

【研究ノート】

Hamlet's Foils : Ophelia and Laertes

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“... there is no doubt that nearly every spectator and reader the first time he encounters the play [assumes] that Hamlet ought to kill the King—....” (Goddard, 1951, p. 334) Not only first time spectators and readers, but many critics in the past who have seen the play and closely studied it continue to hold this view and thus infer Hamlet's indecisiveness and “tragic flaw.” However, as Goddard convincingly argues, rather than Hamlet being a man called on to commit an act that he is unable to rise up to, he is rather a man at a relatively high level of spiritual development caught in a situation where he is forced to choose between two unresolvable evils: to break the Christian ethic of not killing in order to satisfy a spirit of revenge, or to do nothing and let a wrong go unpunished. It is part of the genius of the play that by the end we understand Hamlet's dilemma; we have explored with him the darkness of his choices, and at the finale we feel he is able to make a tragic harmony out of his conflict.

Goddard places the play and the character Hamlet in a line of development that proceeds from Shakespeare's History plays to *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*, and then continues on in *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*.

One by one in these plays Shakespeare had demonstrated how bloodshed invoked in their name brings on the very thing it was intended to avert, how...force begets force and vengeance vengeance....Only on the assumption that Hamlet ought not to have killed the King can the play be fitted into what then becomes the

unbroken progression of Shakespeare's spiritual development.
(Goddard, 1951, p. 336)

Prosser affirms Goddard's position by accumulating evidence to show, among other things, that the Ghost, although it tells the truth, is more a demon than a spirit calling for heavenly retribution; and that the prevailing Elizabethan ethic was to reject revenge as an acceptable response to murder, thereby giving some idea as to how Shakespeare assumed his audience might react to Hamlet's situation—they might sympathize with him, but they probably would not approve of the outright killing of Claudius. (Prosser, 1967) (1)

Hamlet's struggle then is a struggle against the ancient and arguably innate custom of blood revenge; it has ever been a part of history and survives to the present day. Despite the questionable and dark nature of the Ghost (2), Hamlet eventually acts on its charge partially because it is of course Hamlet's own desire. "Hamlet's delay...does him credit. It shows his soul is still alive and will not submit to the demands of the father without a struggle." (Goddard, 1951, p. 341) Goddard says that Hamlet is another example of Dostoevsky's Divided Man; God and the Devil are fighting for Hamlet's soul. (Goddard, 1951, p. 354) Hamlet descends into the dark side of himself just before he kills Polonius (which Prosser as well as others argue is the act which dooms Hamlet; see Prosser, p. 192). His dark, "witching time of night" speech in III.iii and his horrific reason for not killing Claudius at prayer in order to damn his soul (3) reveal the depths to which he has sunk. However, unlike Macbeth, Hamlet is able to change his course and save his soul.

"It is a critical commonplace to assert that the Hamlet of Act V is a changed man: mature rather than youthful,..., and somehow more attuned to divinity." (Bloom, 1986, p. 1) So it is that the angst and questioning of "To be or not to be" becomes in Act V "Let be." Hamlet overcomes the no-win choice of "obeying the ghost's call for

revenge or failing to act because of a debilitating disgust with life," both of which are "a path to Hamlet's destruction." (Siegel, 1993, p. 21) The ultimate rightness of Hamlet's course of action can best be seen when comparing his choices with those of Laertes and Ophelia. They "seem expressly created to act as a mirror of some aspect of Hamlet." (Goddard, 1951, p. 356). They show us what Hamlet would have been if he had been any less than he was and had in fact done what so many have assumed he should have and killed Claudius immediately, or if he really had been an overmelancholy and indecisive prince. Their choices seem to embody Hamlet's potential choices of revenge or inaction. Laertes has been appropriately acknowledged by commentators as the model for the revenger most people assume Hamlet should have been, whereas the role of Ophelia seems to have received relatively little attention.

Prosser is a good example of someone who sees the parallels between Hamlet and Laertes. Like Goddard, she argues how wrong it is to believe that, after thoughtful reflection, Hamlet was supposed to kill Claudius; indeed, the audience should be horrified by Hamlet's previously referred to dark speeches. Laertes expresses the same black state of mind when he dares damnation to revenge his father in IV.v. Both Hamlet and Laertes

swear to forget all forms, all vows, all allegiances, and to devote themselves wholly to revenge. Both reject conscience. Both determine to dare damnation. Both openly align themselves with Hell and the demonic. (Prosser, pp. 213-214)

And both are sympathetic characters.

In Laertes' moving response to Ophelia, we see that he is not a complete reprobate whose example can be dismissed. Like Hamlet, he has genuine cause for his grief....Like Hamlet, he

wins our sympathy in his passion for revenge.

(Prosser, p. 214)

Both are also popular with the people (Laertes enough to start a spontaneous uprising). But more tellingly Laertes also was spurred on to revenge by a king of Denmark, and by a father figure; Claudius identified himself quite closely with Polonius in Act I when Laertes requested permission to return to France, so that Claudius can in Act V plausibly take on a father-like aspect in his relation to Laertes. Only of course Laertes does not question the motive of this king, nor does he have any doubt what he should do.

