 Ibid., 301.

was "Much more to be prayed in the nobles," because of their influence over the common folk.⁴⁵ The cardinal praised Margaret as being a singularly high example of the perfect wife and mother, and a model of piety, purity, and goodness.

If good example among the nobility strongly influences and uplifts the morals among the lower classes, much more powerful is bad example in tearing them down. When Hamlet returned to Denmark, he found the queen living in sin with his uncle. This was another source of his grief and bitterness, for he knew that his mother's sin not only scandalized the people, but also gave them an encouragement and incentive to evil.

The last example of an ideal wife and mother to be drawn from the nobility of the sixteenth century is that of Katherine of Aragon, the wife of King Henry VIII. After twenty years of married life, the king began to question the legitimacy of his marriage to Katherine on the grounds that she had previously been married to his brother. As it has already been pointed out, such an act was forbidden by the Church, and it was this same prohibition that made the marriage of Hamlet's mother to Claudius incestuous.

The fact that Henry could use such an objection in an

45 Ibid., 294.

attempt to obtain a divorce after he had been married twenty years to Katherine points out once again the importance attached to this law of the Church on marriage. The conscientious observance and the sacredness of the law in the eyes of the people is an important point to remember. Its violation explains many of Hamlet's actions and is the fundamental reason why Hamlet was so disturbed by his mother's marriage to his uncle and why he continually called their relationship incestuous and sacrilegious.

The law, however, that forbids a man to marry his brother's wife, presupposes that the first marriage was consummated. In the case of Katherine her first husband Arthur had been an invalid, and the marriage between the two had never been consummated. On the grounds that Katherine was still a virgin, the pope was justly able to grant a dispensation and allow her to marry Henry after her first husband had died.

As a matter of fact it was well known that Henry did not have a real scruple about the validity of his marriage, but that he only wanted some excuse for marrying Anne Bolleyn. The sympathy of the people for Katherine and their anger at the king went to such an extent that at one time Anne Bolleyn, in order to save her life, "had to flee from an irate mob of thousands of women."⁴⁶ Such an action of the part of the English people is

⁴⁶ M. Audin, Life of Henry the Eighth, trans. by Browne, N.Y., 1852, 219.

another indication of how sacred and eternal they considered the marriage contract.

Pope Clement VII also saw through Henry's pretense and told him to end the scandal by returning to his true and virtuous wife.

It is not the Catholic alone who is scandalized, but the heretic also rejoices in seeing you ignominiously expel from your court a queen, the daughter of a king, the aunt of an empress, your wife for upwards of twenty years, while you are publicly living in defiance of our prohibition with another woman. Had one of your subjects behaved thus, you would have punished him severely. My son, set not such a bad example to your people,... Remember that the examples of kings, and especially of great kings, serve as a rule of conduct to their subjects... recall Katherine and restore her to her rights and to your affection.⁴⁷

Katherine saw through Henry's excuse and knew that no divorce could be legitimately granted. In order to remain faithful to her marriage vows, she knew that she was dutifully bound to defend her title as Henry's wife, no matter how much suffering it would cost her. When some lords asked her to put the question to eight lords in order to quiet the king's conscience, she answered:

I pray God send his Grace a quiet conscience.
As for answer to your message; I pray you tell the King,
I am his lawful Wife, and so will abide, till the Court

47 Ibid., 213.

of Rome determine the contrary.⁴⁸

Katherine ordered her life according to God's laws, and being deeply and implicitly a Catholic, she judged Henry as another Catholic. Although she no longer possessed the affections and love of her husband, she knew that a divorce was impossible. It would mean infidelity by both of them to their marriage contract in which they solemnly vowed to be husband and wife until death parted them. Katherine's continual struggles until her death to maintain her rights as Henry's wife well indicate how sacred she considered her marriage vows.

Katherine learned with sorrow that...Henry was desirous to brand her with the crime of incest, and Mary, his child, as the fruit of his sacrilegious marriage, and to place the crown of St. Edward on the head of his mistress. Maternal love made Katherine a heroine. She resolved, at the foot of the crucifix to defend even to death her sacred rights as mother, wife, and queen; and not for an instant did she flinch from her resolution. She is the strong woman of holy writ who obtained courage by the contemplation of heaven... The queen replied that she came a virgin to his bed, and that she should leave it pure; that it was insulting God to ask theologians, whether during eighteen years Mary's mother had not been living in incest.⁴⁹

Katherine knew that justice was on her side. Her innocence gave her strength to defend her cause; her sincerity, the power to penetrate through the hypocrisy of others. When Campeg-

48 E.L. Herbert, Autobiography and History of England Under Henry VIII, London, 1683, 354.

49 Audin, Life of Henry VIII, 141.

gio and other lords pleaded with her to take the veil and enter some convent, she answered:

My lords, it is a question in your opinion whether my marriage with Henry, my lord, is lawful, though we have been united for nearly twenty years. There are prelates, lords of the Privy Council, who can attest to the purity of our wedding, and yet it is now wished to be looked on as incestuous! This is strange, passing strange, my lords, when I call to mind the wisdom of Henry VII, how dearly I was loved by my father Ferdinand, without speaking of the Pope, whose dispensation I still have, I cannot persuade myself that a marriage contracted under their auspices could be sacrilegious.⁵⁰

Again and again, lords, prelates, and others pleaded and even threatened her to consent to the divorce, but she chose to obey God rather than man.

I am a king's true wife, and to him married; and if all doctors were dead, or law or learning far out of men's minds at the time of our marriage, yet I cannot think that the court of Rome, and the whole church of England, would have consented to a thing unlawful and detestable as you call it. Still I say I am his wife, and for him will I pray.⁵¹

The king had now ceased to be--as he once was in the estimation of Katherine--the champion and defender of all that was just and good. Still she never spoke disrespectfully or contemptuously of him, no matter how sorely he tried her. Although she disapproved of his actions, she never censured or reproached him publically. She always remained submissive to him in so far

50 Ibid., 168.

51 Jameson, Characteristics of Women, Boston, 414.

as he did not transgress God's law, and she did her best to remain amiable and cheerful amidst her sorrows and afflictions.

For this fact there is the statement of Sir John Wallop.

"The English ambassador here," says Marin Guistinian, writing to the Signory from Paris, "does not approve the divorce, and praises the wisdom, innocence, and patience of queen Katherine.... He says that the Queen was as beloved as if she had been of the blood royal of England."... She had nothing of the sourness of the recluse about her. Foreign ambassadors are unanimous in commending the smiles and cheerfulness expressed in her countenance throughout the terrible ordeal to which she was subjected.⁵²

Even after Henry had obtained his so-called divorce, Katherine insisted that she was still queen and the lawful wife of Henry. The king's counsellors accused Katherine of clinging to the title out of pride. They warned her that her daughter might be completely disinherited unless she were to forgo them, but she responded:

Do you accuse me of pride, when I wish to prove to the world that I am the wife and not the concubine of a prince with whom I have lived for twenty years. Mary is my beloved child, the daughter of the King and Queen of England. Such I received her from God, and as such I give her to her father. Like her mother, she will live and die an honest woman. Speak not to me of any danger that my daughter may incur. I have no fear for him who has only power over the body; but I fear Him who has alone power over the soul.⁵³

52 J.S. Brewer, The Reign of Henry VIII, 1884, II, 161,162.

53 Audin, Life of Henry VIII, 226.

Although Katherine was disinherited, she was always conscious of her moral obligations towards her husband and king. Nowhere else does her loyalty and fidelity stand out more clearly than the letter that she wrote to her husband when she was dying.

