

“To be, or not to be”

by

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IT is ironic that what are perhaps the most quoted words in English literature—“To be, or not to be, that is the question”—are also possibly the most misunderstood words in English literature; and that the play from which they come, while it is possibly the most discussed of all Shakespeare’s plays, is also the one whose interpretation is acknowledged to be the most difficult. This note is but to indicate how these words must be understood and to show how, when rightly interpreted, they provide an essential clue to the meaning of the whole drama.

The words “To be, or not to be” are usually taken to refer to what is regarded as the crux of Hamlet’s tragic situation: that of a dreamer whose mind is too sicklied by the pale cast of thought, or whose moral nature is too sensitive or too cowardly, to allow him to act clearly and cleanly when the call of duty summons him to action. They are said to illustrate his indecision and dilemma: should he act out the part he has assumed he has to play, or should he avoid it by committing suicide? “To be” is to affirm himself in the world of action. “Not to be” is to opt out, to kill himself and to enter the world of death.

That in fact these words cannot bear this interpretation is, however, quite evident from the lines which immediately follow and qualify them:

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?

If one correlates these alternatives with the alternatives proposed in the opening lines of the soliloquy—“To be, or not to be”—then “to be” is related to suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune in the mind, and “not to be” is related to taking arms against a sea of troubles. Hence it is clear that self-affirmation in the world of action is connected more with non-being than with being.

To understand why this is so one has to remember that *Hamlet* is set within a Christian context. One has further to remember that the Christian context within which it is set is that dominated by the thought—and value—patterns of the Augustinian-Thomist tradition. According to this tradition, especially in its Augustinian form, the material world—the world of the senses

and even history itself—is so far deprived of formal qualities that it can virtually be said to lack any true or intrinsic reality. Only what possesses form possesses reality, or—to put this another way—only what possesses form possesses being. God, who is Being itself, is also the supreme formal principle. But matter in itself is virtually the opposite to God. In itself it is so deprived of form that it can be said to have no part in true being and can consequently be more properly described as non-being. This is tantamount to saying that it can more properly be assigned to the sphere of the devil, since the devil is *par excellence* the negation of being. It is because of this that the world of materiality, and even man himself in so far as through his fall he has severed himself from God and has attached himself to this world and acts out his history within it, may be said to be sold into the captivity of the devil. This world, and man within it, constitute a lump of perdition, dead and decaying carrion, possessed only by things rank and gross in nature, doomed to oblivion.

Once this is grasped, Hamlet's words can be seen to have a meaning which is practically the reverse of that usually ascribed to them. "To be", far from signifying to enter the world of action, means to transcend that world through adherence to the divine; while "not to be", far from signifying to die or to commit suicide, means to enter into the world of history and to embroil oneself in its activities. "To be", in other words, is to cleave to God, to cleave to that world of Being which is the only true reality. "Not to be" is to enter the false, unreal dimension of time and place and to act according to their norms. It is to enter into the world of things dominated by the devil, the sphere of non-being, illusion and evil, of flux and impermanence, of death and corruption. No one with the slightest understanding of the Christian context within which the plot of *Hamlet* unfolds could conceive that "not to be" means killing oneself, or that death signifies an entry into the world of non-being. Similarly, no one could conceive that "to be" means anything less than union with God, the source of all being and Being itself—a union, incidentally, which does require a kind of death or dying, not in the literal physical sense perhaps, but in the sense of the sacrifice of one's own will and selfhood in order to conform to God.

Here exactly, in the light of this interpretation of these much quoted words, one can see the core of Hamlet's tragedy. In a nutshell, it is that he refuses to make the sacrifice of his own will and selfhood. A creature situated, as he puts it, "between earth and heaven", he chooses, not heaven, but earth; not being, but non-being: he aligns himself with the world and the devil, and submits to their norms. In a sense, he makes a pact with the devil. In many ways the tragedy of Hamlet is related to that of Faustus. It too is one of an immortal soul progressively caught up in the coils of the devil and brought to perdition.

Once this is understood, every phase of the play as it unfolds falls into place and its dramatic relevance can be appreciated. Here but one or two examples need be given to show that this is the case. Take, for instance, the ghost, its injunction to Hamlet, and all that that implies. The ghost, who "assumes" the form of Hamlet's "noble father", orders Hamlet to revenge his father's

“foul and unnatural murder”. This injunction is accepted by Hamlet as something equivalent to a divine command. Hamlet, that is to say, is virtually commanded by God to revenge his father’s murder. But such a command is totally at odds with Christian standards. “Vengeance is mine,” says the Lord, “I will repay.” “Judge not, so that you be not judged.” Nothing is clearer. No saintly or divine being, or even a Christian soul in search of redemption, could issue a command that Hamlet should revenge his father’s death by killing his murderer. Such action would make a mockery of Christian precept and principle: the Everlasting may well have fixed his canon against self-slaughter; but he has fixed it no less decisively against taking the lives of others in the name of personal revenge.

Moreover, no saintly or divine messenger would assume the form of a ghost. Ghosts house unshriven beings. They are disguises of the devil, of the demons who haunt the nether world. The ghost of *Hamlet* starts like a guilty thing. It *is* a guilty thing. It is Hamlet’s tempter. It is tempting him to assume the role of an avenger, to presume to judge by the light of his own unsanctified reason between good and evil, to take the law into his own hands and out of the hands of God. It is tempting him to enter the world of non-being and annihilation. And Hamlet assents to the demonic suggestion. He capitulates to it, and sets his tragedy in motion. Indeed, in one sense he has already set it in motion before his actual encounter with the ghost, when he vaunts his soul’s invulnerability to any demonic prompting:

And for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself.
(Act I, Sc. 4).

The play shows exactly what the devil can do with an immortal soul when once he has gained access to it.

The consequences of Hamlet’s capitulation to the devil are quite unambiguously mirrored in the plight of Ophelia. Ophelia is the image of Hamlet’s soul: and what happens to Ophelia is what happens to such a soul when its sovereign faculty—its deiform faculty—loses contact with God, grows “out of tune and harsh”, and the soul is as a consequence abandoned to the forces of disorder and depravity. Virtually, Hamlet kills his own soul. And it is no accident that this death is by water, for water is the symbol of that world of flux and impermanence—of non-being—to which Hamlet has sold himself. When the noble principle of his mind—that through which he is able to cleave to God—is overthrown, man inevitably follows the downward path to disaster. Before he has finished, Hamlet has, directly or indirectly, six murders to his credit. That one of them is also an act of regicide—which in this context is tantamount to a kind of deicide, for “divinity doth hedge a king”—but emphasizes the relentless scope of the coils in which he is caught. Well may he say:

The spirit, that I have seen,
May be a devil; and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps...
Abuses me to damn me.
(Act 2, Sc. 2).

In other words, Hamlet's tragedy is the old tragedy of *hubris*. It is the tragedy of man setting himself up on the throne of God, or attempting to be God in his own selfhood. It is a re-enacting, in terms of human drama, of the devil's primal revolt against the divine, the extrapolation of man's lapse from being to non-being, from contemplative vision and the type of action based upon that to the blind, arrogant, self-motivated action of the man who asserts his own independence and sets himself up as the master of his fate and of the fate of those around him, their judge and scourge and minister, the veritable lord of history. And no one is more demon-ridden than he who in this manner presumes to take arms against a sea of troubles, who thinks that he has some special, God-given assignment to set right a time which is out of joint or to heal what is rotten in the state of the world. "'Vengeance is mine", says the Lord, "I will repay".' "Judge not, so that you be not judged."