Title: Hamlet: the quester's tragedy? Rob Worrall explores Hamlet's enquiring mind

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The first line of Hamlet takes the form of a question. In this opening scene (comprising a mere 175 lines in the standard text) that question is followed by a further 17. Counting the questions in this way is no 'anorak activity' but, rather, a key to the nature of the play. Were one to extend the count, the total sum of direct questions posed within the text would be huge--and this would be to ignore musings, ponderings, theory testings, the balancing of uncertainties and sundry other forms of enquiry or investigation. Just as Professor William Empson's count of '... fifty-two uses of honest and honesty in Othello ...' (The Structure of Complex Words) underlies his analysis of that play, so may the preponderance of questions in Hamlet form the basis of a reading.

... Who would fardels bear?

How stand I then?

... how his audit stands who knows but heaven?

... Am I a coward?

Who calls me villain? Breaks my pate across?

Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?

... what is this quintessence of dust?

Where be his quiddits now, his quillets, his cases, his tenures and his tricks?

Wily may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bung-bole?

The interrogative mood is Hamlet's natural and habitual register of language. Most of his soliloquies are shaped by it. Seldom does his dialogue run for long without being punctuated by it; his thought processes are dominated by it.

Doubling

Let us add to this characteristic manner of thinking and speaking the frequent use, throughout the play, of a rather abstruse rhetorical trope: hendiadys. In Shakespeare's Language, Sir Frank Kermode focuses upon Shakespeare's predilection for this figure of speech and he notes that its use in Hamlet far exceeds that in any other Shakespearean play. Hendiadys is the expression of one idea/image through two nouns and a conjunction. A straightforward example of this trope is Hamlet's comment upon the likely outcome of his killing Claudius while at prayer: it would send Claudius straight to heaven.

Why, this is hire and salary not revenge.

Both nouns, 'hire' and 'salary', refer to the one activity--being recruited for payment. No more information is provided by the additional term, but the phrase carries greater weight than would either the one noun or the other alone.

Kermode likens hendiadys to the concept of the Trinity and notes its use in Tudor liturgy ('We acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickednesses', for instance, in the Book of Common Prayer). Kermode considers its effect to be an enrichment and enhancement of the concept being expressed. He links this specific rhetorical device with a more general structural feature, which he calls 'doubling'. Doubling concerns the mirroring or complementing which occurs in this and other Shakespearean dramas. Thus, Hamlet's name echoes his father's; both Hamlet and Laertes seek vengeance for a parent's untimely death; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are almost indistinguishable from each other. The plot of The Murder of Gonzago mirrors that of Old Hamlet's murder. Young Fortinbras is proactive in Norway, as Hamlet procrastinates in Denmark. And so it goes on.

An actor's response to a mythical situation is more intense than a real person's to actual circumstances. A play (a fiction) prompts guilt in Claudius more effectively than actuality (the truth). When Hamlet shows his mother portraits of her two husbands, one is described as being the 'counterfeit' of the other. Is Hamlet mad or is he merely feigning madness? It becomes difficult to tell fact from fantasy, appearance from reality. Professor Kermode, surely, is right to see this 'doubling' as a key feature of the play's language, structure and meaning.

If King Lear is the Shakespearean tragedy that best strikes the chord of emptiness and abandonment within a modern audience's psyche (as Jan Kott, Peter Brook and the existentialist interpreters of that play maintain), Hamlet best strikes the chord of bewilderment. It is a play relevant to a world that has lost so many of its former certainties and directions. Both plays are especially pregnant with issues pertinent to our own lives--as R. A. Foakes notes when he balances their relative attractions to a modern audience in Hamlet versus Lear. Perhaps King Lear is better understood by an older audience, battered by life's cruelties, and Hamlet by a younger, less hardened, audience, destabilised by the insecurity of lost innocence and shocked by the chicanery within life beyond childhood innocence. Thus, Hamlet is, in many ways, a quester's tragedy; it is much concerned with the search for truth, purpose, meaning.

Hamlet's lost world

We know little of Hamlet's life and circumstances before the play begins, but we know something and that something is very telling. When Yorick's skull is unearthed, the prince recalls the royal court of his childhood, with his father's jester giving him a piggyback, having ended a round of comic entertainment that '... set the table on the roar ...' with '[his] gambols ... [his] songs ... [his] flashes of merriment ...'. This is no one-off memorable moment of nostalgia: it is something that happened 'a thousand times'. Such a recollection of happy days is wholly in keeping with his memories of family life. Of a father who loved his mother so much 'That he might not beteem the winds of heaven/Visit her face too roughly'. Of a mother so shattered by her husband's death that she was, initially, 'Like Niobe, all tears ...'. Of course, it could be argued that these are the false recollections of an emotional inadequate, classically in denial of the truth. There is much within the text that would support such a view.

