

## HUMANIST IDEAS OF MAN IN SHAKESPEAR'S HAMLET

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The word **humanist** has a wide but essential significance. The humanist tradition cannot be described as though it were a set of unchanging ideas, much less a revealed philosophy. It implies, rather, an evolving outlook which has developed with man's increasing knowledge and control of the world he lives in and hence of his own destinies. One would not expect a twentieth-century humanist to hold all the same opinions or even share all the same attitudes as a humanist of the sixteenth or seventeenth century. What distinguishes both, and brings them into the same tradition, is a fundamental tough confidence in the capacity of **men** (though not necessarily the individual **man**) to master-with whatever difficulty, error and tragedy –the particular problem and challenges with which, at the particular stage their world has reached, they are faced, I do want to suggest that the humanist is as his opponent always makes him—an easy optimist committed to some comfortable belief in inevitable progress. Certainly most humanists of Shakespeare's time thought the world was getting worse rather than better (to put it mildly); certainly almost all accepted some kind of religious explanation of the world and man's fate; while even among those most concerned with the new science there was as yet. little of what a modern scientist would call scientific theory or method. many of this time were in fact rather nervous intellectuals whose comparative isolation made optimism difficult. yet there shines out from their work (one recalls the famous 'up word turn' at the close of Shakespeare's most heartrending and blackest tragedies) a refusal to accept despair, a firm determination to see the **social being man** and the world he lives in as clearly, truly objectively as possible, and a deep conviction –which, whatever its particular philosophic form or coloring, is the essence of the humanist spirit—that this can be done. humanism in the very nature of things can only be seen and understood in terms of actual human experience and history.<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare lived during the period of the great flowering of modern humanism, which we still tend to call, for want of a better-agreed name, the Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> That flowering was a direct consequence, as well as a hastener, of the break-up of medieval feudal society and the release of human energy and aspiration, which the needs of a new society called forth. There is a contention that the nature and value of Shakespeare's work is inseparable from the myriad human developments-social, political, religious, scientific –of this time, and that it was they that made Shakespeare possible. Such a view does not, of course, seek in some mechanical way to 'explain' Shakespeare, even less to reduce him.<sup>3</sup> The humanist advances of the sixteenth century made his work possible : his work itself, in ways that nobody could well have foreseen, tremendously strengthened and deepened humanist advance.

Marists call the immense social change, which in England reached its climactic with the Civil War of the seventeenth century the bourgeois-democratic revolution. the term is worth pausing over because its significance is not always understood, even by those who tend to accept it. was the bourgeoisie – the class of town – merchants and profit – making landlords. whose power, position and way of life was based on the accumulation of capital through the employment of wage-laborers – who led the

feudal revolution and became the backbone of the new ruling class. but from the earliest stage of the revolution forces were involved and deployed on the anti-feudal side, which were by no means, in any precise sense of the word, bourgeois to literature as much as to actual life. No one in his senses would describe *Don Quixote*, the great literary manifesto of a new realism dedicated to the undermining of feudal chivalric romance, as a *bourgeois* book. the arguments put forward in Thomas More's *Utopia* in the early sixteenth century or by the radicals of the New Model army in the Putney debates on the *Agreement* of the people in 1647 are not *bourgeois* arguments, on the contrary they are fundamentally anti-bourgeois.<sup>4</sup> For the bourgeoisie the main thing about the change was that it led to the acquisition of power for themselves and freedom to satisfy their needs. But many who rejoiced in the ending of the old order and fought, sometime to the death, for new conceptions of freedom and equity had quite other aims and ideas. To them the new individualist go-getters who, like Volpone, treated gold as a goddess and men and women as commodities, were no more sympathetic than the lords of the old feudal hierarchy, often a good deal less so. The humanist ideas of the renaissance have, it can be seen, a very complex social and we should not be surprised to find that a figure like Shakespeare refuses to be placed tidily in some convenient pigeon-hole marked representative of Bourgeois Ideology" or feudal reactionary it is only to the extent that the rich complexity of the term 'bourgeois-democratic revolution' is appreciated that its helpfulness in clarifying the historical position of a Shakespeare can be claimed. One would make in this connection, only one emphasis. We should never underestimate the democratic aspects and content of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in its early stages to do so is make ourselves immune to much of the bite and vital tang of Shakespearian drama with its often staggering irreverence and down-to-earth homeliness. That is why we may suggest that Shakespeare was, consciously or unconsciously, some sort of modern democrat or socialist born before *his* time, there is an important sense in which the *popular* nature of his achievement can scarcely be exaggerated – and not only in relation his own time.<sup>5</sup>

It seems to be logical to put first, as a hypothesis, a description of *Hamlet* which, though obviously oversimplified, gets some where near the heart of the play what it is about.

