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Hamlet the Existentialist: A Comparison of Hamlet and Kierkegaard

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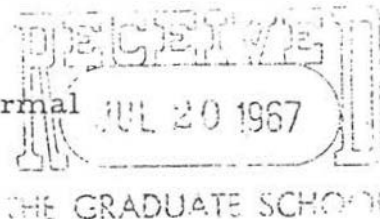
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HAMLET THE EXISTENTIALIST:

A COMPARISON OF HAMLET AND KIERKEGAARD

(TITLE)

BY

June B. Stark

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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PREFACE

While enrolled in a Shakespeare course I became convinced that there were many comparisons which could be made between the philosophy of Hamlet and the philosophy of the existentialists. I began reading background books on existentialism, and concluded that Hamlet could especially be compared to Kierkegaard, still with the emphasis on the philosophy. I then began specializing my reading, and as a squirrel goes up a tree trunk to the large limbs which in turn lead to the smaller branches, so I was led from existentialism to Kierkegaardian philosophy to Kierkegaard himself. There I found a fascinating, complex personality, one as fascinating and every bit as complex as Hamlet himself. With the pedantic conceit of the half-informed I hoped that others might not have noted the similarity, but, of course, other people have connected the two men. Barrett, writing on existentialism, said:

Kierkegaard has been criticized as being overmelancholy, excessively introverted, even morbid--a Hamlet more brooding than the original Dane.¹

Wylie Sypher has commented on the Kierkegaardian humor in Hamlet.² Even Kierkegaard in his Journals recognizes the comparison when he describes his unhappy knowledge of his father's sin and

¹William Barrett, Irrational Man (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1958), p. 139.

²Wylie Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," Comedy, Meaning and Form, ed. Robert W. Corrigan, (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), p. 48.

compares it to the tragedy of Hamlet.³ Walter Lowrie, a Kierkegaard scholar, has noted the similarities between the two men in this way:

I conclude this chapter with a plea for pity-- pity for S.K. even more than for "her," his Ophelia. Is the tribute of pity due only at the conclusion of the fifth act when the tragic hero dies? Must we not pity Hamlet when he discovers his mother's guilt? And can we not pity S.K. when he is confronted with substantially the same experience? He felt that point by point his case matched that of Hamlet. If Hamlet feigned madness, he was often on the brink of it, and many times he debated the question of suicide. He too loved a girl, and because of his secret could not marry her. He treated his girl shockingly, but so did Hamlet--and yet we can pity him. The only essential difference is that our story does not come to an end at this point with the death of both lovers. Regina had enough resilience to get engaged again, thus interjecting a comic note; and S.K. though dying daily, lived on for fourteen years and at last laid down his life in a very different cause.⁴

While others have noted the parallelisms in passing, in this paper I would like to pursue and detail the resemblances which seem to me to be the strongest. I am still convinced that an argument could be made that Hamlet does live in a Kierkegaardian existentialist fashion, particularly in respect to the idea of choice; the leap of faith; the aesthetic, ethical, and religious levels of existence; and the suspension of the ethical in his killing of the king, which can be compared to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, a favorite topic of Kierkegaard's. However, such a task would be much too ambitious under the restrictions of my paper; therefore, I intend to limit it to a comparison of the fictional Prince Hamlet and the

³Soren Kierkegaard, Journals, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 53.

⁴Walter Lowrie, A Short Life of Kierkegaard (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 143.

historical existentialist-theologian Kierkegaard. I am going to show that though Kierkegaard's frail physique and thin voice are unlike the "glass of fashion and the mould of form" that was Hamlet, yet in spirit and emotion they were brothers, that they were alike in personality and temperament, that they faced similar personal problems in a like manner, and that they coped with some of life's knottier philosophical dilemmas in basically the same way.

HAMLET THE EXISTENTIALIST:
A COMPARISON OF HAMLET AND KIERKEGAARD

What do Hamlet and Kierkegaard have in common? At first glance one would be tempted to say, "Very little." Kierkegaard is recognized by many only as an obscure, rather difficult theologian sometimes quoted by a freshly graduated seminary student to impress the parishioners in his first church, that is, until he becomes painfully aware that such quotations are putting his audience to sleep instead of elevating them to a higher level of religious meditation. Hamlet is acknowledged as the prince of Shakespeare's characters by many high school English teachers, and they devote their professional life to bowing before his sacred altar, and religiously and self-righteously force their reluctant students to make their obeisances, too. By those who have more than a popular magazine knowledge of existentialism, Kierkegaard is recognized as the man who coined the term and grandfathered the whole twentieth-century movement, and whose writings formed the firm foundation upon which all later writers have built. Hamlet is a symbol for indecision and melancholy. However, in spite of the fact that one was born of the pen and one of the flesh, and that they are removed from each other by time and university departments, striking parallels can be demonstrated between the fictional life of Hamlet and the historical life of his equally melancholy fellow Dane, Soren Kierkegaard.

