

Hamlet's 'unweeded garden'



By Damien Ryan.

Hamlet's ghost story and its devastating family tragedy are framed within a cold war political thriller – a private world turned very public. As a country furiously prepares itself for war, the families within it destroy themselves without a shot being fired in anger. Tragedy teaches us that we spend our lives arming ourselves 'without', providing our defences and protecting our interests from external threats, but the true threat lies within. We are the greatest danger to ourselves - our own immoralities, our own excesses, our pride and vanity, our struggle for moral courage and our fragile sanity. Denmark bravely faces the enemy outside its walls, but the real enemy sits on its own throne and the only individual who can smell the corruption is too much an enemy to himself to find a solution, raging against his own sense of pollution. But while the play centres on an individual, it is not about one man. It concerns a whole ecology of consequence, actions past and present that have brought that individual, and therefore his entire state, to the very brink of chaos. The play is about things ending, lives, families, ideals, the dying of a great consciousness, both in Hamlet himself and his state.

Hamlet is a deeply religious play, swirling with theology and mythology, and the belief systems behind the original 1000-year-old saga of 'Amleth' remind us how much theology is tied to, or born of, myth. The ancient Danes believed the sun (a key linguistic feature in *Hamlet*) was born from mother nature - or 'Yggdrasil', the Great Norse tree - on the 25th December, an eternally significant date in the western calendar. From this tree we get such surviving phrases as the Tree of Knowledge and the Yule tree or log we now associate with Christmas.

Trees form a symbolic if unseen background to Shakespeare's play, with its King murdered while sleeping among the restorative fruit trees of his orchard, and Ophelia falling to her death from the high branches of the willow, a symbol of repentance in a play all about guilt and shame. But the willow perhaps means something else too, representing the only thing permitted to weep in Shakespeare's Denmark. All of the play's children lose their parents, death walks everywhere, quite literally, but none are permitted to grieve. Grief in this play is made indecent or illegitimate - Hamlet's "inky cloak" is an affront to discretion and must be shed, his grief for a dead father is "unmanly, impious, peevish, unschooled, incorrect to heaven...a fault against the dead, to reason most absurd" and must be repressed. Polonius dies unmourned, buried "hugger mugger" with no funeral rites, shattering his daughter's sanity. And when Ophelia drowns, her brother "forbids his tears". At her bleak and brutal funeral, Laertes demands more "ceremony" but there is none to be had, not in this place. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are beheaded in distant silence. And finally the entire court on the floor of the fencing room is cleaned up by a corps of passing foreign soldiers. This is a world caked in death but Shakespeare works hard to make us see that it is a world without grief for that death. Grief is a medicine for human beings. It is how we heal, through the release of genuine and great sadness. Stifling that grief poisons the heart and mind. It creates a blister over Denmark that simply has to burst.

Shakespeare knew all too well the repressive nature of the increasingly puritanical Protestant world that had replaced and banished the grand Catholic traditions associated with grief and funeral rites. Everything had changed and his own son Hamnet's death would have brought home the new rules all too clearly – no prayers for the journey through an outlawed purgatory, no naming the dead at the funeral, no songs, no long mourning period. All banned. As Stephen Greenblatt writes, "Under Protestantism, the dead are completely dead...Shakespeare's son was beyond reach"

But justice will come and grief will have its day. Tragedies are, above all else, about justice. Yggdrasil, the great tree, was the place of justice to the Danes. Cold judgment, morality and occasional mercy were dished out each day beneath its huge branches. Shakespeare instead sees confusion and horror in this just paradise, infusing *Hamlet* with countless references to flowers, botany, gardens, weeds, trees, roots, images of growth and regeneration but "grown to seed", corrupt and rotten. A young, lost prince is given the sword of justice in this wasteland and expected to be its "scourge and minister" but he cannot find the truth among the weeds. And

he cannot find the oxygen to breathe in this garden, the air of Elsinore nothing to him “but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours”.

Shakespeare peppers this spoilt Eden with a mix of Nordic and Christian biblical overtones – a man tempted to terrible sin in the tranquil garden by a woman, the murder becoming the act of a “serpent”, and representing the “primal eldest curse, a brother’s murder”. Abel’s murder by his brother Cain is referenced three times by Shakespeare, at the beginning, middle and end of this play. The Ghost returns from a Catholic purgatory into a Protestant state to visit his Humanist son. Shakespeare’s religious garden is a salad of myth and theology tossed with careful abandon. Nordic, Christian, and even Greek mythology (which provides Shakespeare with his tragic form) centre on the fatalistic debts of sons to their fathers and the curses they carry in their blood, destined to either fight the father or obey him – Zeus, Odin, Jesus were all similarly forsaken and made servants to their fathers, taking different paths in response.