Hamlet is a sixteenth-century prince who, because of certain extremely disturbing personal experiences, the death of this father and his mother's marriage to his uncle, comes to see his world in a different way. This new vision affects everything : his attitude to his friends and family, his feelings about sex, his view of the court and its politics, his image of himself. The experience is so all-embracing and so shattering that he is not at first sure that his new vision can be true or if it is, whether he can endure it. But as the situation clarifies he becomes convinced of its validity and comes to understand its implications better. In this he is helped by two things : his education, which has predisposed towards a humane and rational approach to life and his friendship with Horatio, young man who, though much less Brilliant than Hamlet, is also a humanist scholar and who stand firm in loyalty and affection when the rest of the world treats him as a pitiable or dangerous neurotic.<sup>6</sup>

At first Hamlet, though of an active disposition, is almost overwhelmed by the difficulty of solving his problem—especially with regard to his uncle—in terms of his new way of looking at things. He more or less deliberately prolongs the business of testing – out his well-founded suspicions and allows his uncle to get back the initiative and ship him out of the country. At this point, however, he comes to the conclusion that he cannot avoid acting, even if the actions he takes cannot

satisfactorily meet all the problem he has unearthed. He acts very decisively therefore on the voyage to England, returns to Denmark and, moved beyond measure by the suicide of Ophelia and the reactions of her stupid but not ineffectual brother, puts on once more the bearing and responsibilities of a prince and solves the situation in the only way he can, by killing the king, leaving Prince Fortinbras to reign in his place, and begging Horatio to live on to tell the tale.<sup>7</sup>

The degree to which Hamlet, "in the last act, capitulates to the values he has previously rejected – the extent to which he gives up the battle to act as a man rather than as a prince – corresponds, as it may seem the actual possibilities in the year 1600 of putting into practice the ideas of the new humanism or, perhaps more accurately, hold the mirror up to nature in the sense that certain limitations in sixteenth-century humanism and discrepancies between humanist theory and practice are revealed.

Hamlet's new view of the world he-lives in is, essentially, the view of the world of the most **advanced humanists** of his time. It reject as intolerable the ways of behavior, which formed the accepted standard of the contemporary ruling Class. The basic view of man of the feudal ruling class had been. In theory, a metaphysical one which saw man as a fallen creature seeking to win redemption through submission to and service of God, in practice a highly conservative one which saw each man as having a specific, appointed place within existing society, and wisdom as acceptance of this fact. Within this view abuses of responsibility tyranny, cruelty, murder – were theoretically condemned but in practice sanctioned by political custom. There was no lack of all three in Elizabethan England. The revolutionary nature of Hamlet's view of the world is that he sees tyranny and murder and inhumanity not as unfortunate abuses but as the norm and essence of the court of Denmark, not as blots on a society he can accept but as integral parts of a way of life he now finds intolerable.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Hamlet can on longer base his values and actions on the accepted assumptions of the conventional sixteenth-century prince. He ceases to behave as a prince ought to behave and begins behaving as a man, a sixteenth-century man, imbued with the values and caught up in the developing and exciting potentialities of the new humanism. The words which Hamlet comes back to in his deepest moments of need and trouble are the world man and friend. He says that his father was a man and he should take him for all in all. Hamlet also calls Horatio a man when he, dying, stretches out his hand to him. There is always a question: "What should a man do ?" He scarcely refers to what, in any of the Histories, would have been uppermost in the thoughts of a prince whose father has been murdered : his own claims to the throne.