My most Dear Lord, King, and Husband,

The hour of my death now approaching, I cannot chuse, out of love I bear you, advise you of your Soules health, which you ought to prefer before all considerations of the world or flesh whatsoever. For which yet you have cast me into many calamities, and your self into many troubles. But I forgive you all; and pray God to do so likewise. For the rest I commend unto you Mary, our daughter, beseeching you to be a good Father to her, as I have heretofore desired,.. Lastly, I make this Vow, that mine eyes desire you above all things.

Farewell⁵⁴

The historian Herbert then adds, "The King having received the letter, became so compassionate that he wept."⁵⁵ From these few historical passages it is easily understandable why it has been said of Katherine that she "was highly accomplished and a model of every feminine virtue."⁵⁶ Her character is a perfect example of the Church's ideal of a loyal wife and mother when afflicted with the most bitter and sorrowful trials.

54 Herbert, Autobiography and Hist...., 432.

55 Ibid.

56 Audin, Life of Henry VIII, 25.

Katherine possessed the type of queenly character that Hamlet believed his own mother to have. Hamlet believed that the same courage and fidelity would shine forth from his mother's character if it were ever to be put to the test. Under such circumstances imagine what a disillusionment it must have been to Hamlet when his mother exposed her shallow character and revealed to him her true worth.

CHAPTER IV

SHAKESPEARE'S IDEAL OF WOMANHOOD

In the last chapter the great reverence and sacredness that both the Catholic and Anglican Church had in regard to marriage was proven. The purpose of the chapter was to prove that in the sixteenth century the ideals of the lay people were lofty and in agreement with those of the Church.

The main purpose of this chapter is to show what are Shakespeare's ideals touching womanhood, and whether or not he esteemed marriage and its obligations highly. Since there is a scarcity of material about Shakespeare's personal life, one is forced to draw out and separate from his fictitious writings his own personal opinion on a particular subject. Such a method cannot give certitude, but it can give a high degree of probability, for it is impossible for a person to write over one hundred and fifty sonnets, thirty six plays and two long poems without revealing something about himself. So, from the lips of Shakespearean characters it will be attempted to give Shakespeare's ideals of womanhood.

Through the words of Juliet, Shakespeare expresses what hardships a wife ought to be willing to undergo rather than to be faithless to her marriage vows.

O, bid me leap, rather than marry Paris
 From off the battlements of yonder tower;
 Or walk in thievish ways; or bid me lurk
 Where serpents are; chain me with roaring bears;
 Or shut me, nightly in a charnel-house,
 O'er-cover'd quite with dead men's rattling bones,
 With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls;
 Or bid me go into a new-made grave,
 And hide me with a dead man in his shroud;
 Things that to hear them told, have made me tremble;
 And I will do it without fear or doubt,
 To live an unstain'd wife to my sweet Love.¹

In the Taming of the Shrew, Shakespeare states more directly and fully the obligations of husband and wife to each other.

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
 Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,
 And for thy maintenance commits his body
 To painful labour both by sea and land,
 To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
 Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe;
 And craves no other tribute at thy hands
 But love, fair looks and true obedience;
 Too little payment for so great a debt.
 Such duty as the subject oweth to the prince
 Even such a woman oweth to her husband;
 And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,
 And not obedient to his honest will,
 What is she but a foul contending rebel,
 And graceless traitor to her loving lord?
 I am ashamed that women are so simple
 To offer war where they should kneel for peace;

1 Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, IV, i, 177-188.

Or seek for rule, supremacy and sway,
When they are bound to serve, love and obey.²

Those words echo the thoughts of the Church concerning marriage. Faithfulness, understanding, love, obedience--these are the virtues a wife owes to her husband. Shakespeare often vested even his pagan characters with this Christian attitude, as in Portia's appeal to her husband.

My Brutus;
You have some sick offense within your mind,
Which by the right and virtue of my place
I ought to know of: and, upon my knees,
I charm you, by my once commended beauty
By all your vows of love and that great vow
Which did incorporate and make us one,
That you unfold to me, yourself, your half,
Why you are heavy...
Within the bond of marriage, tell me, Brutus,
Is it expected that I should know no secrets
That appertain to you? Am I yourself
But, as it were, in sort or limitation,
To keep with you at meals, comfort your bed,
And talk to you sometimes? Dwell I but in the suburbs
Of your good pleasure? If it be no more
Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife.³

So closely united in body and mind are husband and wife that the sorrows, joys, possessions, and secrets of one belong to the other as well. The sacred and eternal ties of marriage merge the two into one. Love becomes supreme because marriage according to Shakespeare is the "contract of eternal bond of love."⁴

2 Shakespeare, V, ii, 146-162.

3 Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, V, i, 151.

Another character who is a beautiful personification of Shakespeare's ideal of womanhood is Desdemona. This "True and loving" wife of Othello was "a maiden never bold, of spirit so still and quiet that her motion blushed at herself." She was the "sweetest innocent that ev'r lift up eye," and remained "chaste and heavenly true" to her jealous husband. Even when Desdemona is rashly and unjustly accused by her husband, she loves him and vows to continue loving him no matter how cruelly he may treat her.

Here I kneel:

If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love
 Either in discourse of thought or actual deed,
 Or that I do not yet, and ever did,
 And ever will, though he do shake me off
 To beggarly divorcement, love him dearly,
 Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much;
 But never taint my love, I cannot say 'whore':
 It doth abhor me now I speak the word;
 To do the act that might the addition earn
 Not the world's mass of vanity could make me.⁵

Of all his characters, however, Shakespeare pays his greatest tribute to womankind by his portrayal of Katherine of Aragon in Henry VIII. The historical reference mentioned above furnished Shakespeare with the materials for his splendid characterization of this truly great and courageous Catholic queen of England. In her Shakespeare finds a model of his highest ideals. Captivated by her character and inspired by her spirit,

4 Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, II, i, 267-287.

5 Shakespeare, Othello, IV, ii, 152-162.

Shakespeare wrote so passionately of her that William Hazlitt says,

The character of Queen Katherine is the most perfect delineation of matronly dignity, sweetness, and resignation, that can be conceived. Her appeals to the protection of the king, her remonstrances to the cardinals, her conversations with her women show a noble and generous spirit accompanied with the utmost gentleness of nature.⁶

Samuel Johnson says,

The genius of Shakespeare comes in and goes out with Katherine... The meek sorrows and virtuous distress of Katherine have furnished some scenes which may justly be numbered among the greatest efforts of tragedy.⁷

Shakespeare took great pains to portray the protagonists in Henry VIII without essentially changing their historical characters. This historical truthfulness has a greater significance when it is remembered that the play was performed before an Elizabethan audience during the reign of Elizabeth, the daughter of the woman who succeed Katherine in the affections of Henry. In spite of danger to his reputation and even perhaps his freedom, Shakespeare presented the character of Katherine as history knew her, even though by contrast the characters of Henry and Anne appeared less noble.