The debts the children in this play owe to their parents and the world they inherit from their forebears destroy any hope for personal freedom. That may be the ‘prison’ Hamlet speaks of. It is a play where every adult is driven by deep self-interest, by self-gratification, including the Ghost. Horatio even gives the spectral visitor a chance to tell if he is “privy to thy country’s fate, which happily foreknowing may avoid” but the Ghost is not here for political reasons, he wants personal vengeance and to get his fevered obsession with his wife’s crime off his chest. Even the play’s great maxim, “to thine own self be true”, a great virtue at face value, carries with it an interesting image of fundamental selfishness. The ideal of freedom, particularly the freedom to express oneself, of independent thought and loyalty in relationships, is struck dumb in this story. The young people are trapped by the various prisons of repressed grief, repressed sexuality, power and self-interest - the embarrassment of failure and the impotence of failing to live up to what you believed you could be. “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be”, says Ophelia, the play’s emblem of wasted hope. Bonds of friendship lie at the heart of any young persons understanding of the world but the play forces each of these children to aloneness – to entirely lonely journeys, even Horatio, in some ways the most powerless figure and the cipher to our relationship with the play. Youth is polluted before it can grow up or grow old in this place called Elsinore.

But the fundamental poetic metaphor of all of *Hamlet*’s botanical imagery does not relate to fathers and sons. Shakespeare only fools us into thinking it is a traditional revenge tragedy about a male crime and its violent repudiation. This play’s greatest drama and the purpose of its ‘nature-turned-unnatural’ narrative relates to the women, and Hamlet’s misogynistic perception of the ‘female crime’ – infidelity, disloyalty and unmanageable desire. Hamlet loses all sight of the play he is supposed to be in, so bewildered is he by the mysteries of the female sexual equation. The Ghost, having already said his eternal farewells in Act 1, even has to return in the middle to remind his son of why he came to the theatre tonight.

The ripest fruit of Shakespeare’s garden is found I think in Hamlet’s bleakest phrase to Ophelia, a reference to the grafting of young plants from an existing tree:

“...virtue cannot inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it.”

We are, no matter how desperately we rebel, destined to bear the fruit of our parents, grafted from their stock and unable to resist their congenital frailties, says Hamlet. In other words, the fruit will never fall far from the tree. The bleakness of the thought comes from the context of their conversation – Hamlet has just told Ophelia he “did love her once”, she has believed him, and he immediately and cruelly retracts his confession... “You should not have believed me...I loved you not”. Why? ‘Because I am my mother’s son which means I cannot be trusted, I am wanton, unrestrained and ungoverned in my desires and sexual appetites, and you are your father – liar, deceiver, hypocrit’. The fabric of the old in this giant Nordic tapestry or ‘arras’, is inevitably stitched into the new. The poetic impact of these plant motifs is doubled by the sustained portrait of Ophelia as a living embodiment of flora and growth. She is characterized by flowers at every step of the story – from our first meeting where her brother describes Hamlet’s love for her as having all the permanency of a “violet...sweet, not lasting”; and her warning to him not to take the “primrose path” to heaven while she walks the “steep and thorny way”; to her fractured distribution of flowers and herbs to an assembly of onlookers at a funeral for her father that only she in her madness is willing to conduct. Meanwhile her brother tries and fails to reach his “rose of may”.

Shakespeare grafts onto Ophelia an irresistible image of budding hope, the promise of renewal and regeneration, the very function of flora - conception and reproduction. But he destroys it in the bud. Every one of her entrances in this play, bar none, brings with it fraught discussion of her womb, her power to breed and the need for men to control and stifle her sexuality and fecundity. Several scholars argue that her floral tributes in her madness make up part of a traditional Elizabethan ‘abortifacient’ herbal remedy to resist unwanted pregnancy, including several parts “rue”. The only ingredient Ophelia does not name from the speculative herbal abortive treatment of the period, says author Mark Anderson, is the willow leaf. She exits the stage and climbs those weeping branches as her final act of life. It is worth remembering that prior to the Jacobean era when some censorship rules briefly loosened, Shakespeare could not write a play featuring unmarried sexual relations without risking a ban or worse from the censors. He hints very hard at it in this play, always staying on the windy side of the law – giving Ophelia an explicit song telling the story of a girl who gave herself to a boy, entering his room a virgin but not leaving as such, “Quoth she, Before you tumbled me / You promised me to wed/ He answers, So I would I had done by yonder sun / And thou had’st not come to my bed.” Her madness keeps the song rich with ambiguity.