Perhaps to some a comparison of a historical figure such as Kierkegaard with a character created even by William Shakespeare may seem a bit nonsensical. Yet who is more real than Hamlet

the Prince, if reality is to be used to defend the comparison? The character Hamlet has become the living person Hamlet hundreds of times to hundreds of people who have bridged the gap between the author and the reader or the actor and the spectator, that magic meeting where reality is not a matter of the flesh but of the spirit and intellect.

Certainly Hamlet and Kierkegaard were alike in many ways. As an example, the theatre was the favorite amusement of both men. Kierkegaard was passionately devoted to the theatre, and it was a love which lasted throughout his lifetime, even after he had restricted almost all of his other social activities to allow him to devote more of his time to his writing. At the time he made his final break with his fiancée Regina, the celebrated parting that has puzzled the students and the psychoanalysts, he left her and went immediately to the theatre, a deliberate action which strengthened popular belief that he had behaved like a cad to the young girl. Hamlet's enthusiasm for the theatre is evidenced by his reception of the news that the players were arriving, even before he thought of using them as a vehicle for trapping Claudius. He remembered each performer individually and made personal comments to each one which bespoke a friend-to-friend relationship. He remembered a speech even though it had not been acted more than once--"twas oaviary to the general"--(2,2,409) which showed a sincere appreciation for the work of the actors. Hamlet, too, was completely at home with the more technical aspects of the theatre. He knew exactly how he wanted his speech delivered, and he explicitly warned the player of overacting. "Nor do not saw the air too much with

your hand thus . . ." (3,2,4) He had formulated a whole theory of the purpose of the theatre, which proves more than a cursory interest in the subject:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end both at the first, and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it makes the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweight a whole theatre of others. (3. 2. 14 ff.)

Another trait shared by Kierkegaard and Hamlet was a penchant for introversion. Kierkegaard's Journals show a man looking deeply, probingly, with wonder, distaste, and sometimes even revulsion, into his own self. And there is probably no character in all of literature who wonders more about himself than does Hamlet. He tries to analyze himself and his actions, frequently without much success. When he talks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he expounds at length on how the world seems to him, and about his lack of joy in living. The personal pronouns figure prominently in this speech, as, for that matter, they do in all his speeches, and this usage points up his introspection. He wonders why he delays in avenging his father's death. He himself doesn't understand why he has acted as he has:

Am I a coward. . .
 For it cannot be
 But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
 To make oppression bitter...
 Why what an ass am I! (3. 1. 537 ff.)

Hamlet's speeches, particularly the soliloquies, continue to prove his introversion. That Hamlet acknowledges this trait in

himself and suspects that it may be a cause for his delay is indicated when he says:

Now, whether it be
 Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
 Of thinking too precisely on the' event--
 A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
 And ever three parts coward--I do not know. . . (4, 4, 39 ff.)

There is, too, a striking similarity between the relationship of Hamlet and Ophelia and Kierkegaard and Regina. Ophelia's age is not given, but the impression is that she was much younger than Hamlet's thirty years. Regina was also considerably younger than Kierkegaard; as a matter of fact, she was only fourteen when he met and fell in love with her. However, much more important than the parallel in age is the similarity in the way the two men acted toward the women they loved. Both men were completely secretive. Hamlet's insistence that Horatio and Marcellus not reveal the visit of the ghost is understandable since a premature disclosure would interfere with his carrying out his father's wish to be revenged. Even here, however, his demand for repeated assurances, "Never more make known what you have seen to-night," and again, "Nay, but swear't," and still again, "Upon my sword," and "Indeed, upon my sword, indeed," and finally, "Consent to swear," (2, 1, 143 ff.) seems a bit abnormal considering that Marcellus and Horatio were his trusted friends. Certainly we have no reason to believe that Ophelia could not be trusted with knowing Hamlet's plans, and it would have been very natural for a young man to have confided in the one he loved, especially about something which affected him as deeply as did the revelations of his father's ghost, and particularly since the ghost originally made no demands for absolute secrecy.

Any explanation then for Hamlet's secretiveness where Ophelia is concerned must be found in Hamlet himself. Kierkegaard was equally reticent with Regina about matters of the most importance to him. He loved her very much; yet he could not lift the curtain to reveal his innermost secrets to her.

But if I had had to explain myself then I would have had to initiate her into terrible things, my relation to my father, his melancholy, the eternal darkness that broods deep within, my going astray, pleasures and excesses which in the eyes of God are not perhaps so terrible, for it was dread that drove me to excess
 . . .⁵

Kierkegaard's obsession with secrecy evidently arose from his shock at finding that his father was not the model of religious perfection he had always appeared to be. Kierkegaard learned that when very young his father had cursed God, and that he had seduced a young servant girl, a girl he later married after the death of his first wife, and who became the mother of all of his children. Kierkegaard was concerned that others might learn the family secret, and in one writing he spoke of a son's being so ashamed of his father's dishonour that he approached him always with face averted in order that he wouldn't have to see the shame. As in Kierkegaard we see the parent as the explanation for the abnormal secrecy, so in Hamlet's case, the betrayal of his faith by Gertrude, his mother, perhaps made him doubly afraid to trust a woman, even one loved as he loved Ophelia. Yet, in both cases if each man had unburdened himself to his loved one, if each had shared the horrible burden of horrible secrets, then each might have found a solace for the

⁵Kierkegaard, op. cit., p. 87.

crippling melancholy, and possibly there could have been a happy ending for the four unfortunate lovers.

