



REVIEW ARTICLE

PRINCE HAMLET IN A FEROCIOUS SPHERE: 'TO BE OR NOT TO BE'

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare is regarded as one of the leading dramatist of his time. He was born on April 23, 1564, in Stratford-on-Avon. The son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, he got education from King Edward IV Grammar School in Stratford. Shakespeare is often regarded as England's 'National Poet', and the 'Bard of Avon'. His works consist of approximately 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and a few other verses. His plays have been translated into many languages all over the world and are performed more often than those of any other playwright. "To be, or not to be" is one of the most widely known and quoted lines in modern English and the soliloquy which has been referenced in numerous works of theater, literature and music. 'To be or not to be' is the soliloquy spoken by Prince Hamlet in the Act III, Scene 1-'Nunery Scene' of Shakespeare's play Hamlet. Unable to do little but wait for completion of his plan to "catch the conscience of the king", an internal philosophical debate goes on in the mind of Hamlet. He ponders over the advantages and disadvantages of being alive. He questions himself whether it is one's right to end his or her own life. This soliloquy of Hamlet questions the righteousness of life over death in moral terms. Thus the paper analyses the tragic hero caught in the trap of uneventful episodes and how he overcomes triumphantly, though the stage is littered with dead bodies.

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INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare is regarded as one of the leading dramatist of his time. He was born on April 23, 1564, in Stratford-on-Avon. The son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, he got education from King Edward IV Grammar School in Stratford. He also learned Latin and Greek and read the Roman dramatists. He married Anne Hathaway, when he was only eighteen years old. The woman was seven or eight years senior to him. They had three children: Susanna, born in 1583 and twins, Hamnet and Judith born in 1585. Shakespeare is often regarded as England's 'National Poet', and the 'Bard of Avon'. His works consist of approximately 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and a few other verses. His plays have been translated into many languages all over the world and are performed more often than those of any other playwright. Very little is known about Shakespeare's activities. As per the records, between 1585 and 1592, he began his career in London as an actor, writer in London with an acting company 'Lord Chamberlain's Men'. By 1590's he was the managing partner of the company. As per the records the 'King's Men' company was very popular.

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After the crowning of King James I, in 1603, the company changed its name to the 'King's Men' and records show that Shakespeare had works published and sold as popular literature. It is not known as to when did Shakespeare began writing, but contemporary references and records of performances show that several of his plays were on the London stage by 1592. Shakespeare wrote more than thirty plays. These are usually divided into four categories: histories, comedies, tragedies, and romances. His early plays were primarily comedies and histories, such as Henry VI and The Comedy of Errors, which are regarded as some of the best works ever produced in these genres. Later on he wrote many tragedies until 1608, which include famous plays like, Hamlet, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet and Macbeth, which are regarded as some of the finest works in the English language. In his final years, Shakespeare turned to the romantic with Cymbeline, A Winter's Tale, and The Tempest. Shakespeare died on 23 April 1616, at the age of 52. There is no evidence nor any contemporary source explains how or why he died. "To be, or not to be" is one of the most widely known and quoted lines in modern English and the soliloquy which has been referenced in numerous works of theater, literature and music. The major part of the plot of Ernst Lubitsch's sophisticated comedy To be or not to be is focused on the same monologue of Hamlet. In 1957, in a comedy film, A King in New York, the famous comedian Charlie Chaplin recites the famous monologue in the shoes of the ambiguous king Shahdov. 'To be or not to be' is

the soliloquy spoken by Prince Hamlet in the Act III, Scene 1- 'Nunery Scene' of Shakespeare's play Hamlet. Unlike Hamlet's first two major soliloquies, his third and most famous speech seems to be governed by reason. Unable to do little but wait for completion of his plan to "catch the conscience of the king", an internal philosophical debate goes on in the mind of Hamlet. He ponders over the advantages and disadvantages of being alive. He questions himself whether it is one's right to end his or her own life. This soliloquy of Hamlet questions the righteousness of life over death in moral terms. The speech emphasizes on the subject of death. The question in front of him was whether "to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles". At this point of time when everything seems to be vague and unclear, death is something desirable- earnestly to be wished, a consummation – a perfect closure. Death is therefore empowering: killing oneself is a way of taking action, taking up arms, opposing and defeating the slings and arrows of despicable fortune. Living is a passive state; dying is an active state. But in order to reach the condition of death one has to take action in life – charge fully armed against Fortune:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
 Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer
 The Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune,
 Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,
 And by opposing end them: to die, to sleep
 No more; and by a sleep, to say we end
 The Heart-ache, and the thousand Natural shocks
 That Flesh is heir to? 'Tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep,
 To sleep, perchance to Dream; aye, there's the rub,
 For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come,
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
 Must give us pause . . .