Ophelia dies from the “poison of deep grief” as Claudius tells us, adding yet another death by poison to the play – Hamlet, Old Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes all die by the unnatural transformation of natural herbs into a distilled contagion – the liquid dew of this unweeded garden. With these deaths, two great family trees are lopped of all their branches and, as the rules of tragedy demand, their seed is lost forever. It is apparently what Hamlet wanted if we believe his plea to Ophelia, “why wouldst’t thou be a breeder of sinners”? And, “I say we will have no more marriages!” Such is his sexual disgust, Hamlet’s super-objective appears to have become the cessation the entire act of generation itself, to end sex, to stop the rot at the source. Hamlet by Act 3 and certainly in the closet scene with his mother is defined by an unbearable sexual shame. When Gertrude asks him to explain “what act” he is so reviled by, he can’t even find a name for it, but leaps to the conclusion that “this solidity and compound mass (the earth itself) is thought-sick at the act”.

The bed, for us humans, is our home of regeneration. Most of us are conceived in it, born in it and if we are lucky, die in it. It is our garden of conception, our soil. “The royal bed of Denmark”, thanks to a series of potent linguistic seeds planted by his father, has become for Hamlet, “a couch for luxury and damned incest”. The bed has become a chief symbol in this production bringing life, death and shame to the heart of Elsinore.

Yet Hamlet, for all his wishing “my mother had not born me”, carries his own immense promise of conception. In a play about how the root systems of the past can corrupt the present and stifle future growth, we meet a young man with a profoundly modern mind who is given an ancient task – bloody revenge. It is a task for the Danish warrior, beneath Yggdrasil, a task of blind justice - kill the killer. The sort of argument that awoke Australia and Indonesia in recent months – how to serve justice and correct a crime? But Hamlet, the student, the thinker, the humanist (from Wittenberg, the European seat of Humanism in Germany) is, as Harold Bloom writes, a new kind of human, coming out of millennia of logical, brutal, sequential, cause-and-effect action into a capacity to think through that action, to consider the complexity of it, to recognise that justice is not blind and action is not sequential, but lateral. Old certainties and world orders don’t make sense anymore, true knowledge raises questions not answers. And yet, Hamlet by the end serves a hideous justice for one particular crime – lying. Anyone who lies to Hamlet in this story dies, and at several moments we see the point of sentencing in his remorseless search for some sort of truth.

Yet somehow within the existential chaos of this broken world order, we have a story filled with such exuberance, such inspiring life-force, particularly in its forlorn hero. This tragical-historical-comical-pastoral play energetically spans every genre and at its heart we get Shakespeare’s great instinct for theatricality as he uses the theatre itself, the roles we play and the masks we where (from grief to madness to smiling villainy) to fuel the conflict. Hamlet knows he is in a play and he doesn’t mind telling us. It is a strange and daring thing to do – to ask us, his audience, if he can pause the play we bought tickets to while he quickly stages another play just to make certain he wants to carry on with the ‘real’ play.

But again, the old myths are perhaps still ahead of us. The Norse saga by Saxo Grammaticus from which *Hamlet* is originally derived, speaks of ‘the first man’ who was made from the great tree Yggdrasil. The man’s name, extraordinarily appropriate to Hamlet, was “Ask” – characterized by questions and a fascination with the ‘promised end’ – death. Hamlet ‘asks’ endless questions, his soliloquies are simply ladders of questions, “to be or not to be, that is the...” biggest of them all. The play’s first line would work well as ‘Ask’s’ first question upon waking beneath the tree – “Who’s there?” Hamlet’s tree is the tree of knowledge, shared with Horatio, climbed by asking questions, but torn out of the ground too soon.

Hamlet’s own birth seems to have promised such wastage – his father killed Old Fortinbras of Norway on “the very day young Hamlet was born”, and Hamlet’s auspicious life is simply the sacrifice for that ‘crime’ – the killing of a King, God’s anointed on earth, breaking the ‘chain of being’ – leaving young Hamlet to die on the very day young Fortinbras comes to claim his 30-year-old right in Denmark. It is a perfect circle.

