**Hamlet –**

**The State of Denmark**

The world of Hamlet is a remarkably enclosed one. From the opening scene, which introduces us to a society heavily fortified against attack from without, to the close of the play the action remains concentrated at Elsinore. The frequent references to other places - to Paris, Wittenberg, Norway, Poland and England - merely underline the play's restricted use of location. Characters do leave Denmark but we see nothing of them until they return. Correspondingly, characters from the world outside Denmark only enter the play when the action brings them to Elsinore: the Players have travelled from another city and probably from another country, and Fortinbras appearance is delayed until his expedition against the Poles takes him through Danish territory. The society depicted in the play is oppressively narrow and claustrophobic; for the audience as well as for Hamlet, Denmark is indeed something of a prison.

The first scene also suggests that this society is a deeply disturbed one. Even before the silent movement of the Ghost across the stage 'harrows' Horatio 'with fear and wonder' there is a feeling of uneasiness and apprehension in the tense, nervous exchanges between the guards; the unsettled atmosphere is such that Francisco feels 'sick at heart'. Horatio believes the coming of the Ghost 'bodes some strange eruption to our state' and Marcellus's account of the country's urgent preparations for war increases the sense of a troubled kingdom. Another important function of this scene is to suggest the nature of the old order which existed in Denmark when Hamlet's father was alive, an order which has been superseded by a very different set of values now that Claudius is on the throne. 'Valiant Hamlet' emerges as a man of honour who settled disputes such as that with Fortinbras (the elder) of Norway by personal combat. The appearance of the King's Ghost, 'majestical' and of 'fair and warlike form', similarly suggests a heroic figure. In contrast to the cold, menacing darkness of the play's opening, the scene which follows presents the light, warmth and formal splendour of Claudius's court. However, although at this stage we know nothing of the murder he has committed to win the throne, Claudius's very first speech hints at the corruption beneath his dignified exterior. The elaborate phrasing of the opening sixteen lines betrays a desire to gloss over the unseemliness of his marriage to his brother's sister - a marriage which has not only been entered into with unbecoming haste but which would also, in Shakespeare's time, have been regarded as incestuous:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our Queen,  
Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state,  
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,  
With an auspicious, and a dropping eye,  
With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage,  
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,  
Taken to wife.  
(I.2.8-14)

The revelation that Claudius is a usurper and guilty of fratricide confirms that he is the principal source of the rottenness which pervades Denmark. He is an efficient ruler (his competent hand-ling of the threat from Fortinbras is an early illustration of this), but throughout the play his actions are governed by a ruthless self-interest; his conscience may trouble him, but guilt is not allowed to influence the execution of policy. His reaction to Hamlet's murder of Polonius is characteristic. His first thought is that the victim might have been himself ('It had been so with us, had we been there'), and he then acts swiftly to ensure the outrage does not weaken his position as king: his wish is that 'slander' should 'miss our name'. (IV.1). He is a skilful manipulator of others, persuading Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to betray their friendship with Hamlet and succeeding first in calming Laertes and then in inducing him to cooperate in the plot against Hamlet. This plot involves a cynical exploitation of Hamlet's open, trusting nature; Claudius knows he will not inspect the foils because he is 'Most generous, and free from all contriving' (IV.7.134). Claudius's court is populated by figures who endorse his values, either by actively living their lives according to the same principles or by a passive acceptance of the status quo. The character most clearly at home in this society is Polonius. He has happily transferred his allegiance to the new regime and assures Claudius:

I hold my duty as I hold my soul,  
Both to my God and to my gracious King.  
(II.2.44-45)

In his words of advice to Laertes before the latter returns to France (I.3.58-80), he preaches a cynical doctrine of calculation ('Give thy thoughts to tongue,/ Nor any un-proportioned thought his act'), wariness of others ('Give every man thine ear, but flow thy voice') and self-interest. In the same scene he similarly warns Ophelia against the spontaneous expression of emotion, rebuking her for too 'free and bounteous' a response to Hamlet's overtures (I.3.93). He pours scorn on his daughter's faith in the honesty of Hamlet's declarations of' love: 'Affection? Pooh! You speak like a green girl' (1.3.101). In Polonius's scheme of things a love relationship is much like a financial transaction, and should be conducted with a similar cold objectivity ('you have ta'en these tenders for true pay,/ Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly ... / Set your entreatments at a higher rate' - 1.3.106-107, 122). His distrust of others extends even to his own son, whom Reynaldo is sent to spy upon. Such deviousness is typical of Polonius, who employs similar methods on several other occasions in the play. He reads Ophelia's letters from Hamlet, reporting the contents to the King, and uses his daughter as bait so that he and Claudius can secretly observe Hamlet's manner towards her. It is his readiness to spy upon others that finally brings about his downfall. His reason for listening behind the arras when Hamlet meets Gertrude is characteristically distasteful:

