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The Secret of Shakespeare (part 2)

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Henry IV

If *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's first really great play, the outlook which dominates it is none the less already to be found in several of his earlier plays. Particularly striking in this respect is *Henry IV* which, in its two parts, must have been written within three or four years before *Hamlet*, probably between 1597 and 1599.

For Dover Wilson *Henry IV* appears to be no more than what might be called an "exoteric" morality play. He says: "*Henry IV* was certainly intended to convey a moral. It is, in fact, Shakespeare's great morality play."[1] He adds: "Shakespeare plays no tricks with his audience…Prince Hal is the prodigal, and his repentance is not only to be taken seriously, it is to be admired and commended. Moreover the story of the prodigal, secularized and modernized as it might be, ran the same course as ever and contained the same three principal characters: the tempter, the younker, and the father with property to bequeath and counsel to give."[2]

This is altogether convincing, as far as it goes; but the story of the prodigal has in itself a deeper meaning also, in addition to the one which Dover Wilson seems to be considering here. Is it conceivable that this could have escaped the notice of the man who, within the next ten years, was to write *Hamlet* and *King Lear*? Not that there need be any question of "either…. or." Dover Wilson is unquestionably right, and *Henry IV* is a morality play; but that would not prevent it from being, at the same time, something more than a morality play. The idea of different meanings existing simultaneously at different levels, however strange it may seem to us, was altogether familiar to men of letters throughout the Middle Ages and even down to the end of the XVIth century—

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2 *The Fortunes of Falstaff*, Cambridge University Press, 1964, p. 14.

Ibid, p. 22.

witness Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

According to Dante "writings are to be understood and should be expounded chiefly according to four meanings"[3] or in other words the literal meaning should be considered as a veil over three others, which he specifies as "allegorical, moral and anagogical." The same principle is to be found also in other arts: the idea that a true work of architecture should have at least three meanings was certainly familiar to Freemasons as late as the XVIth century. A cathedral, in addition to its literal meaning as a place of worship, was planned as a symbolic image of the whole universe, and by analogy, as an image of the human being,[4] both body and soul. The symbolism of a building as an image of the human soul, the inner world of man, corresponds to the fourth and highest meaning mentioned by Dante, the one which he calls "anagogical," and which he illustrates by interpreting the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt to the Promised Land to mean, in addition to its literal or historical meaning, the exodus of the soul from the state of original sin to the state of sanctification. Now this is also the highest or deepest meaning of the story of the return of the Prodigal Son, and it could be said to underlie all faithfully told stories of the prodigal, including Shakespeare's *Henry IV,* even without the author's intention. But Shakespeare's intention is undoubtedly there; we do not need to examine his text over carefully to see that he conceived the newly crowned King Henry V's rejection of Falstaff as representing more than salvation in the ordinary limited sense of the word; for him it is clearly no less than the equivalent of the Red Crosse Knight's victory over the dragon in the *Faerie Queene*; and this victory signifies the soul's final purification, its final complete triumph over the devil.

Dover Wilson does in fact unlock the door and open it for us, even if he does not open it very wide. We must be grateful for his timely reminder that "Shakespeare lived in the world of Plato and St. Augustine; since the French Revolution we have been living in the world of Rousseau; and this fact lays many traps of misunderstanding for unsuspecting readers."[5] He also says: "The main theme of Shakespeare's morality play is

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[3] *Il Convivio,* II, cap. I.

[4] For details of these correspondences see Titus Burckhardt, *Principes et Méthodes de l'Art Sacré*, p.70 (Derain, Lyons, 1958).

[5] p. 7.

the growing up of a madcap prince into the ideal king."[6] Putting two and two together, it must be remembered that in the world of Plato and St. Augustine no man who was less than a saint could possibly pass as "the ideal king."

But, it may be argued, this does not prove that *Henry IV* has a truly esoteric significance, since even from the point of view of an exoteric morality play no limit can be set to the extent of Prince Hal's reform. His world is very remote indeed from the world we live in, the world of mediocrities and relativities in which epic is stifled beyond breathing point, while the psychological novel thrives and grows fat. There is an unmistakable ring of the absolute about the last scenes of *Henry IV* which makes it difficult, from any point of view, to attribute to the new king anything that falls short of perfection. None the less this play can be said to have two meanings in relation to the human soul, one exoteric and moral, and the other esoteric and mystical; but as elsewhere in Shakespeare these two meanings are not altogether distinct, for the lower meaning as it were opens on to the higher. *Henry* IV can be considered as a morality play in which the final perfection is looked at quite objectively and remains far above the spectators' heads, although it serves as a shrine of orientation for their ideals; and it can be considered as an esoteric or mystical drama the purpose of which is to draw the spectator into subjective identity with the hero. The presence of this higher meaning presupposes that the author himself has something more than a purely theoretical understanding of perfection.

