

# ANOTHER LOOK AT HAMLET

By J.E. Bates, written in the 1980s

## THE BACKGROUND

At the beginning of the 1600s when Shakespeare was working on his version of Hamlet, it was already an old story. The earliest form known to us is in the Latin of Saxo Grammaticus, a Danish chronicler of the late 12<sup>th</sup> century though it may date from an even earlier period and could well contain a nugget of historical truth. The tale next surfaces in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in a collection of *Histoires Tragique* put together by Francois Belleforest, and this was probably the source of a play by Thomas Kydd (now lost) which provided the theme in turn for Shakespeare's play. The first, unauthorised edition was printed in 1603, and then a revised and greatly enlarged copy of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* followed in 1604, and finally the Folio edition in 1623.

Although all these versions differ from one another in various ways, from Saxo onwards, essentially the story concerns the murder of a King of Denmark by his brother, who then marries the widowed Queen and assumes the kingship himself, and the consequent necessity for revenge felt by the deprived Prince. Revenge was a constant fact of life in 16<sup>th</sup> century England as great families competed with one another, and within themselves, for the land, power and wealth distributed by Henry V111 as he dismantled the monasteries. Also severe punishment in cases of treason was enforced to maintain the Reformation. In Elizabeth 1's time Acts against treason continued, with a cruel death penalty, and thousands of her subjects committed themselves "to take the utmost revenge" on anyone conspiring to overthrow her. Revenge was also a popular theme for plays in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century, often based on classical models. For instance, Pickering's *Horestes* and Thomas Kydd's *The Spanish Tragedy* as well as his (probable) *Hamlet* were performed repeatedly, with Shakespeare's own earlier plays *Titus Andronicus*, and *Julius Caesar*.

Now, the question for Hamlet is how to achieve revenge on his uncle the King, without causing further tragedy or losing his own life ( "to be or not to be" Act 3.1 ), which is almost impossible. Any form of rebellion will result in his condemnation for treason, bringing the most dreadful death by being hung, drawn, and quartered. The State judicial system may be inadequate or corrupt. Similarly the Church may be bigoted or at best mistaken. Neither of these bodies could provide the satisfaction demanded by the injured party, who, if he takes the matter into his own hands will almost certainly damage himself.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, besides justice, politics is clearly an underlying problem. Set in Elsinore at the entrance to the Baltic, there is rivalry between Norway, Denmark, and Poland over trade. Some thirty years earlier Hamlet of Denmark and Fortinbras of Norway, two equally strong monarchs, had fought in single combat for this strategic site, King Hamlet being the victor.

Then Poland had encroached along the Baltic coast (where the sea is frozen for half the year), probably violating a border, to which King Hamlet had responded firmly "in an angry parle he smote the sledded Polacks on the ice" (Act 1.1). His audience would have been familiar with the attempts of the Hanseatic League to negotiate a return of their trade privileges, sending a deputation to London in 1604, which failed.

Differences in religion added friction to the political situation, between countries which had remained staunchly Catholic such as Poland, and those which had joined Luther's protest at Wittenburg, Saxony, against the power of Rome. King Hamlet had married Gertrude of Saxony thus securing his southern border, and we can take it that she ("th'imperial jointress of this warlike state" Act 1.2) ruled with him like Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. So Denmark is probably a Protestant country, and Prince Hamlet, educated at Wittenburg, a Lutheran Protestant., while Polonius (of Poland) is likely to be Catholic and his crony Claudius still leans that way. In England the crime of heresy carried the death penalty, and although the witchcraze there did not reach the extremes met with on the Continent, it was still dangerous to practise or even speak of sorcery.