Fortunately Hamlet’s is the birth of a new idea – us – apparently capable of change and progress, but polluted by consciousness, unable to cleanse or purify the “foul and pestilent congregation of vapours” we breathe. Still stuck in a cycle of revenge and warfare. It is the thing that makes *Hamlet*’s popularity in the modern world so remarkable to me – it is a story of revenge where we await with frustration the hero’s bloody act of retribution, in an age where revenge is supposedly our most reviled, inhuman trait. Is it not the madness of Isis, the crazed vengeance of the new terrorism, the assassination of princes and heads of state, old testament stuff? How can violence ever purify a state or a people, how can it clean anything? We know it, yet we can’t resist it.

This crisis very much reflects the England Shakespeare was writing in and for – the last throes of a monarch’s 50 year reign, with no heir apparent, with the great religious pendulum perhaps ready to swing in a whole new direction, a police state threatened from within and without by foreign powers and riddled with spies and surveillance, while a remarkable upsurge in education brought new philosophies, learnings and beliefs to threaten the accepted norms, for better or worse. Shakespeare’s England, like young Prince Hamlet, was paralysed by doubt. Our world today is living in the post nuclear age, in the age of climate change, of insidious and futile world wars that have given way to insidious and futile cultural wars of terror and revenge, of people scattering across an unwelcoming globe to find asylum to preserve their families and their ways of life, and of popular uprisings such as those of the Arab Spring that see a new cycle of violence and nihilistic hatred emerge. We all carry the feeling or fear that something has to give, that there’s something big on the horizon. At its bleakest, for many people living on planet earth, it is such a ‘Denmark’, such a ‘prison’ - rapidly losing the very thing we are fighting for - freedom essentially.

Shakespeare's play sees the death of a nation and a culture, alongside this young man's extraordinary consciousness. We see a total dissolution of something once worth living for. By the close of this play, almost in mockery of the desperate struggle of its characters to control their world and their relationships, Denmark is simply handed to Norway and dynasties evaporate, they "melt, thaw and resolve into a dew". An immense cycle of life and power and family and political order coils steadily in upon itself until the circle diminishes completely, leaving only Horatio to explain why and how. And his explanation – "of accidental judgments, casual slaughters, of purposes mistook fallen on the inventors' heads" – is basically that of a giant botch up. The distant, only faintly etched image of Fortinbras and Norway seems to sit side by side with the greater menace of what lies beyond our life, beyond death – what "undiscovered country" is waiting behind the door? That first question – "who's there?" – is an apt one for this bleak uncertainty.

Most Australians fortunately do not live at the coalface of our global turmoil and horror, but again like Horatio, we are privy to it and partner to it. So what do we do? What are our responsibilities in such a world? Like Hamlet or Ophelia or Laertes or Fortinbras, how are we supposed to behave, what are we supposed to stand up for or believe in? How do we preserve our family, the big family tree that includes us all? Shakespeare's tragedies are as big as nations and communities, but always as small as families, and they tell us that parents (from Lear to Lady Capulet) should be sewing health and virtue and goodness into the fabric of their children, grafting their plants with good 'stock', but we too often breed distrust, anxiety and deceit.

We never see a tree in *Hamlet*, but Shakespeare ensures we hear it - plants, gardens, flowers, herbs, mythological and theological symbols of growth and hope and renewal – seeded though language. He shows us how an old story can describe a new world, and even within the drama, brings a group of Players to court with an even older story, from the battle of Troy, to describe his own world – a hero revenging a lost father and a mother's tears of love. The concept of a 'story' is perhaps Shakespeare's final gift to us in this play. Hamlet's dying wish, his only wish, is that Horatio tell his story, to preserve some meaning in a catastrophe beyond reason. That we, "mutes or audience to this act", might learn from it. So the story reinforces our need to tell stories. It is about why we tell stories. Hamlet tells us several times that he knows he is standing on a stage before us and while others try to hide there, out in the open, he lets us in.

As Denmark breathes its last and the stage is littered with corpses, only Horatio can explain why. The double meaning for Shakespeare is that we, the audience, are Horatio in that moment. We leave carrying Hamlet's story, continuing its cycle of life and growth, and thereby, hopefully, its lessons.

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