As regards the text itself, one of the keys to this meaning lies in the son's identification of himself with his dead father. A strange "alchemy" has taken place by which the spirit of the old king is reborn in the person of the new king whose former faults—*affections* or *wildness* as he calls them— have died and lie buried with the old king.

> *My father is gone wild into his grave,*
> *For in his tomb lie my affections,*
> *And sadly with his spirit I survive.* (Pt. 2, V, 2)

The young king also uses the image of the corrupt tide of vanity flowing out into the

[6] p. 22.

waters of the ocean so that a new and truly royal tide may flow in. Not far below the surface here, as elsewhere in Shakespeare's plays, lie the words of the Gospel "Except a man be born again he cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

The heir's identification of himself with his father is important because in order to have a full understanding of Henry IV it is necessary to understand that "Everyman" or the human soul is represented not merely by the Prince alone and by the King alone, but also, above all, by a synthesis of the Prince and the King. In its static aspect, as a fallen soul that "smells of mortality" and must die before a new soul can be born, the soul is personified by the King; and the symbolism is strengthened by the fact that the King is a usurper to the throne, just as fallen man is a usurper to the throne of earth which belongs by rights only to man in his original state, man created in the image of God. On the other hand, in its dynamic aspect, inasmuch as the soul is capable of being purified, and inasmuch as the foundations of the new soul are being laid there, the soul is personified by the Prince who, at any rate according to the logic of the play, will not be a usurper when he becomes King. It is not only the faults of the Prince which die with his father's death but also the stigma of a crown that had been usurped. The dying King says of his own wrongful seizure of the throne:

> *All the soil of this achievement goes*
> *With me into the earth…*
> *How I came by the crown, O God forgive,*
> *And grant it may with thee in true peace live.* (IV, 5)

The substance of the soul of "Everyman" is also represented by England which is in a state of discord and which is gradually brought into a state of peace. The two plots of the play, the bringing to order of the Prince and the bringing to order of the country run parallel to each other and have the same significance. Civil war is a most adequate symbol of the fallen soul which is by definition at war with itself; and the meaning of this particular internal strife in England is heightened by the King's intention to convert its energies, as soon as possible, into a holy war. The whole play is in fact consecrated by beginning and ending as it were in the shadow of the Holy Land. At the beginning of part I the King announces his intention of leading a crusade to Jerusalem; and towards the end of part II he reaffirms this intention, announcing that all preparations have been made to

set out for Palestine as soon as the rebels at home have been defeated:

Now, Lords, if God doth give successful end
To this debate that bleedeth at our doors
We will our youth lead on to higher fields
And draw no swords but what are sanctified.
Our navy is address'd, our power collected,
Our substitutes in absence well invested,
And everything lies level to our wish. (IV, 4).

The rebels have in fact already been defeated, but the news has not yet reached him. Symbolically connected with this is another "already" which, though it dawns on him later, he has also not yet grasped: he is already in "Jerusalem"—the Jerusalem Chamber of the Palace of Westminster where this scene takes place; and here, shortly after his just quoted speech, when news comes that the civil war is at an end, he suddenly sinks down in mortal sickness. For the moment the play's deeper meaning wells to the surface as it were and obliterates the other meanings. The only connection between the good news and the King's illness is a spiritual one: the end of the civil war means that the pilgrim's journey is at an end, that the old soul is now almost ripe for death so that the new soul may be born. If the King is no more than dying and not yet dead, this is simply because the return of his prodigal son has not yet been altogether fulfilled. Once this has taken place the King asks to be carried back into the Jerusalem Chamber, in order that he may die *in Jerusalem*.

The Jerusalem Chamber has also its meaning for the Prince. We may remember that in the *Faerie Queene* the Red Crosse Knight is only able to overcome the dragon because the fight takes place at the threshold of the Earthly Paradise, within reach of the Waters of Life and the Tree of Life.[7] Now Jerusalem is symbolically equivalent to the Earthly

[7] Spenser died in 1599, about the time that Shakespeare was writing this play. The *Faerie Queene*, which death prevented him from finishing, is mentioned here and else-where as an example of symbolism parallel to Shakespeare's at the end of the XVlth century, without any suggestion that Spenser had a profound understanding of the symbolism that he was using. It would perhaps not be unjust to say that compared with the *Divine Comedy* and the best of Shakespeare, the *Faerie Queene* is like a plane surface as compared with a form of three dimensions.

