

*An excerpt from*  
To take Upon Us the Mystery of Things:  
The Shakespeare Lectures  
*by Martin Lings*

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## Hamlet

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, this play, as I mentioned previously, seems to be written when Shakespeare was about thirty-eight, in 1602. Many superlatives may be said to apply to this play; it is the first of his truly great plays, the most complex, perhaps, of all his plays, the most elliptical, the most discussed, and by far the longest. It is nearly twice the length, for example, of *The Winter's Tale*, and it is far too long for the modern theatre, which means that much of it has to be cut, and it is very difficult, so important are most of the scenes, it is extremely difficult when that point comes: "What scenes can we cut?"

As regards its being the most elliptical, this is partly because Shakespeare seems to rely on our imaginations more than some of us deserve. There are ellipses, that is certain, but everything of basic importance to the drama, as always in Shakespeare, is clear. Let us just consider the play from the beginning, or rather, from before the beginning, for this helps to explain certain things which are not explained expressly in the play.

Hamlet is a young man who has been living, one could say, in something of a fool's paradise. Everything has seemed to conspire for his happiness: deeply loving parents whom he loves deeply. We must note the somewhat bitter remark of Claudius also: *The queen, his mother, lives almost by his looks*, and twice Claudius remarks how much Hamlet is loved by the people of Denmark. Besides all this, he is in love with Ophelia, who returns his love, and whom he hopes to marry.

Everything seems perfect, and he has been brought up as heir to the throne, and seems to fulfil that function exceedingly well. He is, to quote Ophelia:

*The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;  
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
The observed of all observers...*<sup>1</sup>

And suddenly it is all gone; his father is dead, his profligate uncle has taken the throne and married his mother. And the shock at what has happened with his mother and her agreeing to this marriage has obviously affected, as we shall see, his whole attitude towards women, possibly including Ophelia.

The play shows us, however, that the losses he has suffered were really a blessing in disguise, and the same applies even to his mother. For neither Hamlet nor his mother during those happy years were more than a part of their full nature. The precept "Know Thyself" was by no means fulfilled. The fall of Gertrude may be likened to the fall of Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, to a certain extent; a hitherto unknown weakness in the soul suddenly manifests itself and throws the soul off its balance. And what has happened, as we shall see, is a re-enactment of the Fall of Man—that is, what happened to Gertrude.

Hamlet's unknown weaknesses are more subtle, and his overcoming of them is the main theme of the play. I think we can say that Shakespeare intended us by the end to see them both, he and his mother, as perfect, and though he makes the perfection of Gertrude less clear, in art the victory over one fault may stand for the victory over all, because the artist cannot obviously take in all details. But we shall come back to this later.

Shakespeare, like other true artists, does not force the deeper meanings of his plays upon us, but he does demand a

<sup>1</sup> Act III, sc. I.

certain openness on our part, a certain pliancy and flexibility. In other words, he trusts us not to say to him, as regards the simultaneous plurality of meanings at different levels: “You cannot have it both ways.” Nor does he trust us in vain, for by the time anyone might be tempted to say any such thing we are totally under his spell.

The Fall of Man is often to be seen, in Shakespeare and in other plays, through a deliberately transparent literal meaning. In Shakespeare it is never perhaps more obvious than in *Hamlet*. The setting for the murder of King Hamlet, the garden, with its fruit trees, in the offing the potentially guilty woman and, above all, the presence of the serpent, stands allegorically, without question, for the Garden of Eden, where Adam was made mortal by the poison of the forbidden fruit at the instigation of the serpent. It was given out at King Hamlet’s death that a serpent had stung him in the garden, and he tells his son in the ghost scene: *The serpent that did sting thy father’s life now wears his crown.*<sup>2</sup>

So King Hamlet may thus be identified allegorically with Adam, and Claudius with Satan; and since we are altogether accustomed of thinking of Adam in two ways, that is, the perfect man made in the image of God and the man who fell, we can easily accept Hamlet’s speaking of his father in exactly the same two ways. The more so since King Hamlet, being a soul in Purgatory, is already saved and on his way to Paradise. It is thus that the Catholic Church speaks of souls in Purgatory as *animae sanctae*, “holy souls.”

To return once more to this question of plurality of meanings, it can be said that, at any rate by the end of the ghost scene, the audience are conscious to a man of the urgency of the need for Hamlet to kill Claudius. They have heard three different people say: *Something is rotten in the state of Denmark*,<sup>3</sup> and Hamlet says: *The time is out of joint*,<sup>4</sup> and the ghost himself has said: *Let not the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for luxury*

<sup>2</sup> Act I, sc. V.    <sup>3</sup> Act I, sc. IV.    <sup>4</sup> Act I, sc. V.

*and damned incest.* “Luxury” is the sin of lust; *luxuria* in Latin was the name of the deadly sin of lust. So the word “luxury” stands for that.

But for many of the audience the sense of urgency will be increased by an extra dimension in virtue of the presence of a deeper meaning, even if they are not fully aware of it, for that meaning is there, and the Fall of Man has, as we have seen, been re-enacted in the murder of King Hamlet. His words *The serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown* make Claudius the exact equivalent of the dragon that has to be killed in so many other symbolic portrayals of the way of the Mysteries. His wearing of the crown is a reference to original sin, that is, the devil's having a hold over fallen man. In fact, every member of the audience is in the same situation as the Prince of Denmark, with an inner dragon that it is their duty to kill, and if few are conscious of this, perhaps less few are subconscious of it.