6 W. Hazlitt, "Henry VIII," Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, London, 1934, 197.

7 S. Johnson, "General Observations on the Plays of Shakespeare," The Works of Samuel Johnson, London, 1906, 213.

Katherine may properly be called the heroine in the play. From her first appearance in which she is found interceding for the people oppressed by taxes until her last when she again is pleading for the poor, she is indeed the "queen of earthly queens."⁸

Besides being a "good queen"⁹ to the people, Katherine also conducted herself as a "true and humble wife at all times,"¹⁰ and "so good a lady that no tongue could ever pronounce dishonour of her."¹¹ Shakespeare takes this unique example of a perfect wife and queen from history and immortalizes her. He first eulogizes her through the lips of the Duke of York when he says,

He counsels a divorce; a loss of her
That, like a jewel, has hung twenty years
About his neck, yet never lost her lustre;
Of her that loves him with that excellence
That angels love good men with; even of her
That, when the greatest stroke of fortune falls
Will bless the king: and is not this course pious?¹²

The Lord Chamberlain shows that the Duke of York's thoughts are those of the people when he immediately adds, "Tis

8 Shakespeare, Henry VIII, II, iv, 141.

9 Ibid., II, 1, 158.

10 Ibid., II, iv, 23.

11 Ibid., II, iii, 3.

12 Ibid., II, ii, 31-40.

most true, These news are everywhere; every tongue speaks 'em,
And every true heart weeps for 't"¹²

Shakespeare gives the master stroke to Katherine's character by placing her praises in the mouth of Anne Bullen, who will succeed Katherine in the affections of the king.

Here's the pang that pinches:
His highness having lived so long with her, and she
So good a lady that no tongue could ever
Pronounce dishonour of her; by my life
She never knew harm-doing: O, now, after
So many courses of the sun enthroned,
Still growing in a majesty and pomp, the which
To leave a thousand-fold more bitter than
'Tis sweet at first to acquire, --after this process,
To give her the avaunt! it is a pity
Would move a monster.¹³

Katherine, deeply wronged and heavily burdened with sorrow, has become:

the most unhappy woman living...
Shipwreck'd upon a kingdom, where no pity,
No friends, no hope; no kindred weep for me;
That once was mistress of the field and flourish'd
I'll hang my head and perish.¹⁴

The suffering and friendless queen is not, however, a weak and helpless woman. She has a moral strength that towers over her adversaries:

12 Ibid., II, ii, 38-40.

13 Ibid., II, iii, 1-11.

14 Ibid., III, i, 145-153.

I am about to weep; but thinking that
 We are a queen or long have dream'd so, certain
 The daughter of a king, my drops of tears
 I'll turn to sparks of fire.¹⁵

Her simplicity and goodness of heart enables her to see through Wolsey's duplicity, and she intends to fight for her rights and titles as mother and wife. Wolsey was one of those who have "angels' faces," but whose heart only "heaven knows."¹⁶ She justly scorns his crooked policy and is not afraid to throw the following challenge at him:

I do believe
 Induced by potent circumstances, that
 You are mine enemy, and make my challenge
 You shall not be my judge: for it is you
 Have blown this coal betwixt my lord and me;
 Which God's dew quench! Therefore I say again
 I utterly abhor, yea, from my soul
 Refuse you for my judge; whom, yet once more,
 I hold my most malicious foe, and think not
 At all a friend to truth.¹⁷

Katherine knows that truth is on her side, but she is humble enough to realize her weakness and the impossibility of her getting the better of Wolsey in an argument.

My lord, my lord,
 I am a simple woman, much too weak
 To oppose your cunning. You're meek and humble-mouth'd;
 You sign your place and calling, in full seeming,

15 Ibid., II, iv, 70-73.

16 Ibid., III, i, 145.

17 Ibid., II, iv, 76-84.

With meekness and humility; but your heart
Is cramm'd with arrogancy, spleen, and pride.¹⁸

Esteem for Katherine reaches its highest point in the court room scene. She has been wronged and has suffered unjustly, as everyone in the courtroom knew; but who does not know that a courageous woman is at her noblest or has the opportunity of being at her noblest when she is most beaten and down? Then may she prove, as at no other time, her endurance, her magnanimity, the depths of her generosity and love. Katherine approaches with humility and respect and kneels at the feet of the king. Strongly conscious of her rights and of her duty, she allows the warmth of her temper to break through the meekness of her spirit, and she turns her tears into sparks of fire. In this, her last appeal to the king, like a true queen and wife she challenges anyone in the court to bring anything against her honor, love, duty, or bond of wedlock:

Sir, I desire you do me right and justice,
And to bestow your pity on me... Alas, sir,
In what have I offended you? what cause
Hath my behaviour given to your displeasure
That thus you should proceed to put me off,
And take your good grace from me? Heaven witness,
I have been to you a true and humble wife,
At all times to your will conformable;
Even in fear to kindle your dislike,
Yea, subject to your countenance, glad or sorry
As I saw it inclined: when was the hour
I ever contradicted your desire,
Or made it not mine too? Or which of your friends

Have I not strove to love, although I knew
 He were mine enemy? what friend of mine
 That had to him derived your anger, did I
 Continue in my liking? nay, gave notice
 He was from thence discharged? Sir call to mind
 That I have been your wife, in this obedience,
 Upward of twenty years, and have been blest
 With many children by you: if, in the course
 And process of this time, you can report,
 And prove it too, against mine honour aught,
 My bond of wedlock or my love and duty,
 Against your sacred person, in God's name,
 Turn me away; and let the foul'st contempt
 Shut door upon me, and so give me up
 To the sharp'st kind of justice.¹⁹

These words are spoken not with arrogance or pride, but with the strength and courage that a wife ought to display in defense of her honor. To have remained quiet and not to assert her rights in such a situation would have been wrong. In this speech Shakespeare joins nearly all the possible virtues an ideal wife could possess. The queen first asks for the protection she ought to have from her husband and demands to know why he is treating her in just the opposite fashion. Then she makes her defense and calls upon God to witness that she always:

- 1 has been a true and humble wife;
- 2 tried to do what he wanted her to do;
- 3 avoided whatever would be displeasing to him;
- 4 suffered or was happy accordingly as he suffered or was happy;
- 5 followed his desires rather than contradict him;
- 6 strove and tried her best to love his friends even though they may have been her enemies;
- 7 severed her connections from any of her friends who were displeasing to him;
- 8 has been faithful to her marriage vows and loyal to him even

19 Ibid., II, iv, 13-52.

in the smallest details for over twenty years;
 9 was willing to undergo any punishment, however severe, even to the extent of laying her head on the block if he could find a single fault against her being a perfect wife, mother, or queen.

It is a challenge of a wife and queen defending everything that was or ever would be dear to her, and in his heart the king knows that she is right. He has lived twenty years with her and has learned to respect her, almost to revere her. Within her there is a strength that makes Henry admire her; a strength which nothing the lords or cardinals said or did could bend, a strength and certainty in herself and her own just cause. The king was of a royal nature and still sensible to the stirrings of royalty in others, for he has not yet entirely cast off his better and nobler feelings. His wife's words moved him, as they did everyone else in the court. Momentarily Henry is true to his better nature and launches out in praise of the queen after her departure.

Go thy ways, Kate:

That man in the world who shall report he has
 A better wife, let him in nought be trusted,
 For speaking false in that: thou art, alone--
 If thy rare qualities, sweet gentleness,
 Thy meekness saint-like, wife-like government,
 Obeying in commanding, and thy parts
 Sovereign and pious else, could speak thee out,
 The queen of earthly queens: she's noble born;
 And, like her true nobility, she has
 Carried herself towards me.²⁰

Such gleams of his better nature show that the king still esteems and respects the queen, but they were becoming more feeble and irregular every day. The queen was aware that she had lost his affections and love. When the lords asked her to let the king handle the situation, she answers:

Put my sick cause into his hands that hates me?
 Alas, has banished me his bed already,
 His love, too long ago! I am old my lords,
 And all the fellowship I hold now with him
 Is only my obedience.²¹

The obedience of which Katherine speaks is the obedience she owes to her God and husband through her marriage vows. Conscious that she was the king's lawful wife, she knew that a divorce was wrong. No man could break the marriage bond between those whom God has joined together.