Paradise; and the Prince's real victory over himself, when he speaks of

The noble change that I have purposed

takes place as he stands by his dying father's bed at the threshold of the Jerusalem Chamber, before his final meeting with Falstaff. This symbolism is strengthened by another; for if any particular moment can be assigned to the Prince's victory, it is at his foretaste of royalty when, believing himself to be by rights already king, he places the crown on his own head.

The last scenes of *Henry IV* pt. 2, if adequately performed, make an undeniably strong spiritual impact. But neither part of *Henry IV,* when taken as a whole, has anything approaching the closely knit intensity of a play like *Hamlet*. In particular, we cannot help noticing that there is no real conflict: like the killing of the dragon the rejection of Falstaff symbolizes the most difficult thing in the world, and yet the Prince has not had, as far as we can see, the slightest difficulty in rejecting him. Secondly—and this weakness is connected with the first—Shakespeare makes the rejection of Falstaff very dramatic, but he has not previously brought home to us dramatically Falstaff's utter villainy. The villainy is there in the text, but we only discover it by analysis; the plot of the play does not depend on it at all, so that at the end we have a certain sense of disproportion which leaves us with a vague feeling of injustice. But it may well be that we partly owe the excellence of some of Shakespeare's later plays to his experience in writing this. Perhaps when conceiving the part of Iago he said to himself, thinking of Falstaff: "This time there shall be no mistake!"; and perhaps when he set Hamlet to kill the dragon he said to himself: "This time it shall not be easy!"

Hamlet

The basic theme of Hamlet is summed up in the Prince's own words:

Virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish
of it. (III, I).

This means: It is no use plastering one or two superficial virtues over our old stock, that is, the original sin which permeates our nature, since in spite of all such virtues, we shall still continue to reek of the old stock." But in order to express fully what is in Hamlet's mind here we must add: "There is only one thing which can effectively wipe out the

stench of our old stock and that is revenge, or in other words, a complete reversal of the state of affairs which caused the Fall."

In its immediate impact upon us sacred art[8] is like a stone thrown into water. The ever widening ripples illustrate the limitless repercussions that are made, or can be made, upon the soul by this impact, fraught as it is with several meanings at different levels. One meaning can, as we have seen, open out on to another deeper meaning[9] that lies beyond it. In this way sacred art often conveys far more than it appears to convey, far more sometimes even than the mind in question is conscious of or could take in by way of ordinary didactic teaching.

The initial impact itself captivates the mind and the emotions. According to the literal meaning of Hamlet, our sense of Queen Gertrude's culpability goes far beyond the sin of marriage to a dead husband's brother, just as we are given many strong and obvious reasons why Hamlet should kill Claudius, enough at any rate even to make us forget for the moment that revenge is unchristian. None the less, it would be true to say that there is no common measure between the literal meaning of this play and the deep sense of urgency that Shakespeare instills into us. There is something mysteriously enormous and unfathomable about the Queen's guilt. Moreover, so long as we are in the theatre we are not far from feeling that revenge is the most important thing in the world; and we are right, for there *is* nothing more important, and indeed nothing more Christian, than what revenge stands for here.

The Ghost's revelation to Hamlet is, as regards its symbolic meaning, like a puzzle with a few missing pieces which it is not difficult for us to supply in the light of those pieces which we are given—the garden with its fruit trees, the serpent, the guilty woman. The Genesis narrative is undoubtedly here. There is also, explicitly, the first-fruit of the Fall, the sin of fratricide. But the Fall itself was in fact a murder also, the slaying or making mortal of Adam by the serpent, and the forbidden fruit was the "poison" through

[8] Shakespeare's plays cannot be considered as sacred art in the full and central sense of the term, but they can be considered as an extension of it, and as partaking both of its qualities and its function.

[9] Needless to say, not every detail in the text has a deeper meaning. Conversely, there are certain details which only make good sense on the deepest plane of all.

which that murder was effected.

The Queen is not merely Hamlet's mother; she is his whole ancestral line going back to Eve herself; and inasmuch as she is Eve, she represents, in general, the fallen human soul, especially in its passive aspect. In other words, she represents that passivity which in man's primordial state was turned towards Heaven and which after it lost contact with the Spirit has come more or less under the sway of the devil or, in the words of the play, having *sated itself in a celestial bed* has come to *prey on garbage.* Like the father and son in *Henry IV,* mother and son here can each be taken separately as representing "Everyman," but above all they are to be taken together as constituting fallen human soul, Hamlet himself being the personification of its active aspect—its conscience and its intelligence. The attitude of the son towards his mother, which many people consider to be something of an enigma and which has prompted more than one grotesque explanation, is amply explained if we consider that allegorically mother and son are one person, different faculties of one and the same soul.