Another point of comparison in the love stories centers in the rejection of Regina by Kierkegaard and Ophelia by Hamlet. Kierkegaard was wholly, madly, and lastingly in love with his Regina. Yet he came to the painful conclusion that he simply could not marry her, though she was in love with him. Why did he come to this conclusion? The answer is not clear, though his sacrifice of any hope of happiness with Regina is dealt with in much detail in his writings. A student comes to the conviction that the denial was the result of many factors, and that all of them contributed to his melancholy which clouded his entire relationship with Regina: Kierkegaard's obsession with his father's sins; a sense of guilt from having spent while intoxicated an evening with a prostitute; a personal conviction of his unfitness for marriage; and an equally strong conviction that he would never be able to make Regina happy--all buttressed by a compelling sense of duty and dedication to his work. At any rate, he finally came to the conclusion that the relationship had to end, that the "divine veto"⁶ had to be obeyed. He pleaded with Regina to end the engagement herself to save her pride, but she refused. He finally concluded that the kindest thing he could do was to pretend to be an unfeeling scoundrel, and thus set her free in spite of herself. He said in a Journal entry:

. . . it is my greatest wish--and I have to say no.
In order to make it easier for her I will, if possible

⁶Lowrie, op. cit., p. 137.

make her believe that I simply deceived her, that I am a frivolous man, so as if possible to make her hate me . . . ?

The analogy with the relationship of Hamlet and Ophelia is clear. If we are to believe Hamlet's words, he truly loved Ophelia, as Kierkegaard loved Regina.

Doubt that the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love. (2, 2, 115 ff.)

These are not merely the words of an adolescent temporarily infatuated with a young woman; they have a ring of true devotion and passion to them. This impression is reinforced by Hamlet's actions and words when he learns that it is Ophelia's grave that has been prepared. He rejects Laertes' right to feel more grief than he does when he says:

What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wand'ring stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,
Hamlet the Dane. (5, 1, 230 ff.)

And his leap into the grave is not to be dismissed merely as an overly melodramatic gesture; rather it is consistent with the love he expressed early in the play. There is poignancy, too, when Hamlet says simply:

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sun. (5, 1, 247 ff.)

Then if Hamlet loved Ophelia why did he treat her as he did? Here the reasons are no less obscure than Kierkegaard's reasons for treating Regina as he did. To justify Hamlet's admittedly shabby actions by arguing that he was disgruntled

because Polonius had insisted that Ophelia repel his attentions is to imply that Hamlet had more respect for the wishes of Polonius than he shows anywhere in the play. On the contrary, his words imply contempt for the old man, "These tedious old fools!" (2, 2, 215) His disrespect is evident even after he has killed Polonius: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! I took thee for thy better." (3, 4, 32 ff.) It is more reasonable to suppose that Hamlet had been torn by his love for Ophelia and his duty to avenge the death of his father, and that he came to the conclusion that he must give up his Ophelia, as Kierkegaard later gave up Regina. If Hamlet had not been a melancholy individual, perhaps he would not have felt that he had to renounce Ophelia; but as Kierkegaard's judgments were clouded by his melancholy, so were Hamlet's. And so Kierkegaard turned from Regina and Hamlet from Ophelia.

Neither of the women involved understood the reasons for their lovers' actions. Kierkegaard's rejection was an excruciatingly painful one to him which led him from violent protestations of love at one time to outright rudeness the next, so Regina's bewilderment is understandable. Ophelia, as puzzled as was Regina, described Hamlet's actions:

He falls to such perusal of my face
 As 'a would draw it. Long stayed he so.
 At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
 And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
 He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
 As it did seem to shatter all his bulk,
 And end his being. That done, he lets me go,
 And with his head over his shoulder turned
 He seemed to find his way without his eyes,
 For out adoors he went without their helps,
 And to the last bended their light on me. (2, 1, 90 ff.)

Then in the very next scene we hear Polonius read Hamlet's touching love letter to Ophelia, followed almost immediately by an exchange where Hamlet makes vulgar insinuations about Ophelia to her father. The contrast of, "Soft you now,/ The fair Ophelia. --Nymph, in thy orisons/ Be all my sins remembered," (3. 1, 88ff.) when Hamlet sees Ophelia and his taunting her immediately afterward is difficult to understand. It makes sense only if we interpret it that Hamlet is pretending to be the unfeeling scoundrel that Kierkegaard pretended to be, a pretense his melancholy made him feel was necessary and which was motivated by love of the rejected one.