What of his father's image as a political bullyboy? The man who has trounced the neighbouring kingdom of Norway and who, thereby, has created a diplomatic crisis so severe that Claudius has felt it necessary to send Cornelius and Voltemand to resolve it immediately upon securing the crown? What of the man whose image is quintessentially militaristic--even in spectral form, where he is 'Armed at point exactly, cap ape'? Psychological theory may suggest that Hamlet has found this all too painful to acknowledge; that grief has blanked it from his memory. But does the text specifically deny the verity of Hamlet's golden childhood memories?

Familiarity with some domestic practice could, with equal vigour, make us opine that a much-cherished (and royal) only child could easily have been protected from life's realpolitik--at least until he was old enough to be sent away, thereby extending that protection. We should remember that it is only his father's unexpected death that has recalled him from the ivory towers of Wittenberg University. There Hamlet would have been able to indulge his undisputed wit and intellect with friends as unworldly as Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and even Horatio (who has to be informed that 'There are more things in heaven and earth / Than are dreamt of in [his] philosophy').

So is Hamlet in denial? Are his childhood memories kitsch nostalgia? Or was he privileged enough to exist within a golden world, the truthful memory of which makes his judgement of adult life so paralysingly painful? Once again, we find ourselves in the interrogative mood. Once again, we find ourselves within the uncertain world of the quester's tragedy.

All these questions...

Why do we ask questions? To prompt thought. To clarify ideas. To promote understanding. To reach conclusions. But there are, of course, some questions that are incapable of resolution, which may, at best, merely prompt further questions. Such is the nature of Hamlet. 'What a piece of work is man!' Grammatically, this is a statement, not a question, and yet it has the tenor of enquiry. The speech's purpose is mockingly to call into question the accepted value of humankind as God's greatest living creation. With acerbic cynicism, Hamlet seeks to unseat the accepted place of humankind near the top end of what E. M. W. Tillyard calls the 'Great Chain of Being' in The Elizabethan World Picture.

In this play even statements are a form of question: and that statement-question lies at the core of the play. What, actually, makes the world go around? That is Hamlet's quest. Is it the pursuit of power? Is it lust? Is it a desperate need to be in control? Is it fame? Is it the completion of a job well done? Is it a grappling with the knotty problems until they either fall loose or are abandoned because they are too tight? Is it the pursuit of truth? Is it an embracing of intellectual abstracts? Is it living life so fully that the prospect of death is shielded from us? Each of these questions (and many, many more) is posed during the course of the play. But how many (if any?) are answered?

One apparent certainty merits close consideration. As he lies dying, using his last breath, Hamlet pronounces, '... The rest is silence'. Uncharacteristically, this statement carries no interrogative undertone. It is possibly the most absolute pronouncement he makes throughout the whole play. Yet even this is problematic. Recognising that he is running out of time, with this statement Hamlet interrupts its unfinished predecessor, which is never completed. Hamlet is urgently soliciting Horatio to pass on a message to the man who he is content should take the Danish throne--the somewhat petulant Young Fortinbras. Note how that message begins to form:

 But I do prophesy th' election lights

 On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice;

 So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less,

 Which have solicited--The rest is silence. [Dies]

What is the message that Hamlet fails to finish forming, even though he considers it to be sufficiently urgent to convey in his final seconds of life? That Hamlet is content for Fortinbras to accede to the throne is clear. That the message is concerned with Hamlet's life experiences is equally clear, but what is it about those experiences that he is so anxious to pass on?

Shakespeare tends not to allow his protagonists to die inarticulately. Even Desdemona, already pronounced dead once, is permitted a moment's revival, sufficient to articulate self-blame for her predicament and a reconciliatory farewell to Othello. But Hamlet is granted no such moment. He dies as he has lived--on an unfulfilled quest to make full sense of his situation. The message he wishes to relay to Fortinbras concerns what he has learned from '...the occurrents, more and less, /Which have solicited ...'. The rest being silence, no one will ever know what has been 'solicited'. Thus, it is the biggest unknown of all, because we do not even know what this final consideration is. This is unlike Hamlet's famous conclusion to the question: 'Why do we put up with life's "slings and arrows"?'--because we are more frightened of what death might be like than of what we know life to be (a conclusion which, at least, we are in a position to debate). Silence, like death, is an ultimate and impenetrable mystery.

Interrogatives, hendiadys, doublings, conundrums, counterfeits, mysteries--these are the materials out of which Hamlet is constructed. Why? Now that is a question we can answer: because Shakespeare was seeking the appropriate form, structure and language through which to explore the great uncertainties of life. Who the quester within this drama actually is--Hamlet, Shakespeare, ourselves?--is one of the many questions left unresolved.

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