Unlike the writer of epic, the dramatist has a very limited space at his disposal. Consequently he often chooses to build a house of more than one story. In *Hamlet* the soul is not only represented by the Prince and his mother; its state is also reflected in the condition of the country. Not that there is actually a sub-plot of civil war as in *Henry IV,* but none the less *Something is rotten in the state of Denmark* and *The time is out of joint* and needs to be *set right*. Moreover, as a parallel to the whole action of the play, the soul of King Hamlet is being purified in Purgatory.

But the dead King has also another aspect. Just as Adam was not only the man who fell but also the most perfect of all creatures, made in the image of God, so also King Hamlet, who in a sense corresponds to Adam, is not only a purgatorial pilgrim but also a symbol of man's lost Edenic state. It is in virtue of this that he refers to his own marriage with Gertrude as *a celestial bed*. And is spoken of by Hamlet in terms of human perfection:

> *A combination and a form indeed*
> *Where every god did seem to set his seal*
> *To give the world assurance of a man.* (III, 4)

It is also in virtue of this aspect that he acts as spiritual guide to his son.

The difference between simple piety and mysticism might almost be summed up by saying that the averagely pious man looks at the story of the Garden of Eden for the most part objectively, whether he takes it literally or allegorically. The mystic, on the other hand, looks at it subjectively as something which intensely, directly and presently concerns himself. Again, the averagely pious man is aware of the existence of the devil, but in fact, if not in theory, he imagines him to be more or less harmless and has little idea of the extent of his own subservience to him. In general he is extremely subject to the illusion of neutrality. But the mystic knows that most of what seems neutral is harmful, and that *one may smile and smile and be a villain*. The Ghost initiates Hamlet into the Mysteries by conveying to him the truth of the Fall not as a remote historical fact but as an immediate life-permeating reality, an acute pain which will not allow his soul a moment's rest.; and every man in fact is in exactly the same situation as the Prince of Denmark, did he but know it, that is, if he were not

Duller…than the fat weed
That roots itself at ease on Lethe wharf. (1, 4).

What the Ghost says to Hamlet could almost be paraphrased: "Latterly you have been feeling that *all is not well.* I come to confirm your worst suspicions and to show you the remedy. Since man has been robbed by the devil of his birthright, there is only one way for him to regain what is lost and that is by taking revenge upon the robber."

With all the ardor of the novice, in answer to his father's last injunction *Remember me!* the Prince replies :

Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter. (1, 4).

Spiritual wisdom, from a worldly point of view, is a kind of madness; and so madness can be made to serve, in certain contexts, as a symbol of spiritual wisdom. Shakespeare avails himself or this possibility more than once in his plays; and in *Hamlet,* in addition to its more outward meaning as a stratagem and a blind, the *antic disposition* which the Prince puts on serves above all to underline the drastic change that has taken place in his life. In his soliloquies he shows no trace of madness; but as soon as he has to race the world, that is, when Horatio and Marcellus enter, shortly after the exit of the Ghost, the new found spiritual outlook which fills his soul almost to bursting point has to find an outlet in what Horatio describes as *wild and whirling words.* It is under cover of this "wildness" that Shakespeare momentarily allows the deeper meaning of the play to come to the surface, for what Hamlet says is:

And so without more circumstance at all
I hold it fit that we shake hands and part
You, as your business and desire shall point you,
For everyman hath business and desire
Such as it is; and, for mine own poor part,
Look you, l'll go pray.

And prayer, which in the widest sense of the word may be said to comprise all forms of worship, is in fact man's chief weapon of "revenge".[10]

It is not however Horatio and Marcellus who represent the world in Hamlet. They do so in this scene only incidentally, because they are the first living creatures that the newly initiated Prince is called upon to face. But he soon takes them both half into his confidence, and later he confides everything to Horatio. The world, not only in its incomprehension, but also in its allurements, everything in "ordinary life" which it is difficult to give up but which the man who has taken his vows must break with altogether and leave behind him is summed up in the person of Ophelia. Hamlet's subsequent visit to her, which she describes to her father, would seem to be prompted by the vain hope

[10] The already quoted line:
Let me wipe it (my hand) *first; it smells of mortality,* which brings the deeper meaning of King Lear to the surface, is spoken by Lear when he is mad. The fact that Hamlet's madness is feigned whereas Lear's is not makes no difference to its symbolism. Another kind of "madness" which has the same significance is the "folly" of the professional fool.

that it may not be necessary to turn his back on the world altogether, or that it may be possible as it were to take the world with him. But when he looks into her face he sees that he must go his way alone; she would be quite incapable of sharing his secret; and so he leaves her without saying a word.