My lord, I dare not make myself so guilty,
 To give up willingly that noble title
 Your master wed me to: nothing but death
 Shall ever divorce my dignities.²²

Her own worth and uprightness has sustained her throughout her trials. In her sufferings she gives evidence of a moral strength that gives her a peace and patience beyond the reach of men's abuse. The integrity, simplicity, and strength of character arising from her just cause enabled her to defend

21 Ibid., III, 1, 118-122.

22 Ibid., III, 1, 139-142.

herself against the tricks of the prelates. When they asked to speak to her in private, she answers:

Speak it here:

There's nothing I have done yet, o' my conscience,
Deserves a corner: would all other women
Could speak this with as free a soul as I do!
My lords, I care not, so much I am happy
Above a number, if my actions
Were tried by every tongue, every eye saw 'em,
Envy and base opinion set against 'em,
I know my life so even. If your business
Seek me out, and that way I am wife in,
Out with it boldly: truth loves open dealing.²³

Have I lived this long--let me speak myself,
Since virtue finds no friends--a wife, a true one?
A woman, I dare say without vain-glory,
Never yet branded with suspicion?
Have I with all my full affections
Still met the King? loved him next heaven? obeyed him?
Been, out of fondness, superstitious to him?
Almost forgot my prayers to content him?
And am I thus rewarded? 'tis not well, lords,
Bring me a constant woman to her husband,
One that ne'er dreamed a joy beyond his pleasure;
And to that woman, when she has done most,
Yet, will I add an honour, a great patience.²⁴

A woman can use no stronger weapon in defense of her honor than truth. Katherine's words are not colored with poetical figures of speech. A higher degree of eloquence is attained by the simple statements of evident truths. Speaking from a full heart and fighting for everything dear to her, she lets the facts fall quickly from her lips one after another. A tremendous

23 Ibid., III, 1, 29-40.

24 Ibid., III, 1, 124-137.

power is felt as these truths, forcefully following one another, strike the listener's ears:

- 1 Before all, even the maid servants or her enemies, she is willing to let anyone accuse her of failing in her duty to her husband in ~~any~~ regard.
- 2 This is not said out of vain-glory but in order to prove that she has always been a true and virtuous wife.
- 3 Is her loyalty even open to suspicion?
- 4 Can anyone accuse her of lack of love and obedience to the king? Or is it not that she has erred in the opposite extreme?
- 5 Did she ever think of any joy which would not bring pleasure to him also?
- 6 To all these virtues can be added a great patience amid sorrows and sufferings.

Here again we find Shakespeare summing up, but in different words, his concept of an ideal wife as portrayed by Katherine. Anyone who admires truth, honors nobility of nature, and respects strength, necessarily will admire, honor, and respect Katherine. Shakespeare was such a man. As a result, her character portrayal can rival the eloquence and beauty of any other Shakespearean heroine.

The last scene of the queen's life is now depicted. In spite of all the force and pressure brought upon her by the king through the cardinals and others to concede her royal rights, she has remained firm in her insistence that she is the king's lawful wife and that in God's eyes it is her duty to remain the same. Finally, no matter what the final outcome of the whole matter should be, she promises that she will always remain devoted to the king. "He has my heart yet; and shall have my prayers While

I shall have life."²⁵

The king obtains the divorce and marries Anne. Meanwhile, Katherine is deprived of her daughter's presence and almost of all her friends. Lonely and broken-hearted, her health begins to fail. Her sufferings, endured with such a heroic spirit, have had a purifying and sanctifying effect upon her soul, as all great sorrows do when they are borne with such meekness and resignation. With Christian charity and kindness, she fully forgives Wolsey, "whom I most hated living, ... Now in his ashes honour."²⁶

Dr. Johnson says of this sadly beautiful death-bed scene that it is

above any other part of Shakespeare's tragedies, and perhaps above any scene of any other poet, tender and pathetic; without gods, or furies, or poisons, or precipices; without the help of romantic circumstances; without improbable sallies of poetical lamentations and without any throes of tumultuous misery.²⁷

Another author says

In approaching the last scene of Katherine's life, I feel as if about to tread within a sanctuary, where nothing befits us but silence and tears; veneration so strives with compassion, tenderness with awe.²⁸

25 Ibid, V, i, 179, 180.

26 Ibid, IV, ii, 73.

27 Johnson, as quoted by Jameson, Characteristics of Women, 432.

28 Jameson, 432.

It is a peaceful scene. Katherine, in as much as it was in her power, has fulfilled all her duties as wife and queen most nobly. All her struggles and trials are now near their end. The vision which promises her "eternal happiness"²⁹ makes one feel that this queen, who has not had a happy moment throughout the entire period that the play covers, at last receives a taste of the rewards she will enjoy in the next life because of her heroic virtues.

In bidding her last farewell to her husband and king, Katherine proclaims that her love and loyalty to him never wavered.

Sir, I most humbly pray you to deliver
 This to my lord the king...
 In which I have commended to his goodness
 The model of our chaste loves, his young daughter:
 The dews of heaven fall thick in blessing on her!
 Beseeching him to give her virtuous breeding, --
 She is young, and of a noble modest nature,
 I hope she will deserve well, --and a little
 To love her for her mother's sake, that loved him,
 Heaven knows how dearly. My next poor petition
 Is, that his noble grace would have some pity
 Upon my wretched women, that so long
 Have follow'd both my fortunes faithfully

...

The last is for my men;...
 That they may have their wages duly paid 'em.
 And something over to remember me by:
 If heaven had pleased to have given me longer life
 And able means, we had not parted thus.
 These are the whole contents and good my lord,
 By that you love the dearest in this world

As you wish Christian peace to souls departed,
Stand these poor people's friend, and urge the king
To do me this last right.

...Remember me
In all humility unto his highness:
Say his long trouble now is passing
Out of this world; tell him, in death I blessed him,
For so I will. Mine eyes grow dim. Farewell,
My lord.³⁰

These are words almost too beautiful to be commented on. In bidding farewell she forgets herself in order to plead for her daughter and people. Instead of reproaching the king, she prays for him and even asks his forgiveness for all the trouble she caused him. Katherine has said all in defense of her honor until she could say no more; she has given her all in love for her husband until there was no more to give--except the final and supreme act of love--to lay down her life. This she will do in a few minutes.

But like a queen and faithful wife, she knows right from wrong. Sure, serene, and majestic, she displays the last sparks of the strength and nobility of her nature in her dying words.

When I am dead...
Let me be used with honour: strew me over
With maiden flowers, that all the world may know
I was a chaste wife to my grave: embalm me,
Then lay me forth: although unqueen'd, yet like
A queen, and daughter to a king, inter me.
I can no more.³¹

30 Ibid., IV, ii, 129-164.

31 Ibid., IV, ii, 166-173.

According to historical accounts, no eulogy was permitted to be preached at Katherine's funeral, but Shakespeare redeemed and immortalized her name by this drama. He has painted a beautiful picture of her soul. Like an artist he portrayed more strikingly her beautiful characteristics and softened her less attractive qualities, while he still remained faithful to the model he was painting. He did not, however, like an ordinary artist, paint the beauty of her external features alone, but revealed that which is much more difficult, the beauty of her soul. In so doing, he has lifted up his portrait of her before the world and set it among the greatest masterpieces of art as if to say, "Here is a perfect model of the ideal queen, wife, and mother; I challenge you to find another rival who will excel her!"

