The World of *Hamlet*

By Maynard Mack

“My subject is the world of *Hamlet.* I do not of course mean Denmark, except as Denmark is given a body by the play; and I do not mean Elizabethan England, though this is necessarily close behind the scenes. I mean simply the imaginative environment that the play asks us to enter when we read it or go to see it” (44).

“The first attribute that impresses us is mysteriousness…. We feel its presence in the numberless explanations that have been brought forward for Hamlet’s delay, his madness, his ghost, his treatment of Polonius or Ophelia, or his mother….” (45).

-Controversies in the play; e.g. ghosts, madness.

“Hamlet’s world is preeminently in the interrogative mood” (46).

“…baffled tone” (46).

“Hamlet’s word is full of riddles” (46).

“Illogical logic” (46).

-*Hamlet* is a play of questions—it even opens with a question.

-Hamlet is the greatest riddle

“Thus the mysteriousness of Hamlet’s world is of a piece. It is not simply a matter of missing motivations, to be expunged if only we could find the perfect clue. It is built in. It is evidently an important part of what the play wishes to say to us” (47).

“…the problematic nature of reality and the relation of reality to appearance” (48).

-Seen in the play within a play

“Like mystery, this problem of reality is central to the play and written deep into its idiom. Shakespeare’s favorite terms in *Hamlet* are words of ordinary usage that pose the question of appearance t in a fundamental form” (49).

“Yet [Ophelia] is of the sex for whom he has already found the name Frailty, and she is also, as he seemed either madly or sanely to divine, a decoy in a trick. The famous cry—“Get thee to a nunnery”—shoes the anguish of his uncertainty. If Ophelia is what she seems, this dirty-minded world of m murder, incest, lust, adultery, is no place for her. Were she “as chaste as ice, as pure as snow,” she could not escape the calumny. And if she is not what she seems then a nunnery in its other sense of brothel is relevant to her” (48).

“This breach between the outer and the inner stirs no special emotion in Polonius, because he is always either behind an arras or prying into one, but it shakes Hamlet to the core” (50).

-The idea of outer vs. inner is represented through clothing: Hamlet’s “inky cloak”, Ophelia’s description of Hamlet’s frightening appearance, Hamlet’s traveler’s clothes

-The idea of image is prevalent in the play—“mirror up to nature”

“The most pervasive of Shakespeare’s image patterns in this play, however, is the pattern evolved around three words, “show,” “act,” “play.”

“’Show’ seems to be Shakespeare’s unifying image in *Hamlet*” (52).

-“Show” relates to seeming, assuming, clothing, painting, etc

“’Act’… [is] the play’s radical metaphor. It distills the various perplexities about the character of reality into a residual perplexity about the character of an act” (52).

-Complexities of the presented characters

“The full extension of [the theme of ‘play’] is best evidences in the play within the play itself… there are ourselves, an audience watching all these audiences who are also players. Where, it may suddenly occur to us to ask, does the playing end? Which *are* the guilty creatures sitting at a play? When is an act not an ‘act?’” (53).

-“Play” is all of the elements in *Hamlet* which connect to theater and theatricality

-Dissolves the barriers between fake and real for the characters as well as the audience

“…the play’s emphasis on human weakness, the instability of human purpose, the subjection of humanity to fortune…” (53).

“Miss Spurgeon, who was the first to call attention this aspect of the play, has well remarked that so far as Shakespeare’s pictorial imagination is concerned, the problem in *Hamlet* is not a problem of the will and reason, ‘of a mind too philosophical or a nature temperamentally unfitted to act quickly,’ nor even a problem of an individual at all. Rather, it is a condition—‘a condition for which the individual himself is apparently not responsible, any more than the sick man is to blame for the infection which strikes and devours him, but which, nevertheless, in its course and development, impartially and relentlessly, annihilates him and others, innocent ad guilty alike.’ ‘That,’ she adds, ‘is the tragedy of *Hamlet,* as it is perhaps the chief tragic mystery of life’” (54).

-Hamlet’s slow-to-act philosophical mind is what devours him like a poison; Hamlet has inherited his situation-- herein lies the true tragedy of Hamlet.

“The chief form in which the theme of morality reaches us… is as a profound consciousness of loss” (55).

-We never meet the Hamlet Ophelia describes in 3.1:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;

The expectancy and rose of the fair state,

The glass of fashion and the mould of form

Instead, we enter into a world where Hamlet is already deteriorating. “

“…Denmark was a different place. That was before Hamlet’s mother took off ‘the rose From the fair forehead of innocent love’ and set a blister there. Hamlet then was still “The expectancy and rose of the fair state’; Ophelia the ‘rose of May’. For Denmark was a garden then, when his father ruled” (55).

“’Hamlet is painfully aware,’ says Professor Tillyard, ‘of the baffling human predicament between the angles and the beasts, between the glory of having been made in God’s image and the incrimination of being descended from fallen Adam’. To this we may add, I think, that Hamlet is more than of it; he exemplifies it; and it s for this reason that his problem appeals to us to powerfully as an image of our own” (56).

-Hamlet begins to see the taint of humanity everywhere.

“The young man growing up is not to be allowed simply to endure a rotten world, he must also act in it” (56).

“The act required of [Hamlet], though retributive justice, is one that necessarily involves the doer in the general guilt. Not only because it involves a killing; but because to get at the world of seeming one sometimes has to use its weapons” (57).

-Hamlet feels guilt for his own infection.

“In the last act of the play…Hamlet accepts his world and we discover a different man” (57).

“The point is not that Hamlet has suddenly become religious; he has been religious all through the play. The point is that he has now learned, and accepted, the boundaries in which human action, human judgment, are enclosed” (58).

“He had been too quick to take the burden of the whole world and its condition upon his limited and finite self… he had dilated it into a cosmic problem…. The whole time is out of joint, he feels, and his young man’s egocentricity, he will set it right. Hence he misjudges Ophelia… he misjudges himself…. Even with the King, Hamlet as sought to play at God… there are limits to the before and after that human reason can comprehend….” (58).

“…in the graveyard scene. Here, in its ultimate symbol, he confronts, recognizes, and accepts the condition of being man” (59).

“…the haunting mystery of life itself…. The mystery of reality is here too…. And last of all, bust most pervasive of all, there is the mystery of human limitation.” (59).

“For as William Butler Yeats once said, ‘Why should we honor those who die on the field of battle? A man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself” (60).