The theme of the play which transcends all others is that of the end of a dynasty. Hamlet the Prince of Denmark is the direct descendant of four former kings, and it is his destiny to continue the line. The throne has been usurped, in his view, by his uncle Claudius by criminal means, and Hamlet has sworn to undertake the revenge. In this it can compare with Aeschylus' *Oresteia* where Orestes is the instrument of revenge, and can only survive with the intervention of the gods to be finally freed from guilt. The tragedy of Hamlet is that having at last overcome his enemies, he cannot live to be king. In England as Queen Elizabeth 1 neared the end of her life without having named an heir, people really feared that anarchy would break out or there might be a return to Catholicism.

## THE FOUR HUMOURS

The Ancient Greek idea that the universe was made up from the Four Contraries, that is Hot, Cold, Dry, and Moist, and that these in combination made up the four Elements composing

Matter, persisted for many centuries. These four Elements were Earth (Dry + Cold), Water (Cold + Moist), Air (Moist + Hot) and Fire (Hot + Dry), and by the 16<sup>th</sup> century were also applied to the body, that is to a person's characteristics.

Paracelsus, although a pioneer of medical science, believed that the balance of these four elements was controlled by heavenly bodies, so a mixture of astrology and experiment emerged with the new learning in this period. Health of mind and body was only achieved if these elements were in balance, an imbalance of which produced the four Humours, so someone unduly influenced by Earth (Dry and Cold) was of a Melancholy disposition, by Water (Cold and Moist) was Phlegmatic, by Air (Moist and Hot) Sanguine, and by Fire (Hot and Dry) Choleric. Hamlet passes through these four Humours during the play, although with false starts and breaks before finally reaching a balance of Humours at the end, characterised by a belief in Conscience following Luther's teaching.



## EARTH

The Melancholy Humour produced inertia, with a traditional belief in plant lore and in the influence of the stars, and in witchcraft, it was thought to be characterised by an excess of black bile. This perhaps carries a suggestion of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, where the black horse signified starvation. When we first meet Hamlet (Act 1.2) he is dressed all in black, 'thy nighted colour', 'my inky cloak', 'my suits of solemn black' and we see him as thin and depressed, inert, and suffering from melancholy. In his first soliloquy he blames his mother's hasty re-marriage for his problems, since if he cannot be king there is no point to his life as Prince of Denmark. 'Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / his canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God / how weary, stale, flat and unprofitable / seem to me all the uses of this world!' Nor can he protest about his situation as it would amount to treason 'but break my heart, for I must hold my tongue'. On meeting the Ghost (Act 1.4) Hamlet at once believes it is his father's spirit, 'I'll call thee Hamlet / King, father, Royal Dane'. A superstitious belief in witchcraft exists alongside an application of the new experimental method 'Say, Why is this? Wherefore? What should we do?' Here is the What, Where, and Why in reverse order.

## WATER

The Phlegmatic Humour follows, believed to arise from an excess of yellow bile. The characteristics of this Humour (cold and moist) are Vacillation and Madness, with a dependence on Fortune, notoriously fickle, and the practice of Wit and Satire generally insincere. In this Humour Hamlet passes the whole of Act 2, Act 3, and Act 4 to the end of scene 4. After his Father's spirit has explained how his death took place, Hamlet feels unable to trust anyone; he has already found fault with his mother Gertrude, and now he suspects his uncle Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and even the nature of the Ghost itself. Polonius has decided that Hamlet is mad because of unrequited love, 'mad for thy love', 'your noble son is mad', mad I call it "into the madness wherein he raves'. (Act 2.2) His one-time friends speak much of Fortune, and with the arrival of the Players, representing a fictitious or unreal world, the Watery element always unstable, is introduced (Act 2.2) Hamlet's second soliloquy following the Player's Hecuba speech describes 'Tears in his eyes', 'weep for her', 'drown the stage with tears', then he decides he must change his attitude 'Fie upon't, Foh ! / about my brains. Hum-' This gives an echo of the Fe, Fo, Far, Fum (known to us from Grimm's Fairy Tales), and the Wie, Wo, Warum i.e. the Who or What, Where, and Why of 16<sup>th</sup> century scientific enquiry. Doubting the Ghost he decides to test Claudius by means of a play re-enacting the murder of his father 'The play's the thing / whereby I'll catch the conscience of the king.' (Act 2.2 ).

