

On Hamlet and the Politics of Incest

Paul Warden Prescott, 1998

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We see the world as we are.

THE TALMUD

The character of Hamlet is often said to be a mystery, the depths of which will never be fully sounded. And perhaps this is so. But as I find myself highly suspicious of this notion of “mystery,” I am going to contest it. Confronted with our limits, we say: “It will always be a mystery.” And of course, some things always will be. Some limitations are born ours, by our nature, and some mysteries therefore are real. But no less certain than this, some ours to command. The blinders we impose upon ourselves are seldom of the same quality as those of our finite and limited natures, much as we might often like – consciously or no – to substitute the one for the other.

The story of Hamlet, like the character of Hamlet himself, is woven through with such tensions: Is Hamlet sane, or patently crazy? If sane, what are his actual motives? Are they calculated as such or merely reactive? Why does he act so decisively in one instance, only to fall seemingly impotent in others? How is one to reconcile such deep cognizance with apparent innocence of (or is it indifference to) the realities that circle around him? It is with these things in mind that I will approach the mystery of Hamlet.

1. A Mote to Trouble the Mind’s Eye

Before we begin, some necessary preliminaries. In the last decades psychology, no less than many other schools of thought, has seen the rise of systems theory. It is from the vantagepoint of the resulting theoretical construct that I am going to confront Hamlet.

Systems theory in psychology does some curious things, standing some of our most conventional assumptions about mental health and illness on their heads. By refusing to see the individual as a self-contained entity isolated from their context (i.e., relationships) systems theory firmly rejects the traditional notion of a ‘patient’ with a ‘problem.’ In place of this, it turns instead to a greater ‘system’ with a problem. The ‘patient’ becomes the

“presenting member” – in contrast to our traditional stigma of mental illness, often the *healthiest* member of an otherwise pathological system, one who possesses the strength and courage to challenge the status quo. In systems theory, families, no less than communities, are not unlike mobiles, to quote the now standard metaphor. To move one, is invariably to move all the others ... and more ominously, vice versa.

Also weighing in heavily in this paper, therefore, will be the endeavors of existential psychiatry, most notably the work of the late British psychiatrist and poet, R. D. Laing. Laing’s basic purpose, throughout much of his career, was “to make madness, and the process of going mad, comprehensible” (1960: 9). The questions raised by existential psychiatry are deep ones, and often lead in disturbing directions. At the very least, they challenge us to consider the extent to which “sanity” may be merely a matter of context and social consensus. Laing has written, “The man who is said to be deluded may be in his delusion telling me the truth, and this in no equivocal or metaphorical sense, but quite literally ... the cracked mind of the schizophrenic may let in light which does not enter the intact minds of many sane people, whose minds are closed” (1960: 28). Thus, he concludes, “the label is a social fact [and as such] a *political event*” (1967: 83). The circumstances surrounding William Shakespeare’s hero could hardly have been better stated.

Thus, we arrive at the thesis of this paper: namely, that Hamlet is not crazy, Elsinore is. Virtually everything said of Hamlet could rightly be said of Elsinore. It is Elsinore that is disturbed. It is Elsinore that is problematic, confounding, and innocent of (or indifferent to) reality. If Hamlet is not the problem needing resolution, wrestling with him will never lead to resolution. Confronting an isolated symptom can be of little use in coming to terms with the deeper reality of a disease. By focusing on the character of Hamlet, consciously or no, we not only collude with the perpetrators of his injustice, but we also ensure that we will never have to confront an answer. We perpetuate “mystery.”

2. A Wounded Name (things standing thus unknown)

From a systemic point of view, the story unfolded in Hamlet is the inevitable culmination of realities laid down long before the play opens. We are not witness to the birth and evolution

of the unweeded garden, only to its final fruition. Thus, from the evidence portrayed, one can only infer the presence of the fundamental past.

We do not get to see Hamlet as “well,” and it is presumption that he ever was. Family systems have their own “narrative” – their own self-understanding “story” in which, consciously or no, all members are deeply invested, both for collective as well as individual identity. This is, of course, particularly true for children. No matter how sick, disturbed or “dysfunctional” the realities of the system may be, the story presents an enforced center of gravity that both creates “order” and makes any given system remarkably resistant to change. Children growing up under such conditions, to “preserve faith in [their] parents ... must reject the first and most obvious conclusion that something is terribly wrong with them” (Herman 1992: 100). Thus, when the play opens with the ghost of Hamlet’s dead father, we are not necessarily witnessing the initial outbreak of disorder, so much as the arrival of what is for one singular member, namely Hamlet, unavoidable evidence that something is indeed terribly wrong.

