

Hamlet and the Nature of Reality

by Theodore Spencer

It is a commonplace of Shakespeare criticism that beginning with *Hamlet* and extending through the great tragedies, we are aware of an increase in scope, an enlargement of dimension, which marks a new stage in Shakespeare's dramatic career. What I should like to do in the present paper is to suggest, by an analysis of *Hamlet*, that this sense of enlargement and depth is partly brought about through an awareness of how the difference between appearance and reality could be used in the creation of dramatic character and situation. But before we come to the play itself, it will be necessary to make an apparent digression.

The average Elizabethan lived in a world very different from ours; a world in which the fundamental assumption was that of hierarchical order. There was a cosmological hierarchy, a political and social hierarchy, and a psychological hierarchy, and each was a reflection of the others. The governing of the state could be seen as an image of the order of the stars, and the order of the stars was reflected in the order of the faculties of man. The Ptolomaic heavens revolved around the earth; and as the sun was the largest and most resplendent of the planets, so the king was the center of the state. Similarly, as the earth was the center of the universe, so justice was the immovable center of political virtue. The cosmological and political orders were reflected in the order of nature: Aristotle had described it in the *De Anima* and elsewhere, and though there might be different interpretations of details, the essentials of the scheme were unhesitatingly accepted. The scale rose from inanimate matter, through the vegetative soul of plants, the sensible soul of animals, the rational soul operating through the body of man, the pure intelligence of angels, up to the pure actuality of God. Man was an essential link in the chain—the necessary mixture of body and soul to complete the order. If man did not exist, it would have been necessary—in fact it had been

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necessary—to invent him. And man was more than this: he was the end for which the rest of the universe had been created. "There is nothing," says Raymonde de Sabonde, "in this world which does not work day and night for man's benefit, the universe exists for him, because of him, and was planned and arranged in its marvellous structure for his good."¹ "This heavenly creature whom we call man," writes the English translator of Romei's *Courtier's Academie* (1598), "was compounded of soule and body, the whiche body, having to be the harbour of a most fayre and immortale soule, was created . . . most exquisite, with his eyes toward heaven, and (man) was placed in the midst of the world, to the end that as in an ample theatre, hee might behold and contemplate the workes of the great God, and the beauty of the whole world . . . and therefore man was worthily called a little world, seeing the body of man is no other but a little modell of the sensible world, and his soule an image of the world intelligible."² Microcosm and macrocosm alike reflected the glory of the divine architect who had planned so admirable a structure, and it was the chief business of man on earth to study the two books—the book of nature, and the book of the scriptures—which God had given him, so that by knowing the truth, he could know himself, and hence reach some knowledge of the God who had made him. The heavenly bodies worked for man, as well as upon him: meteors and comets foretold his future; each herb and stone had its specific virtue which could be discovered and applied to man's benefit. "Homo est perfectio et finis omnium creaturarum in mondo"³—man is the perfection and the end of all the creatures in the world—such was the universal belief. For he alone had reason, and though false imaginations might arouse his passions and turn him awry, and though his humors might be unbalanced, there was no real doubt that by the use of his distinctive reason he could resist all such disturbances.⁴ Man was not a beast, to be the slave of his affections and his immediate experience.

So described, the system appears, as indeed it was, not only orderly but optimistic. Yet underneath this tripartite order, of which man was the center, there were, in the sixteenth century, certain disturbing conceptions which painted the scene in different colors. In the first place, the earth could be seen, according to the Ptolomaic system, not only as the center and most important part of the universe, but as exactly the opposite. It could be regarded, to use Professor Lovejoy's words, as "the place farthest removed from the Empyrean, the bottom

¹ I translate from Montaigne's translation of the *Natural Theology*, Chapter 97.

² Translated by I. K., London, 1598, pp. 16-17.

³ Motto on a diagram in R. Fludd, *Philosophia Sacra*, etc., Frankfurt, 1626.