Obviously Hamlet is not a twenties-century democrat : his thinking remains deeply sixteenth-century in its flavor. Bit within the context in which he is operating **his humanism** has very definite democratic implications-as any able actor doing the part before a modern audience quickly discovers-especially when it is contrasted with the social and political attitudes of Claudius, Laertes, Polonius and Fortinbras.<sup>9</sup>

At the center of any discussion of *Hamlet* must-always fee what he himself calls his 'mystery'. I think it is important to recognize that this mystery, though it include a psychological-'state', cannot be adequately described in purely psychological terms. It involves not only Hamlet but also the world he lives in. If his view of that world had no real basis, if it were bottom a delusion, then one would be justified in seeing Hamlet, as his interpreters on the stage often seem to see him, as a 'case', a neurotic. But Shakespeare is at pains to show that Hamlet's view of his world in the opening scenes of the play is not a delusion. It is the worldly-wise of the play, in particular the Queen and Polonius, who are time and time again shown to be deluded. In his very first speech, after his three sardonic puns, Hamlet states the problem. The King and

Queen are trying to persuade him to be sensible about his father's death. Everyone dies. To die is common.<sup>10</sup>

Shakespeare goes out of his way to emphasize that what hamlet is up against is not a problem of personal relationships simply but a whole society. "something is rotten in the state of denmark". The rottenness is not psychological (though it has its psychological manifestations all right ) but social. This is stressed right through the play. The king and the satate are reflections of one another. It is the time that is out of joint, not hamlet. The difficulty of his dilemma is that he sees all too clearly for his comfort that it is only by setting the time right that he can set himself right. This and not some metaphysical mole is the `cursed spite` behind his mystery.<sup>11</sup>

Shakespeare makes sure that we are in a position to heck up on Hamlet's judgments, to see whether he is deluded or not. It is not authenticity of the Ghost and the conscience of the King that are tested out in the play scene but also the moral values of the Danish court. The author leaves much to the imagination but nothing to chance, permitting no escape to the metaphysical generalities about the human condition.

Hamlet has seen through Polonius. His contempt for him is so complete that he cannot even spare him a moment's pity when he has run his sword through him by accident. For Hamlet, who Knows that a tear is an intellectual thing, has come to see the horror, in terms if human misery and betrayal, of what Polonius stands for. That is why it is wrong for an actor to play the Lord Chamberlain simply as a clown : he is a responsible figure who, in the context within which he works, knows perfectly well what he is doing and boasts of how skillfully he can by indirections find directions out. Politically he is a Machiavellian : morally, as Hamlet (a good stock-breeder's term) he has expatiated at length to her on her value on the marriage – market, fearing she has taken Hamlet's tenders for true pay which are not sterling' and describing his vows as brokers, not of that dye which their investments show.<sup>12</sup>

It is not, of course, only Polonius that Hamlet has seen through but the morality of whole society, which sees nothing wrong with Polonius, expect his garrulousness. Hamlet has loved Ophelia, but now, in the light of his new vision of the Danish world, he sees her as, though personally innocent, a pawn in the corrupt shifts in his scenes with her. ' I did love you once ' and then, immediately, ' I loved you not'. He loved her, but now he sees her—and woman in general – differently, and what he sees he cannot love. She was better in a nunnery. That is before he realizes that Ophelia has been 'loosed' to him. After that he is pitiless and in the play scene treats her with the utmost brutality as a prostitute, humiliating both himself and her.<sup>13</sup>

It is not good enough to describe Hamlet as a man who cannot make up his mind. More – adequately one might say that he is faced with a situation which it is almost impossible for him to resolve satisfactorily in action. For, to put it crudely, longer look at society from the point of view of the ruling class. He might kill the king (as was, within fifty years, to happen in Britain) recognizing him as the source not only of his personal ills but of the corrupt state, the prison that is Denmark. But when then ? Especially if young Fortinbars, Just back from a successful mopping – up operation in Poland, is to reign in his stead.

It seems to be necessary to see Hamlet's problem Historically. To do so helps resolve one of the issues that has always worried actors who tackle the part : how can Hamlet be at the same time—what almost everyone feels instinctively he must be – a hero, yet also ineffective? It is this problem that has led to the tendency to sympathize with Hamlet because he is ineffective.<sup>14</sup> This tendency, though wrong, seems to be a tribute to the significance of the situation Shakespeare has put his finger on, a

situation of great general interest in the modern world and the one which makes everyone recognize the typicality as well as the uniqueness of Hamlet. Hamlet is not merely a Renaissance prince. Along with Marlowe's Faustus he is the first modern intellectual in English literature and he is, of course, far more modern as well as much more intelligent than Faustus. And his dilemma is essentially the dilemma of the modern European intellectual : his ideas and values are in a deep way at odds with his actions. Thinking and doing have got separated, basically because power is in the hands of the class whose values **humane people** feel they must repudiate. Power and effectiveness tend therefore to be suspected by the intelligentsia who retreat physically into a world removed from vital power-decision and mentally into a realm of ideas and art which they value above the world of action and to defend from the corrupting inroads of cynical expediency.<sup>15</sup>

In Hamlet all these tendencies and temptations are to be found, though, being a sixteenth-century prince, the practical possibilities of an escape from the world of action are not, for him, very great. But the lost young man of the opening acts, acutely conscious of 'not belonging', contemptuous, sardonic, even a bit exhibitionist, talking a language different from those around him, speaks directly to the experience of the modern intellectual who proceeds to idealize this unhappy young man into the supreme expression of the eternal human condition epitomized in being an intellectual.

