

THE VENOM'S WORK IN HAMLET AS A METAPHOR FOR SOME ASPECTS OF DESTRUCTIVENESS

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In this paper I shall undertake a study of insidious, poisonous and violent manifestations of destructive tendencies as they are presented in Hamlet. It is not a clinical paper but I will attempt to make some connections between the study of Hamlet, based on my own explorations, those of the others, and on psychoanalytical insights derived from clinical observations.

I believe such a study of Hamlet can involve us in a process of psychoanalytic inquiry which is not dissimilar to the one we undertake in psychoanalytic clinical work. In both situations we are confronted with various manifestations of destructiveness and presented with a question, akin to Hamlet's 'to be or not to be': question about possibility and fruitfulness of work when confronted with vengeful feelings and envious, deadly impulses, and a question of survival of the creative and thinking mind when is 'to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. The play describes a struggle against destructive processes, the struggle which is, like in the analytical situation, linked with a search for meaning, self-expression and with the creative process.

Hamlet fights against the work of venom throughout the play. Shakespeare opposes it with the creative act. His work offers intuitive understanding and emotional and aesthetic experience which can help us to reflect upon our clinical work and to assist in our analytical struggles in dealing with what are the hamletic dilemmas of our patients, and of our times.

I think that Hamlet offers an excellent opportunity to experience and to study the origins and vicissitudes of some destructive tendencies which can be associated with the death instinct (or drive). They are expressed in the play in an insidious as well as violent way and can be linked with the work of venom. There are three scenes of a venomous, murderous attack in the play. The first is described by the Ghost in his revelation to Hamlet during their encounter in Act 1 (Scene 5), the second is an enactment of Gonzago murder in a play stage-managed by Hamlet in the Mousetrap Scene (111.2). The third is the grandfinale of the mass, mutual destruction in the last scene of the play (V.2), which follows the double poisoning concocted by the King and Laertes, of which they also fall victims. Hamlet expresses the destructive motive directly when he delivers the last lethal blow to the King. He exclaims: 'Then Venom do thy work' (V.2.3 34)' (1), while stabbing the King with the unbated and envenom'd point, with which he himself had already been mortally wounded. To complete and to back up the deed of revenge he makes the King drink the deadly potion which has already killed the Queen, Hamlet's mother. The deadly circle is completed, the rest is silence. But this is not all. The thread of the venom's work goes throughout the play and it can be traced back to the events and their roots. This work of venom, as seen in the scenes from Hamlet, can be swift and the death instantaneous. Put the venom can also affect its object in disguise, as something plausible and desirable, as food for the body or for thought. But it 'is nourishment that makes one ill' (Freud, 1935). The illness, the rot sets in and works its way into the essential organs and layers, to spoil, undermine, corrupt. Eventually, it erupts in obvious and violent fashion and kills. The slow death of the inner resistance and of the spirit precedes the final, destructive outcome.

I would like now to map the area I am going to cover in this paper. I do not even attempt to review literature on Hamlet which is vast (2). Nor do I intend to follow the approach of Ernest Jones who once proposed, 'to pretend that Hamlet was a living person' and to treat him as a clinical case (Jones, 1949). This would mean replacing Freud's and Jones's 'oedipal - neurotic' interpretation of Hamlet with another one, perhaps more contemporary and fashionable, coined, for example, in terms of Kleinian positions, narcissism or perversions. This would also be like becoming an interpreter of Hamlet whose task would be to discover 'some hidden, a priori meaning', a position Jacobson warns against in his paper Hamlet's other selves (Jacobson, 1989). I rather prefer, in agreement with him, to accept that in the text of the play something important has already been revealed, on the conscious and unconscious levels, simultaneously, and this can be looked at from a psychoanalytical vantage point. I also hope to use Hamlet as a springboard for considerations which can be meaningful for psychoanalytic work. I will focus on the work of venom in Hamlet.