Hamlet arrives on the stage at the outset of an existential crisis of massive proportions, one with deep implications not only for his own life, but also for what R. D. Laing has aptly called, his *ontological security*. By this term, Laing means a sense of “be-ing”—the foundation through which a “person will encounter the hazards of life ... from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people’s reality and identity” (Laing 1960: 40). He goes on to add that “[i]t is often difficult for a person with such a sense of his integral selfhood and personal identity, of the permanency of things, of the reliability of others ... to transpose himself into the world of an individual whose experiences may be utterly lacking in any unquestionable self-validating certainties” (40). A point well worth remembering in confronting the motives of Hamlet.

As for Hamlet’s confrontations, it is worth note that they are largely public. Only in public, and with the assistance of outsiders, does he attempt to *catch the conscience of the King*. There are, systemically, no real secrets: only denial, and conflicted or limited awareness. All members of a system, however innocent or far removed, ‘conspire’ in so far as they maintain their allegiance to the dominant story. In so doing, they create a deeply compromised social context around Hamlet where, for him, authentic relations are rendered impossible. (i.e., he is ‘accepted’ only in so far as he allows himself to be denied: a double-bind.) Hamlet aptly

calls this, *an unweeded garden, that has gone to seed. Things rank and gross in nature possess it merely ... (how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world)* – depression or no, under the circumstances a rather accurate assessment.

Hamlet does what any of us would do, confronted with such a dilemma. He goes on as if it were not so. He speaks and he does not speak. He knows and he does not know. Nevertheless, to what his words do not fully testify, his actions (or inactions, as the case may be) inexorably do. Therefore, actions speaking louder than words, I am going to make one conceptual leap that is not explicit in Shakespeare's play. I want to make it clear that I do not make such a leap because I believe it was the author's hidden intention. The story of Hamlet and the "mystery" it unfolds has been with us now for some four hundred years and has come to have a life much larger than its author could have intended, or even imagined. I make this leap, therefore, only because it has been implied (unwittingly or no) in productions of Hamlet since Shakespeare's day—and having thus arrived here at my door, I find that for me it unlocks the story's confusion. I make it because without it, only the confusion remains.

When Shakespearian actors, for whatever their reason, sexualize the relation of the Queen, Gertrude, with her son, they may not have altered the letter of the play, but they irrevocably alter the psychological landscape. Incest "takes place in a familial climate of pervasive terror, in which ordinary caretaking relationships have been profoundly disrupted" (Herman 1992: 98). The existential atmosphere created is one of absolute ontological *insecurity*. "Is" and "seems" warp and conflict in the most deep and integral ways creating a context that, in and of itself, works to annihilate the very existence of one of its members. (Or, to put it more bluntly, one that works to erase the 'evidence.')

It is my contention that only in response to such a fundamental 'un-thing' do Hamlet's actions become fully meaningful.

3. This Plague for Thy Dowry

Hamlet is thirty and has never married. This is, to say the least, rather striking for his times and social position. We know that he talks to Ophelia – that is, before he tells her to *get to a nunnery* while there is still time (good advice in hindsight, I must say). However, talk it must be pointed out is only that: talk. Statistically, incestuous conditions in childhood can all but

irreparably derail the development of male social-sexual personhood. Precisely why this is so may continue to be uncertain, but in day-to-day terms it serves as a good example of what an incestuous environment really means. Such an environment is patently schizoid. Intimacy has come to equal death.

Hamlet's rage and hatred against women is as extensive as it is unfocused, and under the circumstances this is hardly surprising. I do not take it as coincidence that his anger translates directly into action only in his mother's bedchamber. There – and only there, it seems – does it find its focus. Polonius dies without measure. Hamlet, in every other instance so reflective and thoughtful, here acts from the heart. This is a marked exception to the rule. To explain it, I can only presume that his heart – normally confounded with unweeded shadows – has here encountered something *real*. He may not consciously acknowledge it, and certainly it stands in violation of his father's commands (note: the ghost returns only once, at this precise moment: *do not forget ... thy almost blunted purpose*), but I do not think Hamlet is acting like he wants to kill Claudius. Being demonstrably able, after all, he could have done so at virtually any given moment throughout the play. Claudius may be his father's purpose, yes. But Hamlet's? His heart's desire, it seems to me, is to kill the Queen.

As for why this does not happen, he is double-bound several times over. The oath inscribed upon him by his honored dead father at the outset of the play, commands both the avenging of a *foul and most unnatural murder* and the restraint of *thy soul ... against thy mother*. This, in light of the darker realities of Elsinore, is a double-bind: an impossible duty to perform. Given even the furthest benefit of doubt, Gertrude is mired in her former husband's death, if not directly responsible for it.