Hamlet next turns on Ophelia, treating her as a strumpet (not realising that Polonius has almost certainly intercepted his sincere Valentine 'but never doubt I love' (Act 3.2). In late evening after the play when he believes Claudius has revealed his guilt, Hamlet thinks he might be sanguine enough 'now I could drink hot blood' to kill him, but then seeing the King at prayer he puts it off, only to kill Polonius by mischance. His mother describes him as 'mad as the sea and wind when both contend which is the mightier' (Act 4.1) as Hamlet struggles to move from the dominance of Water to that of Air.

The next morning, on his way to England (Act 4.1) he meets Fortinbras and his army from Norway, making for Poland to gain 'a little patch of land' and this leads him to decide to emulate their stoicism 'O, from this time forth / my thoughts be bloody/ or be nothing worth'.

## AIR

Hamlet has now reached the Sanguine Humour, imagined to be caused by an excess of blood. This Humour is typified by a veneration for Heroic Antiquity, both action and learning, and for Stoicism, together with a love of Music, Poetry and Rhetoric. Horatio is the ideal stoic, in Act.1.1 he compares the Ghost's appearance in the warlike state of Denmark with the omens seen in Rome ' a little ere the mightiest Julius fell ' - and indeed this passage can almost be read as a prologue to the Hamlet play. Later, in Act 3.2 Hamlet expresses his admiration for Horatio's qualities 'For thou hast been / as one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing, / a man that Fortune's buffets and rewards / has ta'en with equal thanks. And blest are those / whose blood and judgement are so well commedled / that they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger / to sound what stop she please. Give me that man / that is not passion's slave, and I will wear him / in my heart's core / ay, in my heart of heart / as I do thee'.

On returning to Denmark Hamlet is fit and well, having spent nearly two months at sea working on board ship - Drake's edict was that " the gentlemen should draw and haul with the mariners and the mariners must draw and haul with the gentlemen". He meets the gravedigger , with whom he shares a calm acceptance of life and death (Act 5.1) But then at Ophelia's funeral Hamlet and Laertes have a brief but fiery exchange over which of them loved her the most. Hamlet probably weeps for Ophelia, but soon recovers, "So much for this sir, now you shall see the other" (Act 5.2) and finally we learn of Hamlet's adventures on his way to England, when He confides in Horatio his unhesitating treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, saving his own life while sending them to their doom. This prompts Horatio to exclaim 'Why, what a king is this', meaning not Claudius but Hamlet who can now make decisions, dispense justice, and exercise the power of life and death over his subjects without compunction.

Next Hamlet has a wordy duel with the pompous Osrick, and easily defeats him, saying "Thus has he...only got the tune of the time and, out of an habit of encounter, a kind of yeasty collection, which carries them through and through the most fanned and winnowed opinions, and do but blow them to their trial, the bubbles are out." Exit Osrick, deflated,

## FIRE

This is the Humour, hot and dry, which was associated with the spleen and produced Choler. The choleric man was ruled by his own passions, self centred and highly strung. He would be inclined to egoism, and Machiavellian politics.

Hamlet is stung into this Humour (Act 5.1) by Laertes' exaggerated reaction at Ophelia's burial, 'What is he whose grief / bears such an emphasis... This is I, Hamlet the Dane'. Although he says he is not splenitive or rash, he at once in similarly exaggerated terms offers to do all and more than Laertes to prove that his love for Ophelia is the greater. 'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do / Wou't weep? Wou't fight? Wou't fast? Wou't tear thyself? / Wou't drink up eisel? Eat a crocodile? I'll do it .....' until he is soothed by the Queen.

There is another brief flare-up when, after the fatal duel (Act 5.2) , Hamlet forces the King to take his own life 'Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane / drink off this potion. Is thy union here ? / Follow my mother.'