As Regina loved Kierkegaard, so Ophelia loved Hamlet. At first Regina refused to believe that Kierkegaard really wanted to break their engagement. She was convinced of his love, recognized the instability of his temperament, and begged him not to leave her, "in the name of Christ and by the memory of his deceased father."⁸ Her father also entreated Kierkegaard not to break the engagement, because he feared what would happen to his grieving daughter. Ophelia's love for Hamlet was no less real. Laertes, in big brotherly fashion, warns her against taking Hamlet too seriously:

For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor,
Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,
A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute,
No more. (1. 3, 5 ff.)

Ophelia obviously does not take him too seriously. She lightly responds, "No more but so?" (1. 3, 9) And then she proceeds to

⁸Lowrie, op. cit., p. 139.

tease Laertes about taking his own advice. Her defensive attitude when her father minimizes Hamlet's seriousness, "My lord, he hath importuned me with love/ In honorable fashion," (1. 4. 110) implies her own receptiveness to Hamlet's advances, although she obeys her father as a dutiful daughter should. However, the depth of her feeling for Hamlet is more evident in her soliloquy following the nunnery scene:

O, what a noble mind is here o'thrown!
 The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
 Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
 Th' observed of all observers, quite quite down!
 And I of ladies most dejected and wretched,
 That sucked the honey of his musicked vows. . . (3, 1, 145 fr.)

Another way in which Kierkegaard and Hamlet were alike is that both men were melancholy. Kierkegaard's melancholy had a profound effect on his whole life. Hjalmar Helweg, Director of the Hospital for the Insane at Oringe, Denmark, read painstakingly every word Kierkegaard ever wrote and concluded that he ". . . suffered from a condition of depression alternating with, or more commonly blended with, maniacal exaltation."⁹ Surely such a description could just as well have been written about Hamlet! At the beginning of the play, Hamlet is a thinking, speculative, introverted young man. He is haunted by the grossness of palace society and bedeviled by thoughts of his mother's too early marriage. He becomes transformed, at least temporarily, from a young man of brooding thought to a man given over to emotion. As a matter of fact, the pendulum swings so far from passive thought that young Hamlet at times seems almost out of emotional control.

⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
 And shall I couple hell? O, fie! Hold, hold, my heart. . .
 Remember thee? Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
 In this distracted globe. (1, 5, 90 ff.)

Following these lines Horatio and Marcellus reenter and Hamlet has a series of short, staccato lines that approach the "maniacal exaltation" the doctor used in describing Kierkegaard. Staid Horatio finally says, "These are but wild and whirling words, my lord." (1, 5, 132) Yet a hint of the melancholy that is the opposite coin of the exaltation quickly follows in, "The time is out of joint.. O cursed spite/ That ever I was born to set it right!" (1, 5, 187 ff.)

It is true that Hamlet speaks to Horatio and Marcellus about putting on, or pretending, his antic disposition. Does the pretended disposition, however, become the real one when Hamlet confronts Ophelia? Ophelia's very real reaction of alarm and fright indicate more than a pretended change in the personality of a man she knew very well. Hamlet's actions and appearance constitute one of the smaller mysteries of the play, but they would support the conclusion, whether they were put on or not, that Hamlet's behavior, to which Claudius refers in speaking to Gertrude as "your son's distemper," could be compared to that of Kierkegaard.

There is also a parallel in the beginnings of the melancholia in the lives of Kierkegaard and Hamlet. While the childhood of Kierkegaard was not a conventional one, melancholy seems to have disabled him only after the so-called "Great Earthquake," a term used to refer to the spiritual shock that Kierkegaard felt when he learned, either accidentally or from a partial

confession by his father, that the father in what seemed to Kierkegaard as gross, unforgivable sensuality, had seduced his mother while she was working as a servant girl for the older Kierkegaard and his first wife. Kierkegaard's biographers have reconstructed the chronological events of the Great Earthquake referred to in a veiled manner in his Journals. In one entry he said that if he wrote a tragedy of his life, "It would begin on a completely idyllic, patriarchal note so that no one suspected anything until suddenly the word sounded which translated everything into terror."¹⁰ In another entry he said that depression may be a result of a suspicion that all is not right in the area of family relations, though there may be no proof of anything wrong, that depression can descend to the point of despair, and that this despair affects one more terribly than any fact of wrongdoing.¹¹

Surely the parallel to Hamlet is a striking one! Hamlet by inference had been a scholar, a dutiful and loving son, and a gay prince amused by the travelling players at their previous palace appearances. But he too had suffered an onslaught of melancholia, and Kierkegaard's remarks that it must come from a disruption in family relations is particularly applicable to Hamlet, since his melancholia evidently began with the marriage of his mother and Claudius, a marriage that had incestuous overtones to Hamlet. Ernest Jones in his Hamlet and Oedipus advances the thesis that only this relationship, with all its subtleties,

¹⁰Kierkegaard, op. cit., p. 89

¹¹Ibid., p. 53.

