**Hamlet: The agony of royalty**

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| Hamlet has been described as a Renaissance scholar prince. He is learned, sensitive, accomplished; furthermore he is the darling of the people of Denmark, popular and highly respected. Imagine his consternation when an unreal vision urges him to carry out the horrifyingly real act of murdering the king of Denmark.  Hamlet's life is overturned irreversibly when he is confronted by the ghost of his late father. He is thrust, angrily but unwillingly, further into the political limelight, where his own high profile makes it impossible to plan covertly. The magnitude of his entrusted task is utterly daunting; he, the heir to the throne, has to assassinate the present incumbent or at least take revenge upon him in such a way as to make the act justifiable, if not admirable.  We are prepared to accuse Hamlet of inaction, even procrastination, but the truth is that we are dealing with murder, even if it is in the spirit of revenge. In this respect Hamlet is suddenly alone, surrounded by the now unmasked and appalling truth of his most intimate environment. In whom can he confide? In whom can he place his trust? And how will he ever be able to convince the good citizens of Denmark that he had to murder his own uncle as an act of justifiable revenge?  In estimating the size of the task, we should not underestimate Hamlet. He has a formidable reputation as a swordsman, and no-one who has advanced skills in the use of foil and rapier can be ignorant of the murderous potential of such skills; it is rather Hamlet's own refinement and sense of office that restrain him from impulsive action.  In effect his own overmastering royalty - his upbringing and character which, in combination, make him potentially a great leader - prevents him from rushing into a course of action hot-headedly, however revengeful he may feel. This is a man who would lead a country, not undermine its very fabric and infrastructure by his own actions.  Hamlet's moral quandary is almost insuperable. We need to understand that, in Hamlet, Shakespeare has created an uncompromising hero like no other, one whose enormous sensitivity is matched by his courage and intelligence; one who remains completely true to himself and, in the end, succeeds in ridding Denmark of a scourge. Perhaps we should look closely at a list of Hamlet's accomplishments in the course of the play, the better to appreciate the extent of his courage and self-reliance in the face of treachery and betrayal.   * Hamlet confronts the ghost. * He accompanies it alone. * He listens attentively to what it has to say. * He maintains (henceforth) a dignified relationship with Claudius, for the sake of his mother and Denmark. * He breaks off with Ophelia for her own good and safety, not wanting her embroiled in what he has to do, never suspecting that this will break her. * He seizes brilliantly upon the opportunity to expose Claudius through a dramatic presentation by a travelling troupe. * He sees through the duplicity of his erstwhile friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. * He declines to murder Claudius at prayer. * He succeeds in making his mother repent and see the error of her ways. * He reacts positively and lethally to the unseen intruder in his mother's chamber. * He succeeds in overturning Claudius' treachery on board ship to England. * He displays steely resolve by effectively sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstem to their deaths. * He returns openly to Denmark, knowing that Claudius is determined to kill him. * He openly professes to loving Ophelia, regardless of the consequences (of such a statement). * He accepts Laertes in the duel, but falls victim to the poison. * He takes revenge upon Claudius. * He remains true to himself at all times. * He does all this with the support of only one true friend, Horatio. * He leaves Denmark purged, for the worthy - if far less complex - Fortinbras.   After scrutiny of such an impressively unselfish list, are we not compelled to admit to the possibility that Hamlet's light was so intense, that it burnt so brightly that it was destined to be extinguished prematurely? Are we not convinced of the power of his presence in a court compromised by decadent and treacherous leadership? Do we not see that the effort of exorcising the evil and setting things to rights was as much as one man could bear?  Perhaps, finally and in fairness, we need to see Hamlet as a young royal with an impossible burden. We may still choose to criticise him for inaction, or continue to believe that he does indeed "lose the power of action in the energy of resolve".  What we cannot say is that he failed to do what was asked of him; furthermore, in so doing, he put his own life "on hold" while he wrestled with the agonies of legitimising revenge. Henceforth we may, with insight, choose to see Hamlet truly as a hero faced with an impossible decision, rather than simply a young man of promise who is caught upon the rack of indecision. |