In the "nunnery scene," where we first see them together, Shakespeare once more allows the deeper meaning of the play to rise to the surface under cover of Hamlet's "madness." The first part of the spiritual path is "the descent into Hell." The deeper meaning of Dante's *Inferno* [11] is the descent of Dante into the hidden depths of his own soul. The novice has first to learn the meaning of "original sin"; he must come to know the evil possibilities which lie, almost unsuspected, beneath the surface illusion of being *indifferent honest*. The gist of all that Hamlet says to Ophelia in this scene is in the following speech:

> *Get thee to a nunnery; why wouldest 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. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do, crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery.* (III, I)

This calling of oneself to account has a remarkably close parallel in the hovel scene in *King Lear,* where Edgar, also under cover of feigned madness, accuses himself of having been

> *false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand, hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey.*
>
> (III, 4).

[11] The references here and elsewhere to Dante do not mean to suggest that Shakespeare owes anything to him directly. Of this we know nothing. *The Divine* Comedy can none the less help to throw light on certain aspects of these plays because it is based on principles with which Shakespeare was certainly familiar.

Elsewhere "the descent into Hell," that is, the discovery of sinful propensities in the soul which were hitherto unknown, takes the form of actually committing the sins in question, as happens, for example, with Angelo in Measure for Measure and with Leontes in the Winter's Tale.

Despite Hamlet's *antic disposition*, all that he says to Ophelia in the "nunnery scene" makes profound sense. But "the world" is quite uncomprehending; for Ophelia it is all nothing more than

Sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh.

In the *Divine Comedy* the discovery of the soul's worst possibilities and purification from them are treated separately. The *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* correspond to an altogether exhaustive Confession followed by a full Absolution. The "architecture" of Dante's poem demands this separate treatment, as also the fact that it has an eschatological as well as a mystical meaning. Occasionally, as we shall see, Shakespeare also treats the two phases separately, but more often, as in *Hamlet*, he represents them as taking place simultaneously. The killing of Claudius will mean not only the bottom of Hell but also the top of the Mountain of Purgatory, for revenge means purification.

When Hamlet, on his way to speak with his mother, suddenly comes upon Claudius praying and is about to kill him, he refrains from doing so on the grounds that to kill him while at prayer would amount to sending him to heaven which would be *hire and salary, not revenge*. According to the more outward meaning, that is, according to *Hamlet* as a morality play, the Prince's failure to kill Claudius at this juncture springs from the inability to take decisive action, the readiness to snatch at any pretext for procrastination. At this level a more or less blind eye has to be turned to the actual pretext given. None the less, it is difficult to pass it over altogether as an unpremeditated excuse which flashes across Hamlet's mind and is seized on without being weighed, because later in the play Hamlet deliberately sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to a sudden death, *no shriving time allowed,* without even knowing whether they are in the plot against his life or not—and in all probability they are not. We can accept the normal idea of revenge without too much difficulty, even in a morality play, for revenge is or can be a name for justice. But

what sin can compare with the implacable determination to send a soul to Hell?[12] And how is such appalling malevolence to be reconciled with the fact that Hamlet is unquestionably a man of great nobility and magnanimity of character, with a profound love of good and hatred of evil and with even much of the priest in his nature—witness the wise, benign and moving sermon he preaches to his mother in the next scene? It must be admitted, with regard to these questions, that the play's deeper meaning strains here the outward sense almost to breaking point. But once the deeper meaning is understood, the difficulties vanish. Revenge on the devil must be absolute. It requires no apologies. There must be no scruples and no compromise. But the time is not yet ripe. There would be no revenge, and therefore no self-purification, in killing Claudius at that moment because Claudius is not himself. Sometimes the soul's worst possibilities may manifest themselves only partially, in such a way that it would be quite easy to overcome them. But nothing final could be hoped for from resisting them on such an occasion; it is only when those possibilities really show themselves for what they are, when they are rampant in all their iniquity, only then it is possible, by stifling them, to give them the death-blow or mortally wound them. As Hamlet says:

> *When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,*
> *Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,*
> *At gaming, swearing, or about some act*
> *That has no relish of salvation in't;*
> *Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven*
> *And that his soul may be damned and black*
> *As hell, whereto it goes.* (III, 3).

In this scene the devil is far from manifesting himself fully in Claudius. The dragon has not yet come out into the open. Or in other words, Hamlet has not nearly reached the bottom of Hell. He has not even had yet *any direct* experience of the full villainy of

[12] As answer to this question we may quote from *Measure for Measure* (written about the same time as *Hamlet*) what the Duke says about sending a soul to Hell. He has been trying to prepare Barnardine for death, a criminal justly sentenced to be executed for murder. When asked if Barnardine is ready to die, the Duke replies :

> *A creature unprepared, unmeet for death;*
> *And to transport him in the mind he is*
> *Were damnable.* (IV, 3).