We have a foretaste of this humour in Act 3.4, where Hamlet has worked himself up into a passion against Claudius , the Ghost re-appears and asks him to comfort the Queen (who cannot see the ghost), she responds to Hamlet 'O gentle son / upon the heat and flame of thy distemper / sprinkle cool patience'.

## THE BALANCE OF HUMOURS

To be in good mental and physical health, it was thought necessary for all the humours to be in perfect balance without any one of them being dominant. This balance would be accompanied by a belief in Providence, and a reliance on Conscience, the individual would be calm and patient. This attitude contributed to the development of Puritanism.

Hamlet achieves this state of mind in Act 5.2. After thoroughly defeating Osrick in a battle of wits, he is straight-forward and courteous to the Lord who comes to confirm the arrangements for the duel with Laertes 'I am constant to my purposes. They follow the King's pleasure. If his fitness speaks, mine is ready, now or whensoever...' Feeling some mis-giving he tells Horatio 'But it is no matter' and when the latter suggests postponing the duel, Hamlet replies 'Not a whit. We defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man knows of aught he leaves, what is't to leave betimes ? Let be.' When Hamlet and Laertes are both at the point of death after the duel, they exchange forgiveness with one another. Laertes has confessed his treachery, and Hamlet responds 'Heaven make thee free of it !' He also blesses his mother who has died without time for any rites, 'Wretched Queen, adieu !' (A Dieu - to God). Hamlet's last breath is indicated In the F edition with 'O, o, o, o' which we may presume is the passage of his soul.

## NATURE'S LIVERY OR FORTUNE'S STAR

The Medieval view of the cosmos in which concentric spheres carrying the fixed stars and wandering planets revolved around the Earth, had been adopted by the Roman Catholic church. In this system the Sun appeared to follow an annual path through the twelve constellations of the Zodiac. Each sign of the zodiac was believed to influence the lives of those born when it was in the ascendant. Also, the seven known planets, that is the Moon, Mercury, Mars, Venus, the Sun, Jupiter and Saturn, were thought to colour the personality of those born under their influence.



The great Astrological clock at Hampton Court was made for Henry V in 1520. This interest in astrology is apparent in 'Hamlet' together with the new system of Astronomy



arising from neo-Platonism, and the work of Copernicus in the 16<sup>th</sup> century showing how the planets moved round the Sun. (The work of Galileo was yet to come.) 'Doubt thou the stars are fire / Doubt that the sun doth move' (Act 11.2.115).

While Hamlet is waiting with Horatio and the two centinels for the Ghost to appear, he follows a train of thought about these astrological influences.

'So oft it happens in particular men.....  
Carrying, I say, The stamp of one defect,  
Being nature's livery or fortune's star,  
His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,  
As infinite as man may undergo,  
Shall in the general censure take corruption  
From that particular fault.' (Act 1.4.23)

This passage is omitted in the Folio edition, but nevertheless is of great significance especially for the personalities of the main seven characters in the play.

#### SCORPIO (October / November)

If we assume that the play opens at Christmastime, then the action starts two months earlier in late October with the death of King Hamlet. Nature's livery for him is Scorpio, the scorpion, 'Now, Hamlet, hear./ 'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard / a serpent stung me' (Act I.5.34). His planet is Jupiter, ' Last night of all / when that same star that's westward from the pole / had made his course t'illuminate that part of heaven / where now it burns ' (Act I.1.34) Jupiter is very prominent in the western sky late in the year. Astrologically, those born under Jupiter, the Greater Fortune, brought peace and prosperity, and in man inspired a cheerful, noble and temperate disposition. It was the best of planets, and King Hamlet had many of those good qualities. 'A was a goodly king.' 'A was a man. Take him for all in all. / I shall not look upon his like again.' (Act I.2.186). The metal associated with Jupiter was Tin, shining and bright, ' thou dead corse, again in complete steel / revisits thus the glimpses of the moon ' (Act I,4.52) By contrast, King Hamlet's deadly sin is Pride ' O Hamlet, what a falling off was there / from me, whose love was of that dignity / that it went hand in hand even with the vow / I made to her in marriage, and to decline / upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor / to those of mine ' (Act I.5.47). And 'Our last king / ....was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway / thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride / dared to the combat' (Act I.2.80).