⁴ This point is well brought out by Hardin Craig, "Shakespeare's Depiction of Passions," *Philological Quarterly*, 10 (1925), 289-301.

of the creation, to which its dregs and baser elements sank." ⁵ Or, as Marston put it, in more Elizabethan language: "This earth is the only grave and Golgotha wherein all things that live must rot; 'tis but the draught wherein the heavenly bodies discharge their corruption; the very muckhill on which the sublunary orbs cast their excrements." ⁶ In the second place, man, the chief inhabitant of this tiny and remote globe, could be regarded as equally unworthy and corrupt, for since the fall of Adam he had only a faint glimmering of its original gift of natural reason, and hence, through his own fault, he was the only creature who had disrupted the system. The miseries of man, as a consequence of this fact, were very heavily emphasized in the sixteenth century by moralists and satirists alike. The introduction to the seventh book of Pliny's *Natural History*, in which the wretchedness of the human situation, compared with that of animals, is described at length, was adapted and re-emphasized again and again: in 1570 Gascoigne enthusiastically translated Pope Innocent III's *De Contemptu Mundi*; the keynote of Marston's Cynic Satire (*Scourge of Villainy*, 1598, No. 7)—as of Marston's view of man in general—is that while all the other orders of nature fulfill their proper function, man alone has lost his specific virtue:

And now no humane creatures, once disrai'd
Of that faire iem.
Beasts *sence*, plants *growth*, like being as a stone,
But out alas, our Cognisance is gone.

A thousand similar illustrations could be given from sixteenth century literature, and I believe that if they were arranged in chronological order they would show an increase both in frequency and intensity as the century approached its end, for there was a firm conviction in the minds of many people of the time that no age was so corrupt as their own. In fact, it was so bad that probably the last judgment was not far off.

Thus, in the inherited, the universally accepted, Christian view of man and his universe there was an implicit conflict between man's dignity and wretchedness: a conflict which was also a complement. For instance, Pierre Boaystuaeu, in 1557 (the work was translated into English in 1603), wrote a treatise called *Le Theatre du Monde, ou il est fait un ample discours des misères humaines*, which is immediately followed, bound in the same volume, by "*un brief discours sur l'excellence et dignité de l'homme*." The two views existed side

⁵ A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1936, pp. 101-102. In my opinion, Mr. Lovejoy here exaggerates the prevalence of this more pessimistic view. The other was equally common—probably more so.

⁶ *The Malcontent*, iv. ii.

by side, and a writer could choose which one he pleased, according to his temperament, the state of his feelings, or his hortatory intention.

This particular conflict, however, no matter how deep it went and no matter how many aspects it presented, could after all be solved; the doctrines of grace and redemption existed for the purpose. But there was another conflict, more particular to the sixteenth century, and, since it was new, perhaps more emotionally and intellectually disturbing. It consisted in this: that in the sixteenth century each one of the interrelated orders—cosmological, political, and natural—which were the frame, the basic pattern, of all Elizabethan thinking, was being punctured by a doubt. Copernicus had questioned the cosmological order, Machiavelli had questioned the political order, Montaigne had questioned the natural order. The consequences were enormous.

In order to understand what the theory of Copernicus implied, it is necessary to have as vivid a picture as possible of the difference between his system and the Aristotelian or Ptolomaic. Upon the structure of the Ptolomaic system, with the earth in the center, everything had been built: the order of creation, astrology, the theory of the microcosm and the macrocosm, the parallels between the universe and the state. But when the sun was put at the center, and the earth set between Mars and Venus as a mobile and subsidiary planet, the whole elaborate structure, with all its interdependencies, so easy to visualize, so convenient for metaphor and allusion, lost its meaning. "If the celestial spheres," said Hooker, "should forget their wonted motions, and by irregular volubility turn themselves any way . . . what would become of man himself, whom all these things do now serve?" ⁷

We must, however, as Miss Marjorie Nicolson and others have shown, be on our guard against over-emphasizing the effects of the Copernican theory on the popular mind. It was confronted at first, considering its implications, with remarkably little opposition. For though Luther and Melancthon attacked his views (they contradicted certain phrases of Scripture), and Copernicus' book was published by the cautious Osiander with an apologetic preface and the word "hypothesis" on the title page, no official steps were taken against it until 1616, when, because Galileo supported it, it was finally put on the Index. Even then the censure was mild: anyone could read it if nine sentences were changed so that they were turned from statements of fact into matters of conjecture.

The reason for this mildness has been made clear by Mr. Francis Johnson and other historians of sixteenth century science. For the Copernican system could be looked at in two ways: as a mathematical

⁷ Quoted by J. B. Black, *The Reign of Elizabeth*, Oxford, 1936, p. 261.

theory and as a description of physical fact. Being simpler than the elaborate Ptolomaic system, it was welcomed by mathematicians as an easier means of making astronomical calculations, but it was not until Galileo perfected the telescope that it was seriously considered to be a true description of reality. Even Galileo at first hesitated to support it, not because he feared it would get him into trouble, but because he feared it might make him ridiculous. Nothing could show more clearly how strongly the Ptolomaic view was entrenched.