can fully account for Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius.¹²

The melancholia which gnawed away at the emotional stability of Kierkegaard and Hamlet led both of them to contemplate suicide. One of the most poignant entries in Kierkegaard's Journals was written in 1836 at a time when Kierkegaard was socially much sought after and when he was already a recognized wit and a brilliant conversationalist. "I have just returned from a party of which I was the life and soul; wit poured from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me--but I went away--and the dash should be as long as the earth's orbit-----and wanted to shoot myself."¹³ He shows similar suicidal thoughts in another entry when he describes a man walking along thinking about killing himself. Something fell on him at that moment and killed him as he thanked God with his dying breath.¹⁴ Hamlet, too, obviously was tempted to destroy himself, even though he was on the surface a fortunate young man. It is true that his uncle was sitting on the throne, but he seems to have been assured that he would be the next successor, and he was loved and admired by the populace. He was intelligent, witty, and had all the pleasures of the palace at his command. Yet he would not cast off his "nighted color," and his utter despair is evident when he muses:

O, that this too too sallied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. (1, 2, 128 ff.)

¹²Ernest Jones, Hamlet and Oedipus (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1949), pp. 90-91.

¹³Kierkegaard, op. cit., p. 50.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 50.

Then for a while Hamlet seems caught up in the mission given to him by his father's ghost, in the conversational sparring with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and in the taunting of Polonius; yet the melancholia descends again, and Hamlet speaks some of literature's most famous words about the temptation of death:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep--
 No more; and by a sleep to say we end
 The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wished. . . (3. 1, 56 ff.)

Hamlet states very plainly that it is religious scruples and fear of the life after death that keep him from killing himself. "Or that the Everlasting had not fixed/ His canon 'gainst self-slaughter." (1. 2, 131 ff.) Fear of what may come after death is plain when he says:

But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of?
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all; (3. 1, 78 ff.)

Hamlet, after all, has had a very graphic description of the terrors of purgatory from his father's ghost:

But that I am forbid
 To tell the secrets of my prison house,
 I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
 Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
 Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
 Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
 And each particular hair to stand an end,
 Like quills upon the fretful porcupine. (1. 5, 9 ff.)

While later in the play Hamlet tries to rationalize his delay by speculating whether or not it was an honest ghost, there is never any indication that Hamlet thought the terrors of the

afterlife were exaggerated. Surely the ghost's harrowing account of the "undiscovered country" was one to make Hamlet think twice before exchanging earthly existence for a ghostly one.

Kierkegaard is not as explicit as Hamlet is in his soliloquies, but even in his university days when he had dethroned religion for philosophy, he could not escape from the effects of his father's suffocating religious upbringing, a background that would make him as unlikely as Hamlet to succumb easily to suicidal temptations.

Again both Kierkegaard and Hamlet had a brilliant wit which by turn could amuse, bemuse, and lacerate their less mentally agile onlookers. Kierkegaard early recognized that while his melancholy temperament was a handicap, he could hold his own with any of his comrades because of his ". . . eminently shrewd wit, given me presumably in order that I might not be defenseless."¹⁵ Hans Christian Anderson was a favorite target of Kierkegaard's wounding wit during his university days; yet this very wit made him socially popular. Hamlet's wit is obvious in his very first line, "A little more than kin, and less than kind." (1, 2, 65) And the intense bitterness of "Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked-meats/ Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables," (1, 2, 189) does not obscure the wittiness of the remark. But it is Polonius whose pragmatic mind is completely befuddled by Hamlet's conversational fireworks. In their first exchange, Polonius says in an aside, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't," (2, 2, 202) and again, "How pregnant sometimes

¹⁵Lowrie, op. cit., p. 42.

his replies are!" (2, 2, 205) Hamlet completely bewilders Ophelia in the nunnery scene, and she, thinking he is deranged, pays tribute first of all to his mind in her soliloquy, "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" (3, 1, 146) As Kierkegaard used wit as a shield, so Hamlet frequently screened himself with a barrage of witticisms as evidenced when he spoke to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern following the Mouse-Trap scene. Then the screen was dropped and the tormented soul of the young prince revealed itself clearly when he pleaded with his mother to reject her husband and embrace the purer half of her broken heart.

"Absurd" was one of Kierkegaard's favorite words, and both he and Hamlet with their superior intellects and great sensitivity saw life as essentially absurd, long before modern writers and artists made that judgment their password. Each recognized the great abyss that separates what is from what appears to be, which is the essence of the absurd, and Wylie Sypher has described Hamlet as a profoundly comic character, since absurdity is one of the causes of laughter. "He encounters what Kierkegaard calls either/or choices, the extremes that cannot be mediated but only transcended. That is, the comic hero and the saint accept the irreconcilables in man's existence."¹⁶ Sypher proposes that Hamlet is a comic hero whose humor holds up and illuminates tragic themes, rather than the opposite idea that his tragedy is illuminated by humor. Certainly, regardless of which is the case, the bitter humor of both men emphasized the pain they felt when they observed the absurdity of human existence.

¹⁶Sypher, op. cit., p. 48.