The Ghost of King Hamlet begins to walk when his murderer Claudius marries the widow Gertrude. He gives his son Hamlet the duty of achieving revenge although without harming the Queen. Two months later he appears again, when Hamlet, who has still not carried out the revenge, becomes over-passionate in condemning his mother for her second marriage. 'This visitation / is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose ' (Act 2.4.111) . There is only one other faint echo of King Hamlet at Act V.2.266 as Claudius announces 'And in the cup an union shall he throw / richer than that which four successive kings / in Denmark's crown have worn ', reminding us of the previous stable lineage.

To what extent did the pride of King Hamlet, in his own prowess, in his Queen, and in his kingdom, contribute to his brother's jealousy and set off the whole sorry story?

#### SAGGITARIUS (November/December)

It could have taken a month say, to organise the funeral of King Hamlet, as in the case of Queen Elizabeth I, bringing us to Saggiarius in late November. This is when Laertes would have arrived from France. He was undoubtedly a Saggiarian, the Archer, always shown mounted. In Act IV.7.80 Claudius likens him to Lamond , ' a gentleman of Normandy ' and an expert horseman 'he grew unto his seat / and to such wondrous doing brought his horse / as had he been incorpsed and demi-natured / with the brave beast ' (clearly compared to a centaur) and Lamond praises Laertes for his skill in his defence, especially with the rapier (which represents the lethal point of the archer's arrow).

Laertes was governed by Mars, the Lesser Infortune and an unlucky planet with a warlike temperament. On hearing rumours of the death of his father Polonius, he returns once again from France, gathering a band of followers to confront the King, 'How came he dead? I'll not be juggled with. / To hell allegiance! Vows to the blackest devil! / Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit! / I dare damnation. To this point I stand / that both the worlds I give to negligence / let come what comes, only I'll be revenged / most thoroughly for my father. ' (Act IV.5. 132) This shows Laertes' deadly sin of Anger, which becomes excessive when he learns that Hamlet is the cause of his father's death, and the probable cause of his sister Ophelia's madness and death also. He decides to add venom to his weapon when he fights the duel with Hamlet, to make sure of his revenge. Mars' metal is Iron, hard and unyielding, and it is only when he is about to die that he repents and forgives Hamlet 'Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet. / Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, / Nor thine on me ! ' (Act V.2.323)



Laertes death arises from being caught in his own trap, plotting to kill Hamlet by treacherous means, he loses his own life as well.

CAPRICORN (December/January)

Another month passes after King Hamlet's funeral, and the play opens at the rising of Capricorn, on 21 December, when Claudius marries the widowed Queen. He is The Goat, typically lecherous, 'Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast' (Act 1.5.41), and 'Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / a couch for luxury and damned incest' (Act 1.5.82).

Claudius is governed by the planet Mercury, and is quick, active and intelligent, and skilled in the use of the scholar's highly wrought rhetorical prose. His first speech at Act 1.1.0 'Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death / the memory be green, and that it us befitted / to bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom / to be contracted in one brow of woe / ....' where he sums up the whole situation both at home and abroad, and deals with diplomatic skill with the threat from Norway, and is typical of his persuasive capabilities.

Mercury's metal is Quicksilver, which is remarked on by the Ghost to his son Hamlet at Act 1.5.63 'and in the porches of mine ears did pour / the leperous distilment, whose effect / holds such an enmity with blood of man / that swift as quicksilver it courses through / the natural gates and alleys of the body / ....'