And naturally so. For the whole inherited order depended on it, as Donne was one of the first people to realize. He saw—the lines from the *First Anniversary* are almost too familiar to quote—that the new astronomy not only set the inherited cosmology awry, so that the sun and the earth were lost, it also affected the state, the order of society, and the individual:

Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot
For every man alone thinks he hath got
To be a phoenix, and that then can be
None of that kind of which he is, but he.

It broke down the order which Ulysses, in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (I, ii) had so admirably expounded, and which so intimately related to each other the planets, the government of states, and the government of the individual. In considering its effects one can almost sympathize with the Jesuit who, two hundred years later, taught the young Stendhal the Ptolomaic system, "because it explained everything and was supported by the Church."

The ideas of Machiavelli had a different reception from those of Copernicus. Though for about half a generation after *The Prince* was published its views attracted no very remarkable degree of attention, once they were seriously considered the storm broke with what now seems an extraordinary violence. No term of abuse was too strong for Machiavelli's principles, works, and character. The Jesuits of Ingolstadt burned him in effigy; to Cardinal Pole he was obviously inspired by the devil; he was put on the Index as soon as that institution was founded; the protestants considered his ideas directly responsible for the massacre of St. Bartholomew. He was universally described as an atheist and an unscrupulous fiend; he became, in Signor Praz's words, "a rallying point for whatever was most loathsome in statecraft, and indeed in human nature at large."⁸

The reasons for Machiavelli's reputation can perhaps best be realized by comparing *The Prince* with the *De Officiis* of Cicero, just as

⁸ Mario Praz, "Machiavelli and the Elizabethans," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 13 (1928), 8.

the effect of the Copernican system can best be seen by comparing it with the Ptolomaic. For the *De Officiis*, as much as the *Politics* of Aristotle, from which it was partly derived, represents the official sixteenth century doctrine. Prudence, justice, liberality, greatness of soul, these and other virtues characterized the public man; the life of reason, in public as in private, implied the pursuit of virtue. All medieval thought said the same thing; it was the basis of political theory, and like the inherited Elizabethan psychology, it was fundamentally optimistic, and it was intimately concerned with morality. But Machiavelli, in the words of J. W. Allen, "thought of the state as a morally isolated thing."⁹ He was fundamentally practical. He regarded human history divorced from revelation, and human nature divorced from grace; he looked at man, as Bacon said, not as he should be, but as he is, and he found that man was naturally evil and that the best way to govern him for his own good was by fear and by force. The view may have been sound, but it was outrageous to Elizabethan sensibilities. Was this the truth, underneath the idealistic appearance, about man as a political animal? The Elizabethans refused to believe it: the violence of their feeling on the subject may be taken as an indication that, below the surface, they realized—with a half-horrified fascination—that the ideas of Machiavelli, which they received in so distorted a form, might after all be true.

Montaigne's position is less easy to summarize. But the implication of his ideas, at least those in the *Apology for Raymond Sebonde*, could be just as devastating to the inherited view of man's place in the natural sphere as the ideas of Copernicus and Machiavelli might be to man's place in the spheres of cosmology and politics. Again this is brought out most clearly by contrast, and this time we need go no further than the work which Montaigne was apparently setting out to defend. I know of no book which more optimistically and thoroughly describes the inherited view of the order of nature than Sabonde's *Natural Theology*. Its optimism is, in fact, almost heretical. All the ranks of nature, he says, lead up to man: his reason sets him apart from all the other animals, and by a proper use of it he can come to a full knowledge of himself, the external world, and God.

But these are just the assumptions that Montaigne, in his *Apology*, sets out to deny. Man can know nothing by himself, says Montaigne; he cannot know God, he cannot know his soul, he cannot know nature. His senses are hopelessly unreliable, there are no satisfactory standards of beauty or of anything else, everything is in a flux, and the only way man can rise from his ignorant and ignominious position is by divine assistance. His purpose in writing the essay, says Mon-

⁹ J. W. Allen, *History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, New York, 1928, p. 477.

taigne, is to make people "sensible of the inanity, the vanity, and insignificance of man; to wrest out of their fists the miserable weapon of their reason; to make them bow the head and bite the dust under the authority and reverence of the divine majesty."¹⁰

Of course all this, though extreme, is neither entirely unorthodox nor necessarily disturbing. From one point of view, it is related to what Innocent III said in the *De Contemptu Mundi*, and what countless other reputable writers had said before and since. But there was one point—and it was this that bothered the authorities in Rome (from their point of view quite rightly), when they examined the *Essais* in 1582—which was *not* orthodox and which *was* disturbing. Montaigne gave the appearance of saying that there was no fundamental difference between the faculties of man and those of animals. His remarks, to be sure, are highly ambiguous, probably on purpose, but he suggests that animals have the capacity, hitherto and for obvious reasons attributed to man alone, of abstracting from sensible phenomena their essential characteristics, and of making them conform, to use his own words, to the soul's "immortal and spiritual condition."¹¹ Such a statement has wide implications; it implies, as Montaigne's whole argument, of which this passage is the climax, tends to imply, that there are no true distinctions between the psychology of man and the psychology of animals; that reason amounts to nothing, and that in consequence the whole hierarchy of nature, at a crucial point, is destroyed.