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark

In Hamlet, we are told that 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark' early on, even before we hear the Ghost's story (I.4.89). The appearance of the Ghost ['In the same Figure like the King that's dead'] to the guards [Barnardo and Marcellus] and later to Horatio, seems to initially indicate that 'This bodes some strange Eruption to our State' (Horatio, I.1.63). Meltzer in his brilliant essay on 'Hamlet' (in The Apprehension of Beauty, written with Meg Harris Williams) suggests that it represents 'Denmark's sickness, deep ulceration coming to the surface, internal eruption' which is embodied in the Ghost's appearance. And to him, 'Hamlet's initial function as an element of the Mind of Denmark as a whole, is to bring this indefinable sickness on to a plane where it is at least seen and acknowledged; and ... to carry the process of thought into "undiscovered country", the sphere of the unknown', in his Hamlet's 'quest...for the truth about himself and the landscape of his soul' (Meltzer & Williams, 1988, p.88 & 92).

The nature of the Ghost is queried by those who meet him (?it) first, and subsequently by Hamlet. Eleanor Prosser in her book Hamlet and Revenge, which is a thorough historical and literary study of Hamlet, analyses various interpretations of the true nature of the Ghost arising from Protestant and Catholic views on such an apparition and concludes that already the first scene of the play provides evidence that the Ghost is probably a malignant, evil spirit, rather than a benign Purgatory soul, which would behave differently and also would not be wearing full armour, as the Ghost does, as if he was coming from or was ready for battle (Prosser, 1971).

Frattaroli, in his 1990 paper points out to metaphorical meaning of the Ghost and he sees the central conflict of the play portrayed in a contrast between the armour-clad Ghost which represents a terrifying personification of darkness, revenge and war, and the picture of 'the russet mantle-clad Morn', being a personification of light, love and peace (Frattaroli, 1990).

Meeting of Hamlet with the Ghost is the point where history meets the present. The whole play, and to some extent the thesis of this paper, revolves around that which comes out of their encounter. From then on 'the time is out of joint' and attempts to 'set it right' will be paralleled and opposed by the forces of madness and destruction. According to Dover Wilson, a well-known editor and commentator on Hamlet, 'The Ghost is the linchpin of Hamlet' (Wilson, 1961).

An unweeded garden

Hamlet is presented to us before he meets the Ghost, but after the Ghost had already made his appearance to others. We can see how the scene is set for that momentous encounter. The Scene 2 of the play presents Hamlet in the discourse with Claudius who took place of Hamlet's father in the kingdom, 'wearing his crown', and replacing him in Hamlet's mother's bed. Hamlet quips in response to Claudius's 'fatherly' approach that he is 'too much in the Sun', a line which can be read as a pun, particularly if the original Second Quarto spelling s-o-n is adopted. There is some other evidence in that scene that Hamlet can be also referring to his father, who is later compared to the Sun god, Hyperion. What strikes most in Hamlet's first soliloquy, however, is not so much sadness and desperation linked with a loss of the loved (we assume) father but his outrage at his mother's lack of proper grief, her duplicity, her eagerness and speed in getting 'With such Dexterity to incestuous Sheets'. Before that he says:

O that this too too sallied Flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve it self into a Dew;
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His Cannon 'gainst seal (3) slaughter; O God, God,
How wary, stale flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this World?
Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded Garden
That grows to seed: things rank and gross in Nature
Possess it merely that it should come thus
But two months dead, nay not so much, not two; (I.2.129-137)

The metaphor of an unweeded garden can be read merely as a reference to the external world - the garden of Elsinore which has become unkempt and neglected after its keeper-King's death. But it could be also a garden of Hamlet's mind, now overgrown with thoughts which do not feel right; not good, loving thoughts that could sadly but respectfully grow on his father's grave; the thoughts 'rank and gross in nature': corrupt and foul, offensive and seedy, which he tries to ascribe to his turned-into-strumpet mother, because otherwise they might require an execution - a 'self-slaughter' of their carrier. Hamlet's outrage about his mother's all-too-short grief, giving way to the contemptible desire, follows his thoughts about attacking himself, his body, as if it was his body that was sullied, i.e. blemished, defiled.