But the higher significance of Eve does not enter into the question. On the contrary, at the beginning of the play, Gertrude may be said to personify fallen man's whole ancestral line going back to Eve, the first faller, and for this purpose Shakespeare gives her an aura of mysterious and unfathomable guilt which might seem to go far beyond her actual desserts. But nonetheless, although there cannot be the slightest doubt that, according to the literal meaning of the play, Gertrude is altogether innocent of the murder of King Hamlet, and indeed altogether ignorant of it, the very fact that she was willing to marry a monster of a man immediately after having been widowed of his opposite, comes somewhat near to ridding herself of the one in order to marry the other; and to rid oneself of a person can be equated allegorically with killing. Gertrude had in fact already rid herself of the memory of her first husband.

And so it is that Shakespeare makes use of Hamlet's pretended madness. Very often, as you know, Shakespeare

puts wisdom into the speech of madmen. It does not matter whether the madness is real or whether it is pretended, or whether it is the sort of madness that a king's fool has, but we find that in Shakespeare again and again. And when Hamlet is pretending to be mad, he speaks nearly always words of wisdom in a mad way—disguised. But in his madness, his pretended madness, he several times accuses his mother of having killed her first husband, and this helps to bring Gertrude's responsibility into line with that of Eve. Not that Eve killed Adam—I am not saying that, of course, but she did give him the apple, and she is guilty as the first fallen woman; and it is, after all, the making mortal of Man—the Fall—and can be likened to a killing. Hamlet is very insistent about this; we shall see later some examples.

The question of incest, on the other hand, serves to add to Gertrude's guilt, and, in the verbal arrows which Hamlet shoots at his mother in the earlier parts of the play, he makes continual reference to the incestuousness of her recent marriage, simply in order to add sharpness to the point of his shafts. But although the marriage showed a monstrous disregard of established principles, in itself that particular mode of so-called incest is blamelessly in the nature of things. After all, the patriarch Jacob married first of all Leah, and then her sister Rachel, and his best son was the offspring of that marriage, which would be described as incestuous according to the morality of this play and according to Christian morality. It would seem that the established doctrine of it being incestuous to marry one's sister-in-law or brother-in-law is a kind of typically Roman deduction from the principle that man and wife are one flesh. But it is an unnecessary deduction, and, of course, it has been discarded now in English law, though many people still cling to it. It is noticeable that when Hamlet is at last able to speak his mind freely to his mother, the whole question of incest goes; his whole blame is exclusively concentrated on the evil of exchanging something excellent

for something immeasurably inferior, in echo of his father's words: *O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there!* The two portraits of his father and his uncle which form the basis of his upbraiding of his mother have nothing to do with incest.

Dover Wilson, one of the greatest Shakespearean critics of the first half of the century, was very right in insisting that Shakespeare lived in the world of Plato and Saint Augustine, and it is therefore not surprising that Shakespeare's concept of human perfection should coincide with that of the whole ancient world. To regain what was lost at the Fall a man must become once more fully as Man was created—a priest-king: king because he was placed at the centre of this earthly state to be its ruler; priest because his centrality has also a vertical aspect—that of being the mediator between Heaven and Earth. In some of the plays these two aspects are forced into the background by some particularly characteristic fault which has to be overcome, and as we have said, we can accept that in art, and especially in the concentrated brevity of drama, the victory over one fault may stand for the victory over all.

But in many plays we are kept conscious of this definition of perfection, that of the priest-king and its feminine equivalent, and could it not be said that in *Othello*, *Lear* and both protagonists of *Antony and Cleopatra* the royal element is already much in evidence, and it is the priestly element which has to be regained? In the storm scene, when Lear is going mad, his being fascinated by Edgar, *my philosopher*,<sup>5</sup> as he calls him, shows that he is moving in the right direction. Othello, at the end, is conscious of having lacked wisdom, of being *one that loved not wisely*; but Hamlet, on the contrary, is by his very nature a priest, and he has some difficulty in accepting that he must be also a king, and that difficulty is, I repeat, the theme of the play.

We may assume, I think, that Claudius staked much on what we have just been saying about Hamlet. If Laertes, for

<sup>5</sup> *King Lear*, Act III, sc. IV.



example, had been Hamlet, we can imagine that when the news came to Wittenberg of his father's death and Claudius's election as king, he would have marched back to Elsinore at the head of a daily increasing body of men. If when Laertes, from France, did the same when the news came to him of Polonius's death, and if his followers shouted, as in fact they did, *Laertes shall be king*,<sup>6</sup> how much more would they have shouted for their prince: "Hamlet shall be king!"

But Claudius was safe on that score. We shall never know exactly how, to quote Hamlet's words in the last scene, he *popp'd in between the election and my hopes*.<sup>7</sup> But there must have been quite a long period of plotting, of saying just the right word to the right person, of gaining the gratitude of all sorts of people by securing for them advantages which, as the king's brother, he could easily do. And he would also, of course, have his own particular friends of the same disreputable nature as himself; "birds of a feather flock together," and I think there can be no doubt that, although Hamlet is speaking of the world as a whole when he uttered the following words, he is referring in particular to the horrible difference between the court of his father and the court of Claudius, that is, to the brilliantly dressed time-servers and sycophants who have just left the stage to the flourish of trumpets: *Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden, that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature possess it merely*.<sup>8</sup>

He may well have been thinking especially of the passage in Claudius's first speech where, in speaking of his marriage to Gertrude, he makes those present share his responsibility by saying that he has consulted them at every stage of the affair. We may be sure that he has not consulted anyone of whom there was the slightest possibility of his saying no, but we can imagine, as he says these words: *nor have we herein barr'd your better wisdoms, which have freely gone with this affair along. For all, our thanks*—and we can imagine that as he says

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Act IV, sc. V.    <sup>7</sup> Act V, sc. II.    <sup>8</sup> Act I, sc. II.