Though not as plentiful, the parallels between Hamlet and Ophelia are nevertheless present. Both are to some degree manipulated by a father figure, and both experience an intense degree of psychic distress at the deaths of their respective fathers, Ophelia to the point of madness. Hamlet, Laertes, and Ophelia all three go through trials that give them the opportunity to grow, Laertes and Ophelia of course in minor ways compared to Hamlet, and the fulfillment of these opportunities is much weaker. Nevertheless, by the time of their deaths, there is evidence that to some degree they realized some truth that they hadn't before, though Ophelia less so than the others. As Laertes is dying, he understands that he's been tricked by Claudius, that he's acted in error, and begs to reconcile himself with Hamlet. Prosser notes that Laertes compresses his dark, violent resolutions in one short scene (Prosser, p. 214), and likewise the growth of his awareness is compressed into his final dying moments.

In her madness, Ophelia, like Hamlet, says nonsensical things that nevertheless have a point; her words have relevance to her situation and suggest she realized more than simply that Hamlet killed her father and she was overcome by that. Unlike Hamlet and Laertes however, she was unable to bear up to and assimilate what

she knew, and so she went truly mad. She is a prime example of French's argument that in Shakespeare's works (and in much of literature) female characters are static and their experience does not change them, which leaves the central role to the male characters, who are usually the assumed norm for human behavior. (French, pp. 26-27) Ophelia's mental state is analogous to that of Lear's when he goes mad; she is also poised to learn and grow from her madness, but she is clearly not capable of it as her character is conceived. Hamlet's soul is the vital one. We see him twist and squirm, express hate, anger, joy, and affection. He is unfairly oversimplified as a melancholy, indecisive prince. Ophelia is the one that is closer to this image. Her character is the one that becomes depressed and is unable to cope with her trying circumstances. She is the one unable to act. Nevertheless her words at least suggest that to some extent she might have realized more about her situation than she's usually given credit for.

She speaks much of her father, says she hears
There's tricks i' th' world, and hems, and beats her heart,
Spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt
That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection; they aim at it,
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed, would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.

Like Hamlet's words, the hearers fit their own thoughts to Ophelia's words. Some can see at least the outline of a method in Ophelia's madness, though, as usual, Ophelia's achievement is less than Hamlet's.

Ophelia's two explicitly sexual songs are about men taking advantage of young women. In one song a man falsely promises to marry a naive young woman only so that he can sleep with her. The obvious object of her scorn is Hamlet, who expressed affection for her at one time and then spurned her. She goes mad, then, because she loves Hamlet and can't bear what's happened to him, can't bear losing him and being unjustly accused of being wanton, and, most importantly, can't bear the fact that he killed the father she loved. Hamlet is the one who played tricks on her by promising his love and then rejecting her. This interpretation is most likely what she "means" in some sense, but her madness puts her in a dreamlike state where her words have multiple meanings, just as Hamlet's do (though Ophelia does not pun).

Then the man she loves kills the father she loves, and thus tears her apart. In her ensuing madness she confuses the one with the other and comes to identify herself with the betrayed and forsaken woman of popular song and ballad. (Hibbard, 1987, p. 51)

Her confusion could be caused by her realization that she and her father, too, were at fault. Polonius, too, played tricks in the world. She could be unconsciously acknowledging this scheming side of her father, the side that used her to trick Hamlet into revealing his true intentions. She betrayed Hamlet before he had rejected her. She might even have been afraid that Hamlet was right about the wantonness of women, too young and innocent as she probably was to have come to terms with her own sexuality (she may have protested too much about the sexual desire of young men). Goddard writes that in the nunnery scene, Hamlet is unconsciously heaping scorn on Ophelia for being like him.

"I have heard of your paintings too, well enough ; God hath given

you one face, and you make yourselves another.” There in a sentence is Hamlet’s perfect indictment of himself for betraying the God within him....For who has made himself another face than the one God gave him if not this man who has put on an antic disposition to hide his revenge ?

(Goddard, 1951, p. 358)

Perhaps Ophelia is also heaping scorn on herself in an analogous manner, and is accusing men of being false when she was being false also when she reflexively (we can only guess if she was in any way unwilling) allowed herself to be used to deceive Hamlet. In any case, she is incapable of doing anything about her situation, which is another cause of her insanity. Ophelia is the character who best exemplifies a person who is unable to deal with the world and is thus unable to act. Hers is the way of passivity and madness.

Notes

1. Prosser wrote two chapters in her book to support this point. They are appropriately titled “Revenge on the English Stage, 1562-1607,” and “Shakespeare and Revenge.”
2. See Prosser, pp. 98ff. for a detailed explication of the demonic aspects of the Ghost ; e.g., it’s appearance at night, it’s leaving at a reference to Heaven and at the cock crow, and it’s calling out from beneath the stage, which conventionally identifies it with Satan.
3. This speech should be read straight, not as evidence of Hamlet’s procrastination or indecisiveness. See Prosser, pp. 186ff.

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It is becoming more common for literary critics to take issue with the traditional image of Hamlet as melancholy and indecisive. Harold Goddard is one prominent 20th C. critic who sees Hamlet as a vigorous, highly moral character who is being urged under extreme circumstances to commit an inherently immoral act. He believes Shakespeare wanted the audience to end up questioning the rightness of killing Claudius in order to revenge Hamlet's father. After explaining this premise, this paper extends Goddard's arguments by contrasting the behavior and choices Hamlet makes with those of the other two characters whose circumstances are most like his, Ophelia and Laertes. It is not new to say that Laertes is important to contrast with Hamlet, but Ophelia has received relatively little attention in this regard.