Hamlet seems to be open and receptive to an intervention which could 'set it right', particularly if would come from the right source, from an idealised father, the gardener, who could weed and replant the garden of his troubled mind. Hamlet displays remarkable submissiveness and compliance in his reaction to his discredited mother's and his self-appointed stepfather's requests not to go back to Wittenberg. (4) This can signify his inability to separate from the corrupted parental couple and his willingness to give up the independent pursuit of knowledge.

Desperation of Hamlet when he approaches the Ghost can be thus seen in a different light. Hamlet has many reason to be suspicious of the Ghost's intentions and his 'honesty' but he still approaches the Ghost in daring desperation or rather in a desperate and mindless determination, against the advice of his friends and perhaps against his better judgement; as Prosser point out, he violates 'all Protestant and Catholic teaching of the period' and 'defies the powers of both Heaven and Hell'. This is expressed in Hamlet's emotional invocation:

Be thou a Spirit of Health, or Goblin damn'd
Bring with thee Airs from Heaven, or Blasts from Hell
Be thy Intents wicked, or charitable,
Thou com'st in such a Questionable shape
That I will speak to thee, I'll call thee Hamlet,
King, Father, Royal Dane; O answer me,
Let me not burst in Ignorance... (1.4.38-43).

Scenes which follow provide further evidence for Hamlet's determination to follow the Ghost whatever he might be and wherever he might lead him.

In the name of the father

Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost is dramatic and frightening. Hamlet seeks out the Ghost and wants him to 'Say why is this, wherefore, what should we do?', (I.4.56). The Ghost who claims to be Hamlet's father's spirit gives him a long dramatic story, full of vivid and exaggerated descriptions and expressed in the suggestive, emotionally loaded language. It evokes images of betrayal and incest, violence and decay. Although the Ghost claims to be protecting Hamlet from frightening images of his current condition, 'the Secrets of my Prison-house', he made him 'list, list and list' to the horrific details of his story, and in no uncertain terms incites him to carry out revenge for his father and to intervene in the current sexual relationship of his mother. The Ghost invokes him:

Let not the Royal Blood of Denmark be
A couch for Luxury and damned Incest. (I.1.81-82)

The story of murder by poisoning is important and therefore worth quoting.

... Sleeping in my Orchard,
My custom always of the Afternoon,
Upon my secure Hour thy Uncle stole
With Juice of cursed Hebona in a Vial,
And in the Porches of my Ears did pour
The leaperous Distilment, whose Effect
Holds such an Enmity with Blood of Man

That swift as Quicksilver it courses through
The natural Gates and Allies of the Body,
And with a sudden Vigour it doth possess (5)
And Curd, like eager droppings into Milk,
The thin and wholesome Blood. So did it mine,
And a most instant Tetter bark'd about
Most Lazer-like, with vile and loathsome Crust,
All my smooth Body. (I.5.58-72)

I suggest that Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost is a replica of the scene of poisoning of Hamlet's father which the Ghost so dramatically depicts. The venom is contained in the Ghost message which he pours into Hamlet's ears. It is however not only the vengeful intention which is implanted in Hamlet's mind, it is also conflict and confusion. (6) There have been various ways of looking at Hamlet's conflict in connection with his encounter and relationship with the Ghost-father, and I will review briefly some of these that are relevant for my argument.

Prosser in her book discusses the well-known Jones's interpretation of Hamlet's conflict, in which Jones talks about Hamlet's 'natural tendency to avenge his father' and he interprets, following Freud, Hamlet's delay in following the Ghost-father's directions as a (neurotic) inhibition (of that 'natural tendency'), the inhibition which is determined by his own suppressed Oedipal - sexual and aggressive wishes (Jones, 1948). Prosser convincingly argues from a historical perspective that revenge was far from being acceptable and 'natural' in Elizabethan times. According to her research, revenge would be considered a force from Hell and blasphemy against God, treated as a destructive force which 'begins in malice and ends in despair... poisons the reason and perverts the will. No matter how appealing it may seem, it will destroy the mind, soul and body of the man who embraces it' (Prosser, 1971). The idea that bloody revenge was a 'sacred duty', associated with masculine ethic of courage, honour and action would be certainly challenged by such an description and was evidently in conflict with Christian ideals of forgiveness and acceptance of the ultimate God's right to deliver justice. Following Prosser's reasoning, Hamlet's conflict would concern destructiveness and could be seen as principally ethical one.