Claudius. All that he has learnt so far is relatively indirect compared for example with what he finds when he opens the letter to the King of England and reads Claudius' instructions to have him beheaded immediately on arrival; but the very bottom of Hell is only reached when the Queen lies dead and Hamlet's own body has tasted the poison. Meantime, before he can kill the great devil he has first of all to account for the lesser devils—Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and like Dante's "cruelty" towards some of the sufferers he sees in Hell, who are really elements in his own soul, Hamlet's attitude becomes immediately understandable and acceptable and reconcilable with his nobility of nature if we realize that all the victims of his revenge are in a sense part of himself.

What has so far most impeded Hamlet upon his path is a certain apathy, sluggishness and lack of fervor. *Lapsed in time and passion* is the way he describes himself. The basic cause of this half-heartedness, the chief reason why it is out of the question that Claudius should be killed at this moment of the play is that the soul is divided against itself, being still, in so far as it is represented by the Queen, largely under the Devil's domination. It is only in the next scene that a certain unity of soul is achieved when Hamlet wins his mother over to his side.

This scene is as it were the centre of the play. Personifying the soul that is afraid of its conscience the Queen is afraid of her son and has been holding him at bay. Even now, when the two are to be alone together at last, she has contrived, or rather let us say willingly consented, to have a third party present, one of the devil's spies, hiding behind the arras. Polonius is the embodiment of hypocrisy. His presence at the beginning of this scene means the presence, in the soul, of the determination to brazen things out. The Queen's first words to Hamlet are shameless in their effrontery:

Hamlet, thou has thy father much offended (III, 4).

But when Hamlet's sword pierces the body of Polonius, conscience pierces through the soul's mask of self-justification, and with all possibility of intervention at an end the soul is forced to listen to its better self:

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 braz'd it so
That it is proof and bulwark against sense.

The Queen is eventually driven to say:

O Hamlet, speak no more:
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;
And then I *see such black and grained spots*
As will not leave their tinct.[13]

No sooner is the soul's repentance assured than its good angel appears. Gertrude, representing the lower part of the soul, cannot sense directly the spiritual power which the ghost of her dead husband represents; but Hamlet sees and hears it, and under its inspiration he tells his mother what she must do.

In this scene, which is really an epitome of the whole play, even the literal sense rises to heights that are almost mystical. It is as if the drama's outer meaning, in virtue of which it is a morality play, had been drawn up to the level of its inner meaning. For whether we consider the Prince to be addressing another person or to be addressing his own soul, he is in any case speaking with an exaltation worthy of a spiritual master who is admonishing and counseling a disciple.

According to the first Quarto[14] version of this scene Hamlet succeeds in destroying once and for all Claudius' hold over Gertrude. Moreover she promises to help Hamlet to accomplish his revenge. This is left out of the masterly revised text of the second Quarto,[15] which leaves the audience with the impression, not that Gertrude has completely conquered her weakness for Claudius but that she is well on her way to doing so and that she is sincerely repentant and determined to give her son all the passive support she can. They feel that like Hamlet himself, she still has some obstacles to overcome; and indeed if she had not, and if Hamlet had not, Claudius would have to die then and there.

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[13] Nothing I can say to myself will make them leave their black tint to take on a lighter color.

[14] 1603.

[15] 1604.

To judge from the cuts in the First Folio edition of Hamlet, published only seven years after Shakespeare's death, we may assume that the full text of this play was considered then, as now, too long for the requirements of theatrical performance. Unfortunately one of the passages nearly always sacrificed is Act IV, scene 4, without which the balance of the play as a whole is seriously upset. In this scene Hamlet, on his way to the Danish coast to set sail for England, has a glimpse of Fortinbras, the young Prince of Norway, who is leading his army through Denmark to fight against the Poles; and this glimpse reveals to Hamlet a hero endowed with all those virtues which he himself most needs to develop.

Fallen man stands between two perfections, one past and one future, that which was lost and that which is to be gained. In this play it is the dead King Hamlet who stands for the past perfection and its loss, whereas Fortinbras represents the perfection in which the redeemed soul, after its purification, will be reborn. It is he whom the dying Hamlet is to name as his heir. The analogy between the symbolism of this play and that of *Henry IV* is by no means exact in every detail; but the dead King Hamlet partly corresponds to the dead King Richard II, whereas Queen Gertrude and her son, taken together, correspond to the synthesis of King Henry IV and his son,[16] while Fortinbras in a sense corresponds to that son regenerated as King Henry V. But this scene, where Fortinbras first appears, is needed above all in that it marks a stage in the development of Hamlet, who drinks a new strength into his soul from his vision of the hero prince. In the soliloquy which is prompted by this foretaste of his own true self there is a ring of confidence and resolution which we have not heard before. It must be remembered in this connection that the symbolism of honor throughout this play is inextricably connected with the symbolism of revenge. In other words, as the incentive to revenge, honor means spiritual aspiration.