'Tis meet that some more audience than a mother  
(Since nature makes them partial) should o'erhear  
The speech of vantage,  
(III.3.31-33)

Polonius's son proves capable of still baser duplicity. That Laertes shares his father's cynicism is evident early in the play, when he too speaks dismissively of Hamlet's love for Ophelia, urging his sister to withhold her affection and trust: 'For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour,/ Hold it a fashion . . ./ The perfume and suppliance of a minute ... / Be wary, then. Best safety lies in fear' (I.3.5-9, 43). When he returns from France and seeks immediate vengeance for his father's death he is clearly, to be seen as a contrast to Hamlet, but he is equally clearly not presented as an example the audience would wish Hamlet to follow. Untroubled by moral scruples ('Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!' - IV.5.134), he would be willing to murder Hamlet in church and compounds the treachery of Claudius's plot by proposing that he use a poisoned foil in the fencing match.

Like Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become the willing instruments of a corrupt king, abandoning the principles of friendship in order to assist Claudius's manoeuvrings against Hamlet. Their fellow courtier Osric is a comic illustration of the kind of mindless servitude that enables Claudius to remain in power. The women in the play have a finer sensitivity than these characters but they too are pawns in the intrigues devised by Claudius and Polonius. Ophelia at first defends Hamlet when her father questions his sincerity, but she obeys when she is told to avoid further contact with him. She also gives up Hamlet's letters to her and allows Polonius and the King to listen in when she meets him - a meeting that has been deliberately set up by her father. Gertrude, because of her marriage to Claudius, is more actively corrupt, though this is offset by her genuine compassion for her son and by her acknowledgement of her own guilt when Hamlet confronts her with it. But she stands by as Claudius and Polonius plot and scheme and she raises no objection to Polonius hiding behind the arras when she speaks to Hamlet in her room. The Danish royal court, then, is full of characters who readily acquiesce in, if they do not actively promote, the corruption of their king. It is unsurprising that the Council's 'better wisdoms' have 'freely' supported Claudius's accession and incestuous marriage (I.2.14-16). Denmark emerges as a society in which spying, manipulation and deceit are norms of human behaviour - a place where 'one may smile, and smile, and be a villain' (I.5.108). The pleasures of the court are of an appropriately coarse and dissolute nature:

This heavy-headed revel east and west  
Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations.  
They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase  
Soil our addition.  
(I.4.17-20)

Hamlet here attributes drunkenness not just to Claudius's inner circle but to the Danish people as a whole, and elsewhere in the play there are further suggestions that the rottenness in Denmark extends beyond the court. The people are described as 'muddied,/ Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers' (IV.5,82-83). Hamlet comments on the fickleness evident in their transference of allegiance from his father to Claudius: those who used to make faces at Claudius now pay money for pictures of him (II.2.62-65). At other points in the play we are told that they support Hamlet (said to be 'loved of the distracted multitude' - IV.3.4) and then Laertes, who is accompanied by a 'rabble' of 'false Danish dogs' when he storms the court (IV.5.104, 112). A profound sickness afflicts the whole society, and gives rise to the play's recurring imagery of foulness, rottenness and disease. Inevitably, these images are frequently centred upon Claudius: when he is attempting to pray he admits that his crime is 'rank' and 'smells to heaven' (III.3.6), and in the same scene Hamlet spares his life, with the comment, 'This physic but prolongs thy sickly days' (III.3.96). It is appropriate to the portrayal of a society riddled with deceit, and in which important elements of the nation's sickness (such as Claudius's murder of his brother) are hidden from general view, that the disease imagery should often suggest an infection attacking the body from within. In the closet scene, Hamlet urges his mother not to attribute his words to madness and so overlook her own sinful behaviour:

It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,  
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,  
Infects unseen.  
(III.4.148-150)

Young Fortinbras dispute with Poland is compared by Hamlet to:

. . . th'imposthume of much wealth and peace,  
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without  
Why the man dies.  
(IV.4.27-29)

Such images can be linked with the play's repeated emphasis on the discrepancy between, again in Hamlet's words, what 'seems' and what 'is'. Polonius speaks of how with 'pious action we do sugar o'er/ The devil himself', and this prompts Claudius's aside:

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,  
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it  
Than is my deed to my most painted word.  
(III.1.51-53)

But in the course of the play the corruption of Denmark is progressively uncovered, a development that is anticipated at the close of the second scene:

Foul deeds will rise,  
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.  
(I.2.257-258)

