

IMMORTAL HAMLET

by Edward Jayne

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How can anybody baldly declare that *Hamlet* is the greatest work of literature in all of western tradition? It seems absurd, I know, but that's the conclusion I'm compelled to accept. My reasons:

First of all, let it be emphasized that the notion of a "high" literary tradition in western civilization was accepted by both Freud and Marx, among too many others to list here. And even today this confidence in such a tradition is not altogether moribund, for deconstructionists turn out to acknowledge its importance. In a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, the arch-conservative Dinesh d' Souza quotes Fish, Rorty and Derrida to the effect that they fully support the study of western tradition. Derrida, for example: "I start with the tradition. If you're not trained in the tradition, then deconstruction means nothing. I'm in favor of tradition. I'm respectful and a lover of the tradition. There's no deconstruction without the memory of the tradition" (July 27, 1993, p. A15). Of course irony is to be detected here, since Derrida accepts western tradition to work against it, but so, too, did both Marx and Freud, and in fact most everybody else who has joined the tradition by rejecting it. This was T.S. Eliot's primary assumption in his pivotal essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Unless an author effectively fights the tradition, he/she doesn't belong, at least not among its first ranks. So it seems our principal guardians of indeterminacy are finally coming around, and good for them.

But how can qualitative comparisons be made among texts and authors in the Eurocentric tradition, or, for that matter, in any cultural or historical grouping? Like almost everybody else in the field of literary criticism up until the last two or three decades, I consider it possible, though admittedly difficult, to make such qualitative distinctions. Nowadays, of course, this effort is not fashionable, but watch out: too many times in the field of literary criticism one decade's favorite assumptions become grist for dismissal, if not ridicule, a decade or two later. Useful advice to those who try to reject qualitative comparisons: do read with care David Hume's essay, "Of the Standard of Taste" and Edmund Wilson's "The Historical Interpretation of Literature," both of which come to the defense of normative distinctions. My own unpublished paper, "16 Literary Functions" (in my website), lists a variety of relevant considerations to be taken into account. So egalitarian cultural enthusiasts should hedge their bets. To live in an age of mediocrity doesn't mean that superiority is necessarily a myth.

Who, then, might have been western civilization's greatest author? The primary contenders for this title include, besides Shakespeare, Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Milton, Goethe, Austen, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Proust, Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Faulkner, and, among recent authors, Bellow, or Updike, or Nabokov. Having taught all of the above over the past thirty-two years (except Proust, come to think of it), I find Shakespeare the best and most challenging of them all. Shakespeare finally says more than anybody else. He is the most taught, read, and performed on the stage--the most quoted in daily usage (often without the speaker realizing it). Moreover, his use of metaphor and image clusters stretches language

further than may be found elsewhere, and his characterization is the most profound. Of course most Shakespeareans fully agree with my judgment here, but so do many non-Shakespeareans, even those who haven't have had much of a chance to read, teach, or write about his plays.

Which of Shakespeare's plays, then, is to be considered the greatest? Alas, *Hamlet*, by far his most popular play, is also his greatest! Many of Shakespeare's comedies and histories are marvelous, but on balance these are less demanding than his tragedies, especially those at the peak of his career: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*--also *Coriolanus* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. And among these *Hamlet* stands alone.

But why *Hamlet*? Because it was the first of his major tragedies, also the longest, the most autobiographical (see Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, chap. 6), and probably the most heavily revised (see Jenkins's summary of its early versions in his Introduction to the Arden edition). Moreover, Hamlet's lines as a character actually fill over half the play, which is in turn is almost twice as long as *Macbeth*. In other words, Hamlet himself provides as much verbiage as the entire play *Macbeth*. Reduced to the size of *Macbeth* and limited to the words of Hamlet, the performance would become nothing more than an extended soliloquy by Hamlet.

Also, the play *Hamlet* is the most relevant to Shakespeare's political vision in its response to political crisis as well as his own personal crisis at the turn of the seventeenth century. Thirty-six years old (roughly the age of Christ in the final year of his life and two years older than Jefferson when he drafted the Declaration of Independence), Shakespeare was at the peak of his literary powers at the same time as many of his friends and relatives who mattered to him were in trouble. His father died while Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet*. Moreover, one of his benefactors, the Earl of Essex, was executed, and another (and putatively his lover), the Earl of Southampton, was imprisoned at the Tower of London and facing death. In response, it seems, Shakespeare wrote an extraordinarily profound study of despair and indecisiveness.

Hamlet also provides Shakespeare's only suicide play in which self-destruction is contemplated not simply as an act of contrition for misdeeds. Hamlet finally avoids destroying himself by letting circumstances culminate in a tragic blood bath--much the same thing as self-destruction, but on a more inclusive scale and without any need to accept the responsibility for it. Murder and self-inflicted death become paramount issues throughout the play. By focusing on them, Shakespeare took the conventions of tragedy to the limit beyond anything he did in the rest of his plays.