Shakespeare does not permit this idealization. Hamlet, Having stood on the brink of despair, comes back to the court – of Denmark, refusing to continue to contemplate the possibility of the separation of thought from action. From the moment, at which recalled to actuality in the graveyard by the death – of Ophelia, he leaps into the grave with a cry, he puts behind him the most desperate of his haunting doubts. The atmosphere of the fifth act, with its tense, controlled unemphatic prose statements, is one of sad, almost (but not quite) passive acceptance of the need to act. The readiness is all. Hamlet is not taken in, nor has he become cynical: in his heart there remains a kind of fighting that will not let him sleep. Although all's ill about his heart he will meet the challenges that come bravely, without cynicism and without humbug.<sup>16</sup>

Neither Hamlet nor Shakespeare, in the year 1600, could resolve in action, even tragically the dilemma of a young man from whose eyes the veils which shrouded so many truths about class-divided society had been torn. Shakespeare could do nothing about Hamlet's Dilemma except express it with profound realism. but the 'except' is a tremendous one, pointing to the way art works and helps.

We begin to see the link between *Lear* and *Hamlet* when we recognize that Lear, unlike Hamlet in so much, is, like him, a hero. A hero is a figure to whom, irrespective of faults and weaknesses, we feel a deeply sympathetic commitment. We do not, in the daydream sense of the word, identify ourselves with him, but we do in a decisive way identify our hopes and fears with his career. It is not more purely individual characteristics—his personality or his charm – that make a man a hero, nor his actions as such – he can be strong or even brave without being heroic. What makes the hero, or heroine, heroic, is that he bears on his shoulders, sometimes without realizing it, something of the actual aspirations of humanity in its struggles to advance its condition. Prometheus is the greatest of heroes in that he embodies human aspiration itself. Most of his successors have a more limited burden and, because **human aspiration** is not something absolute and abstract but real and changing, the hero cannot as a rule be fruitfully taken out of his actual historical situation.<sup>17</sup> The heroes of Renaissance drama are the men and women whose lives and struggles express the actual attempts of people at that time to extend the frontiers of human possibility. We

commit ourselves to the career of Romeo and Juliet, though we know their love is in the pejorative as well as the sympathetic sense romantic, because we recognize the need of advancing, men and women to choose their own lovers rather than subscribe, to marriages arranged by their parents for dynastic or family purposes. In our attitude to a hero we are always partisan, to be indifferent to his fate would be to be indifferent to the outcome of our own lives. But our partisanship, even where it seems intuitive, is based on an assessment of the forces and values involved in his situation, which has to bear the scrutiny of *objective* analysis. Scientific humanism is the basis on which we can come both feel our commitment (our identity as human beings and our impulse to take the right side in human choices) and understand it (submit it to the tests of argument and experience).<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

1. Stephen Booth, p. 145.
2. Traversi Derek, p. 149.
3. Ibid., p. 56.
4. Finkelstein Sideny, p. 63.
5. Samuel Johnson, p. 38.
6. A. Lunacharsky, p. 79.
7. Eric Sams, p. 52.
8. Noyes S., p. 34.
9. W. Shakespeare, p. 96.
- 10 C.W. Underwood, p. 69.
11. J.D.Wilson, p. 125.
12. Eugene Patrick Wright, p. 145.
13. Samuel Schoenbaum, p. 174.
14. T.M. Parrot, p. 136.
15. Eugene Patrick Wright, p. 122.
16. Stephen Booth, p. 158.
17. Noyes S., p. 34.
18. Ibid., p. 36.
19. T.M. Parrot, p. 126.
20. Eric Sams, p. 155.
21. A. Lunacharsky, p. 79.
22. J.D.Wilson, p. 147.
23. Traversi Derek, p. 99.
24. C.W. Underwood, p. 189.
25. Ibid., p. 73.
26. Finkelstein Sideny, p. 29.

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