Kierkegaard keenly perceived the difference between appearance and reality, the absurdity, that permeated his society. He knew his father to be a man who had cursed God and seduced a servant girl; yet he was respected throughout Copenhagen as a man of tremendous Christian integrity. He saw the church and in it he saw little of Christ; and the knowledge brought him to despair. Even in himself he saw irony in his frail, misshapen body housing the intellect of a genius. He looked clearly at the restlessness of his contemporaries, and the absurdities were obvious:

Of all ridiculous things, it seems to me the most ridiculous is to be a busy man of affairs, prompt to meals, and prompt to work. Hence when I see a fly settle down in a crucial moment on the nose of a business man, or see him bespattered by a carriage which passes by him in even greater haste, or a drawbridge opens before him, or a tile from the roof falls down and strikes him dead, then I laugh heartily. And who could help laughing? What do they accomplish, these hustlers? Are they not like the housewife, when her house was on fire, who in her excitement saved the fire-tongs? What more do they save from the great fire of life?¹⁷

Kierkegaard says he laughs heartily, but the laughter is frightening and sends quivers down the spine, because it hints that there is no more meaning in life than in the hustle-bustle of ants in an ant hill.

Hamlet, too, saw this absurd aspect of life. His mother had seemed to love his father devotedly and had grieved his death, "Like Niobe, all tears." (1, 2, 149) Yet she had married within a month a man who had none of his father's virtues, and his father's brother at that! The anguished disillusionment of a

¹⁷Soren Kierkegaard, The Witness of Kierkegaard (Selected Writings From Kierkegaard on How To Become a Christian, ed. Carl Michalson, (New York: Association Press, 1960), p. 33.

son is heard in Hamlet's cry, "O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/ Would have mourned longer." (1. 2, 150) That it is of his mother that Hamlet is speaking, as Kierkegaard spoke of his father, makes the discrepancy between what was and what had seemed to be even more heartbreaking. His father had served his people faithfully; yet they apparently had immediately switched their affection to their new ruler with no remorse or sense of impropriety, and again the absurdity of life becomes as evident as in Ionesco's plays today. Hamlet's disillusionment makes him see a vicious mole of nature in people even if they ". . . be pure as grace." (1. 4, 33) a mole which obliterates all the noble substance of their characters. Hamlet saw the humor, the absurd humor, in using funeral meats to set a marriage table. He saw Polonius, not as a wise elder statesman, but as a tedious old fool whose "candied tongue" would "lick absurd pomp." (3. 2, 51) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were supposed to be his friends; yet he quickly recognized them as tools of the king. He saw worms feeding on the remains of beggars and kings alike. He even saw the discrepancy in himself, as did Kierkegaard. He had been ordered to avenge the death of a noble king; yet he delayed and was entertained by an actor's speech, a speech which embodied the passion he himself had reason to feel. "What's Hecuba to him or he to her,/ That he should weep for her?" (2. 2, 525) He, the handsome, loved, young prince of Denmark, reproaches himself:

This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A stallion! Pis upon't! foh! (2. 2, 549 ff.)

The bitter humor that is a basic part of an absurd view of life, plus something much deeper that perhaps is the essence of tragedy, is most obvious in Hamlet's comments in the graveyard scene. The gravedigger is singing while he digs the grave, and the stage is set for the contrast of the grotesque and the serious. Hamlet holds up a skull and the reader is immediately uneasy. A skull is an absurdity that remains when life is gone. Hamlet comments as he holds the skull, "This might be the pate of a politician, which this ass now o'erreaches; one that would circumvent God, might it not?" (5, 1, 70 ff.) And we think of Polonius, the court politician, and we think of God! It is ridiculous to Hamlet to think that the next skull might have been that of a lawyer, a proper gentleman, respected, able to practice the fine points of law; it was as ridiculous and laughable as it was to Kierkegaard to observe the fly settling on the nose of the "busy man of affairs." Hamlet holds the skull and thinks that "The very conveyances of his lands will scarcely lie in this box, and must the' inheritor himself have no more, ha?" (5, 1, 98 ff.) Hamlet trades witticisms with the gravedigger, but all the time the banter is going on, the skull is providing the background for the humor.

Hamlet is fascinated by the physical aspects of death and with the contrast of the nothingness of the skeleton with the wholeness of the body. "How long will a man lie i' the earth ere he rot?" (5, 1, 144) And the dissolution into dirt of the flesh of a politician, a courtier, a lawyer, or a king, even his father, becomes a degradation and an absurdity. The poignancy becomes acute when Hamlet realizes that the skull he picked up

did not belong to some unknown but to his father's jester, Yorick.

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio--a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? (5. 1. 163)

Until this time Hamlet has intellectually comprehended the absurdity that such is the end of all men, but now he realizes emotionally--or existentially, since it now has a subjective, individual meaning--that each man, great as Alexander, or humble as the court jester, or fair as Ophelia, or noble as his father, becomes at last a skull and part of the earth, earth which may be used to stop a bung-hole. And, like Kierkegaard, he sees a grisly humor in life's absurdity. "Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that." (5. 1. 170 ff.)