Hamlet is also the most ethical of Shakespeare's plays. His other three major tragedies divide the good guys from the bad guys with too much simplification. *Lear* and *Othello* are too simple-minded in their virtue, and *Iago*, *Macbeth*, *Goneril*, and *Regan* are too evil. Good wins in the end--big surprise! In contrast, *Hamlet* is beset with a far more desperate internal conflict between good and evil, and in his effort to resolve this conflict, as explained by G. Wilson Knight in *The Wheel of Fire*, Hamlet himself turns out to bear much of the responsibility for the final catastrophe. The Manichaeian psychomachia between virtue and vice lies at the very core of his identity, taking both metaphor and characterization to their limit. But even Claudius is torn inwardly, and with a level of complexity that matches the depiction of *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

With Claudius pitted against Hamlet, bad father vs. ambivalent son, the play's fullest implications become almost fathomless.

Also, *Hamlet* is the most philosophical of Shakespeare's plays. It perfectly exemplifies the unique importance of skepticism during the Renaissance. As documented in Richard Popkin's *The History of Skepticism*, it was primarily the resurrection of ancient skepticism, as exemplified by the teachings of Cicero, that initiated the Renaissance as an historic achievement unique to western tradition. Other cultures and civilizations have minimized skepticism, and they have suffered accordingly, without much science or philosophy and with religion devoid of cumulative theological advancement. Arguably, the task of "high" literature during the Renaissance, like that of religion, was to find the needed answers for dealing with skepticism's apparently unanswerable questions regarding God, knowledge, and the human situation. Hence the unique status of *Hamlet*, since it came closer than any other text I know of by Shakespeare or any other poet or playwright during the Renaissance in exposing the reader to these issues.

Here the connection with Montaigne may be suggested. A generation earlier Montaigne had featured skepticism in his pivotal essay, "Apology for Raimond Sebond." This essay was probably circulating in London in its Florio translation at the time Shakespeare was at work writing the play *Hamlet*, so it seems more than a coincidence that the word *consumption*, used by Montaigne to describe the experience of death, was also used with the same implications by Shakespeare in Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Here death is referred to as a "consumption devoutly to be wished." In both instances the word suggests a peaceful death, but in Hamlet's case, this was questioned specifically relevant to suicide, which might entail eternal hellfire as God's punishment for self-inflicted death according to orthodox Christian doctrine. Christian eschatology was thus at stake, and it would seem Montaigne's fascination with paganism extended to Shakespeare as well, permitting his revision of English morality tradition in the more sophisticated context of tragedy.

Significantly, when Hamlet forbids Horatio from committing suicide with the words, "Absent thee from felicity a while," he actually discounts Christian eschatology for the more benign vision of self-extinction as "felicity." This would be confirmed by the full implications his final words, "The rest is silence"--in essence neither heaven nor hell, but the pleasure of mute infinitude, no longer obsessed with words, words, words. Of course Horatio's reply, "And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest," denies Hamlet's expectation, so the "double truth" of Renaissance philosophy (best illustrated by the stance of Pomponazzi) was brought into the context of tragedy, providing an open choice to the Elizabethan playgoer between skepticism and Christian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, *Hamlet* remains the most iconoclastic of Shakespeare's plays in the sense that he, like Montaigne, at least raised the issue and admitted his uncertainty in his effort to come to terms with the challenge of skepticism. And just as Montaigne culminated his essay with praise of orthodox Christianity, Shakespeare resorted to the formulaic conventions of revenge tragedy in order to salvage an "appropriate" sense of an ending in the final scene.

Not surprisingly, the play *Hamlet* dominates Shakespearean criticism. In a quick and unscientific survey I have done within my personal library, I find that general studies of Shakespeare devote roughly twice as many references to *Hamlet* as to *King Lear*, roughly three times as many as to *Macbeth*, and from five to fifty times as many for each of the rest of the

plays. On Google, *Hamlet* produces 32,900,000 citations, *Macbeth* 16,400,000, *Othello* 11,500,000, *King Lear* 5,130,000 citations (one-sixth as many), and *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's marvelous final comedy, 4,480,000 citations (one-seventh as many). *The Odyssey* has 4,860,000, *The Divine Comedy* 2,430,000, and *Paradise Lost* 5,940,000.

Marvin Rosenberg has produced a "The Masks of" series devoted to exhaustively summarizing the criticism of every scene and line in Shakespeare's major tragedies by the actors and directors who have performed them. Of the two copies I own, *The Masks of Lear* includes 431 pages, as opposed to *The Masks of Hamlet*, which includes 971 pages. Also, Kenneth Muir's introduction to the Arden edition of *King Lear* includes 64 pages, whereas Harold Jenkins' introduction to *Hamlet* includes 159 pages. Norman Holland's exhaustive summary of psychoanalytic interpretations in *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare* devotes 5 pages to treatments of *King Lear* as opposed to 43 pages to *Hamlet*. And *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* includes 89 passages from *King Lear* as opposed to 232 passages from *Hamlet*. Among other authors, 108 passages are included for all of Homer, 63 for all of Dante, 58 for all of Goethe, etc. In almost every respect the critical response to *Hamlet* has been significantly more extensive compared to the rest of Shakespeare's plays and indeed the rest of literature.

Add it all up. Shakespeare was arguably Eurocentric tradition's greatest author, and *Hamlet* was Shakespeare's most challenging play. So there it stands--both simplistic and pretentious, almost ridiculous, I admit: *Hamlet* was probably the greatest accomplishment in western literary tradition. I dare to suggest this in front of my classes despite my admiration for Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, George Eliot, Dickens, George Bernard Shaw, and so many others.

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