Claudius' deadly sin is Lust, 'with witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts / O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power / so to seduce! won to his shameful lust / the will of my most seeming-virtuous Queen.' (Act 1.5.42)

Claudius thought he could outwit everyone, but he has committed a mortal sin in causing the death of his brother, he is unable to repent and even sacrifices the Queen rather than admit his guilt, so he takes his own life by swallowing the poison he destined for Hamlet.

#### AQUARIUS (January/February)

Ophelia's birthsign is Aquarius (the Water Carrier). She is governed by the planet Venus, the Lesser Fortune, and is endowed with beauty and amorousness. In Greek, her name Ophelia means 'benefit'. Venus' metal is copper and there is only an indirect reference to this when Hamlet says 'No, good mother. Here's metal more attractive' (Act III.2.119). Ophelia's deadly sin is probably Envy, she envies Gertrude 'Where is the beauteous Queen of Denmark?' (Act VI.5.21) as this what she aspires to be herself.

Both her brother and father have warned her against Hamlet's attentions. In February Hamlet bursts in upon her while she is sewing, (seizing her wrist as she is still holding the needle) and quite distraught since she has not responded to his sincere Valentine 'But that I love thee best, O most best, believe it.' (Act II.2.120) Polonius has almost certainly

intercepted this, and avoids the Queen's question 'Came this from Hamlet to her?' (Act II.2.113) Ophelia is shocked by Hamlet's repudiation of her and when her father is killed and Hamlet is sent away, this unexpected double loss, together with her brother's absence in France, is all too much. Even the Queen, pre-occupied with her own guilt, does not befriend her.

Ophelia's songs during her subsequent 'madness' are all about absence and loss. She has probably been fasting during Lent and treating herself with herbs, her 'fantastic' garlands' contain crowflowers (an ointment made of the leaves and flowers will draw a blister, a sign of un-chastity), white deadnettles, (a herb of Venus which will make the heart merry and drive away melancholy) daises (good for wounds in the breast), long purples – early marsh orchid (will support the system in privation and during famine). Along with her court clothes she has cast off formal speech and behaviour, and is now able to say what she feels. Giving flowers (healing herbs) to the Queen, she offers rosemary for tears and pansies for catharsis; to the King, fennel for wind and columbine for sore mouths and throats; to Laertes and herself rue for healing old sores (and Laertes must wear his rue 'with a difference' because he has succeeded to his late father's rank and arms); for herself a daisy, the leaves and roots were reckoned among the most traumatic and vulnerary plants and very effective in consumption of the lungs; and lastly Violets for cooling any heat or distemper either outwardly or inwardly, but these had withered, perhaps they were meant for Laertes too. (Act IV.5.176)

The Queen describes Ophelia's watery end, 'fell in the weeping brook', 'mermaid – like', 'Or like a creature native and indued/unto that element' (Act IV.7.179). Laertes responds ' Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia / therefore I forbid my tears ' Nevertheless he weeps ' I have a speech o' fire that fain would blaze / but that this folly drowns it. '

Ophelia is buried rather than married, 'I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid / and not have strewed thy grave' (Act V.1.241). There is dissent over the ceremony, the Church thinks 'her death was doubtful .... for charitable prayers / shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her' (Act V.1.222). (This sounds like the punishment for a woman taken in adultery and stoned to death.) But the State, that is Claudius, has decided her death shall not appear as suicide, but it is indeed debatable.

PISCES (February/March)

Polonius was born in Pisces, the Fishes, and apart from Hamlet calling him a Fishmonger, there is certainly something fishy about him. At times he is cold, slippery, and deceptive, and

as there are two fish in his birthsign, this perhaps shows him to be two-faced. As a Spy he can play a double role and as an Actor he is able to portray characters other than his own.

The planet governing Polonius is Saturn, a sinister influence which produced melancholy in man and disastrous events in history. It is the most terrible of planets, the Greater in fortune. The associated metal is Lead, heavy and dull, and his deadly sin is probably Covetousness. He covets power, spying on his own son, controlling his daughter's life, and treating Claudius and even Gertrude with undue familiarity and dishonesty.