In Hamlet, as also in King Lear, the play begins with worldly wisdom in a state of triumph. It is as if Shakespeare had set up a pair of scales, and to begin with he allows the

[16] Needless to say there is no exact correspondence here between parent and parent and between son and son. It is true that Gertrude is burdened with guilt towards King Hamlet just as Henry IV is burdened with guilt towards King Richard; but Prince Hamlet, the censurer of self and others, also has much in common with Henry IV, whereas Gertrude in some respects comes closer, symbolically, to the repentant prodigal Prince Hal.

weight of worldly wisdom in one scale to lift the opposite scale of spiritual wisdom right up into the air, so that it appears as "light" as folly. But as the play goes on, more and more weight is thrown into the spiritual scale until, even before the last act, it has sunk down to rest on a solid, sober foundation. By the time King Lear is drawing to its close the Fool has disappeared, Edgar has ceased to feign madness, and Lear has recovered his sanity. Similarly in Hamlet we see no more of the Prince's "madness" after he has left for England; and when he returns he astonishes Horatio with his new-found strength and determination. Meantime it is the scale of worldly wisdom which, found sadly wanting, hangs poised aloft in insecure suspense; and the "lightness" of this world, unstable and transitory as it is, racing towards decay, ruin and death, is pictured in the madness of Ophelia. For her there are only two categories—the dead and the dying.

> *And will he not come again? *
> *And will he not come again?*
> *No, no, he is dead.*
> *Go to thy death bed.*
> *He never will come again.* (IV, 5).

Ophelia's madness is like a mirror for the failure of all worldly aspirations, the shattering of all worldly hopes; and it is significant, considering what she stands for in the play as a whole, that the corpse which is being buried in the church-yard scene is none other than hers.

In this scene, Hamlet, who is himself to die the next day, has the inevitable certainty of death brought home to him with a concrete realism which makes his bones ache, and those of the audience too. He is made to hear death in the knocking together of dead men's bones as the grave-digger throws down one against another; he sees, touches and smells death as he takes the jester's skull in his hands; he even almost tastes death as he remembers how often as a child he had put his lips against what is now no more than two rows of teeth set in two jaw-bones:

> *Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft.*
> (V, I).

Moreover the scene is to end with the actual burial of everything that had represented, for Hamlet, the possibility of earthly happiness. His own days are numbered too, for it comes

out that the grave-digger had taken up his profession on the day that Hamlet was born, thirty years previously; and for him the Prince is already almost a thing of the past, one who has not only come but gone. There is a strange and sudden chill about the words, spoken with the objectivity of a chronicle:

It was the very day that young Hamlet was born;
he that is mad, and sent to England.

We are reminded by this scene that more than one mystic has sought before now to familiarize himself with death by laying himself out in a coffin; and this is precisely what Hamlet is made to do here. It leads up to his speech in the final scene where he expresses his readiness to die at any time. What does it matter if a man die young, since no man really ever possesses any of the things he leaves behind him at death?

Since no man has aught of what
he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?

We have come a long way from the fears expressed about death in the most famous of his soliloquies.

That soliloquy, *To be or not to be.…*, marks Hamlet's lowest ebb. As has already been pointed out in an earlier chapter, he goes somewhat back after the first encounter with his father before he begins to go forward. We cannot start to trace the development of the soul he represents until the play-scene, in which doubts are altogether removed and faith confirmed. Onwards from there, the soul gains singleness and sincerity from the reconciliation between Hamlet and his mother; confidence, resolution, a sense of true greatness and even a foretaste of perfection from the glimpse of Fortinbras; resignation to death and a foretaste of death from the churchyard scene; and complete trust in Providence from the discovery of Claudius' letter to the King of England. Hamlet's discovery of this plot to have him killed in England takes place shortly after he sees Fortinbras, but we only hear of it in the last scene of the play. He ascribes, with considerable insistence, every detail of his escape to Divine intervention, and his account of what happened enables trust in Providence to take its place as cornerstone in the remarkable image of royalty which Shakespeare gives us in Hamlet at the beginning of this scene. Without the least arrogance, but with an altogether objective sense of values, he dismisses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as *baser natures* who have perished for

daring to step between two *mighty opposites*, that is, between himself and Claudius—mighty because, as we may interpret, since all Heaven is on his side, as he now knows beyond doubt, the clash is ultimately between Michael and Lucifer.