In creating Hamlet, Shakespeare painted another picture. This time it is upon Hamlet's heart and soul. It is a portrait of the internal beauty of Hamlet's mother as she appeared to him before her sin, a portrait that rivals and perhaps surpasses the one of Katherine in Shakespeare's mind. Then when this beautiful picture is disfigured, torn, and completely ruined by a filthy and degrading sin, Hamlet's nobler feelings are overcome and choked out by feelings of despair and melancholy.

CHAPTER V

FOR THE QUEEN WAS HAMLET'S ANGEL

Like all ages, the Elizabethan Era had its licentiousness, but as it has been pointed out, its ideals of womanhood were lofty. A pure woman was honored and respected precisely because she presented such a contrast to those who brought disgrace and degradation to their sex by surrendering all the qualities that Christian womanhood represented. A refined and cultured Christian would almost instinctively feel a repulsion from a wanton and lustful woman, for her life was in complete contradiction to his Christian principles and ideals of womanhood.

The study of these social conditions and ideals during Shakespeare's age has taken up a good proportion of the thesis so far. This was done in order to substantiate the interpretations that will be given to many lines of Hamlet, for Shakespeare's plays are the expression of very life as he knew and lived it.

Because Hamlet's thoughts often dwell upon his mother's infidelity to her marriage vows, it had to be shown what were the Church's obligations concerning marriage in Shakespeare's time.

Because Hamlet's deep reverence and love of his mother arose from his belief that she was a perfect model of his lofty ideals, the ideals of noble-minded men as Spenser and Shakespeare had to be shown to be lofty. The play concerns a Christian queen's sin and the consequent destruction of her son's ideals; consequently, there was need to show the lives of Christian queens who could and did live up to such high ideals and were perfect models to the women of their realm. As a proof that there were women among the English nobility who lived up to the high ideals, the examples of Margaret of Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII, and Katherine of Aragon, a queen of England, were used. These historical characters were drawn from sixteenth century England because Hamlet is a play about kings and queens and princes in a Christian country, and the only royalty with which Shakespeare was acquainted was in the English court, the center of all pulsating and surging Renaissance Society.

The relationship between the play Hamlet and the conditions of Shakespeare's contemporary life and ideals appear to be closer than in any other Shakespearean drama. Using Hamlet as his mouth-piece, Shakespeare reveals much of his own character. Hamlet's advice to the players, his satire through Osric on certain affectations of his day, his reference to the children actors--these and other similar incidents reveal Shakespeare's own convictions, sentiments, and reflections on popular topics of the

day. On the other hand Hamlet's famous soliloquies, or his reflections on death through the grave digger's scene give a comprehensive view of Shakespeare's more intimate thoughts, ideals, and principles. There are but few critics who do not agree that "From the rich troops of his heroes, Shakespeare has chosen Hamlet as the exponent, to the spectators and to posterity, of all that lay nearest to his own heart."¹

Another important factor that makes this drama so close to real life is that Shakespeare himself was suffering a tragic period in his own life about the time when he wrote Hamlet. Many of his closest friends were either imprisoned or put to death on account of the Essex conspiracy. His own life was endangered when his play Richard II was declared treasonable and his company lost favor with the government. Then too, it seems possible that Shakespeare may have been suffering in his personal life some great disappointment or disillusionment at this time. During this period of his life he wrote almost all of his tragedies, and the plot of a number of them as Othello, Troilus and Cressida, Hamlet, and others evolve around a woman's infidelity.

Troilus was not written in the afterweariness of Hamlet, but, ...it is the first reaction to some horrible emotional experience which had the effect on Shakespeare's mind that he afterwards drew so potently in Hamlet's first soliloquy. Later, as the experience became less immediate, partly perhaps through this

¹ H.H. Furness, Hamlet II, Variorum Shakespeare, Philadelphia, 1877, IV, 235.

very expression of it in Troilus, it was mastered--comprehended and evaluated in relation to other elements in life, so that it became one of the major elements in the greater play, which the instinct of all critics has concurred in thinking to be most of all Shakespeare's work the record of his own soul. Troilus is thus the reaction to an experience, Hamlet the transcript of the subjective part of that experience together with, as commentary, the awed deduction of what might have been, but for the grace of God. As to the objective details of the actual events, there is, I am glad to think, no evidence, unless what is indirectly in the Sonnets. Shakespeare had as much right to suffer privately as you or I, and the only objective point that matters is what is indirectly told to us by himself--that it had something to do with a woman. Whether or not she was Mary Fitton, and what precisely were the dirty facts or her disloyalty, is matter for the kind of mind whose pabulum is not Hamlet, but the elaborate biographies of courtesans. What she did to Shakespeare he made our business, and the record of it is in Cressida and Helen and Queen Gertrude, and in the bitterly contemptuous justice that he did Ophelia.²

With all this background in mind, let the reader try to think of Hamlet as Shakespeare would have conceived him in his imagination. As a child, Hamlet would have first learned about purity and goodness from his mother, and it would have only been quite natural for him to see these virtues again in his own mother. Then also, as an only child, Hamlet would have been given all the attention and love of his mother, and he in turn would have worshipped her. Gradually his undeveloped mind, like an untouched recording disk, received an impression of his mother's goodness and loveliness which would remain on his mind forever.

² A. Mackenzie, The Women in Shakespeare's Plays, N.Y., 1924, 187.

Hamlet, however, did not reach full manhood in ignorance of the evil of the world. Like any mature young man he knew to what depths of degradation a woman could lower herself by her sinfulness. But the fact that his mother stood out in contrast to so many women as a shining light of all that was good and pure, made him love and reverence her that much more deeply. As a queen and mother she was in Hamlet's mind a perfect model for all the women in her realm to imitate. Because Ophelia lived up to these same ideals, because she possessed the same lovable qualities of simplicity, purity, and goodness, Hamlet also cherished and loved Ophelia as deeply as his mother.

Before his father's death Hamlet was anything but melancholy. He may have been a deep thinker in so far as he judged people and affairs more deeply than their surface appearance, but he certainly could not have been moody. His natural temperament was a happy and cheerful one. His crystal-clear sincerity, his kindness, and his hatred of any type of pretense gave him a winning personality that made him the idol of Denmark. Even Claudius speaks of the "great love the general gender {multitude} bear him,"³ and says that he was "most generous and free from all contriving."⁴ Ophelia, in reference to Hamlet, speaks of:

3 Hamlet, IV, iv, 18.

4 Ibid, IV, iv, 134.

The courtier's, scholar's, soldier's eyes, tongue, sword;
The expectancy and rose of the fair State,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers.⁵

Hamlet was affectionate by nature. He had a happy and hopeful outlook toward life because he had a beautiful future ahead of him. He had met with small sorrows and disappointments in his life; but as yet, the shadow of a crushing grief had never crossed his path and left any traces of bitterness in him.

It is a different Hamlet that Shakespeare introduces to the reader in the beginning of the play. He is clothed in black and immersed in grief not only because he has come home to find his father dead, but especially because he discovers his mother living in incest with his uncle.