I hope I have made it clear, through these introductory remarks, that the idea of man which lay behind Shakespearean tragedy was, in the first place, inextricably interwoven with the ideas of the state and the world as a whole to a degree which it is difficult for us to realize, and, in the second place, that this interwoven pattern was threatened by an implicit and an explicit conflict. At the time when Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* there were available for emotional contemplation and for dramatic representation two views of man's nature, two views of the world, two views of the state. Drama could be not merely the conflict between romantic love and external forces, as in *Romeo and Juliet*; it could represent a conflict far more complicated and far more profound.

It would be a fascinating and rewarding study to analyze in detail just why this conflict seemed particularly alive at this particular moment. The pressure of material forces, social and economic, the political and religious situation, the growth of a realistic and satiric school of literature, the recrudescence of an emphasis on death—all these

¹⁰ *Essays*, 2, 12, translated by E. J. Trechmann, Oxford, 1927, 1, 439-440.

¹¹ *Essays*, ed. cit. 1, 475.

things, as well as others, contributed to a movement, emotional rather than intellectual, which from one point of view might be described as the Counter-Renaissance. But a treatment of this, however necessary, must be reserved for another occasion. Our present business is with the text of *Hamlet* itself. I hope to show that an awareness of the difference between appearance and reality, based on the fact that there was a deep conflict in the contemporary views of man and his world, is woven into the texture of the play, and is largely responsible for the enormous increase in size which characterizes *Hamlet* over any of its predecessors. Not that Shakespeare deliberately reflects the Copernican system, or the ideas of Machiavelli or Montaigne: to say that would be nonsense. The split they illustrate was merely a part of Shakespeare's emotional climate; many sensitive minds were aware of it; he alone turned it to full dramatic use. The creation of dramatic suspense by an internal conflict in a mind aware of the evil reality under the good appearance is the core of the greatness, the originality of *Hamlet*.

We may best begin our discussion by observing what sort of man Hamlet was before his mother's second marriage. According to Ophelia he had a "noble mind," "the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword." He was

The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,

a man with a "noble and most sovereign reason." In other words, he was an ideal Renaissance nobleman, himself an idealist, with—to use Bradley's somewhat romantic expression—"an unbounded delight and faith in everything good and beautiful."

But the discovery of his mother's lust and the fact that the kingdom is in the hands of an unworthy man (Hamlet's—the prince's—feeling that the king is not worthy of his position is a more important part of his state of mind when the play opens than is usually realized)—these facts shatter his picture of the world, the state, and the individual. His sense of the evil in all three spheres is as closely interwoven in his first soliloquy as all three spheres were interwoven in sixteenth century thought. It is characteristic of Shakespeare's conception of Hamlet's universalizing mind that he should make Hamlet think, first, of the general rottenness: to him all the uses of the world are weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable, and things rank and gross in nature possess it entirely. From this he passes to a consideration of the excellence of his father as king, compared to his satyr-like uncle, and he finally dwells at length on the lustfulness of his mother, who has violated the natural law by the brevity of her grief and the hastiness of her marriage.

O God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,
 Would have mourned longer.

In other words, in first presenting Hamlet to his audience, Shakespeare uses an interwoven series of references to the world, the state, and the individual, and one reason this first soliloquy is so broken, its rhythms so panting, is that it reflects Hamlet's disillusionment about all three spheres at once. So closely were they related in contemporary thought that to smash one was to smash the others as well.

This, of course, is not the only place where Hamlet thinks in general terms: one of his most striking habits is to stretch his thought to embrace the world as a whole, to talk of infinite space, to use rhetoric that includes the stars. For example, it is characteristic of him that when he approaches Laertes after Laertes has jumped into Ophelia's grave, he should ask who it is who

Conjures the wandering stars, and makes them stand
 Like wonder-wounded hearers,

when, as a matter of fact, Laertes had not mentioned the stars at all. It is as if Hamlet were attributing to Laertes a thought that would be natural to him, but not to Laertes. Again, the first thing that Hamlet exclaims after the ghost has given his message is "O all you host of heaven!"; and, in his mother's closet, when he upbraids her with her marriage, he describes it not merely as violating human contracts, but as affecting the world as a whole:

 heaven's face doth glow,
 Yea this solidity and compound mass,
 With tristful visage, as against the doom,
 Is thought-sick at the act.

