**Hamlet: Characterisation**

**Claudius**

The presentation of Claudius is interesting. He is by no means the classic villain of melodrama.

The more reprehensible aspects of his character are filtered to us entirely through the speeches of the two characters he has grievously wronged, Hamlet, father and son.

But there is another Claudius, rather different from the one seen by Hamlet and the Ghost.

Sp allows us glimpses of this other Claudius from time to time, and thereby humanises and balances the portrait.

Claudius is one of the many illustrations of the fact that SP, even when confronted with the need to present ‘evil’ characters, gives us men, not monsters.

The attractive side of Claudius belongs, of course, mainly to the surface. He behaves at the beginning like the typical kindly uncle, anxious to put his nephew at ease and to make him feel at home in the court, holding out to him the prospect of royal succession, and generally cajoling and flattering him: “But now my cousin Hamlet, and my son... ‘Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet... think of us as a father... remain/ Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye... ‘tis a loving and fair reply”.

This courtesy, relatively unforced at this point in the play, extends to Laertes and the ambassadors , although in the case of Laertes, the desire to please is carried to the point of fulsomeness: “And now, Laertes, what’s the news with you?... You told us of some suit, what is’t Laertes?... what wouldst thou beg, Laertes?... What wouldst thou have, Laertes?”

**Claudius, the Practical Monarch**

Hamlet’s view of Claudius as king, as distinct from his hatred from him as a man, is not borne out by the facts as they appear. His nephew sees him as being “a vice of kings” and “a king of shreds and patches”.

We are, however, allowed to see enough of Claudius in his capacity as a monarch to realise that he is an efficient, capable and practical ruler, with considerable diplomatic ability which he turns to good account in the Norwegian business. (1:2, 36-9)

Soon comes the news from the Gentleman that Laertes has raised an armed rebellion, and that common cry is “Laertes shall be king”.

It is, however, at this point of most acute crisis that Claudius shows his political skills at their most impressive; confronted by the armed Laertes, he displays a rare presence of mind, considerable coolness in the face of real danger, and, most ironically for a murderous usurper, an exalted sense of the dignity of his royal office:

Let him go, Gertrude; do not fear our person.

There’s such divinity doth hedge a king,

That treason can but peep to what it would,

Acts little of his will. (4:5, 122-5)

He insures his self-preservation by plotting treachery with the incensed Laertes against Hamlet. He quickly converts a dangerous enemy into a useful instrument of his purposes.

Hamlet may be able to win his verbal battles with Claudius, but the latter is by far the shrewder plotter. He skilfully plays the delicate game of accommodating his relationship with Gertrude to his irreconcilable conflict with her son.

When he decides to have Hamlet killed, he chooses a place far from home and away from Gertrude.

Claudius has strengths as a politician, as a monarch, and as a diplomat. He has a strong nerve and a cool head. He can handle people, even those potentially dangerous to himself, with much assurance.

He has an attractive presence, and is endowed with the art of pleasing, despite Hamlet’s talk of him as “a mildew’d ear”.

When Hamlet, in one of his calmer moments, forgets his hatred for Claudius the man, he accurately describes his uncle and himself as “mighty opposites” (5:2, 62), thus paying an unconscious tribute to his adversary’s stature.

**“...A Mingled Yarn, /Good and Ill Together...” (Good and Evil)**

There are, however, other aspects of SP’s presentation.

The evil aspects of Claudius are more than adequately exposed by Hamlet and the Ghost, and no weight of emphasis on his more endearing qualities or on his statecraft can obscure the fact that he has committed one of the most reprehensible crimes known to man, the crime, as he himself recognises, with “the primal eldest cure upon it”.

But SP, master of the mixed motives of human character, allows for the possibility that even the treacherous murderer of a brother can be a devoted husband. Claudius tells Laertes of his feelings for Gertrude:

For myself,

My virtue or my plague, be it either which –

She is so conjunctive to my life and soul,

That as the star moves not but in his sphere

I could not but buy her. (4:7, 12-16)

Subsequent events, however, tend to cast a dark shadow of doubt over these fine sentiments.

In the final movements of the play, when Gertrude raises the poisoned cup to her lips, Claudius makes a vain attempt to stop her, but he is able to watch her drinking the poison without saying the words which could save her life.

He prefers to concentrate on preserving his own.

His last words about her (“She swoons to see them bleed”), are a callous lie to save himself from detection. No feeling for what she has been and suffered is allowed to take his mind off his own predicament: “O yet defend me, friends, I am but hurt” (5:2, 314).

**The Tragic Villain**

It is in the Prayer scene that any audience mist find it most difficult not to respond imaginatively to the plight of Claudius.

Few tragic villains have ever been given more beautiful or moving sentiments to express than the following:

What if this cursed hand

Were thicker than itself with brother’s blood,

Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens

To wash it white as snow? (3:3, 43-6)

What is most striking about the remainder of the soliloquy is that it reveals a conscience- stricken, rather fearful man “a limed soul struggling to be free”, facing the terrible truth that there is ‘no shuffling’ where heaven is concerned, that no forgiveness is possible where the fruits of the crime are still enjoyed.

The effect of this revelation of the hidden Claudius as a man with a tormented conscience reinforces that of the other direct glimpse of his inner self, his aside following the remark of Polonius in the hypocrisy of human beings. (3:1, 49-54)

Claudius is a complex and totally convincing representation of humanity.