For men as sensitive as Kierkegaard and Hamlet the perception of life's absurdity leads them to suffering and deep despair. The despair of Kierkegaard was such that the translators found "despair" too mild a word and thus "dread" became a stronger substitute. His Sickness Unto Death is a study in despair, and the emotion led him to contemplate suicide and made him afraid at times that he was losing his mind, though his writings make it crystal clear that his powerful intellect remained in control. Both suicide and insanity are escapes, and Barrett describes despair as a sickness where the victim longs to die but cannot, an emotion where people want to escape from themselves.¹⁸ Hamlet's

¹⁸Barrett, op. cit., p. 150.

utter despair is apparent early in the play, as is his desire for escape, but God has forbidden suicide. His despair voices itself:

O God, God,
 How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
 Seem to me all the uses of this world!
 Fie on't ah, fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
 That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature
 Possess it merely. (1, 2, 132 ff.)

Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he has lost his laughter, he does not exercise, and that:

This most excellent canopy the air. . . why it
 appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent con-
 gregation of vapors. . . And yet to me, what is this
 quintessence of dust? Man delights not me, nor woman
 neither. . . (2, 2, 287 ff.)

As Hamlet was brought to the brink of suicide by his despair, he seems, too, to wonder about his own stability. He appeared out of control with Ophelia, but that was a pretense; he played games with Polonius, but his immediate abandonment of the role when Polonius left makes it clear that it was only a game.

But he says to Horatio, the character with whom he never pretends,

. . . and blest are those
 Whose blood and judgment are so well comeddled
 That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
 To sound what stop she please. 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 heart,
 As I do thee. (3, 2, 59 ff.)

The implication is that while Hamlet may not consider himself actually unstable, he considers himself a slave to passion, in contrast to Horatio, a man of balance and self-control.

Their view of life as absurd and meaningless led both Kierkegaard and Hamlet to despair, but the despair did not result in suicide or insanity. Rather the responses of both men to

their sufferings were more affirmative. How did they arrive at positive responses? Here the specifics differ; yet, here, too, there is a basic similarity. Kierkegaard said that it is from the basis of despair that an individual launches out to find the absolute and that is what both he and Hamlet did-- launch out from despair.

Kierkegaard's was an emotional launching as well as an intellectual one. The effect of his father on his life cannot be over-emphasized, and it was on his twenty-fifth birthday that he became reconciled with his father. Biographers believe that Kierkegaard's father asked his son's forgiveness, and convinced him that he was repentant and that his love for God was real, not hypocritical. Kierkegaard forgave him, and through his reconciliation with his earthly father, he also was reconciled with his heavenly one. He wrote that it was from his father that he learned the true meaning of human fatherly love, and received a conception of what divine love must be, the divine love which is the one stable thing in life.¹⁹ In his Journal entry dealing with the reconciliation, Kierkegaard appropriately copied the Lear-Cordelia reconciliation speech. It was a short time after the birthday that for the first time Kierkegaard entered a prayer in his Journal, and it was shortly after the birthday that the father died. Kierkegaard grieved deeply. "My father was the most loving father, and my yearning for him was and is most profound--whom never a day have I failed to remember in my prayers, both morning and evening."²⁰ He looked

¹⁹Lowrie, op. cit., p. 119.

²⁰Ibid., p. 121.

upon his father's death as a death for him, since his confession may actually have hastened the end, and since it was by the confession that he was reconciled with his heavenly father.

Yet knowing the genius of Kierkegaard, it is doubtful that even the removal of an emotional barrier to faith, as represented by his relationship to his father, would have led automatically to a vital, affirmative faith, and a rejection of life as meaningless. In reality, what it did was to free Kierkegaard from the crippling effects of the despair, although he continued to regard life as absurd. Religion, in effect, became part of the absurdity. Kierkegaard felt that no one can prove the authenticity and relevancy of religious faith. An individual must make an Either/Or choice, one in which Kierkegaard argues that all other choices are posited, since it is the basic choice between what he terms good and evil, faith and disbelief, between the aesthetic view of life and the ethical-religious. Other choices may be between relative goods; this one is the ultimate choice. And here Kierkegaard says he risks all; intellectually as well as emotionally he decides to stake his whole life on an uncertainty, on the absurd, if you will. Faith then is a leap, a striking out from the safe waters to water fathoms deep; only there can a man put into practice what he has theorized about the art of swimming.

Then since it is from the depths of despair that man launches out, making the choice and the leap, it follows that despair is the sickness that it would be unfortunate not to have.

So then I bid you despair, and never more will your frivolity cause you to wander like an unquiet spirit, like a ghost, amid the ruins of a world which

to you is lost. Despair, and never more will your spirit sigh in melancholy, for again the world will become beautiful to you and joyful, although you see it with different eyes than before, and your liberated spirit will soar up into the world of freedom.²¹

Kierkegaard here was a little carried away. He lived with melancholy all his life, but despair ended when he turned emotionally and intellectually to faith.