But the occasion on which Hamlet speaks at greatest length of the heavens is of course when he describes his state of mind to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the second act. It is perhaps worth while, before quoting the passage, to remind ourselves again of the orthodox description of the beauty of the heavens—the heavens of which Spenser had so glowingly written in his "Hymn of Heavenly Beautie," and which Thomas Digges in his "Perfit Description of the Coelestiall Orbes" (1576) describes more scientifically, but with equal enthusiasm. Digges is referring to the motionless heaven of fixed stars according to the Copernican system, and in his case, as in others, the acceptance of Copernicus did not mean that the universe was not beautiful. "This orbe of starres," he says, "fixed inifitely up extendeth himself in altitude sphericallye and therefore immovable the palace of foelicitie garnished with perpetually shineing glorious lightes

innumerable, farr excellinge our sonne both in quantitye and qualite, the very courte of coelestiall angelles devoid of grieffe and replenished with perfite endlesse ioye the habitacle for the elect."¹² Perhaps Shakespeare was even thinking of this description: Digges was a kind of sixteenth century Eddington or Jeans; his book went through six editions before 1600; Shakespeare could have found these words merely by looking at the title page, where they are inscribed in a diagram; and Hamlet's description of the heaven sounds more like the motionless outer sphere of Copernicus than the revolving heaven of Ptolemy. Be that as it may, what Shakespeare does is to use the traditional feeling about the heavens as a background to bring out an important side of Hamlet's character; nothing could show better the largeness of Hamlet's mind and his present melancholy; for he sees in the heavens, as well as in his own situation, the reality of evil underneath the appearance of good. To understand the force of his remarks we should have clearly in our minds the thousand and one sixteenth century repetitions of the old teaching, with which every member of Shakespeare's audience must have been familiar, that the surest way to understand man's place in the world and to realize the magnificence of God's creation, was to contemplate the glory of the superior heavens which surrounded the earth. But what Hamlet says is exactly the opposite.

This most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.

And from this consideration of the macrocosm he passes at once to the microcosm: the sequence of thought was, in his time, almost inevitable; and again he uses the familiar vocabulary of his age (I follow the punctuation of the second quarto and of Dover Wilson, which alone makes sense in terms of Elizabethan psychology):

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god: the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals; and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me.

This use of generalization, which is one of the most attractive and important sides to Hamlet's character, illustrates more than Shakespeare's way of describing a single individual; it also illustrates a

¹² See Francis R. Johnson, *Astronomical Thought in Renaissance England*, Baltimore, 1937, p. 166. Digges' tract is published in *The Huntington Library Bulletin*, No. 5, April, 1934, by F. R. Johnson and S. V. Larkey.

dramatic device which Shakespeare frequently used at this period in his career, the device of weaving into the texture of his play a point of view or standard of values which the action is violating, but against which—for the proper understanding of the play—the action must be seen. The two great speeches of Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* are perhaps the best illustration of this device, but *Hamlet* itself is full of examples. Hamlet's own remarks about reason, the specific virtue of a human being (which Montaigne had so ingeniously labored to minimize) are a case in point. Horatio speaks (I.iv.73) of the "sovereignty of reason," as does Ophelia, but Hamlet, as is eminently appropriate in a play where the conflict is so much inside a man, is the one who describes the traditional view most fully (IV.iv.33):

What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unus'd.

It is worth observing in what terms Shakespeare speaks of reason in the important passages throughout the play. Reason, the specific function of man in the order of nature, is twice referred to as "noble," an adjective, like "sovereign" (also applied to reason), that has connotations in the political order, and, in the passage I have just quoted, it is described as "god-like," an adjective that, to an Elizabethan would have cosmological connotations as well. It may not be fantastic to see, in this adjectival microcosm, an image of the macrocosm I have been trying to define.

At all events, the standard which Hamlet's soliloquy describes is not only the standard which his own behavior violates; it is also the standard which was violated by Gertrude in mourning so briefly for her first husband, and in unnaturally yielding to her lust, so that her reason, in Hamlet's words, has become a pandar to her will, her fleshly desire. In both cases, the appearance, the accepted natural order of good and of the supremacy of reason, is destroyed by the individual reality of evil, and man has sunk to the level of animals, his specific function gone.