

Shakespeare's Hamlet, then and now



by Lev Tsitrin

I will blame it on Ralph Berry and others who sprinkle their articles with quotes from Shakespeare: the other day I felt an irresistible urge to re-read Hamlet.

I read Shakespeare's plays in their entirety before – but by now, even plot lines have dimmed beyond recall. The last time was seventeen years ago, when after a major restructuring by my then-employer I found myself with plenty of free time on my hands – and decided to use it for reading. It was also a time when I sued the government, so for a year I was steeped in Shakespeare, Milton, Mark Twain, Melville, and briefs by my lawyer.

By now, not only did I forget the finer details of Hamlet's plot; I even forgot that back then, I did something I never do with books: I marked in my set of Shakespeare the passages

that struck me the most. What surprised me when I re-read Hamlet this time around, was my present indifference to a great many passages I found remarkable then – and that the passages that most forcefully struck me now weren't then marked at all.

I guess it is impossible to read a book without reading into it one's own experiences and thoughts; reader's life experience colors the perception. I guess when I read Hamlet the last time around, there was simply nothing in it that touched me personally: I was a detached observer who duly noted and enjoyed the sheer virtuosity of Shakespeare's language. Hamlet's coolly detached analysis of suicide in "to be or not to be," or his equally philosophical dismissal of premonition of impending death before the fatal exercise in fencing with Laertes, "if it be now, 'tis not to come" were admirable – but not relatable. His majestic discourse on the grandeur of humanity was fine, but not more than that. There was much to enjoy in Hamlet's condescendingly witty exchanges with courtiers, or in the way he parodies bumpkins' pretensions to wit and leaning – Osric's ridiculous pseudo-courtly lingo or gravedigger's pseudo-paradoxes, but nothing to learn from them. I admired marvelous similes with which the text is sprinkled – but only for their verbal aesthetics; the emotional involvement was missing. The only scene I felt I could relate to was Polonius' parting advice to his son – which sounded sensible, and was couched in beautiful language.

Perhaps the utterly implausible plot was to blame for my lack of emotional engagement, for the story line doesn't make much sense. In the play, Hamlet is about thirty (as follows from Yorick being dead for "three-and-twenty years," and Hamlet being old enough to witness Yorick's "setting the table on a roar" with his witty escapades). So his mother, for whose love his uncle has committed murder, is about fifty. Why would the usurping uncle wait for thirty years to get his desire? And shouldn't Hamlet lament and resist usurpation of the throne

that is rightly his by his uncle, rather than his mother's speedy re-marriage? By the law of inheritance, the crown descends to the son and not the brother of the king; Hamlet being clearly of age, his uncle could not claim even regency, leaving alone the crown itself. Simply put, plot's demand that Hamlet be an adult (so he could avenge his father's murder) invalidates the part of the plot that motivates this crime. Nor do Hamlet's swings of mood are convincing – being in deep grief at the death of his beloved Ophelia, he nonetheless lightheartedly jests with Horatio over Osric's ridiculous pretensions to courtly speech. Whom will that convince?

And yet, one part – or perhaps just one line to which I paid no attention before – moved me profoundly this time around, the place where, shocked by what the ghost of his father told him about the manner of his death, and comparing it to breezy behavior of his guilty uncle, Hamlet exclaims about those in power, “one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!”

In my prior reads, this cry of Hamlet's soul apparently did not strike me as significant, let alone profound, for back then I have not marked it. Yet reading it now, it touched me to the quick, as I have ample confirmation of the truth of this observation in my own life. While Hamlet hastens to qualify the matter (“At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark”), this trait of those in power seems universal. As I learned through the nose, it is certainly true of the US, too. Federal judges who earnestly, if not smilingly, assure us during confirmation hearings that they will follow “due process of the law” once nominated to the bench; the senators who claim to represent us; the press which claims to shed the disinfecting light of public scrutiny on the misdeeds of the officials – all of them turn out to “smile, and smile – and be villains.”

Their assurances are false, and we who trust them are gullible simpletons. Judges do not follow due process – instead of adjudicating parties' argument, they concoct their own

argument for the parties, so as to decide cases the way they want to, not the way they have to – and claim the self-given right to act “maliciously and corruptly” which they enshrined in *Pierson v Ray*. The press adamantly refuses to cover this obvious outrage. The elected “representatives” do nothing when complaints reach their office; they simply do not hear them – they represent only those who they do hear, the big donors who give enough to sit at their table. The small fry who calls the office gets, at best, a standard letter of assurance that the senator takes the constituents’ concern seriously – and misstates that concern. (Years ago, I repeatedly called and wrote to “my” senators, Schumer and Gillibrand, regarding judicial fraud – only to get a letter confirming Senator Schumer’s unwavering commitment to “bail reform” about which I must have been anxious. Can anyone tell me what the bail reform is?). So, judges, and journalists, and the elected officials just “smile, and smile” at us – and laugh at our credulity, and our impotence to do anything about their villainy.

As the book of Ecclesiastes has it, there is a time for everything – which includes reading Shakespeare, I guess. The time for that is, of course, always – yet there is a time to read Hamlet for the beauty of its language, and the time to read Hamlet for the deeper truths expressed in it. It being that we read into a book the truths we discover in life, those truths cannot be encountered in a book before we experience them ourselves. And so, for me, the recent reading of Hamlet was the time to admire the play not for the finer turns of phrase I admired before, but for Hamlet’s raw, visceral, inarticulate cry of “O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!” which he addresses to his murderous uncle – but I see as addressed to our hypocritical, manipulative present-day powers that be: the fraud-steeped federal judiciary, the lying press, the deaf-to-constituents elected officials.

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