Beyond this, Hamlet's own position in relation to his mother is, for obvious reasons, perilously compromised. Unfortunately, "children who develop in [an incestuous] climate ... develop pathological attachments to those who abuse and neglect them, attachments that they will strive to maintain even at the sacrifice of their own welfare, their own reality, or their lives" (Herman 1992: 98). It is entirely possible, if not likely, that Gertrude's sexualized affection is the *only* affection Hamlet has ever known. Nature abhors a vacuum. Thus, when the chamber scene collapses from a violent confrontation with the Queen into seeming "repentance" we may well be witnessing only an appearance. The underlying truth could well be a child's. The Ghost has returned with all its paternal authority, undermined Hamlet's

assertiveness, and left in its wake a naive, cornered, and pleading attempt to somehow make the 'bad' parent relent, and in so doing become 'good': to *live* as it were, *with the other half*. Which presumes, of course, that there actually is one.

4. Where th' Offence Is (let the great axe fall)

And thus, we arrive at the secret of Hamlet's "delay." In light of his unspoken circumstances, his inaction shows itself to be very much action indeed. Action, however, directed by neither the motives that we, nor his father, expect of him. He is not fighting to avenge. Under the circumstances, vengeance is at best a distant concern. Rather, he is ontologically under siege, and is fighting to preserve his existence.

The censure of people in such circumstances is common, if not predictable, as our response to Hamlet readily illustrates. The 'outside' world, in its enduring denial, perennially mistakes and misjudges both the motives and the character of the person involved. "Social judgement of [such] people tends to be extremely harsh" (Herman 1992: 115). Hamlet is trying to resolve an irresolvable problem, and thus in one sense, he is indeed paralyzed. This is not a reflection on him, however, for under such circumstances, none of us do any better. In truth, there is no better to do. Elsinore is insane. To participate in it is to participate in its insanity, and to inevitably suffer as a result. To be dependent upon it for one's life – or as is the case for Hamlet, for one's very identity – is ultimately death and psychological dissolution.

The first clear mark of this arrives as Ophelia – the most vulnerable member, the one with the least outside support – gives way. As Freud once observed, if smoke cannot go out the chimney, it invariably heads for the nearest open window. For me, Ophelia's death marks the turning point in the play. The systemic story, which thus far has held together for the larger whole, now begins to universally fail. As Ophelia foreshadows with her fateful bouquet, Elsinore's consequences are close at hand. The systemic center is faltering, and as the truth begins to assert itself "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (Yeats 1997: 91).

In the final scenes, the disparate social realities claim champions and pit themselves one against the other. Both Hamlet and Laertes return, and by their mutual presence bring to a climax a social and political schism that simply can no longer endure. Laertes swiftly

embraces the King's consensus narrative and turns on Hamlet as the source of the injustice and communal concern. Hamlet, for his own part, seems to have reached some inner point of surrender. Feeling increasingly implicated in the guilt and insanity around him, he seems no longer willing even to strive for anything better, and thus ready to embrace another injustice, if only it might lead to some resolution.

In the end, with all the court gathered under one roof, there are simply too many lies and denials for the system to bear. In being forced to accommodate them all in the same room, the organizing story breaks down. The various betrayals contained within it escape, and, striking outside their intended bounds, set a final cathartic dissolution into effect. Like Samson in the palace of the Philistines, the truth shakes free of its moorings, and the roof comes crashing down.

Laertes' willingness in those final moments to recognize both a greater offence, and the part he has played in it, give the play some small – albeit tragic – sense of closure. It is this action on Laertes' part that allows Hamlet to publicly die as he privately lived: courageously. Beyond this, however, *the rest is silence* as Hamlet well knows. With no way to ever confront the truth of what happened (provided a yet unseen willingness to do so), Elsinore will inevitably continue as before.

5. The Silence That the Rest Is

And so, Hamlet is dead, and I, for one, can't say as I blame him. He was the heir to Elsinore, an inheritance that was worse than useless. As an individual, he was forced to confront a terrible "is" in a place that cared only for "seeming." Thus, he could trust no one, respect no one, and turn nowhere for comfort—let alone justice. Under the circumstances, he could only "be," and in so being be utterly alone; or choose "not to be," and in so doing take his fatal place in an unweeded garden.

What would justice have looked like for Hamlet? Justice – as Hannah Arendt once observed – is advocated because "it is the body politic itself that stands in need of being repaired, and it is the general public order that has been thrown out of gear and must be restored" (1964: 261). Systemically speaking, Arendt is right. Justice would be Elsinore asserting itself on behalf of justice, thus taking responsibility for itself, validating Hamlet's

existence, and restoring some possibility of uncompromised human relations within its borders. Of course, human nature being what it is they bury him instead. Just, I might add, as they buried him when he was alive. The story told of Hamlet is a true story, in that it is a human one. We do not see the world the way it is. All too often, we only see the world the way we are. The potential for tragedy lies – sometimes dormant, often not – inherent in these limitations; and in the end, I would submit, it matters little whether they are willfully or unwittingly enacted.

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