In this speech, a hopeless Prince, Hamlet contemplates death and suicide while waiting for Ophelia, the love of his life. He laments on the pains and unfairness of life but acknowledges the alternative might be still worse. Within the play, the speech explains Hamlet's hesitation to directly and immediately avenge his father's murder on his uncle, his stepfather, and new king, Claudius. Claudius and his minister Polonius have set Ophelia there in order to overhear the conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia and find out whether Hamlet is really mad or he is only pretending it. Claudius and Polonius are hiding behind an arras. They are preparing to eavesdrop on Hamlet's interaction with Ophelia. The soliloquy in the play portrays Hamlet as a very confused man. He is very unsure of himself and his very thoughts often waver between two extremes due to his relatively strange personality. When the question is asked in the middle of the play, it is applied to the universal man in whom the particular revenger is subsumed. "To be" for a man who has man's nature in him includes the conflicting passion which the play recognizes in the revenge. And doing so it gives us a hero who is called upon to remember his heritage, to live out his human destiny and whose wish is to decline. For whatever may be said or not said about the role of Hamlet as a revenger, his dissatisfaction with the role of a man is notoriously stamped upon the play. He finds no honesty in the world. He thinks about the capricious public, who once scorned his uncle in his father's time, but now seems to be in favour of the present king and pays heed to the words spoken by the mighty king. Hamlet thinks about his mother, the queen, who shows the falseness of the marriage vows. Thoughts come into

his mind that perhaps it is the nature of beautiful women to be unchaste. The world is like a garden in which all that flourishes are weeds, the things in nature which are "rank and gross". If Hamlet's speech is followed carefully, we notice that his beliefs of "being" and "not being" are rather complex. He is in a fix whether life should be preferred or death is preferable. For Hamlet, "to be", is a passive state, to "suffer" outrageous blows of the fortune, while "not being" is the action of opposing those blows. But there is more to it than that. It is not just about killing himself but also about the mission he is on – to avenge his father's death by killing his father's murderer, the king. Hamlet now lets his imagination stroll on the subject of the quest of discovery and the analytical voyage. He thinks that dying is like crossing the border between known and unknown geography. One is likely to be lost in that unexplored destination, from which one would never return. The implication is that there may be unimagined horrors in that land. Hamlet now seems to make a decision. He makes a thought provoking judgment that "conscience does make cowards of us all": it our conscience which makes cowards of us all. In the whole soliloquy, this is the most important sentence which reflects the deeds of Hamlet in the past and his indecisiveness related to the future. Throughout the play we find Hamlet in a fix what to do and what not to do. All through the play we find him making excuses for not taking revenge on his father's murderer and killing his father's murderer, his uncle, the king. He even does not take the opportunity when he could have easily ended his uncle's life and thus could have taken revenge for his father's murder.

He further contemplates on the religious aspect of killing that murder is a sin. There is a religious dimension to it and this is the conflict in Hamlet which is the core of the play. Convention demands that he should kill Claudius but as seen from the perspective of religion, murder is a sin and no one has the right of taking other's life, Hamlet hesitates to execute this act. So with that added religious dimension, the fear of the unknown after death is intensified. At the end of the soliloquy he pulls himself out of this thoughtful mode when he decides that too much thinking about a thing will prevent the action to be taken. Now Hamlet contemplates on the final end. He finally realizes, "But that dread of something after death, / The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveler returns—puzzles the will / And makes us rather bear those ills we have" (III.i.81-84). At this final moment Hamlet realizes that many people chose life over death because they are unaware to know the afterlife, They don't know whether there will be life after death or not, neither they are aware of the fact as to what will happen to them after death. The speech of Hamlet remains a deep contemplation about the nature and reasons for death. It's not that while contemplating death he is contemplating suicide as reflection of his own life. We find Hamlet looking towards life to be burdensome and devoid of power. Its "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, like a garden overrun with weeds". We find Hamlet's sense of agonized frustration towards life. Thoughts come to his mind that we're prevented from doing the things in our lives we want to do by fear of the unknown. The soliloquy is probably one of the best-known and quoted lines in English literature. It is 33 lines long, and consists of 262 words. The play, Hamlet, in which 'to be or not to be' occurs is Shakespeare's longest play with 4,042 lines. This famous soliloquy gives the answer that one may choose life over death from a fear that death might be worst. This is what Hamlet seems to be doing in this soliloquy. But this negative attitude of Hamlet is nowhere more apparent than in this soliloquy and his

dealings with Ophelia in the 'Nunnery scene' where the soliloquy appears. She is the woman Hamlet has loved and hoped to marry. But in this famous soliloquy and his encounter with Ophelia in the middle of the play, he denies his love for her denounces marriage and bids her to go to a nunnery. The rejection of Ophelia poignantly dramatizes Hamlet rejection of life and its opportunities of love, marriage and procreation. It is the choice of "not to be". Hamlet is recognised to be a very moral play. It acknowledges original sin, the presence of evil in man's nature and it accepts that guilt must be redressed. The play offers us a hero who, in a world where good and evil inseparably mingle, is tempted to avoid the human lot but at the end comes to embrace it, finally choosing "to be"

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