Many people today are comparatively unaffected by the implications attached to an incestuous marriage, but such an act had a shocking effect upon the sincere Christian of Elizabethan times. Shakespeare intended this incestuous marriage to have an important influence upon Hamlet's character, for it is continually being referred to throughout the drama. The thought of it is constantly on Hamlet's mind.

The very first first words of Hamlet in the play are

5 Ibid., III, i, 151-154.

an aside in which, after the king has called Hamlet his cousin and son, Hamlet ironically replies: "A little more than kin, and less than kind."⁶ He is a little more than "kin" because he is now more than a nephew to Claudius; but he is less than "kind" (in its primitive sense of "natural") because his new relation to Claudius as his son is unnatural. It springs from an incestuous marriage, and therefore is unnatural and invalid.

Later when Hamlet is leaving Denmark for England, he bluntly tells Claudius that he does not recognize him as his father because he cannot according to God's law. It happens when Hamlet bids his mother goodbye:

Hamlet: ... Farewell, dear mother.

King: Thy loving father, Hamlet.

Hamlet: My mother: father and mother is man and wife;
man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother.
Come, for England.⁷

To return to the beginning of the play again, Hamlet refuses to acknowledge his filial relationship to Claudius by his words, "A little more than kin, and less than kind." He further emphasized the same thought by his next words. Claudius asks him, "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" Hamlet answers, "Not so, my lord; I am too much in the sun"⁸ -- an old

6 Ibid., I, ii, 65.

7 Ibid., IV, iii, 50-54.

8 Ibid., I, ii, 67.

proverbial phrase that signified the state of being ostracized from home and kindred. Hamlet considers himself to have lost both his father, through death, and his mother through her incestuous marriage.

His mother then unconsciously stabs again at his already deeply wounded heart. She says that it is common for people to die, so why should his father's death seem so particular to him? Hamlet knows that death is common, but he also knows that it is common for a wife to mourn the loss of her husband for some length of time afterwards. However, it is most unnatural and uncommon for a wife to cease to mourn for her husband within a month. His mother's behavior in this regard reveals to him that much more clearly the shallowness of her character and her lack of true love for his father.

Claudius gives a pedantic speech about resignation to divine providence. He tries to win Hamlet's friendship by flattery, a thing that only causes Hamlet to despise him that much more. Hamlet now realizes that both his mother and Claudius are incapable of understanding from what cause his griefs arise; so he chooses silence as his only course of action. When alone Hamlet gives utterance to his pent-up feelings.

O that this too, too solid flesh would melt
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God!

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
 Seem to me all the uses of this world!
 Fie on 't! It is an unweeded garden
 That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
 Possess it merely.⁹

The explanation that Professor Bradley gives for the words of this soliloquy expresses their meaning perfectly:

Here are a sickness of life and even a longing for death, so intense that nothing stands between Hamlet and suicide except religious awe. And what has caused them? The rest of the soliloquy so thrusts the answer upon us that it might seem impossible to miss it. It was not his father's death; that doubtless brought deep grief, but mere grief for someone loved and lost does not make a noble spirit loathe the world as a place full only of things rank and gross.... It was the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature, falling on him when his heart was aching with love, and his body doubtless was weakened with sorrow.¹⁰

The truth of those words is easily verified by the rest of the soliloquy that reads:

That it should come to this!
 But two months dead! nay, not so much, not two:
 So excellent a king; that was to this,
 Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother
 That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
 Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!
 Must I remember? why, she would hang on him,
 As if increase of appetite had grown
 By what it fed on; and yet, within a month--
 Let me not think on 't--Frailty, thy name is woman!--
 A little month, or ere those shoes were old
 With which she followed my poor father's body

9 Ibid., I, ii, 129-137.

10 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 117.

Like Niobe, all tears,--why she, even she--
O God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourn'd longer--married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month?
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married. O most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good;--
But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.¹¹

Everything on which Hamlet had based his whole future and had considered the most important as well as the safest and securest things in life, suddenly crumbled and gave way before him, as strong walls and the solid earth would do in an earthquake. What could he grasp now? There was nothing left on which he could rely. If so much of lust and weakness could be found in his own mother, what was there left in the world that was worthwhile? If so great a man as his father had been so easily deceived, how could he be certain that he himself would not be just as easily deceived by some woman?

Within a month of her husband's death the queen rushes like a senseless beast into an incestuous marriage with his uncle. The whole thing has a sickening and poisoning effect upon Hamlet's character. The fact that he keeps this anguish within himself where it can continually lacerate and probe the open

¹¹ Hamlet, I, ii, 137-159.

wound, only intensifies and thickens the grief within his paralyzed soul.

Previously he had been devoid of doubt, free from all harassing questions, and living a life that was utterly simplified because his goal was clear and the way to it as open as the skies. Now he found himself deluded, disillusioned, and helpless. He who had been walking a highway as broad as a Roman road and as bright as a cloudless noonday heaven now was groping in a fog that was impenetrable. Never again was Hamlet to know his former peace of soul. The shattering of life-long ideals is too great a disaster to be forgotten in a few weeks, to pass away without leaving an indelible mark upon his soul.

That his mother's conscience should be so blunted by her moral callousness and coarse sensuality as to make her senseless to her open and disgraceful sin, only intensified Hamlet's mental agony. Not only had she sinned through weakness, but her inability to understand Hamlet's grief revealed to him just exactly how fickle and shallow was her character. She had completely destroyed an ideal around which Hamlet's whole life was built, and the most tragic part of it was that she was incapable of realizing what she had done. Hamlet felt forced to say, "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue." Indeed, that noble heart does break later, as Horatio in the final scene will confirm, for

no man whose manners had been as open and carefree as the air and whose soul more transparent than pure glass could suddenly assume an entirely different attitude without tragic consequences.

A bitter struggle is taking place within Hamlet's soul. Already he is cast into a state of melancholy and disillusionment. This sickness of heart and intense desire for death is present even before Hamlet has any knowledge of his father's murder. Consequently, it cannot be said that the great duty of revenge is the load which presses so heavily upon his agonized soul. The only explanation left is his mother's sin.

In this hour of uttermost weakness, this sinking of his whole being toward annihilation, there comes on him bursting the bonds of the natural world with a shock of astonishment and terror, the revelation of his mother's adultery and his father's murder.¹²

This new information causes Hamlet's grief, confusion, and frustration to reach their greatest depths. His belief that sensuality and lust must inevitably betray human nature is confirmed, strengthened, and intensified. How those words of the ghost, "my most seeming virtuous Queen,"¹³ must have bitten into Hamlet's heart. All the goodness, all the saintliness, all the purity, and virtue which he had idolized in his mother so many

12 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 120.