Frattaroli also takes the issue with Freud's and Jones's interpretation, putting the Shakespeare's hero's conflict on intergenerational and moral plane. He sees Hamlet's tragedy in his inability to say 'no' to his father, which would be a necessary step on a path to self-determination (Frattaroli, 1990).

Ernest Jones in his other paper *The death of Hamlet's father* discusses the scene of poisoning and he points out to both aggressive and erotic, homosexual aspects of Claudius's murderous assault on his brother. According to Jones, 'To the unconscious, 'poison' signifies any bodily fluid charged with evil intent' and 'the ear is an unconscious equivalent for the anus' (Jones, 1948, p.326). In the latter statement Jones refers to his earlier paper *The Madonna's conception through the ear* in which he analyses that Biblical story in which a dove, representing the Holy Ghost fertilises virgin Mary Madonna with its breath, through her ear. He considers it a derivative of an unconscious infantile phantasy in which the ear is equated with the anus and the breath (7) with a flatus and 'a Father incestuously impregnates his daughter ... by expelling intestinal gas, with the help of the genital organ' (Jones, 1914, p.355). The Jones's interpretation, coined in concrete, libidinal terms can be read as an attempt to capture complexity of relatedness between the idealised and denigrated aspects of the object in its interaction with the subject, the self. This may be relevant for understanding Hamlet and his Ghost. The Ghost seems to represent both idealised and 'bad', destructive aspects. He is apparently a spirit of the father, a noble soul suffering in Purgatory. To Hamlet he is a Hyperion, a god of the sun (8), contrasted with Claudius - a satyr, a lecherous and smelly beast, who personifies a lower form of being. The Ghost's actions are supposed to be linked with a high paternal moral ground, filial duties and ideal aspirations of honour and justice. (9) But they are clearly tainted by their opposite: the Ghost is far from being Holy - he has devilish qualities and expresses evil intentions. He does not breath peace, compassion or forgiveness into Hamlet's ears - he emits fumes of ill feelings and ill will, toxic vapours of mistrust and revenge. The result is not a conception and creation; it is a mis-conception which operates in an overpowering and corrupting way. Hamlet's intercourse with the Ghost can only bear a poisonous fruit. Hamlet cannot free himself from the inevitable and is bound to deliver a monster of the murderous retaliatory wish. The fruit never falls far from the tree, the son is to be like the father, it bears the same name already. The oedipal conflict is not fully repressed as Jones suggests and it is not only reversed

into homosexual submission; it is expressed quite overtly and enacted through the violent action and in Hamlet's compulsive involvement in the scene of 'damned incest, between the mother and the father-usurper (as Jacobson points out; Jacobson, 1989).

The confusion and conflict resulting from Hamlet's interaction with the Ghost can be looked from a perspective of Laplanche. He talks about an ambiguous message of the parent, originating from his/her unconscious and becoming a generative, causal factor in the unconscious conflict in the child's mind, through the process of misinterpretation or rather of what he calls mistranslation, a process referred to already by Ferenczi in his famous paper on confusion of tongues between the adult and the child (Ferenczi, 1933; Laplanche, 1992).

