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TRUE HAMLET: AN ATTEMPT AT DECONSTRUCTING MISCONCEPTIONS

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Abstract: *This study is rooted in classroom experience, and it deals with several misconceptions regarding the play Hamlet, by William Shakespeare. Starting from the most frequent preconceived ideas students come up with, most of them inoculated by critical readings, we hereby attempt a systematic deconstruction of these, and a construction of a different edifice, hopefully a well-deserved one.*

Key words: *Hamlet, misconception, flaw, tragic.*

1. Introduction

The study that follows emerges from an actual need that I have identified in students while teaching the course on Shakespeare's works, and particularly the seminar on the Bard's plays. Thus, students are expected to read several of Shakespeare's most representative plays, they are then required to consult critical comments, and then they are advised to just turn the page on what they have read, return to the actual text of the play, and come up with their own considerations regarding some issues that have always proved to be tough nuts with Shakespeare.

In other words, what students are naturally invited to do is to think *outside the box*, to step on less trodden paths, to avoid the vicious circle of clichés that unfortunately surrounds Shakespeare's plays.

It is not by chance then that I have chosen to deal with Hamlet as THE Shakespearean play that has enjoyed (or been afflicted by) loads of critical commentaries, essays, treatises, entire volumes of considerations that seem to be playing out loud similar tunes. Therefore, it is no wonder that when provided with the topic for their first seminar, on *Hamlet*, the students' reaction is quasi-similar: '*Hamlet* again? What is there left to say on *Hamlet*? We've heard it all!'

Students, and why not admit it, all of us, are intoxicated with ideas whose redundancy proves dangerous, not only because it is dangerous indeed to be filled with preconceived ideas, but while Shakespeare as playwright is concerned, the obvious tendency will be to diminish the significance of his works in general, and worse, to eventually reject reading his plays, not so much the lines, as what emerges from between the lines.

What follows is a sample attempt to deconstruct some of the most frequently encountered clichés regarding this exquisite piece of writing that *Hamlet* is, and, simultaneously, an attempt at

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reconstructing the well-deserved contours of an unfortunately blurred image.

2. Hamlet is the prince of doubt

However well-structured a metaphor this phrasing might be, it cannot be further from the truth. Hamlet is a prince indeed, the prince of an *'unweeded garden that grows to seed'*, the prince of Denmark. He then is the prince, as son of the king, of the deceased Hamlet, and as stepson of the current king, Claudius.

To Hamlet, there is no doubt as to his status; he is aware of it, and fully faces the burden of being a two-fathered son:

King Claudius: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
Hamlet: Not so, my lord; I am too much in the sun.(I,2)

Then, why the prince of doubt?

Well, an instance of misinterpreting Hamlet's reaction as doubt is the moment of his first encounter with the Ghost of his father, who is 'telling' him about Claudius' foul deed. Hamlet's immediate reaction is that of considering the unreliability of otherworldly apparitions, and consequently he is reluctant to heed the ghost's injunction to immediately take action:

Hamlet: Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. (I,4)

Let us not overlook the highly significant fact that Hamlet is a student of theology and philosophy at Wittenberg, so his character is solidly built on thinking rather than on performing. Consequently, thinking is what he does in this first instance of encountering his father's ghost.

The theory that we are putting out here is that while the ghost is uncontroversially an appearance in the play (as it is apprehended by several other characters), its ability to have spoken could be debatable. The fact that Hamlet alone heard the words of his father is consistent with Hamlet's previous determination to straighten things in Denmark, to actually bring everything into place by avenging his father. His death, the death of a king, thus of God's sent on earth, had indeed disrupted the natural order of things and beings.

Hamlet, hearing the words of the ghost, could just be Hamlet hearing his own thoughts, and objectifying them to himself, turning them into a purpose per se. So, this is by no means having second thoughts for Hamlet, but, on the contrary, it is a moment of resolution.

Furthermore, Hamlet is said to display wavering determination right at the moment he starts the lengthy process of staging the *Mouse-trap*. Why would he waste his energy with so much work on a seemingly useless thing, such as a play, when he certainly did not need any other proof that Claudius was the murderer?

In order to find an accurate answer to this question, let us go back to an essential piece of information regarding our character: he is a thinker, a speaker, an artist. And being an artist, he most certainly will feel at home under any circumstances that pertain to the world of art, such as writing lines for a play or staging it, for that matter.

Hamlet is comfortable in this world of art, comfortable enough to be able to concentrate on Claudius' reaction, as he himself confesses, or, rather, we dare say, on a change in progress: his own change.