13 Hamlet, I, v, 47.

years was only "seeming", only a dream. Nor were the words which immediately followed any less painful:

O Hamlet, what a falling off was there!
From me, whose love was of that dignity,
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage.¹⁴

To Hamlet and to his father, marriage vows implied something extremely sacred and holy, but to the queen they had no meaning than "dicers' oaths."¹⁵ The final thought that must have scraped the bottom of Hamlet's grief was that his mother's lust would stoop so low as to "prey on garbage."¹⁶ A person can only guess at the depths of the mental anguish and sufferings within Hamlet's soul that wrung from him the anguished cry: "O most pernicious woman!--O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!"¹⁷

Hamlet has now lost faith in all mankind, and fears to trust anyone. His deep love for Ophelia undergoes a subtle change. He grows suspicious of her innocence and fidelity. Her unaccountable action of denying him her presence only increases his suspicion and mental bewilderment. In such a state of mind

14 Ibid., I, v, 48-51.

15 Ibid., III, iv, 45.

16 Ibid., I, v, 58.

17 Ibid., I, v, 106-107.

he rudely bursts into her room in the hope of obtaining sympathy and comfort from her. He studies her to see if he can read her heart and still find love, virtue, loyalty, and if possible, strength enough to be able to share the dread secret which was crushing him to the ground. But her blank stare of fear indicates nothing to him, and he leaves the room more confused and bewildered than when he entered.

It is only when he meets Ophelia again that his suspicions are confirmed. If Hamlet could so quickly read in Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern's looks what their mission was, how much more easily must he have summed up the situation when he found Ophelia sitting alone in the lobby, reading a prayer book, and having all his love tokens with her. Her very simplicity made it impossible for her to pretend, and every word and action of hers necessarily seemed strange and unnatural to him. She tells a patent lie and does it badly. Of course, she does it for his sake, but he is unaware of her motives and believes she has betrayed him. He thinks that she too has gone over to the enemy's side and considers himself as left entirely alone to fight against his foe. That his mind should become poisoned against all women and that he should be so embittered was only natural. The only two women whom he had ever loved were his mother and Ophelia and these two, who had previously represented to him the best of womankind, were now found to be faithless to him.

Here lies the very heart of the tragedy. Nothing is more tragic in life than to be disappointed and deceived by loved ones. A man often recovers from failure or disgrace in life when there is someone to inspire him on, someone who understands and loves him, someone to whom every word and action of his matters; but the situation is very different in Hamlet's case. The very ones who had been the driving force and inspiration to him throughout his entire life are now the cause of his unhappiness and misery.

Next comes the play scene. One would expect that Hamlet's whole attention would be concentrated on proving the king's guilt. Instead his thoughts frequently wander to the thought of his mother's sin. Ophelia drops a chance remark about the brevity of the prologue. Immediately Hamlet twists the meaning around and uses it for an occasion to comment on the brevity of a woman's love.

Ophelia: 'Tis brief my lord
Hamlet: As woman's love.¹⁸

As the play begins Hamlet seems to ignore Claudius and to center his attention on his mother. Hamlet seems to intend to awaken in his mother by this play the memory of her former life and fidelity as well as to prove Claudius' guilt.

¹⁸ Ibid., III, ii, 146.

The player-queen vows eternal love to her husband and swears even if he were to die, she would never love another. As proof of her love she calls upon heaven to rain down all kinds of curses upon her if she is not loyal to this vow. Hamlet remarks here, "If she should break it now!"¹⁹

Hamlet laps into silence again while the player-queen continues to pledge her loyalty. Then Hamlet suddenly asks his mother, "Madam, how like you this play?"²⁰

Having learned from her troubled looks and restlessness, that she recognized herself in the Player-queen, he now suddenly turns upon her and startles her by the suddenness and vehemence of his sarcastic question, "Madam, how like you this play?" His question was a shaft barbed with bitter irony, which quickened the memory of her infidelity to his loving father. Gertrude in surprise, falters for the moment at the fierce utterance, only to reply, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." These telltale words of covered guilt prove that she has recognized in the Player-queen her own faithless love; and Hamlet, mindful of her disdain to mourn the memory of his honored father and of her shameful hasty marriage, shoots another shaft steeped in ridicule and raillery, in the words "O, but she'll keep her word."²¹

All these remarks point to one conclusion, that Hamlet even in his state of disillusionment was still hoping to make his mother conscious of her grievous sin and to repent. When Ophelia quietly comments on Hamlet's condition as, "Still better and

20 Ibid., III, ii, 224.

21 Blackmore, Riddles of Hamlet, 296.

worse," he quickly replies, "So you must take your husbands."²² It is another reference to the marriage vow: "I promise to take thee for my lawful husband...for better for worse..." Thus even at this crucial moment of the play-scene his mother's sin seems to keep haunting his memory. He just could not forget it.

Perhaps the most important scene in the drama is the interview between Hamlet and his mother. He is still in a passionate mood when he prepares to meet his mother. Like a true Christian, however, he prays that he may show anger at her sins but only love toward her person.

I will speak daggers to her, but use none;
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites:
How in my words soever she be shent, [injure]
To give them seals never, my soul, consent!"²³

Although Hamlet is intent upon revenging his father's murder, still his mind is constantly occupied with the thought of his mother's sinfulness and her complete indifference to the scandal she was causing. This idea always seems to be uppermost in his mind, as if his religious principles were continually telling him that the salvation of his mother's soul was of more importance than revenge for his father's murder. Somehow, Hamlet hopes he can so make his mother conscious of her sinful life

²² Hamlet, III, ii, 242.

²³ Ibid., III, ii, 383-386.

so as to cause her to repent and change her way of life.

When his mother rebukes him, "Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended," he quickly puts her on the defensive by replying, "Mother, you have my father much offended."²⁴ When she asks if he remembers her, he more openly and boldly reveals her sin by replying, "You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife." There is a pause; then comes the line that reveals what shameful, heart-rendering, and painful effects her sins have had on him: "And--would it were not so!--you are my mother."²⁵ For a queen to live an open incestuous life to the scandal of all was shameful and disgraceful; but for that queen to be his own mother who had been the incarnation of his highest ideals, was an unbearable grief to Hamlet. He would have preferred to be motherless.

Still he felt it his duty to bring his mother back to the state of grace, no matter how painful a task it might be. He tells her that he intends to hold a mirror up to her soul so that she may see its blackness. "You go not till I set you up a glass Where you may see the inmost part of you."²⁶ He tells her,

24 Ibid., III, iv, 9-10.

25 Ibid., III, iv, 16.

26 Ibid., III, iv, 19-20.

Leave wringing of your hands: peace! sit you down,
 And let me wring your heart: for so I shall
 If it be made of penetrable stuff;
 If damned custom have not brass'd it so,
 That it is proof and bulwark against sense.²⁷

The queen asks, "What have I done, that thou darrest wag thy tongue In noise so rude against me?" The queen still remains or pretends to remain impervious to a sense of guilt and shame. This irritates Hamlet the more. What has she done? He replies:

Such an act
 That blurs the grace and blush of modesty;
 Calls virtue hypocrite; takes off the rose
 From the fair forehead of an innocent love,
 And sets a blister there; makes marriage-vows
 As false as dicers' oaths: O, such a deed
 As from the body of contraction plucks
 The very soul, and sweet religion makes
 A rhapsody of words! heaven's face doth glow;
 Yea, this solidity and compound mass
 With tristful visage, as against the doom
 Is thought-sick at the act.²⁸

The queen has sinned against purity, despised virtue, removed the rose of love from the forehead and put a blister here, (an allusion to an old custom of branding harlots on the forehead.) Such an infraction of the marriage vows remove the very soul from the marriage contract and leaves it a lifeless body which will quickly decay and perish. Such infidelity makes religion and its obligations nothing else but pious sentiment-

27 Ibid., III, iv, 34-38.

28 Ibid., III, iv, 39-51.

ality. Heaven and earth even seem to be stricken with grief and horror at her sin, as though the day of judgment were at hand.