Hamlet's struggle continues on a number of planes against his fate which is designed by the scenario the Ghost prepared for him. His destiny, as shown in the play is to be a replica of the Ghost story: it is Old Hamlet compulsively repeated under the sway of the Death instinct, instead of being revived in a creative continuity of generations. Hamlet is, exactly like the King-father in the Ghost's story, thrown out from his serene orchard of apparent innocence in the result of serpent-inflicted poisoning. For Hamlet the serpent is the Ghost, and he ends up like his Ghost-father:

Of Life, of Crown, of Queen at once dispatch'd,
Cut off even in the Blossoms of my Sin,
Unhuzled, disappointed, unannel'd (10) (I.5.74-76)

The woman he might have had as his Queen - Ophelia, is taken away from him through a combination of another, parallel father-son plot, forged between Polonius and Laertes, and under the impact of his own deranged mind, needless to say, the mind disorganised under the influence of his own Ghost/father-son unholy alliance.

The Mousetrap

The Ghost's supposed revelation becomes associated with the exact opposite of a search for meaning and truth: it represents a deadly entrapment in which venom can do its work. Hamlet's struggles to find a way out are futile because the only promising path - one of the creative growth, self-knowledge and self-determination - is closed to him.

In the second act Hamlet has 'put his antic disposition on' and we can see that he is pregnant with the ideas conceived in his encounter with the Ghost. It was he who felt that he had been 'too much in 'th son'. Now the idea of exposure to the sun of the Ghost's 'enlightenment' becomes associated with conception which is expressed in an awful, 'rotten' image of 'the Sun (breeding) Maggots in a dead Dog, being a good kissing Carrion' (II.2.185-6). Other images come from Hamlet's meeting with Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern in Act II. During their conversation he states that for him 'Denmark is a Prison...one o'th'worst'. Following that he says:

...I could be bounded in a Nutshell and count my self a King of Infinite Space; were it not that I have Bad Dreams. (II.2.266-8)

The dreams have taken a form of nightmares. In his internal space the world which has become 'a sterile Promontory' and it appears to him 'nothing but a foul and pestilent congregation of Vapours' and 'Quintessence of Dust'. This dramatically described degradation and mortification of his internal world has the appearance of the effects of pollution and contamination, in the result of which his world has become like an anus mundi which has now become the place for him to live in. Hamlet wanders through The Lobby in the castle which, as Meltzer & Williams point out, used to be for him a dreaming poetic and interactive space: there is where he meditates, where he meets Ophelia in the Nunnery Scene, it is where he delivers his most famous soliloquy 'To be or not to be'. But now '...it is ambiguous as to whether the Lobby is a chamber of dreams or a prison for nightmares. In it the prince is bounded in a nutshell, rehearsing the interaction between infinite space and bad dreams' (Meltzer & Williams, 1988, p.100).

The position in which Hamlet finds himself brings to mind Rosenfeld's and Steiner's descriptions of pathological organisations as well as Neville Symington's formulations on destructive aspects of narcissism. Meltzer summarises central aspects of these organisations succinctly [in the chapter Infantile perverse sexuality], saying; 'The destructive part of the self (then) presents itself to the suffering good parts, first as a protector from pain, second, as a servant to its sensuality and vanity and only covertly - in the face of resistance to regression - as the brute, the torturer' (Meltzer, 1979).

I believe that the fortunes of Shakespeare's hero illustrate Hamlet's failure to find such a solution which would enable an alternative way of relating: internally as well as externally. His poisoned internal world has locked him in a retaliatory deadly cycle. The grip of his Ghost-father, which he colluded with, prevented him from turning to the loving Other, and particularly to feminine - maternal and sexual - objects. Meltzer & Williams point out to Hamlet's failure to find an external resonance and intimate relationship which could "denote him truly" (Meltzer & Williams, p.86). This also can be attributed to the work of venom.

The Ghost involves Hamlet not only in a pursuit of revenge but also directs him or rather redirects him, because he was already there, to the generationally wrong and defiled bedroom - to his mother's. The mother apparently is to be protected, (that is what the Ghost says:

But howsoever thou pursues this Act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy Soul contrive
Against thy Mother ought; leave her to Heaven,) (I.5.83-85)

but in fact Hamlet is presented with a contradictory image of a woman who cannot be touched, as if she was beyond censure but who, at the same time, is an incestuous and duplicitous adulteress, a strumpet who betrays all that is right and is driven mainly by her instincts. This is the image which is impossible to defend, representing the object which he is stuck with but cannot relate to. It can only add to the internal turmoil and prevent any chance of finding support, comfort or a 'resonance' in the loving Other. The possibility of transforming oedipal ties into mature relating has been thwarted by betrayal, confusion and madness.