The widespread sickness of the society is one reason for the enthusiasm and affection with which Hamlet greets those characters who are newly arrived in Denmark and therefore likely to be untainted by its corruption. The Players receive such a welcome, as do Horatio (who has come from Wittenberg) and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (who have been summoned by the King, possibly from Wittenberg also). Hamlet soon discovers that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in Elsinore to serve the King's purposes, but Horatio is a friend who is worthy of his trust. For the audience also, Horatio's loyalty and honesty are a refreshing contrast to the prevalent duplicity, servility and self-interest. Unlike Hamlet, however, Horatio is never a threat to the established order of Denmark. Hamlet's observation that 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (I.5.166-167) suggests Horatio's limited perception; he lacks Hamlet's insight into the rottenness that surrounds them. Hamlet's disgust at the nature of life in Elsinore is shared by no one but the audience. From the second scene, when his soliloquy uncovers the ugly reality beneath the pageantry and splendour of Claudius's court, Hamlet is our guide to the world of the play and Shakespeare offers ample evidence to support his view of it:

. . . 'tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely.  
(I.2.135-137)

Moreover, the finer aspects of Hamlet's character highlight the human deficiencies of the rest of the court; he possesses the very qualities that Claudius and Polonius denigrate and reject - -qualities such as openness, honesty and spontaneity. Hamlet is oppressed by an overwhelming despair and disgust but we see enough warmth, humour and generosity (in his exchanges with Horatio and the Players, for example) to convince us of his essential goodness. There is also Ophelia's description:

O, what a noble mind is here overthrown!  
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword,  
Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
Th'observed of all observers . . .  
(III.1.151-155)

Hamlet's tragedy is that he ends by accepting the standards of behaviour his better nature rejects. At several points in the play we see him attempting to shed his moral sensitivity so as to take on the ruthless brutality of the avenger:

Now could I drink hot blood  
And do such bitter business as the day  
Would quake to look on.  
(III.2.397-399)

My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!  
(IV.4.65-66)

By the final Act the transformation has taken place. Hamlet's cry when he interrupts Ophelia's funeral is peculiarly apposite in view of his submission to the values of Denmark:

This is I,  
Hamlet the Dane.  
(V.1.253-254)

We learn that during the voyage to England he discovered Claudius's letter to the English king (ordering Hamlet's execution) and replaced it with instructions that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be put to death. This is an act that is Claudius-like in its cruelty (Hamlet stipulates that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to be allowed no time for confession before they die) and cunning. Hamlet feels no remorse: 'They are not near my conscience' (V.2.58). An earlier indication of Hamlet's blunted sensitivity and moral judgement is his approval of' Fortinbras’ attack on Poland. Just before he leaves Denmark, Hamlet encounters Fortinbras' army as it passes through the outskirts of Elsinore (IV.4). A Captain tells him the purpose of the expedition is to gain an area of territory that is worth nothing to either side. Hamlet describes Fortinbras as 'a delicate and tender prince' and is impressed that he should lead his army into a battle where nothing but honour is at stake. He contrasts Fortinbras' determined pursuit of military success with his own failure to avenge his father's death:

How all occasions do inform against me  
And spur my dull revenge!  
(IV.4.32-33)

He reproaches himself for his delay, whether it has been caused by 'craven scruple' or 'thinking too precisely on th'event'. At the close of the play, Fortinbras returns in triumph and Hamlet, before he dies, supports his election to the vacant Danish throne. But are we intended to applaud Fortinbras's accession and find believe that it heralds the regeneration of' Denmark? The answer has to be no. Fortinbras is unimpeded by 'craven scruple' and 'thinking too precisely on th'event' but it is exactly this that makes him a much lesser man than Hamlet. Shakespeare's account of the Polish expedition emphasizes its futility, a futility that Hamlet, despite his apparent enthusiasm for the venture, clearly perceives. The Captain tells Hamlet:

We go to gain a little patch of ground  
That hath in it no profit but the name  
(IV.4.18-19)

And Hamlet is astonished that thousands of men are to 'debate the question of this straw'. In the closing speech of the scene, he has another damning metaphor for the object of this military contest, comparing it to an 'eggshell'. For Fortinbras, of course, the conflict is all about 'honour' rather than territorial acquisition. But this too is an illusory objective - a mere 'fantasy and trick of fame'. Fortinbras is said to be 'puffed' with 'ambition', and it is in the service of this vanity that 'twenty thousand men' face 'imminent death'. Fortinbras' shortcomings have in any case already been highlighted much earlier in the play. The account we were given of him in the opening scene suggested that he was impetuous and unprincipled: he had refused to accept the agreement made between his father and King Hamlet (a 'sealed compact,/ Well ratified by law and heraldry') and had 'Sharked up a list of lawless resolutes' to seize the lands his father lost to the Danish King. It is difficult to view Fortinbras' accession as anything other than a triumph of mediocrity. He is, it is true, an effective man of action. He is also an outsider untainted by the corruption of the Danish court. But his coming to power does not mark a radical alteration in the ethos of Denmark; it remains a society in which the qualities we admire most in Hamlet have no place.