Hamlet throws all those accusations against his mother. When she still pretends to be ignorant of what he means and of the cause of his anger, Hamlet draws a comparison between his father and Claudius, and he then asks what devil caused her to prefer Claudius to his father. He cries out:

O shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious Hell,
 If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
 To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,
 And melt in her own fire; proclaim no shame
 When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
 Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
 And reason panders will.²⁹

At last the queen admits her guilt and that she had always been aware that she was living in sin, for she says,

O Hamlet, speak no more!
 Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;
 And there I see such black and grained spots
 As will not leave their tinct.³⁰

At this first sign of her repentance and confession of her sins, Hamlet's violent feelings and passions are calmed. He now no longer bitterly condemns her, but with filial tenderness pleads with her to change her way of life. Like a priest, Hamlet has struggled violently to win back his mother's soul from the

29 Ibid., III, iv, 82-88.

30 Ibid., III, iv, 88-91.

devil, and only after a long and bitter conflict was the enemy forced to yield ground. Hamlet is quick to grasp this opportunity and he bids his mother,

Confess yourself to Heaven;
Repent what's past; avoid what is to come;
And do not spread the compost on the weeds,
To make them ranker. Forgive me this my virtue;
For in the fatness of these pury times
Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,
Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good.³¹

The crisis of the conflict has been reached. As sudden rays of sunshine will break through the black clouds after a violent storm, so the queen after her previous display of base sensuality once again shows nobility of soul when she says, "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain." Hamlet replies,

O throw away the worser part of it
And live the purer with the other half.³²

Simple, yet so full of meaning, these words contain a most eloquent appeal. After their bitter quarrel in which their deep love for each other was crucified and purified in pain, this sudden burst of faith and love comes as a soothing relief to both.

Tears of sorrow replace the queen's former arrogance. She humbly bows her head in shame and contrition and asks, "What

31 Ibid., III, iv, 149-155.

32 Ibid., III, iv, 156-158.

shall I do?"³³ Hamlet advises her to avoid further sin by keeping away from the king's bed, and if necessary, even to assume virtue that she does not have. Hamlet asks her forgiveness for having had to speak to her as he did. Also he asks her to forgive his omitting the filial act of receiving her blessing. This he considered impossible for she was not as yet in the state of grace. He then bids his mother good-night.

Such an estranged relationship between a mother and son who love each other so deeply is matter for the deepest pathos. She is hurt by the loss of her son's respect as well as shamed by her sin, and Hamlet finds it extremely painful openly to charge his mother with her sin. But whereas his whole heart was never in the task of seeking revenge for his father's murder, it was in his horror at his mother's fall and in his longing to lift her up again. Nor does his conduct appear unduly harsh if:

we recall his filial love, which, intensified supremely by the lofty idealization of his mother's character, had been lacerated by her shameful conduct; if we consider his own nature, so highly sensitive to moral good and evil that, enamored of the one and abhorrent of the other, he feels a revulsion of soul at the disgraceful state of one so near and dear to him; if we reflect upon his own understanding of his duty of "revenge", a duty, which comprises not only the punishment of the usurper, by depriving him of life, crown, and Queen, but, moreover, the awakening of his mother's

33 Ibid., III, iv, 180.

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33 Ibid., III, iv, 180.

soul to a sense of her shameful guilt, in order to restore her to her former virtuous self: it seems evident that his conduct, far from being undutiful and harsh, is, on the contrary, clearly prompted by his strong filial love for an idol, which, though basely shattered, he is anxious to upgather, and, by inducing it anew with his own esteem of virtue and of honor, to restore it to its lost dignity and splendor. Hence, his supreme filial love and sense of duty makes him the physician of her soul, -- makes him apply the one sole remedy which, however painful, can alone revive her from a moribund state, and save her from a disgraceful moral death.³⁴

Shakespeare leaves us uncertain whether the queen returned to her sin or not, but with her dying breath in the closing scene she shows that her maternal love did finally conquer her sensual love when she turns against her husband and warns her "dear Hamlet" not to drink the poisoned wine.

34 Blackmore, Riddles of Hamlet, 331.

EPILOGUE

Quiller-Couch, Hazlit, Coleridge, Victor Hugo, and other commentators say that Hamlet has a greater universal appeal than any other Shakespearean tragedy because each spectator in beholding Hamlet feels, "This is I!" This explanation may be true but it is not sufficient. The success and popularity of any tragedy depends upon its power to make the spectator identify himself with the protagonist. The real reason for the perennial popularity of Hamlet lies in the explanation of why a person will more naturally and perfectly identify himself with the character of Hamlet rather than with Othello, Macbeth, or some other protagonist. None of the commentators, however, attempt to explain it that deeply. Nevertheless, if we accept the explanation in the foregoing chapters for the actions of Hamlet, we can search more deeply into the reasons why we will more readily identify ourselves with Hamlet rather than with Macbeth or Othello.

Macbeth, in opposition to all his other fine qualities of nobility, has a tragic trait that is repulsive to us even though it may be a very human fault. The same may be said for Othello or any other tragic hero. In Hamlet this is not true.

His tragic trait grew out of the goodness of his nature. The nobleness of Hamlet's moral nature made him judge the rest of humanity in the same light. He knew that there were evils and rottenness in the world, but the closer a person was to him, the more he judged that person's moral nature to be as pure and noble as his own. He had chosen his friends according to their moral worth and not according to any external impression. However, his own high principles and ideals caused him to overlook the weakness of human nature and to put too great a trust in its moral strength.

The reason why most of us say, "We are Hamlet," is that almost all of us have been guilty of this same fault. Because our Christian principles give us such high ideals and assure us that it is possible for human nature with the help of God's grace to reach them we go to the other extreme. We overlook the fact that human nature is also weak. We begin to rely too much on it; and as this reliance continually grows stronger, it causes us to expect too much from a friend or loved one. Then at some crucial moment we find human nature wanting. Disillusionment at last comes. Sometimes this disappointment may manifest itself in only a trivial fault--a slight, a mean word, crankiness, or thoughtlessness by the loved one; yet, it is enough to make us realize the imperfection of human nature and its inability to satisfy fully the love that is in our hearts.

The presence of this tragedy in our lives, whether it be on a grand or small scale, is what makes us identify ourselves so perfectly with Hamlet. He is the universal type of our endless anxiety when we, stripped of the delusive hopes of the present life and harassed by the personal sense of our helplessness, are brought alone face to face with the mysterious world of destiny. Like Hamlet, we are confronted with the problem of changing our standard of values.

Shakespeare seems to have sensed that he touched upon the great tragedy of life in this drama. In order to put his audience at rest again, he realized that it was necessary to do what he had refused to do in any other tragedy--to mention the future life in the closing scene. Consequently, Hamlet not only perfectly reflects the universal restlessness of man and his longing for perfect love, but he also teaches us where the solution to the difficulty lies.

There is a moral victory in this fatal tragedy. Out of the material ruins, a grander spiritual character arises. Hamlet exchanges his former standards of values for truer ones. Instead of building on the shifting sands of human nature as before, he now builds on rock and relies on the "divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will."¹ His sufferings

¹ Hamlet, V, ii, 10-11.

have detached him from this world and its vanities. Through painful disappointments he realizes the truth of St. Augustine's words, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it finds rest in Thee."² Having been thus purified, Hamlet is ready for his heavenly reward, and Horatio says as he dies,

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.³

2 The Confessions of St. Augustine, London, 1895, 1.

3 Hamlet, V, ii, 353.

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