This is the fate of Hamlet's relationship to Ophelia which becomes also Ophelia's fate. After their relationship is demolished in the Nunnery Scene Ophelia gives a heart-rending account of Hamlet's deterioration and fall: 'O what a Noble Mind is here o'erthrown!', as she talks of his virtues which have been 'blasted with Ecstasy'. But it is also she whose mind will be 'o'erthrown' and will take her to her death. Hamlet is also going to lose his life, but first, his chances for fruitful, creative relationship are destroyed, taking away a possibility of partnership, procreation and renewal. Instead of coupling Ophelia, Hamlet indeed, 'couples Hell'.

The Mousetrap, a play which is staged by Hamlet in order to confirm Claudius's guilt and also to test the veracity of the Ghost's account, provides a point of no return for Hamlet. It is an apparent attempt to find 'the truth' and the solution to his problems. But it turns out to provide, like the Ghost's 'revelation' itself, only a futile and damaging illusion or distortion of truth which now has to be adhered to and followed in a mindless, destructive way. As Meltzer & Williams put it: 'The riddle of the Mousetrap represents a kind of caricature or anti-type of the classical, devastatingly logical sequence of self-revelation found in Oedipus: it is a vehicle for lies, not truth.(and)...Hamlet succumbs to the role of the revenger... (Meltzer & Williams, 1988, p.113). So it is a trap but the trap for Hamlet who now is locked in it and onto the path of destruction. The immediately following scenes bear witness to that fact.

In the Prayer Scene Hamlet displays most vicious, damning and unchristian feelings towards Claudius. Hamlet does not kill Claudius while he is praying because he wants to make sure that the King will be beyond redemption and will go to Hell. In that way he really 'couples Hell' and secures it for himself. (11) The next step, the Closet Scene is an invasion of his mother's bedroom, followed with the killing of Polonius and Hamlet's interference in his mother's sexual life, combined with his apparent attempts to make her repent. It seems that it is not only considerate, grieving mother who is absent and cannot be brought back. It is also an aspect of himself which is lost: he can no longer reflect, forgive and repent, as his mad - delinquent and offensive - treatment of his victims indicates. So when the Ghost appears in the Closet Scene

he seems to only externally represent an intervening force which is intended to 'step between (his mother) and her fighting Soul', thus preventing any deviation from the original compact. The Mousetrap has closed.

But before the inevitable happens and the final carnage takes place we see Hamlet after his return from England. He seems to have avoided the deadly trap set by Claudius. He appears to have changed. This cannot be a change in his predicament; nothing can alter his destiny, particularly now when he and Claudius are openly locked together in a fight to death. However, his reflectiveness and sorrow in the Graveyard Scene seem to indicate some awareness of himself and of his condition, some recognition of his loves and allegiances. There is however no return and no choice is left, in the presence of figures of death. Ophelia is dead. So is Yorrick, whose skull is not merely a memento mori for Hamlet, but the only remainder of those lips which '(he) has kissed (he) knows not how oft', the lips of tender parental love, unlike those which poured venom into his ears. Yorrick's remnants are also a reminder of the 'back on which he bore him a thousand times' - a lively figure providing support and holding, quite different from the skeleton's grip. But it is a degraded figure of a jester, a 'nanny-like' father who carries these qualities, a "fool" (12) whose 'truth' is to give way to the prevailing 'clamour of war' (Ricoeur). The possibility of a loving union with Ophelia is lost. What is left is the regal but illegitimate and destructively incestuous couple which is like a pearl-union (13) - carrying and delivering death to all.