We have a foretaste of his leaden wit when Laertes mockingly quotes (although perhaps affectionately) one of his endless proverbs 'A double blessing is a double grace / occasion smiles upon a second leave' (Act I.3.53) Polonius is long-winded and tedious as well as untruthful in Act II.2. when telling the King and Queen about Hamlet's love for Ophelia, and asks for praise for discovering that unrequited love is the cause of Hamlet's 'madness'. He adheres to this opinion to the end. 'But yet I do believe / the origin and commencement of his grief / Sprung from neglected love' 'He has no compassion for his daughter after Hamlet's unkindness to her' 'Get thee to a nunnery....' (Act III.1.121)

On the last day of Pisces, towards midnight, Polonius hides in the Queen's closet - spying again - where he is killed by Hamlet in mistake for the King. So his death is accidental, but brought on himself for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

#### ARIES (March/April)

The Queen, Gertrude, was born under the sign of the Ram, and at the end of the play she is sacrificed by Claudius. Her planet is the Sun, the Greater Fortune conferring wisdom and liberality, and governing happy events. This planet is represented by Gold, she is warm, and soothing, her first words to Hamlet in Act I.2.68 are 'Good Hamlet, cast thy knighted colour off / and let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark. / Do not for ever with thy veiled lids / seek for thy noble father in the dust. / Thou knowest 'tis common. All that lives must die / passing through nature to eternity.'

Her deadly sin is gluttony, 'Why, she would hang on him / as if increase of appetite had grown / by what it fed on.' (Act 1.2.143 - Hamlet's first soliloquy), and again at their interview in the Queen's closet (Act III.4.67) when Hamlet compares the portraits of the two brothers, 'Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed, and batten on this moor?'

In the early hours of Aries, following the death of Polonius at the closing of Pisces, Gertrude is won over by Hamlet and recognises her error in marrying Claudius 'Thou turnest mine eyes into my very soul / and there I see such black and grained spots / as will not leave their tinct' This suggests sun-spots. (Act III.4.90)

The poisoning of the Queen is another death that is doubtful. She drinks the poison prepared by the King for Hamlet, although warned not to - 'Gertrude, do not drink' 'I will, my lord, I pray you pardon me' (Act V.2.284). So it would seem that her sin of 'gluttony' is a contributory cause of her death. However she does not die unshriven, she has made her confession in Act III.4, and at Act V.2.327 Hamlet gives her a final blessing 'Wretched Queen, Adieu!' (to God).

#### TAURUS (April / May)

At last we come to Hamlet. He is without doubt the Taurean, born under the sign of the Bull, and with a highly sexual nature which is immediately made explicit in his first soliloquy - 'O that this too too sallied flesh would melt, / thaw, and resolve itself into a dew' (Act I.2.129). Even Laertes refers to 'his unmastered importunity' when cautioning Ophelia against Hamlet's advances (Act I.3.32). In his second soliloquy Hamlet comments 'Yet I ..... peak / like John-a- dreams, unpregnant of my cause' (Act II.2.563) and then compares himself to 'a whore' .... 'a very drab / a stallion' (Act II.2.563 ff.) He has a bawdy exchange with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Act II.2.229) and with Ophelia (Act III.1.100) when she unwittingly arouses his suspicions by quoting the tedious Polonius 'For to the noble mind / rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind'. He casts her off completely, treating her as a strumpet, as he does at the inset play *The Mousetrap*.

