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محاضرات مادة المسرح الشكسبييري (النشوء في هاملت: العقل، السلوك والشاعر)

THE variety of possible meanings of "conscience" in the Eliza- bethan period has enabled its occurrence in Hamlet's most familiar soliloquy to be widely interpreted (or, as I hope to suggest, misinterpreted) to mean "consciousness" (OED, I) rather than "knowledge of right and wrong" (OED, II). For instance, most of the readily available editions of Hamlet gloss "conscience" here as "consciousness," "self-consciousness" or "reflection."² There appears to be nothing in the lines themselves, however, to suggest this reading of the word. The apparent meaning of the text is fairly straightforward: the moral sense inhibits action by generating fear (of the consequences). The word "conscience" occurs several times in the rest of the play where it seems to need no gloss, and it refers consistently to the faculty which distinguishes between good and evil.³

Six lines before the beginning of this soliloquy Claudius has given the audience the first clear indication of his guilt when he says, "How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!" (III, i, 50). The word is common in the rest of Shakespeare, and it tends generally to be used in the sense familiar from much Renaissance and later moral writing to mean the element in man which is "appointed of God to declare and put in execution his iust iudgement against sinners,"⁴ a moral arbiter whose function is "to iudge of the goodnes or badnes of thinges or actions."⁵

Nor does the immediate context require any other reading of "conscience" here. "To be or not to be" is perhaps the most disputed of Hamlet's soliloquies, but it seems to me that

the simplest interpretation offers the best starting-point, at least, for analysis, unless there is good reason to reject the obvious. Clearly Hamlet is posing a problem. It is characteristic of the play that the soliloquy is interrupted before he reaches a solution ("soft you now . . .," 1. 88), but the question itself has been clearly stated: it is whether it is "nobler" to suffer or to take arms, to be passive or to act against the "sea of troubles" in which Hamlet finds himself. The hopelessness of taking arms against the sea perhaps suggests something of the nature of Hamlet's predicament. Opposition to Claudius is treason (III, iii, 1-23; V, ii, 315), and in plotting against him Hamlet risks his own death, as the rest of the play makes clear. To kill the king may put an end to his troubles in every sense: "And by opposing end them? To die... ." And if death were no more than sleep, he continues, very reasonably (and it is the most ordered and rational, the least hysterical of the soliloquies), it would surely be welcome, but men choose to go on living, however wretchedly, because of the fear of something after death, the unknown which includes (we may construe) the possibility of eternal punishment, damnation. "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all . . .," conscience which forbids suicide to wretches, however intolerable their lives, and which also forbids a murder which is simultaneously regicide .6

The widespread reading of "conscience" as "consciousness" must, then, reflect an understanding of Hamlet's meaning which is determined by a different interpretation of Hamlet's problem. It is, I think, a vestige of the Romantic view of the play, which locates the central problem not in Hamlet's situation but in his character: the tender, delicate, sensitive prince, unequal to the sacred duty of revenge, endlessly inventing excuses to escape from the harsh reality of action. This Hamlet toys in his melancholy with the notion of suicide, but he is incapable even of that, and the "conscience" said to make a coward of him is the speculative tendency which continually supplies him with pretexts for inaction. But we can no longer accept that revenge is a sacred duty,⁷ and in rejecting this we must also reject the escapist Hamlet inhibited by a Romantic "consciousness." Once we do so, as Eleanor Prosser argues, "the final lines of the soliloquy can mean only one thing: that the inner voice of judgement, by warning us that a proposed action is damnable, prevents us from undertaking great enterprises and thus makes us cowards."⁸ We are then confronted by an altogether more vigorous Hamlet, struggling to determine

the "nobler" course, but caught up in the moral ambiguity that what seems a great enterprise is forbidden by conscience.

Hamlet and Revenge is a most valuable and stimulating book, but in making its case against the sacred duty theory it seems to me to obscure some of the complexity of Hamlet's predicament. On the one hand, revenge is damnable; but, on the other, something is rotten in the state of Denmark. By Act III it is clear to the audience at least that Claudius is a villain; by Act IV Claudius is plotting to murder Hamlet; most of the court is spying on most of the rest of the court. The question of a recourse to law does not arise:9 the king is the source of law, and significantly Claudius twice insists that he will not bring Hamlet to "a public count" for the murder of Polonius (IV, iii, 3-4; IV, vii, i6 ff.). There is an irony available to the audience in his explanation: Hamlet's popularity would ensure that the king's arrows "Would have reverted to my bow again,/ But not where I have aimed them" (IV, vii, 23-4). The fountainhead of justice is poisoned. The time is out of joint; and Hamlet believes, as might any Renaissance prince, that he has a duty to set it right. It is difficult to imagine that an audience, however attentive to contemporary moralists, could admire a Hamlet who simply washed his hands of the whole matter.

On the contrary, he has two possible courses, both wrong-or perhaps both right. The question which confronts the audience as well as the prince is which is "nobler."