After the Graveyard Scene Hamlet appears to be ready to face his destiny: 'The Readiness is all' (V.2.235), he says, accepting the conditions of the duel. Has he really accepted the inevitable or does he believe that he can still 'defy Augury'? Has he achieved anything? Meltzer & Williams believe that ...'Hamlet's final achievement in the face of mystery appears to be the knowledge that he knows nothing: neither what he leaves nor what leaves him', yet they accept that 'there is a new quality' present in Hamlet's last talk with Horatio. They conclude: '(Hamlet's) recognition of the lack of knowledge is therefore less an expression of nihilism than a Socratean first step in confronting the mystery' (Meltzer & Williams, 1988, pp.130-1). I would add that Hamlet has perhaps achieved something, through acceptance of his destiny and by dissociation from the complete identification with the work of venom. He managed to distance himself from the poisonous malice implanted in him by the Ghost and ceased to be just his clone, a poisoned apple of his father's eye. At the same time he did not accept uncritically the role of a passive victim. He cannot stop the venom's work but it will be carried out by the others who, instead of him, have become its instruments. It will be Claudius and Laertes, another 'parallel', deceitful and malignant intergenerational couple who formed a deadly 'union', (14) doubled their venomous, murderous efforts and finally double-crossed themselves. And thus the venom did its work,

And in this Upshot, Purposes mistook
Fall'n on th'Inventors Heads. (V.2.496-7)

Conclusions: 'To tell my Story'

When the story of Hamlet is discussed it is perhaps difficult not be drawn into a deep involvement in Hamlet's failure to solve his problems and this can be felt as a triumph of destructive forces. Apart from T.S. Elliot who considered the play a Shakespeare's failure, (15) the prevailing view is that 'Hamlet' is a masterpiece, perhaps one of the greatest literary and theatrical achievements of the modern times.

Dying Hamlet asks Horatio to keep on living, in order to tell his story. The story of Hamlet and the play itself is certainly more than what Horatio refers to, as a story,

Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural Acts,
Of accidental Judgements, casual Slaughters,
Of Deaths put on by Cunning and for no Cause, (V.2.393-7)

This is certainly not an ordinary revenge tragedy. Meltzer & Williams say that 'The play, like its hero, is in search of a new mould of form. It contains Shakespeare's most savage attacks on acting and theatre, both implicit and explicit; and could be described as evolving a type of dream-play...through a process of violently cannibalising the revenge-tragedy structure which is its ostensible vehicle (Meltzer & Williams, 1988, p.92). But this is not a process of destructive devouring, like one represented in the dream of my first

patient. How could it fit with the fact that Hamlet has provided inspiration and artistic experience for five centuries, to generations of readers, viewers and critics?

The fact that so many stories have been written on Hamlet and so many interpretations of the hero's predicament have been given may need an explanation. I would like to suggest that perhaps Hamlet presents us, the readers and viewers with a request, demand or challenge 'to tell his story'. An attempt to stage the play is already an attempt at an answer. The text has to be selected from a potential play which would take four or five hours to perform if the full text was used. Thus staging of the play is already an interpretation: through the selection of scenes, decisions about the script, about meaning of various scenes and, of course, thorough the input and interpretation of actors.

Psychoanalytical interpretation of Hamlet can be seen as Jones did, as a discovery of the 'underlying' truth. He believed that the 'truth' of Hamlet has been revealed by Freud and he followed Freud's footsteps as a loyal and creative son. Freud believed that 'the conflict in Hamlet is so effectively concealed that it was left to me to unearth it' (Freud, 1942). It is easy to fall into the same trap. For example, Frattaroli who criticises Freud and Jones, believes that the hidden truth has been revealed to him, that Shakespeare 'really' spoke to him, not to Freud nor Jones (see Frattaroli, 1990).

What I believe Hamlet may be revealing (or hiding) is more complex and less comfortable. The play may be showing how the work of venom can be disguised as a revelation and presented in such a way that it can affect exploratory, transformational and creative faculties of the mind. In consequence, the mind, instead of finding its 'story', its self-revelation, becomes trapped in a stifling and potentially deadly ambition: of being the only or a privileged possessor and deliverer of the truth. Such an ambition - linked with omniscience and omnipotence - can be like poison. It can damage or kill off the potential reflective space, so the path to thoughtfulness, moderation and tolerance will be closed, and possibility of restoration and renewal through productive discourse and intercourse can be lost.