Hamlet, too, took steps toward an integration of personality and the finding of some absolute, as Kierkegaard termed it, which resulted in a different Hamlet in the fifth act, a Hamlet who was ready to act decisively. These steps, however, are not as clearly outlined as are Kierkegaard's in the Journals. Yet some parallels can be seen.

As Kierkegaard's resolution to despair began with a reconciliation with his father, Hamlet's evidently began with his mother, though any reconciliation is implied, not stated. Hamlet's mother did not have the brooding sense of sin nor the conscience of Kierkegaard's father, only his sensuality. Kierkegaard's father saw his spots as clearly as did Kierkegaard, and perhaps he even magnified their size. Not so Gertrude. She acknowledges her sins only when Hamlet has depicted them in the most vivid terms. She quakes under his attack:

O Hamlet, speak no more!
 Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul;
 And there I see such black and grained spots
 As will not leave their tinct. (3, 4, 89 ff.)

She asks Hamlet what she should do and he tells her to turn away from the sinful, sensual pleasures of the king's bed. While she never tells Hamlet in so many words that she will turn

²¹Kierkegaard, op. cit., p. 56.

from Claudius, she at least acknowledges her guilt, and he could have been justified in assuming that she would. The queen assures Hamlet that she will not tell the king what Hamlet has said, and Hamlet could easily presume that while not reconciled with his mother, yet the first few tentative steps toward such a reconciliation had taken place, and perhaps Gertrude intended him to think so. Such a conclusion is strengthened by her turning on the king at the end of the play to tell Hamlet that the drink was poisoned.

So Hamlet left for England, and he is a much different Hamlet when he returns. There is a decisiveness, a sureness of purpose that was not there when he left. Gone are the wild and whirling words of Hamlet from the beginning of the play. Rather here he is calm, reasonable, and determined when he says of the king, ". . . is't not perfect conscience/ To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned/ To let this canker of our nature come? In further evil?" (5, 2, 67 ff.) Horatio reminds him that the king will shortly find out that he has returned, but Hamlet's answer indicates self-confidence that has no relationship to the erratic, introspective musings of the earlier Hamlet. He simply says, "It will be short; the interim is mine." (5, 2, 73)

While Hamlet still looks on life as absurd--he makes this memorably clear in the graveyard scene--yet there has been some finding of the absolute, because he says to Horatio, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Roughhew them how we will." (5, 2, 10 ff.) A similar recognition of a divine force is indicated in his answer to Horatio's question about the seal,

"Why, even in that was heaven ordinant." (5, 2, 48) These are hints that Hamlet has taken the leap of faith that Kierkegaard speaks of, even though we do not have the road clearly outlined that led to such a leap. We wonder what happened in the soul of Hamlet as he sailed to England. When he is relating his adventures to Horatio, he says, "Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting/ That would not let me sleep." (5, 2, 4 ff.) And it was this restlessness, which he implies was caused by the "divinity that shapes our ends," that led him to get up and search for the packets that contained instructions for his execution. We are not sure why he left unable to act and came back calm and resolute. But certainly Hamlet had come to some terms with the absolute, with God. There are too many references to a supreme power for us to think otherwise. Perhaps Hamlet experienced an instant as described by Kierkegaard:

So when all has become still around one, as solemn as a starlit night, when the soul is alone in the whole world, then there appears before one, not a distinguished man, but the eternal Power itself. . . He does not become another man than he was before, but he becomes himself, consciousness is unified, and he is himself.²²

Hamlet is not another man. He is still the noble prince with all the qualities that made us love and admire him before; he simply has shrugged off the coat of indecision, ". . . and he is himself."

Thus Kierkegaard's reconciliation with God and his leap of faith left him free to follow the tortuous, original paths of his own philosophical thinking, and thus Hamlet's leap of faith left him free to act in his own life. Kierkegaard wrote books that fill a twenty-four foot shelf; Hamlet killed a king. A

²²Kierkegaard, op. cit., p. 49.

A make-believe Hamlet lashed out at the corruption of a make-believe society; a real Kierkegaard lashed out at the self-satisfaction of Christendom. Today students of theology stumble over Kierkegaard's Either/Or and Concept of Dread; serious actors shake at the thought of playing Hamlet.

Yet behind the encrustation of scholarship there are two haunting spirits that have much in common. two spirits that shine from the past to haunt us in much the same way. They ask questions we ask in our own souls when we no longer can dodge a confrontation of self; and their insights have a twentieth-century contemporary quality to them. We feel a kinship of spirit, and the fact that both not only posed the questions but found what were to them acceptable answers points a possible path from our own spiritual labyrinths. And both men stand out in bas-relief to the societies which surrounded them, not merely as cold figures philosophizing on life's problems, but as lovable, very real people. Horatio's words, "Good night, sweet prince,/ And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (5. 2. 344 ff.) apply appropriately to both of them and are a fitting farewell to the two melancholy Danes.

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