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And the proof that he did not actually need any reconfirmation of Claudius' guilt lies in the fact that right after the play, when he seems to be content with having Claudius finally reveal his true colours, what does Hamlet do? He follows the King and finds him praying, or rather trembling with fear for what his punishment, earthly or heavenly, might be. At that moment, Hamlet appears to be again doubtful and hesitant, and his words may be easily misinterpreted:

> *Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;*
> *And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;*
> *And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:*
> *A villain kills my father; and for that,*
> *I, his sole son, do this same villain send*
> *To heaven.*
> *O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.*
> *He took my father grossly, full of bread;*
> *With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;*
> *And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?*
> *But in our circumstance and course of thought,*
> *'Tis heavy with him: and am I then revenged,*
> *To take him in the purging of his soul,*
> *When he is fit and season'd for his passage?*

It is not because of his undecided nature that he doe not act at this very moment, and instead he starts speaking and weighing things. It is also not because he fears that his revenge will not be absolute were he to murder Claudius in a state of grace. More likely, here we have again Hamlet in the making, Hamlet that is close but not yet there. It is Hamlet just about to become non-Hamlet.

3. Hamlet postpones several times the accomplishment of his duty, hence he is weak

We shall prove that this assertion is probably one of the most profound fallacies as far as this play is concerned.

To take things in a logical sequence, we should say that being the character he is, more precisely a student of philosophy and theology, Hamlet has a propensity towards thinking rather than acting, as argued before. Furthermore, with Hamlet, the process of thinking is often externalized into speaking, hence the numerous soliloquies the character is so famous for.

Hamlet's status of a thinker and speaker might have been utterly unproblematic, had he not been requested to act. And this is no ordinary request that one might choose to honour or not; no, it is the duty of a son whose father, the king, was murdered.

This is actually where *Hamlet* diverts from the moral simplicity of the common revenge tragedy. Hamlet's mind-frame has transformed a stock situation into a unique internal conflict. He, the thinker, is required to take action; not any kind of action, but the action of avenging a dead king/father, an action that is objectively evil.

Hamlet's moral principles are deeply shaken, his beliefs are about to be severely disrupted, as he needs to act bloodily.

Our contention here is that for this mandatory action to be carried out, Hamlet must become non-Hamlet; he must, bit by bit, give himself up, and become another person altogether.

It takes a great deal of courage for such a radical transformation to take place. And moments of doubt do exist in Hamlet; but there is never doubt in him about what he must accomplish; doubt slides in his soul as he ponders upon the fragility of the human being, the fine line that separates life from death:

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Hamlet: To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd.To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
(III,1)

However, such words do not pull him back from what he is heading for, they represent the externalization of potential weaknesses and fears: once out, once uttered, they no longer represent a menace.

For Hamlet, speaking is a sort of cathartic therapy having a dual purpose: to cure him of whatever humane feelings cross his mind and body, and, on the other hand, to convert all fears into strengths, and build up a differently strong character.

4. Hamlet's tragic flaw is that he doubts everything, as he is weak

This misconception follows logically from the previous ones. Hamlet does have a tragic flaw, for being the principal character in a tragedy, written within the template of a classical tragedy, Hamlet was expected to share this trait with all other noble, tragic characters.

The idea that Hamlet's tragic flaw is his weakness, really comes in handy as it fits and confirms the simplistic view that our hero is a weak person. However, since we have hopefully dismantled the misconception regarding Hamlet's weakness, we seem to be left with no immediate solution as to his flaw.

In his famous *Poetics*, Aristotle outlined the sketch-portrait of a tragic hero: thus, although this should be a morally blameless man, he '*is not eminently good and just; yet his misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty'* (Butcher, 1902:45).

This error or frailty is actually a moral trait the character is born with, and which is to such an extent particular to his nature, that it will surface at a certain point in the hero's life, and, because of it, the hero will be brought to his downfall. The fatalistic nature of the flaw raises it above ordinary errors the tragic characters commit, or plain defects their moral stature incurs.

The idea that we wish to advance at this point is that Hamlet's tragic flaw, that inborn feature of his that leads him to self-destruction needs to be related to the destiny of such a grand character; and this is always the case with Shakespeare's characters, and not only; their mistakes are *fatal*, in that they are final, but also destiny defying.