So much for 'nature's livery'. For Hamlet 'fortune's star' is the Moon, a planet whose character is one of inconstancy, changeability, and with a tendency to fits of madness. Hamlet's madness is very complex – that due to the influence of the Moon, shown in the inconstancy of his feelings towards the Ghost, his mother, and Ophelia - the madness he adopts to conceal his suspicions of Claudius and his dealings with the Ghost 'How strange or odd some'er I bear myself / as I perchance hereafter shall think meet / to put an antic disposition on' (Act II.1.170) - that due to the long period when he struggles between the humours of Water and Air 'mad as the sea and wind when both contend / which is the mightier' (Act IV.1.7) – and, perhaps genuinely, the madness of unrequited love, which Polonius believes is 'the origin and commencement of his grief / sprung from neglected love

' (Act III.1.177). There is also the idea of Hamlet's madness accepted by Claudius to prevent his own guilt coming to light 'Madness in great ones must not unwatched go' (Act III.1.190)

The metal associated with the Moon is silver, there is a brief reference to this when the Queen tells Claudius, after the killing of Polonius ' like some ore / among a mineral of metals base / shows itself pure. 'A weeps for what is done' (Act IV.1.125)

Hamlet's deadly sin is clearly sloth. He delays, with good reason, to revenge the murder of his father, while he mulls over the rights and wrongs, the means, and the effects of such an act. It costs him his crown, his kingdom, and his queen, together with his life. Although his end is brought about by the treachery of Laertes, he has forgiven him and also confessed to the killing of Laertes' father, and been forgiven. Horatio gives him a final blessing 'Good night, sweet Prince / and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!' (Act V.2.163)

## HAMLET AS HERCULES

This is another aspect of Hamlet which is worth looking at, as it seems possible that he plays the part of Hercules, son of Jupiter, throughout. Hercules, one of the Greek Heroes, was famous for his strength and physical prowess, and for his singing with the lyre. Among many other adventures, the goddess Hera sent the Fury of Madness to Hercules which caused him to kill the children of Eurystheus, for this he was banished, and had to complete a series of twelve labours to free himself from guilt. He was poisoned by a tunic which was soaked in the blood of a centaur. At the end of his life he built a pyre for himself, and amidst thunder and lightning disappeared from the eyes of men and was admitted to Olympus to join the Immortals.

While there are some general reflections of Hercules' adventures in Hamlet's career, there are a couple of direct references in Act I. At I.2.151 he sees himself as totally un-heroic, 'my father's brother, but no more like my father / than I to Hercules '. In Act I.4.82 he becomes bolder when meeting his father's Ghost 'and makes each petty artere in this body / as hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve '. Overcoming the Nemean lion was the first of Hercules' twelve labours, he killed the lion and there-after wore its skin which made him invulnerable.

Hamlet's 'my seagown scarfed about me' at Act V.2.12 where he tampers with his death warrant carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to England, probably illustrates the lion-skin.

During the play, Hamlet's 'twelve labours' consist of making friends and overcoming his enemies. Starting with his father's spirit, he decides it is 'a good ghost' and next that

Claudius is the villain who murdered his father. Hamlet then secures the silence of the sentinals and his friend Horatio, concerning their traffic in sorcery. He suspects Polonius of dishonesty, and also Ophelia, and then Rosencrants and Guildenstern as they are not open with him. The Players are his friends and help to test Claudius' guilt, as does his especial friend and confidant Horatio. Hamlet, accusing his mother Gertrude of incest, persuades her to repent and become his ally. The sailors who bring Hamlet home are also his friends. Laertes is his mortal enemy since Hamlet has killed his father, and driven Ophelia mad. The philosophical gravedigger is also a friend, and the pompous Osrick an enemy.

In Act V Hercules re-appears, at V.1.287 Hamlet, exasperated with Laertes says 'Let Hercules himself do what he may / the cat will mew, and dog will have his day.' At Hamlet's death, there is a simulation of Hercules' end. 'Give order that these bodies / high on a stage be placed to the view ' (Act V.2.371), ' let four captains / bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage ' (Act V.2.389), ' And for his passage / the soldiers music and the rites of war / speak loudly for him ' (Act V.2.392). And so Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, passes from this world to join those memorable heroes of fact and fiction who are never to be forgotten.

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