Why, what a king is this!

exclaims Horatio in wonderment. It is significant also that only here, for the very first time, does Hamlet mention among Claudius' other iniquities, that he has robbed him of his rightful crown; and when Horatio implies that there is no time to be lost because news of what has happened will shortly come from England, and when Hamlet replies:

It will be short; the interim is mine;
And a man's life's no more than to say "One "

we know that Claudius has not long to live.

The keynote of this opening passage to the final scene is maturity—readiness in every sense of the word, and it is summed up in the words *the readiness is all.* "Everyman" knows that he has almost come to the end of his journey and that the end will be victory but also, necessarily, death. The confidence in the one and the foreboding of the other are expressed in Hamlet's words to Horatio:

I shall win at the odds. But thou
wouldst not think how ill all's
here about my heart.

These words, with their combination of victory and death, are equivalent to Henry IV's:

And wherefore should these good news make me sick?

(IV, 4).

as he hears of his victory over the rebels. Symbolically the two situations are identical; Henry IV here corresponds exactly to Hamlet before the fencing match. All that remains to be achieved, in either case, is the complete redemption of the other aspects of the soul, represented in *Henry IV* by the Prince and in *Hamlet* by the Queen. As regards the Queen, "the return of the prodigal" has in a sense already taken place; but art demands that it should be clinched beyond all doubt. In this respect, what is generally accepted today as the final text is almost certainly more elliptical than Shakespeare originally intended it to be when he conceived the play. After the King and Laertes withdraw together at the end of Act IV, scene 5, the first Quarto has a scene in which Horatio tells the Queen of

Claudius' unsuccessful attempt to have Hamlet killed in England and of Hamlet's return. When the Queen learns that her son is back in Denmark she tells Horatio:

Bid him awhile
Be wary of his presence, lest he fail
In that he goes about

which means, freely paraphrased: "Tell him to make quite sure that Claudius does not kill him before he kills Claudius." But although this scene is left out in all the later editions of the play, according to the final text a letter is brought from Hamlet to his mother, presumably telling her everything. Moreover, on the basis of Claudius' remark at the end of the churchyard scene:

Good Gertrude, set some watch upon your son,

we may imagine that mother and son have ample time to discuss the whole situation. However that may be, the Queen would be certain that Hamlet's life was in the greatest danger, and she would be watching Claudius' every move. It is very likely, to say the least, that she is suspicious of the drink that Claudius has prepared for her son, and that she drinks from it herself to test it. Though not clear from the text, this can be made clear by the actress. But even if we do not accept this interpretation, Shakespeare has completed his symbolism beyond all doubt by making this last action on the part of the Queen an act of direct disobedience to Claudius who had forbidden her to drink, and by making her final words whole-heartedly on the side of her son:

No, no, the drink, the drink,—O my dear Hamlet,—
The drink, the drink!—I am poison'd.

As to Hamlet's last words, it is no doubt significant that they are a message to Fortinbras. This, together with the entry of Fortinbras immediately after Hamlet's death makes a certain continuity between the dead prince and the living one. There is a suggestion that Hamlet is mysteriously reborn in Fortinbras, though Shakespeare does not indicate this "alchemy" explicitly here as he does in *Henry IV*. At the end of Hamlet the stress lies rather on what rebirth leads to "Except a man be born again.…" If the play as a whole corresponds to an interpenetration of Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio,* the *Paradiso* is none the less not merely implicit. It is expressly anticipated in Horatio's farewell prayer for Hamlet:

Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

Shun asked Ch'eng, saying "Can one get Tao so as to have it for oneself?"

"Your very body," replied Ch'eng, "is not your own. How should Tao be?"

"If my body," said Shun, "is not my own, pray whose is it?" "It is the delegated image of God," replied Ch'eng. "Your life is not your own. It is the delegated harmony of God. Your individuality is not your own. It is the delegated adaptability of God. Your posterity is not your own. It is the delegated exuviae [i.e. castoff skin, shell, etc.] of God. You move, but know not how. You are at rest, but know not why. You taste, but know not the cause. These are the operations of God's laws. How then should you get Tao so as to have it for your own?

Chuang Tzu.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

The "clairvoyants," according to the schools to which they belong, go so far as to see "fluids" or "radiations," just as there are some, particularly among the theosophists, who see atoms and electrons; here, as in many other matters, what they in fact see are their own mental images, which naturally always fit in with the particular theories they believe in. There are some who see the "fourth dimension," and even other supplementary dimensions of space as well in recent years, under the influence of the new physics, occultist schools have been observed to go so far as to build up the greater part of their theories on this same conception of a "fourth dimension"; it may be noted also in this connection that occultism and modern science tend more and more to join up with one another as the "disintegration" proceeds step by step, because both are travelling towards it by their different paths.

René Guénon.