William Blake refers to omnipotent aspects in his Auguries of Innocence, saying:

The strongest poison ever known
Comes from Caesar's laurel crown.

The death of Caesar is, in fact, mentioned at the beginning of Hamlet, before the events of the play unfold, and it is not by accident. The Ghost's revelation is a story of ambition, conquest, failure, fall and damnation. Such is a story of the kings: Old Hamlet and Old Fortinbras and of a usurper, Claudius. Hamlet is presented with the story conveyed in the Ghost's revelation as a challenge to write his own: his story of self-revelation and self-determination. We can watch and join his struggles as we follow the play. In this way we are invited to experience the same dilemma: we in turn have to deal with ambiguities, uncertainties, anxieties and choices which seem to demand an answer, to find a revelation, listen to it and follow it to its conclusion. Some choice has to be made if the story is to be told at all; if the play is to be played. In the analytical situation a choice is needed if an interpretation is to be formulated and communicated.

Shakespeare leaves us with no illusion, in regard to Hamlet, that once it is done, we can rest on our laurels. It can be the same next time: the King is dead but Hamlet is replaced by his counterpart, another slain king's son, young Fortinbras who will now wear the crown. What will become of him? Will 'telling the story' make a difference? Can Hamlet's Horatio who is not a 'passion's slave', 'truly deliver', as he promises, so that 'Misfortune, Plots and Errors' he talks about, would not prevail?

I think we are left with a Horatio in ourselves and with this question.

ENDNOTES

1. All quotations are from the Everyman's edition of Hamlet which in principle maintains the 'authentic' Second Quarto spelling, allowing for additional meanings and ambiguities.

2. As Jones noted, 'More has been written on Hamlet than about any other character of fiction...more than anyone who actually lived with the exception of Jesus Christ, Napoleon and Shakespeare himself', (Jones, 1949)
3. Ambiguous 2nd Quarto reading: self or a monarch's seal; suicide or regicide.
4. M.D.Faber comments (in his essay 'Hamlet and the inner world of objects',): 'Hamlet has oriented himself toward mother and father as a "good boy" and only as a "good boy", in the very deepest sense of the term' (Faber, 1993).
5. Folio has 'posset': a hot milk drink curdled with ale, wine or other liquor.
6. Rhode made a similar point in a chapter of his book *On Birth and Madness* (Rhode, 1987).
7. Ghost also means breath.
8. Strictly speaking, Hyperion was a titan - a 'lesser' god, and his son, Helios, was a god of sun, but according to Graves, Helios was also called, inaccurately, Hyperion, e.g. by Homer.
9. As indicated by Horatio in his account of Old Hamlet's deeds, Hamlet's father killed his counterpart - Old Fortinbras, depriving him of his life and land; this is attempted to be shown as a honourable and legal act. Viciousness and ruthlessness are split off and become a threat of an external invasion by 'hot-headed' Fortinbras-Son who is seeking recompense, thus a taint of lawlessness and illegitimacy does not apply to the image of Old Hamlet's (I.1).
10. = unhousled, without having received the Eucharist - the Housel; disappointed = unprepared; ananeled = unanointed.
11. As Claudius cannot repent because of his ambitions and omnipotence he is loath to renounce, so Hamlet cannot free himself from his ultimately destructive omnipotent path.
12. Hamlet's name is apparently derived from one which means 'idiot, simpleton'.
13. The deadly, poisoned pearl which Claudius puts into the goblet for Hamlet to drink is called 'union' : And in the Cup an Union shall he throw' (V.2.284).
14. The woman again is marginalised and disposable: the Queen is to die first.
15. He wrote: 'The play is most certainly an' artistic failure...Shakespeare tackled a problem that was too much for him'.

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