It is Hamlet's words that offer the key to such a decoding of his tragic flaw:

Hamlet: The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right! (I,5)

A closer read shows us a character who acutely feels the burden of carrying on his shoulders – just like the mythical Atlas – the entire responsibility of straightening the destiny of his world, of putting things in their right place. However, such a task is not one for a human being to accomplish; its pursuance pertains to some superior forces, that ultimately and exhaustively control life.

Nevertheless, Hamlet undertakes and assumes this task to the full, and proceeds as if this were his fate; to even attempt such a thing, is a grievous mistake, a tragic

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flaw. To extrapolate, it is an offensive act since it insults the self-regulating logic of created things and beings.

5. Hamlet is a misogynist

The two women that share the stage with Hamlet are Gertrude – his mother, and Ophelia – his loved one.

Hamlet's internal voice, the one that is externalized in the shape of his father's (the Ghost's) words, forbids him to punish his sinful mother, although, instinctively, this might have been the most logical thing to do. However, this is not Hamlet's concern, as his single task is certainly a higher one, and he will not let any lesser feelings interfere. Him, looking for revenge by punishing a mother, would have deprived his character of tragism, it would have placed him among ordinary others.

A similar reasoning characterizes his relationship with Ophelia. He loves her, there is no doubt about that. He loves her to the extent that he can give her up. This is clear at the moment when he abruptly tells him that there was once love between them, and then, as if out of the blue, he sends her to the nunnery.

Hamlet: Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a
breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest;
but yet I could accuse me of such things that it
were better my mother had not borne me.(III,1)

At first sight, these words seem to be consistent with insane behaviour, another misconception regarding Hamlet. However, by reading between the lines, we shall easily interpret Hamlet's words as a desperate attempt towards protecting the innocent Ophelia from becoming a Gertrude. Also, love as a fundamentally humane inclination, just like all the other humane distractions, had to be banished, although temporarily from Hamlet's mind, because, as argued above, there was a higher purpose Hamlet had to focus on.

6. Hamlet is inconsistent as a character

This preconceived idea is always quoted in relation to Polonius' murder by Hamlet. The argument is further extended by means of questioning the fact that Hamlet is essentially a speaker and a thinker. If this is so, the argument goes, then he must be a flawed character since he is subject to a serious inconsistency: the apparently impulsive gesture of killing Polonius.

Let us recap the circumstances: Polonius is eavesdropping behind the curtain in the Queen's chamber, while Hamlet, highly strung-up, is having an argument with his mother. The noise behind the curtain draws his attention, and triggers a reaction:

Hamlet: How now! a rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead! (III,4)

Thus, the creature that Hamlet instantly stabs is a rat, a traitor, and that rat should ideally have been Claudius; however, this is of no relevance, since Hamlet does not get to see his victim, so what he murders is the idea of a traitor – rat – Claudius. This gesture of him stabbing an idea is consistent with Hamlet's behaviour so far.

If Hamlet can only have *bloody thoughts*, and he can only *speak daggers* to his mother, then for certain he can only murder ideas, at least for now, since the process of becoming non-Hamlet is not yet complete.

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7. Hamlet murders Claudius at the end of the play – he did not have a choice

This misconception has once again the undesirable effect of severing Hamlet's stature, and therefore, of having him perceived as another tragic character for whom time is running up; from such an angle, it is the external circumstances (as time or lack thereof) that compel Hamlet to eventually act.

In fact, throughout the entire play, we have been witnesses to a rather painful and complex process: the process of Hamlet becoming a non-Hamlet.

As previously substantiated, on acknowledging the imperious necessity of performing a deed he could not immediately perform, Hamlet went the only possible way: step by step he suppressed Hamlet the thinker, and made room for Hamlet the doer. This annihilation ordeal that Hamlet subjects himself to involves the self-slaughter of Hamlet as we know him, and the emergence of non-Hamlet. Thus, by the time Hamlet murders Claudius, he had already killed himself, or rather *his self*. Eventually, the one inhabiting Hamlet's body is a doer who can perform the avenging task.

8. Conclusions

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a brilliant play, and the character is no less. Hamlet is unlike any other character in literature, and more often than not he is wrongly perceived; perhaps, it is the passage of time that we should blame for this, the time that allowed this play to be so worn-out by thousands of commentaries, which frequently divert the readers' attention from what is essential.

As the initial trigger of this study was the literature classroom and the young readers' reactions to the play, I choose to end it by returning to these, and by urging young readers to trust their own judgement and, whenever in doubt, to confidently return to Shakespeare's text, for that is what is essential and accurate indeed.

References

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